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“ROMM-ANTICALLY SPEAKING:” A VISIT WITH RON, AARON, AND AVIS ROMM BY DAVID CHAMPOUILLON

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“ROMM-ANTICALLY SPEAKING:” A VISIT WITH RON, AARON, AND AVIS ROMM

BY DAVID CHAMPOUILLON

Even though we see each other frequently, the Romms and I sat down recently and had lunch at the 2012 ITG conference. Catching up with friends is always exciting and rewarding but never so much as this time.

Recent events, stories, updates, thoughts, and overall friendship were shared. Ron and Avis are great role models in our personal and professional lives. For me the best highlight was that Aaron Romm was there too. We had heard a lot about each other and this was the first opportunity for both of us to be in the same room with Ron and Avis. With many stars of the world, one either gets the “star” treatment or the “humanistic” interaction. Ron and Avis always give to everyone themselves as people first

and this is, in my opinion, is why they are “stars!” Ron was specifically at ITG to accept the Honorary Award, perform with the Romm Trio on a recital, and participate in a master-class session.

Our paths started crossing frequently in 2005 when the Romms appeared at East Tennessee State University. This appearance resulted in a June 2006 *ITG Journal* article where



Avis congratulating Ron after his acceptance of the ITG Honorary Award at the 2012 ITG Conference

we discussed health issues, teaching, and performance in general. Since that time we have sat and talked on a number of occasions. Ron and Avis are not only survivors (cancer and heart, respectively) but they are truly conquerors. They have

a relationship that has lasted well over forty years while maintaining personal and collaborative international careers and raising a family, including Orlan, Aaron, and new granddaughter, Elysia Grace Romm. Ron received the 2012 ITG Honorary Award along with his Canadian Brass collaborator, the late Fred Mills. It was just so fitting that they received it at the same time. It was especially meaningful that both Avis and Aaron were there to help honor Ron as the Romms have truly always

been a team effort—sharing the spotlight, supporting each other—and, through it all, simply being a family. I posed some topics for the three of the Romms to discuss and share including career, education, experiences, pedagogy, arranging for the trio, comments about family dynamics, the Romm Trio, reflections, and future plans. The results are the Romms “Romm-antically Speaking!”

Ronald Romm: Thanks David. Always great to see you and talk to you. I am cancer free as of 2004, so I consider myself *really* blessed. As I said before, my cancer event was a fantastic gift, albeit in a really strange package. In a nutshell the event set my mind even more on the direction of “being of use to those around me.” I feel that, while I have no specifically or significantly improved knowledge in any direction, I am better equipped to help those that inquire [to] travel a path so as to begin to find their individual answers. I feel that I am more patient with events and my response to those events than before.

These words are only words, but the feelings that accompany them are subtle but powerful. The ITG has seen fit to bestow upon me their Honorary Award... this is their highest award of achievement. I am truly humbled. This organization has seen, worked with, published, and been driven by some of our great musical minds. I am in extremely illustrious company as the recipient of this award. While I am really proud of my accomplishments and I have worked very hard to do well in life endeavors, to be recognized on this level is very powerful and more important to me than I have words to say. For those who saw fit to nominate me for this award and to those who

voted in favor of my receiving it, a thank you is not enough; a commitment to continue to work for positive results through musical (and of course other) communication is the best that I can do.

At this point I’ve spent eleven years in academia as professor of trumpet at the University of Illinois. Although concerts are powerful in their impact on the listener, and are hopefully memorable for some time to come, the legacy one imparts as a teacher continues for generations. I think back on my teachers, Lester Remsen, James Stamp, William Vacchiano, with pride that I am carrying on their teachings (perhaps adding a bit of my own flavor to their ideas), bringing the experiences and concepts they shared with me to each successive generation. It will seem odd, but each year I attend our School of Music graduation ceremony; I get dressed in the full regalia, march down the aisle, take my seat with my esteemed colleagues, and observe and participate in the launch of the next step in our graduates’ careers. Here is a really sweet thought: I have watched many of these young people for several years go through the rigors of working through their personal quest to satisfy what their parents, their friends, their professors have required of them, to find the most important part... ultimate-



Fred Mills and Ronald Romm together during their Canadian Brass days

musically and socially connective. Neither of my parents had had the opportunity to attend college, so my sister (Eileen, a talented singer, songwriter, pianist), my brother (Ken, a professional scientist and a semi-professional keyboardist and bassoon player) and I attended. My mother was a classically trained clarinetist. Her dream of attending the Juilliard School was not to happen for her; she instead worked in her father's bakery. My father was a semi-professional percussionist and an enthusiastic jazz drummer, so my mother took up saxophone so she could play dance jobs with my father. Eventually they formed a family dance band, the Romm-Antics, which was extremely active in the Los Angeles area. We performed not only at dances, but for live radio and tv. The inspiration to work hard to do whatever was necessary to succeed was very important in our childhood experiences. I studied, I practiced, I performed in ensembles, I began to freelance, and my career as a performing musician took life. In Los Angeles I played in school, in churches, in dance bands, in orchestras, in concert bands, in chamber ensembles, etc. When I transitioned to New York I was lucky enough (tenacious enough) to do the same things. Very early in this New York timeframe I met Avis, we fell in love, and started playing recitals together. Then we moved to Canada and our lives merged with Canadian Brass (1971 – 2000). When I left Canadian Brass in 2000, the idea was for Avis and me to continue our Concert Duo career. We appear, on the average, at ten to twenty events per year. I have a full teaching schedule at the University of Illinois, performances with the Illinois Brass Quintet (the oldest brass quintet of any college or university in the world, begun in 1954), and Avis has her teaching studio and chamber music performances as well, so it is a challenge to find more time to travel. Our international exposure has been growing as well; in

2012 we were at the Isla Verde Bronces Festival in Argentina as well as the PentaBrass Festival in Quincinetto, Italy.

When Isla Verde Bronces Festival advertised that we were coming, the enrollment for the festival doubled. This is a nice thing! Add to this that David Hickman and Summit Brass has invited me to participate at the Rafael Méndez Brass Institute for the last five years, and Avis and I have appeared for the last two years at the ITG conference and all of this together gives the

reader an overview of the performance side of our lives at the present time.

Well, as our lives move through transition, we respond to the impulses and opportunities that are presented. Avis and I discussed at length the fact that great music that had lived through many years of scrutiny—rather than disappearing—was becoming more and more popular. The success of this great music's longevity elevated its status, in our opinion, to a meditative medium. With this in mind, we

created a CD, which we entitled *Wellness for the Soul*. Our target was anyone interested in the idea of music as a binding, heal-

ly they need to require more of themselves than any of us have ever asked. It is daunting to realize that the majority of students coming to university now will be doing something for a career that has not yet been invented, and that the life lessons we share with them are equally as important as the music lessons we share with them. I had the honor of hooding Aaron Romm for his MM degree, and this year, if all goes as planned, I will be hooding him at his DMA graduation this May... talk about highlights!

Music captured me very early on in my life. My parents, both semi-professional musicians, both encouraged me to follow my dreams and use music as the great communicator. They taught me that "music is music," and one should be conversant in many styles of music to derive the maximum pleasure from the experience. They brought me to community orchestras and bands to play; this was how I learned much of the classical repertoire I know. They sent me to music camps, teaching me that I needed to network and interface with all kinds of people. My father drove me to my lessons, to my rehearsals, and wherever I wanted to go that was

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Avis and Ron enjoying a lighter moment

ing medium. Repertoire for our second CD, *Living the Dream*, could fit into the same parameters. On this CD we also included a few “younger” pieces, which have an expanded range of feeling. [Note: Opening Day Entertainment Group released a Ronald Romm Solo CD entitled *Meditations for Trumpet*, which was in the Top Ten Billboard ratings for several weeks. They subsequently released *Piano Dreams*, Avis’s solo piano album (Avis is a Steinway Piano Artist); that was on the Billboard charts as well.]

One of the things a parent focuses upon is the success of his/her children and how we can be of assistance in facilitating that success. Aaron choosing to be a musician was extremely challenging... mostly for him. From the beginning he had a kind of target on his back—son of Ronald Romm of the Canadian Brass and Avis Romm, gifted concert pianist. Neither Avis nor I knew that Aaron was going to focus his attention on being a professional musician. We worked to teach both him and his brother Orlan to be good people, to treat others well, to be honest, and to follow your [their] dreams. Aaron didn’t decide to study music at the university level until his senior year in high school. I must say Aaron exhibits all of the best attributes of both Avis and me. He is diligent, focused, sensitive, kind, and positive (I know, one might ask... where are “my” attributes in there?). Aaron is a lovely musician and a terrific trumpeter. He is really unusual as a student; he listens to what both Avis and I suggest and folds that information into his intuition. I talk a lot about dreams and following them. For me the ultimate dream is being on stage and playing concerts

with both Avis and Aaron. Those who have heard/seen us do this are generally astounded with the depth of musical connection and feeling that they are given.

Grandparenthood! What can one say? The beauty of this is more than I have words for. Elysia is a spectacularly beautiful young child... her curiosity and sensitivity are unbelievable. When she looks in my eyes, I melt. Tears (from me) all the time. I think when we discuss the future, I have the same vision I had before; I only need to stay inside of the music and the future will take care of itself. I intend for the Ronald and Avis Romm Trumpet and Piano Duo to present concert/masterclass events for as long as the folks “out there” want us to come. We have our own wonderful Pops Shows with Symphony Orchestra, including our Christmas Pops with the Romms. The Romm Trio appeared in Nebraska for a concert at the First Presbyterian Church in Lincoln (NPR Broadcast as well) and a masterclass at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. We appeared at ITG in Columbus, Georgia, this past year as well, to a standing ovation. I look forward to more performances, recordings/video, and more chamber music focused masterclasses from the Romm Trio. And... I am always interested in special projects. Thanks for catching up with us. Always a pleasure.

Avis Romm: Again David, thanks for letting us catch up. My mitral valve repair that was done in 2007 is holding as a success. I am in really good physical condition, and in a constant state of careful diet and exercise maintenance. As a strong advocate of early detection and aggressive treatment, I believe

that it (good, careful diet and proper exercise) is an extremely important part of heart health. I am blessed.

There are three components to my musical career. First is my teaching studio. I maintain between eighteen to twenty students weekly. Second, as an active performing artist, I am both a freelance pianist and a collaborator. I am fortunate enough to work with artists of international recognition. Third, and most interestingly for me, is my participation as a member of the Ronald and Avis Romm Trumpet and Piano Duo and the Romm Trio, with our son Aaron. We present concerts and masterclass events. Becoming a Steinway Piano Artist is the fulfillment of a lifelong dream; what an honor! To have it occur while performing at ETSU was special in more ways than I can say. Recently I performed at the dedication of the new Steinway Piano at the WUSF Radio studios in Sarasota, as well as the concerts I shared with Ron and Aaron at the 2012 International Trumpet Guild conference in Columbus, Georgia. Teaching is a continuous learning experience for me. I learn a great deal from my students, whether they are five years old or seventy-five years old. The interesting thing is that the young students and the older ones share one common attribute: they only respond to positive input, so I am encouraged to put all my teaching in that format. This inspires me.

A mother and a child share the same heartbeat. Working with Aaron is a joyous experience; he has musically matured marvelously. When we work with him, although it is a pleasure working as a family, it is not necessarily always easy. We have to treat rehearsals as equal professionals, so there is no holding back with suggestions or observations. Everything is done for the best product outcome, and the results are exquisite. Family

is everything to me! Although our son Orlan has chosen a profession outside of music (clinical research), he is likely our best critic. He has perfect pitch and a magnificent sense of rhythm and pacing. Our granddaughter, Elysia Grace, is perfect in every way. She has perfect independent finger motion and I have already gotten her to work on her fingering on the little piano we got her. She loves to play, loves applause, and smiles really easily. Being a grandparent is the ultimate for me. Orlan and Christine are spectacular parents, and it is a credit to them and a thrill for us to see that Elysia is such a happy child.

The Romm Duo is still a priority in my/our life. We enjoy working together and have done so for years as we continue to find great music to share and present as the Duo moves forward. The only limits on our activity are limits of available time; this has always been the case, so careful scheduling and prioritizing is what we do. The Romm Trio is an unexpected thrill... synergy of the family unit is an unbelievable team experience. This is musically, emotionally, and physically a most rewarding endeavor—can you tell I love it? We are in the process of creating the next in our series, this time with the Romm Trio. Some of our friends have heard us perform pieces from this repertoire; Aaron, Ron, and I have been arranging some glorious music. Scheduling recording times is still the big challenge, but we are up to the task. Stay tuned (<http://www.MusicRomm.com>). We are truly blessed to be engaged in the business of music, and to do what we love and share that with others. We feel like the audiences are our friends, and we count the blessings of living our dream every day.

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Aaron Romm: Thanks for including me in this—I appreciate it very much! I didn’t start playing the trumpet seriously until junior year of high school; I had been playing since I was nine, but I didn’t catch the “bug” until then. My first teacher aside from Mom and Dad was Victor Mongillo, who is still active as a teacher and freelance trumpeter in the Sarasota area. I studied for a year with Bernard Adelstein, who had retired to Sarasota. I went to Vanderbilt University and studied with Allan Cox. I worked very, very hard to make my studies with all of my teachers successful... and I salute them because they were very patient with me! After graduating Cum Laude from Vanderbilt, I went to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, to study with Dad and Michael Ewald (it was a shared, or “open” studio concept), where I was a teaching assistant during my master’s degree. Within a month of my starting at the University of Illinois, Professor Ewald passed away. I studied with Jake



Ron and Avis perform at the 2011 ITG Conference in Minneapolis

Walburn, who now teaches at University of Texas, Pan-American, and since his appointment there I have studied with Charles Daval. I'm currently in my last year of my DMA at the U of I, so by night I focus on studying and preparing for the big projects coming up (comprehensive exams, solo recital, final project proposal, thesis, and lecture recital), and by day I'm an Archives Assistant at the Sousa Archives and Center for American Music, where I study under Scott Schwartz and Adriana Cervo. Every day is a new learning experience for me, and I get to understand the history of our modern instruments and music by examining documents, sheet music, and instruments of the past. I get to demonstrate many of these old and extinct instruments for tour groups and classes, which is really fun and challenging. I've had a lot of opportunities here at the University of Illinois; I've gotten to play in all the school ensembles, and I've been fortunate to be doing lots of freelance work playing in quintets, brass bands, big bands, and orchestras, (and the occasional solo) in and around the Champaign-Urbana area. It's been great experience so far!

I spend a good amount of my time teaching at the Conservatory of Central Illinois and have a studio of really nice, hard-working students. I've found that my background as a former personal fitness trainer has helped with teaching music. The performance of brass instruments is a very physical endeavor and I do my best to encourage a positive mental attitude in the study of music. My students learn to approach this most difficult craft from a positive frame of mind. Most recently I had the opportunity to be Coordinator/Trumpet Faculty of the Illinois Summer Youth Music Trumpet Camp at the U of I, along with Dad, Mom, and Thomas Siders of the Boston Symphony. We had twenty really great high school students come for a week to take lessons, learn to work with a collaborative pianist, and perform solo repertoire and trumpet ensembles for each other. It was a great experience and a lot of fun!

The charts that I've done have been primarily for the Romm Trio, simply because we need more arrangements and transcriptions for this type of ensemble. Very few pieces exist for two trumpets and piano that have wide-audience appeal. One of the tour-de-force pieces for any ensemble, large or small, is J.S. Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor* (BWV 565). Like so many other brass players, I grew up listening to the Canadian Brass play Fred Mills's arrangement, which was the first time I heard two trumpets interact and sound like one. The idea came to me when I was in counterpoint class (*Tocatta and Fugue* was an example we were studying) where I saw that it was a three-voice fugue and decided that I would take on my first major transcription project for the Romm Trio. After about a year, I had completed the version that we play today. I've learned to



The Romm Trio performing at the 2012 ITG Conference

arrange and transcribe works that are somewhat shorter... *Tocatta and Fugue* was worth it, though. It's my observation that we try and spend time on arrangements that work in terms of programming by answering a few simple questions: Will it appeal to the audience? Does it work with the program, and if not, can we make it work? Is there something for everybody in the program?

The first sounds of music I ever heard were from my parents—even before I was born. I guess I could say “the first music I felt” was from them. As people, they are the most loving, wise, genuine, and good people I know. They have always inspired me to be better, in whatever I did. I can tell you that sharing the stage with them is the single greatest thrill that I've ever had. I've had the opportunity to share the stage with and to learn how to collaborate musically from my mom (and even turn pages for her when I'm *sans* trumpet, which is really exciting on its own!), and I've had the opportunity to perform next to my dad in orchestras, quintets, and brass choirs; all incredible experiences! But one of the greatest honors in my life was when we started working together as a trio, because I knew

“The first sounds of music I ever heard were from my parents... even before I was born.”

that my hard work had paid off; it was like a graduation, of sorts. Successful people, regardless of field, work toward the final goal with absolute focus. It's really incredible to watch them work, with the amount of focus they have when rehearsing and performing. They

taught me to put everything into what I do, especially love. They were always supportive of what I wanted to do with my time and energy whether that was martial arts, soccer, fitness pursuits, or education. They never forced me into music; their words were simply, “if you decide you want to pursue music, we will help you.” We approach performances with the idea that “we get to play,” not “we have to play.” Mom taught me that, and it was certainly helpful to watch my dad dress up as bearded Carmen or Cornetta [in Peter Schickele's *Horn-smoke, a Horse Opera in One Act for Brass Quintet*] during

Continued on Page 29

Canadian Brass concerts and become the role, even if it seems silly at the time. All of the costuming aside, the musical product was always present, never sacrificed for a laugh. Regardless of the medium (music, acting, dance, visual art), we need to love what we do, and do it with passion. It might be the most difficult part, but if you don't at least love the goal, change your perspective and find a way to connect with your passion. Otherwise, it becomes another "have to," contradicting the very idea that we *play* our instruments! Like I said before, it's one of the greatest thrills to perform with my parents. They make statements, they "lay it down," and it is very easy to play with them. Something changes in the room when they take the stage, a calm but excited focus that is very inviting for both audience and performers alike. In short, it's very welcoming, and I think that a main goal of the Trio, like any other performing ensemble, is to have the audience be as engaged in the music as we are.

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I don't know what the future holds for me, but what I will tell you is that I will continue to work hard to find my path, be the best I can be, and actively do my best to help others along the way to do the same. I can see myself teaching at a college or university sometime in the future, but I want to spend the present touring, and performing chamber music, masterclasses, and educational shows to help people discover the importance of music in their lives. I've spent a good majority of this article discussing how we Romms view performing.

About the author: David Champouillon is a Bach Artist/Clinician, professor of trumpet and jazz studies, coordinator of the brass area, and director of the jazz program at East Tennessee State University. He is also the leader of the ETSU Faculty Brass, leader of The Jazz Doctors, and currently serves as a jazz brass columnist for *The Brass Herald*. A veteran of the United States Air Force band system with an extensive 35-year national performance career in both classical and jazz genres, he has contributed to the ITG by chairing the jazz improvisation and trumpet preludes committees, writing feature articles and numerous news stories, and performing and presenting several projects at conferences.

