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Ray Crisara: Teaching by Example

KEITH WINKING

When I first met Ray Crisara, he asked me about my aspirations regarding the trumpet. I told him that I loved playing all types of music, but my first priority was to play the horn well. Without elaborating, he shared his professional creed: To learn the language of the trumpet, use your ears and adapt to your environment.

At the time, I knew about his reputation as a fine performer and teacher, but I did not realize that his varied career included work with the NBC Symphony, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Goldman Band, Paul Lavelle's Band of America, ABC Brass Quintet, Canadian Broadcast Company, a recording of the Hindemith *Sonata* with Glenn Gould accompanying, commercial recordings and jingles, and recordings with rock and roll legends Kiss and Paul McCartney.

Ray Crisara is a modest person of extraordinary talent and exemplary character. As a teacher, he makes sure that every lesson is entirely focused on the student, and he politely deflects queries regarding his own career. He only offers anecdotes about his life as an effective means of driving home a point during lessons. I came to admire him not only as a great musician and teacher but also as an honorable and gracious man. He helped me develop a path to excel as a professional musician, but most importantly how to improve as a human being.

KW: Where were you raised, and when did you start playing the trumpet?

RC: I was born and raised in Cortland, New York, a small upstate city. I was ten years old when I started to play. My dad was a tool and die maker in a local truck manufacturing company, and he was the conductor of the town band as an avocation. As I improved to the degree that my playing was acceptable, I became a member of that band.

KW: Was there also a school band and music program?

RC: Yes, we had a good band, the kind that would normally earn top ratings at state contests. I joined when I was in the ninth grade. My dad never formally taught me, although he taught most of his band members. Luckily, I sat next to his solo cornetist, Robert Reitano. He was an excellent musician and a natural, gifted instrumentalist. I learned a great deal from just watching him and listening to his playing.

KW: Did you have any early private instruction?

RC: No, I didn't. The first private instruction I ever had was when I attended the Ernest Williams Band Camp after graduating from high school. I attended the camp in Saugerties, New York, in 1936 at the suggestion of my high school band director.

KW: Who were some of the great players who studied with Williams and went through the Williams Winter School and Summer Camp?

RC: There are too many to remember or cite here, but there were standouts. That's where I met Don Jacoby. We were both 15 and he was already an extraordinary player. Ray Wetzel, Frank Scimonelli, Jimmy Burke, and Gil Mitchell also come to mind. They, with many others, made the camp somewhat of a legacy. The Goldman Band, a fine concert band that presented programs throughout the summer in New York City, Brooklyn, and Canada, had three cornet soloists who were all Williams' students – Leonard Smith, Frank Elsass, and Ned Mahoney. Every summer they came to camp and performed a

William Vacchiano, Ray Crisara, Ned Mahoney, and Jimmy Burke

trio with the camp band, which was always a big occasion. Williams (the Chief) had countless students working with him at all levels of accomplishment and from all areas.

KW: Did you go directly from the summer camp in 1936 to the Williams Winter School?

RC: My parents didn't allow me to go to New York the first year after high school graduation. They thought I was too young to be in New York at 15 years of age. I just sort of kibitzed around home, had a part-time job, and then went to the Winter School the following year in the fall of 1937.

KW: Was your plan to study trumpet?

RC: When I talked to my dad about what I would do after college, I told him that I'd like to be a trumpet player. His comment was "Why don't you go to a regular school and do something normal?" I was insistent and stubborn about it, so he was good enough to agree. He talked it over with the Chief and Williams probably said something like, "He's perhaps marginal, so we'll have to see what develops." I marvel at the fact that my parents decided to send me because becoming a professional musician was such a tricky thing. So was going to a school in New York with virtually no widespread reputation.

KW: Were you at the school for three years, including summers?

RC: Yes, except for the last summer after the third year. That summer I went to Camp Smith with the Seventh Regiment Band. It was a professional band assigned to the Seventh Regiment of New York, a unit of the National Guard. In the summer, the regiment went to its own camp, sort of a "having a great time" Army camp. Captain John Sutherland, who had been a cornet soloist with Sousa, conducted the band. We played a concert every night, and I did a solo on almost every concert. It was a really good training ground. Camp Smith was located in Peekskill, New York, and a man who lived there and worked at the Conn store in New York City attended the concerts. He spoke to his colleagues about the performances, and my reputation was probably starting to build at that time.

KW: Were you rehearsing at Camp Smith during the day and doing solos at night?

RC: Yes. In fact, we got up in the morning at six a.m. to do reveille, marches, and a parade. Then we had breakfast, followed by a rehearsal. Actually, it

was good for me. I liked to play, and the level of the group was good because Captain Sutherland was very capable. Most of the band members were older with professional backgrounds.

KW: How did the training at the Williams School help prepare you for that position?

RC: I can best quote Ned Mahoney, who said, "Things were so intense at the Williams School and the Chief was so demanding, it was a relief to get out and have a job." The Chief was a great taskmaster. He was always insistent, and he constantly raised the level if he felt you were shirking your responsibilities.

KW: Had you studied the solos you were performing at Camp Smith in school, or did you learn them on the job?

RC: I believe that I had learned most of the solos during lessons, those of Walter Rogers, Herbert Clarke, and material written by Williams. With Williams, the emphasis was on solo cornet playing, more than orchestral trumpet playing. We didn't cover any orchestral repertoire until the third year. His comment was, "If you can play the language and play your instrument properly, you can just use your head and ears. If you do this, you're not going to have any trouble. If you have the alphabet down, then you can write." That's how he felt about it.

NBC trumpets: Harry Glantz, Frank Falcone, and Ray Crisara

Philip Jones, Gerard Schwarz, Louis Davidson, Charles Colin, and Ray Crisara

KW: Where did you go after Camp Smith?

RC: I think I went to the Williams Summer Camp for the last four weeks of the session. Dr. William Revelli had come through the Williams School in the spring, recruiting students for his band at the University of Michigan. The Chief thought I should play for him. After I did, Revelli offered me an opportunity to play in his band and teach trumpet at the university. Today, we refer to this as a teaching assistant position.

KW: Were you the only trumpet teacher at Michigan then?

RC: I think I was, though anyone who was serious about trumpet studied with Revelli. He was a clarinet player, but I think his teaching encompassed everything.

KW: I've heard a famous story for years about your playing under Revelli. Can you tell us about it?

RC: We would rehearse and sometimes he would be difficult. If something wasn't quite right in the clarinet section, he might even pick up a clarinet and try to illustrate what he wanted. On one occasion, he was working the cornets so hard and long that I think I finally just stood up in desperation. I reached my cornet out toward him and said, "Well, then you show us." That was it, but stories sometimes are exaggerated. It broke the ice enough so that he stopped for a moment. There were *many* very good things about Revelli.

KW: When did this take place?

RC: I was at Michigan from 1940 to 1941. I presumably went there to study academics since the Williams School curriculum did not offer general courses. During the fall term, Vincent Bach came through to do a clinic and present his instruments. Revelli had three of us play a Williams trio while Bach was there. So, I got to know him more than I would have by just going up to his factory to say hello. During the winter, I received a telegram from Bach telling me the NBC Symphony was looking for a first trumpet player because Benny Baker, the regular first trumpeter, was having problems. He wired, "My suggestion would be that you come out as soon as you can."

The next day, I received another telegram with the same information from Simone Mantia, the personnel manager of the Metropolitan Opera House orchestra. He also suggested that I come to New York. He took me to play for the NBC personnel manager, Leopold Spitalny. After I played, Spitalny commented that I played nicely. He asked about my background

and what I was doing professionally at the time. I told him I was at the University of Michigan and he replied, "I don't think that's enough experience for this position," and he was right. It would have been a terrible mistake for me to be in that orchestra with no maturity to equal the responsibility, but I remember Mantia saying to him, "You do as you want, but if there is an opening at the Met, we're going to give him serious consideration." I happily went back to the university, and because Frank Elsass joined the Navy in 1941, there was an opening in the Goldman Band. I auditioned for Goldman, and that summer I played in his band. During that summer, the first trumpet position at the Met became vacant. Mantia contacted me and, after auditioning, I was given the job with the understanding that I would be coached by one of the opera conductors through the summer to learn the trumpet literature. In October, I started playing at the Met.

Leonard B. Smith, Ned Mahoney, Ray Crisara, and Edwin Franko Goldman (Larry Gordon)

KW: Were you being coached at the same time you were playing in the Goldman Band?

RC: Yes. The coaching amounted to meeting the conductor a couple of times a week and having him point out various passages in the repertoire I would play for him.

KW: How did you make contact with Simone Mantia?

RC: The World's Fair was in New York, and Mantia was playing in the World's Fair Band. Williams said one day, "I'm going out to see the World's Fair Band, and I would like to have you go with me. We're going to plant an acorn and see if we get a tree out of it." I remember those words so well. On that little visit, I met Del Staigers, the renowned cornet soloist, as well as some members of the Sousa Band, Mantia being one of them. Later, the Chief contacted Mantia and arranged a time for me to play for him. I remember playing part of a cornet solo, the prelude to the opera *Parsifal*, and some other excerpts from the opera repertoire. That is how I got to know Mantia and the reason he sent me a telegram about the NBC Symphony position.

KW: How long were you at the Met?

RC: From 1941 to 1942. I started my second season in the fall of 1942, but I was inducted into the Army in December 1942. I was first sent to Ft. Dix, New Jersey, and then I was transferred for a short time to an Army band at an infantry camp in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. In September 1943, I was sent to a Special Service unit stationed at Fort Slocum on a small island off New Rochelle, New York. The unit was made up of professional musicians who were mainly from New York City, Philadelphia, and Hollywood. They formed an ensemble similar to the Kostelanetz Orchestra, a full-size dance band enhanced by a large string section. The ensemble was primarily for public relations, supplying soundtracks for films, and performing concerts. I was released from the Army in February 1946, and at that time I decided not to return to the Opera House because I liked the musical variety and musical lifestyle that had developed for me while I was in the Army.

With that in mind, I talked to the personnel managers at the three major radio stations in New York. After doing a radio broadcast for NBC, I was appointed to their musical staff. At that time, the deservedly well-known Harry Glantz was the first trumpet of the NBC Symphony, and he always vacationed a few weeks during the summer. Roy Shield, the NBC personnel manager, told me I would play in place of Glantz during his vacation. Toscanini did not conduct during the summer months, but those four or five concerts with guest conductors all went smoothly and Shield told me I was going to be asked to join the symphony. With this, I became a full-fledged member of the NBC Symphony with Glantz on first trumpet and Frank Falcone playing second, with me playing associate first and third.

KW: I've heard wonderful things about Glantz' playing. What was it like playing in the orchestra with him?

RC: Well, you would have to be deaf and have the sensitivity of a statue to not learn from him. He was a sensitive and glorious player. He was very consistent, with a warm, big sound and great strength when necessary. He did everything well.

KW: Was almost everything being played on B-flat trumpet in the orchestra?

RC: Yes, the B-flat trumpet was the instrument of choice, particularly in the New York area, except for special situations.

KW: How long did you perform with the NBC Symphony?

RC: I was there until the end when Toscanini resigned and the orchestra was disbanded. Everyone on staff was given notice except for three people, including me, Neal DiBiase, the first trombone, and Jack Fulton, a fine flutist who could also double on various woodwind instruments. I was making considerably more money with outside commitments than I was at NBC.

KW: What kind of things were you doing at that time?

RC: Films, recordings, jingles, concerts, and radio and TV broadcasts. I think that if someone would describe me, the person would say I was a commercial legitimate trumpeter who could stretch a bit if called upon. I think that would sum it up.

KW: I know that you played under many conductors and arrangers during that time. Are there certain leaders or projects that are memorable to you?

RC: The NBC Symphony had a virtual parade of the best conductors in the world besides Toscanini, including Pierre Monteux, Eugene Ormandy, Fritz Reiner, and Guido Cantelli. Some of the high spots would be the *Victory at Sea* television series, *Project 20* at NBC with Robert Russell Bennett, and doing recordings with a variety of people including Bernstein, Stokowski, Robert Shaw, Paul McCartney, Alice Cooper, Kiss, and many Broadway cast albums. We also did films with Dimitri Tiomkin, Alex North, Victor Young, in addition to TV's *Wide, Wide World* with David Brockman. I especially liked the opening signature for solo trumpet for the television series *The Defenders,* and the many trumpet solo spots on *Wide, Wide, World.* As far as the jingle business is concerned, I worked for the major houses in New York with products from baby food to tires. There were so many good experiences, including the social side with colleagues, and hearing and working with innumerable wonderful players. It was a great way to make a living and I am so grateful for the opportunities I was given.

KW: Did you premiere Copland's "Quiet City"?

RC: No, Harry Glantz did that. I happened to be at the performance because the United Service Organization provided me with a ticket to the New York Philharmonic. Later, Harry told me he had conferred with Copland about the solo before it was ever done. The solo was originally written for just trumpet, but Copland added the English horn part after Glantz told him, "It's impossible. The endurance factor is too great, and it must be changed."

KW: Did you have the opportunity to play for Stravinsky?

RC: I recorded with him, and I did a performance of *L'Histoire du Soldat* in Carnegie Hall the night he was honored. That was a very special occasion.

Ned Mahoney and Ray Crisara (John Ware)

KW: Were you teaching in New York before your appointment at the University of Texas?

RC: Yes, I taught trumpet at New York University as an adjunct professor and held the same position at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut.

KW: Did you have a teaching studio in Manhattan?

RC: I did my teaching at home. If I had a studio downtown, I would never be at home, a lifestyle that is completely unworkable for me.

KW: What made you decide to go to Texas?

RC: I received a letter from Frank Elsass, whom I knew from the Williams School. He was teaching trumpet at the University of Texas (UT) at Austin. He was retiring and wanted my thoughts about coming to replace him. Unfortunately, my general habit is to look at a letter, put it on my desk, and forget to respond.

I received a telephone call from Daniel Patrylak, the director of the music department at UT. He was wondering if I was interested in teaching there. I asked him about the position, and he suggested that I come to Austin to talk with them. I went to the school and played with their quintet, taught a couple of lessons, and met some of the faculty and administration. I decided it would be a good move at that time in my life. My wife, Angela, liked Austin and agreed that, if I liked the whole idea, it would be fine – and it has been fine. The position included the rank of full professor with immediate tenure, two things I have found are very important. I have been awarded the title of Outstanding Teacher of the Music Department, and I hold an endowed professorship, the Frank C. Erwin, Jr., Centennial Professor of Fine Arts. I have also been elected to the Academy of Distinguished Teaching Professors. I have a healthy productive studio, love my work, and all of my students – so all is well.

KW: I would like to ask you about several important aspects of your life and career. What was the nature of your relationship with Vincent Bach?

Carmine Caruso, Ray Crisara, Jimmy Maxwell, and Harvey Philips

RC: I first met Bach at his factory in the Bronx when I had a trumpet mouthpiece underpart made to fit my cornet mouthpiece rim. The next time was at the University of Michigan and then during numerous trips to the Mount Vernon factory to select trumpets for the Army band and those to be sent to Russia during World War II. I always found him to be a helpful man who was proud of his work, as well as being honest and dedicated. He was a good friend who was aware of the needs of those in the profession, and he always found time to advise and evaluate. He left a healthy influence and a widespread legacy for all in the brass community. It was my good fortune to know him.

KW: With your extensive background in the recording industry, how do you feel about current technology that allows a musician to produce a performance without any of the flaws that might be heard in a live performance?

RC: There are many techniques to help produce an outstanding record. Overdubbing and tracking make anything possible. My first experience with that was on a record date featuring Ezio Pinza, the great basso from the opera world. He was recording an aria, and, for some reason, he was not doing his best work on the cadenza. After two attempts, the producer came out of the control room and said, "Don't worry about it. We'll record it later and lay it in its proper place." This has become the mode of the day. In this respect, there are now many records presenting performances that never really existed. It's a boon to the industry, and sometimes a safety net for the performer, but not quite honest as a final product.

My first experience with speed changes came while recording some NBC identification spots. The conductor/composer spoke to me about one short piece we were doing. He told me to play as purely as possible with no vibrato. I remember the spot finished with a B major scale done rather quickly with a hold on high B, just above the staff. He called me into the control room to hear the result. It was recorded at seven-and-a-half inches per second (ips) and would be finished at fifteen ips, resulting in a recording sounding one octave higher than the original. The result was that someone would hear a trumpeter play a very high B scale with a warm, relaxed, and

big finale, and then wonder who had accomplished such a performance, one that never really existed. I remember overdubbing a trumpet call in the opera *Fidelio*. It was for a documentary about the Austrian State Opera for NBC's *Project 20* series. The original trumpet player had a bit of trouble and Robert Russell Bennett, the conductor, solved the problem by having me record the call. He put it in the proper place and covered the tape that was done originally. At one time or another, all of us have profited from this technology, and I am certain there are those who had to correct my errors in the same way.

KW: There seems to be a lot of talk these days regarding the correct embouchure, and I was wondering about your thoughts regarding this topic.

RC: The best thing I can do is to recommend looking at the book *Chops* published by Charles Colin. It's a pictorial treatment of the working embouchures of many brass players throughout the country. The variety of them will be a surprise. The only consistency I find is firmness at the corners of the mouth. Writing ideas down is a troublesome thing and the moment that is done, someone will appear to refute your statement and with their playing, prove you wrong. Remember that we are all different from each other, and we do not have the same physical tools – so naturally we do not do anything exactly the same way. There is no *correct* way. With patience, discipline, and some responsible guidance, the embouchure will develop through an evaluation of what works and what doesn't.

KW: What are your thoughts regarding equipment?

RC: It seems some players are constantly changing mouthpieces and horns in searching for the right equipment. Some experimenting is healthy and educational, but it should not become an obsession that goes on and on. Williams always said, "Don't ever forget that it's 90 percent the person." I have never heard a terrible trumpet player pick up another trumpet and sound great, and I've never heard a great trumpeter sound poor on a different trumpet. There may be some extra comfort involved, perhaps a different timbre, but I always felt that careful, thoughtful practice would be the better route to take.

KW: Regarding your teaching, do you hear certain things lacking in students?

RC: Basically, patience, discipline, and dedication. One must gradually shape the tools of the trumpet language and then be challenged by materials that teach you how to use them. It is my experience that playing musically makes it easier to play overall. Good musicality requires sensitivity, analysis, organization, and intellect. All of this emanates from your brain. Think of it this way – the trumpet just amplifies the chaos in your head. Good performance

Ned Mahoney, Keith Winking, and Ray Crisara (John Ware)

results from eliminating that chaos. I spend a lot of time giving a line direction and using our language to make a product that is easy to listen to.

KW: Do you keep a practice schedule covering the basics?

RC: Yes. Over the years, I developed a routine that pretty much covered all the things I might be asked to play. I start with lip slurs done slowly with attention to sound, clarity, control, and covering all my practical range, then done at a faster pace for flexibility and control. Articulations follow, including all of the different ones in varied styles that I recall from study books and some that I have dreamt up myself. After doing scales and arpeggiating to all registers, I am ready to go to work. This phase of practicing depends upon the individual. Experimentation will help draw some conclusions, but the function of the routine is to prepare you for the day's playing in a consistent way so that you can function comfortably and securely.

KW: Is there more that you would like to add?

RC: Yes, there always will be! My three years at the Williams School provided all the formal study I had. When I was there with Williams as a real mentor, I also had Leonard Smith, Frank Elsass, Ned Mahoney, and Don Jacoby for inspiration and example. I learned a great deal. After leaving school, everyone that I heard play, talked with, and worked with became my educators and rounded out my musical life. Playing trumpet was a great and satisfying way to earn a living, and teaching is just as great. I can draw from my experiences and my acquaintances to hopefully be effective with my fine students as a mentor, taskmaster, friend, and educator.

About the Author: Keith Winking is associate professor of trumpet and jazz at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas and is a clinician for the Selmer Corporation.