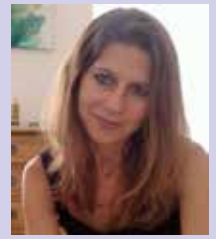


Zoltan Kiss in conversation with Kim Trail



Zoltan Kiss, Mnozil Brass trombonist, international soloist, Schagerland Latzsch Artist, Visiting Professor at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, talks to Kim Trail in Vienna.

KT When and how did you come across your first trombone?

ZK My brother's best friend played the bass trombone. That was the first time I knew they existed. Before then it was always trumpet, saxophone and drums. My brother is five years older and played the trumpet insanely well. He started when he was very young, was always practicing, recording already, and was even on the radio. His best friends played trombone, trumpet and clarinet and I was always hanging out with them. They were the stars of the music school at that time so it was very inspiring.

I started playing trombone myself when I was twelve. Before that I'd learned the piano at eight or nine. I then switched to clarinet as my goal was to play the saxophone. A year later I decided wanted to play a brass instrument. Trumpet is of course a cool instrument, but I didn't want to be in competition with my brother. He was such an inspiration that I didn't want to have to try to keep up with him.

KT What about the trombone appealed to you?

ZK I went to a concert where I saw people playing the trombone. The most interesting thing was the slide going in and out. I thought they were swallowing it. For me it was really mesmerising, especially the glissandos. It was the most natural thing to make kids laugh. So I thought, 'yeah, I want to try that out.' But I mainly listened to trumpet music.

KT When you first picked it up, how did it feel?

ZK I had to start with the euphonium. I wasn't very motivated because I wanted to play the trombone, but my arms weren't long enough. At first my teacher focused on playing on the mouthpiece. For a few months I didn't even see an instrument, just the mouthpiece. I practiced by singing what I had to play, then buzzing. It was a very popular technique. There was a brass quintet in the school which even played a piece only on mouthpieces. It was really amusing.



Zoltan Kiss.

You have to know what you want to play to be able to buzz - not just a mindless 'try this position, try this pressure and it will come out'. So I think this was very good and this is how I teach - first to sing, then buzz. That way you're not limited by your ability to play the instrument.

Then one day my teacher said: "Good, from next month you will start the trombone." Maybe it was unintentional on his behalf, but when I was finally upgraded and big enough to play, I had such respect for the instrument. I always had the trumpet in my head and my brother had given me a trumpet mouthpiece to buzz on. So I already had the idea to squeeze a bit higher and my first note was a B1! (laughs)

KT You grew up in Hungary, then later in Poland, both behind the 'Iron Curtain'. Do

you think this had any effect on your outlook?

ZK It was really competitive in Hungary. I remember at the age of 13, applying for one of the best music schools and there were 23 trombonists. I didn't get in, then went to the next one and didn't get in there either. It was only the fourth school I applied for that took me, which was the army music school. In a city of 1.7 million there were five specialist music schools, plus many more across the country. Back then everyone was competing to get one of the two or three places in the Conservatorium.

It's a very Spartan style approach. They push you in and if you survive, it means you are ok. And if you don't, you do something else. It's harsh, but it's also fair.

My brother was always playing and hanging out with other brass players, and I was the little guy looking up to them. So it all felt very normal to be with musicians. From very early on I was always pushing to play the first part, even though the guy on first was very good and a few years older. I was very driven and had a very healthy sense of competition.

I think it's possibly because of politics, of coming from a small country, with a weak economy and this feeling of Big Brother watching us, that gave us a sense of having to prove all the time that we were good. We weren't in a system where you think you will be fine if you are not good. We were taught that if you are not the best, you will not be fine. We felt we had to really good to be treated equally.

Our teachers said to us directly that if we were at a competition, as Hungarians we had to be better than everyone else in order to be taken seriously. It's different now and it's not unusual to see a Hungarian brass player in Germany. In Budapest I think there was this mentality that because we

come from a small country, we have to be the best at home to have a chance abroad. So our teachers were not very generous with their praise, but were always very critical. It was a punishment system: you do it well, or else. I hardly remember hearing anyone say 'well done'.

KT And that didn't discourage you?

ZK Not at all. Maybe they said something good, but that's how I lived through it as a kid. So I ended



Zoltan conducting a warm-up class of over 100 students in Valencia.



Zoltan with James Morrison and myself at the Schagerl works in Austria.

up studying in the army music school and doing a lot of marching music, just getting better and better. There were five trombonists in my class in the army school and in the other schools in Budapest there were 3-4 in each year. So you can imagine, there were over 10-15 trombonists each year in one city, plus others coming from other cities, making a total of around 20-25, all trying to get just two places in the Music Academy. Once they graduate, they have already gone through all the filters, so they can certainly play and are all trying to get a job in an orchestra. Maybe in a bigger country it's easier to find something else, but the smaller the country, the harder it is to get what you want.

When I was 15, my mum got a job in the Hungarian Embassy in Poland so I had to go with her. I was full of fire, wanting to be the best and wanting to prove myself. Suddenly I found myself in Warsaw, in a capital city with one of the best music schools, where there were only two trombone players in the whole school. I became the third. The other two were not ambitious at all. They played well, but they didn't feel that they had to prove anything to anyone.

So I went straight in and played the first part in the orchestra. Even though the others were older than me, I could play all the high voices. I was full of Hungarian temperament and playing at a much higher level than they were, already able to play pieces that they were only considering. But I was still not satisfied, because I was always comparing myself to the best.

KT *Were there particular players who inspired you?*

ZK My generation all had Christian Lindberg fever. My brother listened to a lot of Wynton Marsalis, because he was the all round best in every style. Personally I wasn't that in love with him, but I definitely got more inspiration from trumpet players. Maynard Ferguson and Bill Chase were to me the rock stars of jazz trumpet. Arturo Sandoval was another huge inspiration. From the classical players it was Maurice André, Håkan

Hardenberger and Sergei Nakariakov.

As kids we listened to the recordings of Lindberg, and I thought, 'Wow! Well if he can do it, I can do it.' I respected him very much, but at the same time, listening to his incredible technique gave me a green light to really push myself.

I was also really inspired by Arturo Sandoval's classical CD, which was technically insane. So this was while I was 15-16. We'd be driving somewhere in the car and listening to André, Chase or Ferguson, rewinding to the toughest places and listening to them a million times over. We were so happy listening to this stuff. It was mostly trumpet oriented, but of course all we trombone players were in love with Lindberg, Michel Becquet and Joseph Alessi.

Brass players always have to fight to prove that their instrument is a virtuoso instrument. Trumpets get some attention, but a trombone is just a trombone. So I really liked to listen to these guys who showed it was possible to turn a trombone into a virtuoso instrument.

KT *When did you decide you wanted to be a professional musician?*

ZK At the age of 14 I knew that my mother would most likely get the job in Warsaw, so I was already saying to my mates that I would graduate from the Chopin Music Academy. They all laughed at me, but I always said to myself that I would be one of the guys who makes it.

KT *Are your family musical? Where did your love of music come from?*

ZK My mother sings well. She used to sing solo parts in a choir and tried out for the Academy, but didn't make it, so she pursued another career. My mum's voice came from my grandmother, who was a coloratura soprano. She had a promising future, but then she met my grandfather and had my mum, so she stopped singing and became a housewife. Her uncle was the great baritone, György Radnai, who was acclaimed as the best Papageno of all time. So there's something in the bloodline somewhere.

KT *When did you start playing professionally?*

ZK It was really difficult to get a job. My very first gigs were during my high school years. I formed a funk band with my best friend, Bartek, who plays the electric bass. We played every Thursday in a club and it was always packed, so I got a lot of experience on stage - dancing, singing, entertaining people and playing funk tunes.

It wasn't all roses before my Mnozil career took off. I got a job in a southern Polish orchestra, but it didn't work out. Financially things were really tough for a long time, but that didn't stop me from being ambitious.

KT *How did you first hear of Mnozil?*

ZK A friend of my brother's was working with Schagerl instruments - the Austrian company which sponsors Mnozil - and was asked if he could organize an exhibition of instruments during Mnozil's tour to Poland. He had already translated all the flyers from German to Hungarian for an exhibition there, and now needed to translate them into Polish. So he asked my brother if he could help with the translations and my brother recommended me. I was really happy about it and thought it would be good to get in contact with the company and maybe start selling instruments in Poland.

I went to Krakow, where Mnozil was playing a concert at the Music Academy. I'd never been there in my life before and I'd never heard of Mnozil, although my brother had told me they were an insane band and I had to go and watch. My job was to stand behind the display table and tell people about the different instrument models, which I already knew about because I'd done the translations.

When I got there, the place was empty, apart from a big pile of instrument cases. While I was in the foyer, the band began to come in and I recognized them from a poster. I welcomed them to Krakow and they assumed I was working there. They asked if I could show them to the practice rooms. I asked the porter for the keys and he gave them to me! Even though it was the first time in my life I'd been in the building, I ended up opening the concert hall in Krakow for the band.



Zoltan, the soloist.

In the meantime Karl Schagerl arrived and I helped to unpack the instruments and hand out flyers. It wasn't possible to try out instruments in the foyer, so anyone who wanted to test one had to go into the concert hall. After everyone had finished, Karl handed me a trombone and said: "Here, try one." So I went onto the stage in the hall - it was still half an hour before the concert was due to begin - and began to play. There were others playing too, but suddenly there was silence. I looked around and realized that the band had been warming up on stage and now they were just listening to me. But I didn't know them, so I wasn't bothered. I just kept on playing then handed the instrument back.

When I heard the concert I was blown away. I thought, 'Wow, this is how you do it! This is how you make music with brass. You rock the house, fool around and entertain people.' I was an immediate fan.

Later that evening there was a dinner and I was invited along because I'd been helping with the instrument exhibition. I sat next to Karl Schagerl and after the others left, he asked me if I could see myself playing in the band. I told him I could only dream about something like that, but wasn't at the level to join a band of this calibre.

The next day there was a concert scheduled in Warsaw, at the Chopin Academy where I was studying. However, overnight, the Polish pope, Jean Paul II, passed away. All entertainment was cancelled, but the pubs were open.

We went ahead with the exhibition of instruments, but the concert was rescheduled. Thomas (Gansch) and Willy (Brandstötter) stopped me in the foyer and asked me to sing the Hungarian National Anthem. So I sang, really loudly, and people began to circle around, wondering what was going on. When I finished, Thomas said they would like to invite me to audition for the band, because they were one trombone player short and had already been performing for a few months with only six players. He gave me his card and said: "Start learning German." (My German is still not the best!)

I was so happy they were so positive about me. I did the audition and was the last one they heard. They said they would let me know in an email, but a couple of hours later I got a call asking me to join the band. After my trial year, we opened up a bottle of nice wine and they told me that when they heard me in Krakow they all



Zoltan giving a masterclass in Finland.

said: "Who the hell is that guy?" They had decided to go ahead with the audition to be fair to the others, but they were pretty sure they wanted me from the first time they heard me.

KT *What are the best, and most challenging, aspects of playing with Mnozil?*

ZK It took me a while to get used to touring. You think you can play, you think you can play by heart, but for me, Mnozil was the best professional school. I thought I was ready, but I had to work so hard. I had to practice through the night to get the material ready for the first concert. I learned that there is a huge difference between professional and semi-professional playing. I learned discipline and self-critique and I think I lost a lot of complexes during these ten years. We're like a family. Sometimes we have disagreements, but we have to work it out because we all have the same goal.

You get ready for one concert, then the second, fifth, tenth, then you think 'yes, where's my prize?' But there is no prize. No one is patting your back. It's your job. Then you see the calendar and there's another fifty coming up and you have to be as good every night. Before I even go on stage to play two hours from memory, I practise a thousand times. And until now I've played over 1400 concerts with the band. People ask how I'm so comfortable on stage. I was already comfortable, but now, I feel like the stage is my second home.



Zoltan performing with Spanish Brass.

KT *Do you ever get nervous?*

ZK Yes! Every time. I like that positive charge of excitement, that feeling of 'Let me go! Let me get out there!' I don't like waiting by the side of the stage. I just want to get out and do it. Being on stage or off stage are fine, but not being on the side. Sometimes when I know there are people I know in the audience, I feel more excited.

And now when I play to my heroes I really feel the pressure to be good. But I always tell myself they wouldn't come if I wasn't any good. I am the one who is setting standards. If I make a mistake I don't care, but I'm here because of how I play, so I just do my thing. And it's easy to say when you play very often. It's like training. If someone only plays a concert twice a year, then they may get nervous, but when you do it a lot, you get a routine.

I know my body. I sometimes get short of breath. In masterclasses I teach that you should put yourself in a stressful situation at home - stand on a chair, put your jacket on and do a few pushups before you play so you feel uncomfortable playing, because that's pretty much how you can feel on stage. You will learn how your body works and won't be surprised by the discomfort when you are on stage. Your heart might be a little jumpy, but you know the feeling already because you had it at home when you were doing pushups. This way, you can remain in control and know where you need to take more air. You don't want to play badly and have to explain why. You want to play well.

For me, Mnozil has been like a master's degree in becoming a professional player. Intentionally or otherwise they have given me a lot of knowledge, along with a lot of tough love, and also a lot of love. After ten years I can say that it was completely different to how I imagined, but without it I wouldn't be the musician I am. The better I got, the more humble and appreciative I became.

KT *Along with Mnozil, you have also put out your own solo CDs. Can you tell me a little about them?*

ZK "Slideshow", my first album, was like a business card - a showcase of all styles, so listeners can hear a real palette of colours. I play alto trombone with string quartet, modern music and a solo piece written for me. I play with a jazz trio, with a pop band and my own funk composition. I also play my signature piece, the Hungarian Schnapsody with Mnozil.

My second CD, "Rebellion", (released in September 2011) is with my good friend Jacek

Obstarczyk on piano and the American jazz trumpet player, Adam Rapa. Rapa is the star of Blast, a brass show that was very popular in America and Japan. I met him at the brass festival in Melbourne and was asked if we could perform something together. He's more a jazz player, but with classical technique. I'm more classical, but have a little bit of jazz. We found the best place to 'meet' was with the music of Piazzolla, so we recorded an album with trumpet, trombone and piano. Recording this CD was a real learning experience and I'm very proud of the end result.

The latest CD, "Non-Stop", (released in December 2014) is a recital for trombone and piano. Jacek and I have so much fun playing together. He is amazing and he's also my daughter's godfather. We fool around and he can follow me, change keys and there is really no limits with him. We share ideas, he arranges and composes and acts with me on stage. It's a really easy and fast work process for us. We're both really inspired by the great Victor Borge.

KT Can you tell me about your selection of music on "Non-Stop"?

ZK The classical trombone literature is beautiful, but some pieces are only interesting to trombonists. There are already some brilliant pieces in the classical trombone repertoire, a couple of which I would like to perform, but they are over-performed and have become standards which everybody plays. I don't want to repeat what Lindberg did. He did it really well and I want to listen to his version, not mine.

My wife, Skye, is a horn player and she encouraged me to check the horn repertoire as there are beautiful compositions which I could try to interpret because I have the right range. Jacek really likes Robert Schumann's *Adagio and Allegro* and convinced me to try it. It's really difficult to play it well, but I'm happy I did it and it's part of my basic repertoire now.

One of the guys in Mnozil joked that if I liked playing high and fast, why didn't I try *Carnival of Venice*? So I decided to try and after a few months I figured out how to get around all the tricky places which I thought were only possible with valves. So it's now become part of my standard repertoire too.

There are also some beautiful Schubert songs I've played so many times with Mnozil on stage and some unknown romantic and very virtuosic concertinos that I've never heard recorded before. So I wanted to show some new pieces and also adapt music originally written for other instruments. My goal was to impress not only by being able to play fast, but also beautifully. I didn't only want to impress trombone players, but also have fun trying other things.

Maybe some day I'll try something modern, but not now. I also do what I do in Mnozil,



Zoltan with the Millennium Jazz Orchestra.

which is comedy. There's one piece where we just have a laugh about doing an audition for an orchestra, so we made an arrangement where melodies just pop up which trombone players know very well because they practice them all the time for auditions. It's been very well received in France and Spain at trombone festivals.

Of course I also play *Hungarian Schnapsody*, which is my signature piece now. It was written for me by Leonhard (Paul) who made it as kind of a joke about a Hungarian gypsy violin player. He gave me the sheet music when we were on our way back from Mexico and said: "Just do your thing." There were only notes, no dynamics or other hints of interpretation. So I did, and it was really great. I think that's how I put myself on the map with that piece.

KT You have also recently released a new trombone. Why?

ZK There wasn't anything wrong with my old trombone, but I was offered the opportunity to personalize an instrument for myself and I thought, "Why not?" So I designed it to be how I like it. I made some parts lighter, I reversed some tubes and experimented with the aesthetics. As a kid I imagined how it would be to have a signature instrument and now I've had the possibility to design something for myself. I need to be able to play virtuosically, so I need something really light, with a light trigger action.

It's like having your own suit. There's nothing wrong with your old suit, but if someone can make something just for me, then that's even better. When it suits you, why not put your name on it? It's not just about what I play, but what I'm playing on. We made one model, called the Kissbone. I was very happy with it, but with time I became more engaged with solo invitations, so I needed a model which had an even quicker response. So the new Kissbone X is even lighter and is good for delicate pieces like the Schumann. I can really sing with it and don't have to put in so much effort. It took around two years to develop the Kissbone X. We did it really precisely, with 3D computer animation. The Schagerl team came to my home in

Vienna and really focused on the details of exactly what I wanted.

I did the same thing with the Lätzsch company. I was at a festival, talking about how I'd like to design a new mouthpiece as well. Not that there's anything wrong with other mouthpieces, but there were things I liked in one, things I liked in another, so I thought I would try to combine them. The Lätzsch company said they had the machines to help with that, so we started to experiment. It took two and a half years of master craftsmanship by the late Hans Mook before we ended up with a special mouthpiece. It's very light, with just a thin wood shell which keeps the vibration under control but doesn't choke the sound. Maybe we could have done it in one week, but it took time to get to the point where it worked really well. I am very happy with it and it really suits me, and if it suits anyone else too, then that's great.

KT Where to now?

ZK I plan to do more solo recitals with piano as I did on my latest album, "Non-Stop". I'd like to keep rocking the planet with Mnozil and perform with symphony orchestras as a soloist. I also hope to find a place where I can become a trombone professor and teach a class of my own. At the moment I'm a visiting professor at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, but I would also like to be in a situation where I am able to guide students right through the process - from A-Z.

My aim is to continue to be involved in as many different projects as possible, as this keeps me excited and stimulated as an artist. I also play in a group called the Warsaw Brass Trio. We have been very good friends since high school in Poland and won a few competitions while studying together at the Chopin Music Academy. I've also recently formed an ensemble called the Hungarian Trombone Connection together with eight successful Hungarian trombonists. Our goal is to inspire and spread positivity to trombonists of all levels, all over the world.