

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Alex Knutrud



Alex Knutrud is a Boston based trombonist, educator, and composer. He has performed with many orchestras across the United States, and has recently been acting as second trombone in the Bangor Symphony and the Southwest Florida Symphony. Alex maintains a studio of private students and regularly appears in masterclasses at colleges and high schools across the country. His students have gone on to attend prestigious conservatory programs all over the world.

Alex curates an online trombone pedagogy presence known as Trombone Guide, which serves the trombone community by providing free pedagogy resources, interviews, and articles written by himself and other trombonists. Alex did his formal studies at Ithaca College and Boston University, studying primarily with Jeffrey Gray and Toby Oft.

All of Alex's published compositions and educational works can be purchased from Ilan Morgenstern Publications.

How old were you when you began playing your instrument? Did you start playing another instrument before your current one?

I grew up as a violinist. I started very young, and really enjoyed it, but when 5th grade came around, I really wanted to play trumpet. I was a really forgetful kid, and missed band sign up day. The next day, I ran into the band teacher's office practically in tears, begging to play trumpet even though I missed the sign up. The band teacher told me I was too tall to play trumpet and had to play trombone. I was thrilled just to be there.

I kept playing violin and trombone until college. Playing a string instrument is really great for a brass player, particularly trombone. There are so many analogies between air and bow and they can really help you understand each other so much better.

What equipment do you primarily use?

I currently play a tenor trombone made by Bach in the early 1960's in the Mt. Vernon factory. I got it from my graduate school teacher, and it's a really special instrument. My alto trombone was made by Thein. The mouthpieces I play were made by Karl Breslmair in Germany and Christan Griego in Wisconsin.

What are some of your favorite highlights of your career?

There have been many amazing moments, but touring with famous pop artists and sharing the stage with classical trombone heroes have always been highlights. I remember feeling like a true rockstar performing with Evanescence on a stage of 25 thousand people, but equally special was getting together to read Rochut duets with trombone heroes if mine like Toby Oft and Colin Williams in Boston. Honestly, coming out of the pandemic, any music making is a highlight.

What are some of your favorite and most influential albums that you have heard?

I'll never forget hearing albums by Alain Trudel, Jim Markey, Joe Alessi, Toby Oft, Trombones de Costa Rica, Jennifer Wharton, and Jim Nova for the first time. They were so special. That being said, I actually had to re-purchase Alessi's New York Legends CD as a high school kid because I actually played it so many times the CD wore out. It has Ewazen's sonata on it- this may have been the first time I fell in love with the trombone as a career.

As a side note, the principal horn of Buffalo Philharmonic, Jacek Muzyk, has a CD with Bach cello suites for horn. Buy it and listen. You're welcome.

Who inspired you to play your instrument?

Choosing the trombone was an accident, but my high school teacher, Jamison Clark, was the reason I pursued it. He was INCREDIBLE as a teacher as well as as a trombonist. He's recently been nationally recognized for his work as a middle school jazz and classical teacher. Easily one of the most inspiring people I've ever met, and personally responsible for much of my personality, temperament, extroverted energy, and commitment.

What are some of the silver linings of the pandemic that you have found?

I began composing music again, something I always enjoyed doing but haven't had time for in years. To date, I've composed 14 pieces this year, mostly for trombone. Many of them are available for purchase through Ilan Morgenstern Publishing, and those that aren't will be soon. I'm actually just putting the finishing touches on my first Bass Trombone Concerto, which I cannot wait to share with the public!

What are your thoughts on the social justice movement in regards to music and music education?

Everybody deserves equal access as well as equitable support. It has always been a problem, and I hope that increased awareness will help us correct this course. Music has always been a tool for helping drive humanity towards progress, and it always should be.

For me, as a tall white guy with some pretty serious privilege it's important to listen with the goals of being receptive, patient, and supportive. I think that institutions are finally waking up to the vast body of work by composers who have been historically left off the stage, and I get really excited to hear music by new voices.

What are some of your favorite solos written for another instrument?

The Popper Requiem, originally for 3 cellos and piano, is gorgeous on Alto-Tenor-Bass, and I really enjoy vocal work transcribed for trombone.

In my personal practice, I find lots of value in playing fiddle tunes along with recordings. Learning Irish music by rote on the trombone is both incredible for technique and phrasing as well as a lot of fun.

Do you have any tips on becoming better at transcribing?

I've spent a lot of time doing this over this year and I've made plenty of mistakes. One of the best pieces of advice is to not over orchestrate. When arranging, don't be afraid of blank space.

How have your practice habits changed over the years?

I've grown dependent on a practice tracker. I track and plan sessions in 20 minute blocks, and I plan all my weekly practicing during an hour block each Sunday. This helps immensely.

As a young player, what did you struggle most with your playing?

High range. Ironically, it's one of my greatest strengths today, but it never came naturally. As it turns out, the thing you struggle with most will become something you grow to understand through practice.

Do you like to sing when you practice? Why or why not?

Yes. It's incredibly helpful. A pro tip- make sure you're using syllables that mimic what you want your trombone playing to sound like. You'd be shocked at how much singing "twAAAHH or woAHHHH" will leak into your playing.

What is your definition of success?

Success is getting slightly better at something each day. Small growth compounds over time. Your goal isn't to fix things instantly in one go, but instead to improve constantly. Remember, we all have the same 24 hour day, and there was a time when the greatest musicians alive today didn't know their scales. Everybody had to work constantly, slowly, for long periods of time.

What qualities do you think are important for being successful in life?

I'm convinced that on trombone and anything else, the single biggest factor in success comes from flexibility to change and grow. If you're not willing to challenge your paradigm of thinking, way of doing things, belief in something, or assumptions, you cannot grow past it. When I look at the most successful trombonists, they don't act on assumptions of how things work, but rather they constantly analyze and ask questions of their playing. They experiment and adapt to try and find easier, better ways to do things. They are always growing, and there is no ceiling to their growth because they are constantly challenging their preconceptions.

What do you want your legacy to be?

As I'm only 32, I can't possibly think about that yet, but I guess as good an answer as any is to get as many people as possible to love music just a little bit more through my playing, writing, and teaching.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

I'm a dedicated oil painter. I study painting like it's another instrument, and I love to hike with paints and plein air paint. I also take professional illustration and commission painting jobs on occasion. Beyond that, it's a balanced diet of free time spent composing, playing dungeons and dragons, exercising, reading, and answering trombone guide emails.

How do you stay motivated when you get frustrated or down? Do you have any tips to help stay motivated?

I may be the wrong person to ask, but at some point in my mid 20's I accepted that I was a pretty lazy person and that motivation would always be a problem, so I tried hard to remove it from my option list. My graduate teacher Toby Oft always would say the trick was to stay Inspired, and I find that focusing on inspiration helps me work, and that by working I act motivated. Sometimes, I also get "tough" on myself and remember that many people work jobs from 9-5 where they hate every second of it. The trombone is my job, so whether I feel like it or not, I'm here to do my job.

Do you meditate? If so, what benefits do you get from meditating?

I don't, but I do actively try and daydream whenever possible. This helps me stay creative.

With whom did you study?

My undergrad was a double major at Ithaca in music education and performance and my professor was Jeffrey Gray, Bass Trombone of the Rochester Philharmonic. He was incredible, perhaps the most underrated bass trombonist alive. I then took a bunch of lessons with Mark Kellogg and Steve Lange over a couple years while out of school teaching middle school and practicing.

I went back and did my MM in performance at Boston University with Toby Oft. Other teachers that I've studied with for extensive periods were Colin Williams and Amanda Stewart.

What qualities do you think are important in a student?

Interest, curiosity, drive to practice, kindness, and patience. Trust in your teacher is critical as well.

How much do you practice on a typical day?

I shoot for 3-4 hours, but I always work in 20 min blocks. Every three blocks, I take a break. I try and take a light day each 10 days or so (where I only play relaxed stuff in a very limited one octave range)

Do you have a website? If so, what is the address?

I do! www.tromboneguide.com is filled with literally thousands of pages of free materials. Check it out!

What are some of your favorite etude books?

I love the Weissenborn bassoon book, which is like the bassoon Arbans book. I also love the Cimera 60 lyrical studies. Finally, I've got to plug my new Alto pedagogy and etude book, AltoNative Methods.

Do you use any apps when you practice?

I put my phone on airplane mode when I practice, so usually not. However, when I'm trying to record just for my use, I'll use Snapchat and take a snap of myself playing, watch it back, and then delete it. It's a great way to use their server space and not your phone memory!

Do you listen to any podcasts and if so, which ones?

I like the Trombone Retreat Podcast run by my friends Nick and Sebastian, Neil deGrass Tyson's podcast StarTalk, and I also listen to fitness expert Shaun T's podcast, Trust and Believe. It's motivational, inspirational, and uplifting when you're having a bad playing day.

What are some ways to improve one's rhythm?

Learn the takedimi system. Google it and give it an honest hour before you decide you dislike it. It really helps a lot. I bought a rhythmic dictation book and will use

takedimi for a few lines each day just to practice. It's great on short breaks for your chops!

If you could go back in time and give yourself any advice, what would it be?

Never miss a warm up or arbans practice session in undergrad, and never be afraid to practice painfully slow long tones or slurs with a metronome and a mirror.

Where is your favorite place that you have traveled to?

My family is from Norway, and it's gorgeous there!

Who are your main influences in your life?

My dad.

How do you suggest balancing life with being a musician?

Accept deeply that you are only renting the trombone. There will come a day when it will leave you, and you won't be able to operate it as well. Be ready to pass it on to the next generation of trombonists, and do so gracefully. Music stays in your heart forever, but never allow yourself to wrap your identity up in trombone playing. The trombone has to serve the music.

Please give some tips for freelancing.

Ok here goes, long list here: folding stand in trunk of car always. Straight mute in trunk. 30 minutes earlier than you think to a gig always. Large bag of granola in trombone case music pocket at all times. Extra large shank mouthpiece in car (yes, I have both forgotten my mouthpiece because I was buzzing earlier and have had to lend the extra to other people) Envelope with 20 bill in trombone case at all times. 3 pencils in case at all times. Extra phone charger in case. Greet contractor with thanks each time. When subbing, phone on silent in trombone case always. Quiet long tones at gig and nothing else, especially nothing showy. No selfies/Instagram photos/"today's gig" posts unless it's a regular gig. Make a rule you're only going to hype other people, never gossip negatively. If you're asked to the bar/dinner after, go at all costs. No perfume/cologne. Bring a book in your case. Introduce yourself warmly to people sitting near you but don't distract them if they're warming up. Always check emails and try and respond quickly and politely. Buy 10 cheap white and black bowties online and put them in : car, backpack, trombone case, garment bag...etc.

What are your feelings about students majoring in music education versus music performance?

I'm strongly in favor of the double major. It's incredibly helpful for your playing, and will help ground you as a player as well as a pedagogue. Trombone is an apprentice craft- even if you don't need to teach because you're a successful performer, you should teach to pass on your knowledge so the art form can stay alive. An education degree only helps with this.

Is anyone else in your family a musician?

My family are actually mostly visual artists.

Where are some of your favorite places that you have performed?

Lots of places ..Symphony Hall Boston, Boston Esplanade, and Carnegie Hall come to mind first.

Do you have any suggestions for working on one's range?

I have a great set of routines for this up on my website.

Do you prefer to learn solos by ear or by transcribing or both? Why?

By ear is faster for me, but it's important to do both! They work different skills.

What advice would you give to someone interested in majoring in music in college?

Begin taking piano, theory, and ear training lessons on YouTube/with a tutor. Being playing fundamentals each day for at least 40 min.

What projects are you working on right now?

So many compositions, a recital tour, an album, and a new book!

What are some of your favorite books that are helpful for musicians?

My all-time favorite is a book called "Art and Fear". It's mainly designed for visual artists, but every musician should read it.