

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Alexis Smith



Alexis Smith is currently the Product Specialist at SE Shires. A graduate of The Juilliard School, Alexis has also received her B.M. from the Manhattan School of Music and is currently pursuing her doctorate at Boston University with Toby Oft. In addition to being the principal trombonist of the Southwest Florida Symphony Orchestra, Alexis has toured the globe with artists ranging from Adele, Evanescence, Sigur Ros, and Seraph Brass Quintet. In her spare time, Alexis boxes and is an award-winning axe thrower.

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

I began playing trombone when I was ten. I remember telling my mother that I wanted to play trombone and she told me to bring back something more 'lady-like' so of course I brought home a trombone. I spent my first two years practicing in the barn with our donkeys.

What equipment do you primarily use?

I currently play on a Shires Custom tenor that I won at Southeast Trombone Symposium in 2012--it's kind of crazy to think that now I work at Shires. I also use the Q35 Alto Trombone from Shires for whenever I play alto with an orchestra.

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

Resilience. I cannot stress that enough. Life can get very hard and very complicated and sometimes it seems as if there is no way forward, but you will make it work for yourself. Fight for what you want and be flexible, keep an open mind and say yes to things--put yourself into play, you never know what avenues may open up to you. Also, the music world is small--be nice to people. Some of the people I work with are the same mentors and peers I've had since I was a teenager.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

In my spare time, I have a variety of pretty bizarre interests. I'm an award-winning competitive axe-thrower and have recently started sparring--which is unbelievably cathartic! I also spend a lot of time in used bookstores and my house is starting to become overrun with books. I recently bought a theremin so I'm trying to figure out how to become the world's leading theremin (theremaster?)/ trombone player...I may have to invest in a looping pedal.

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

I think the biggest thing is to realize that progress isn't linear and that there will be ups and

downs, it's natural. That's probably the more hippie-granola way to look at it. What I really do is envision myself on stage unprepared and how nobody cares if I had a bad week or wasn't feeling 'artistic' that day. I think of that moment of reading a rejection letter or of standing on a stage and my name isn't the winning name called. This type of visualization forces me to put in those extra few hours because if a few hours stand in the way of me getting a job or winning a competition, then a few hours really aren't that big of a deal in the spectrum of things. In the long run, excuses don't matter. It sounds tough, but the realization that you are not special and that nobody is coming to save you, is actually quite freeing—it gives you the agency to be your best advocate and your success is largely dependent on how you prepare. Whether it's a job interview, a recital, or a concert, you should be excited to show off what you've prepared!

I feel like it's just a bit more overarching whether or not you decide to go the audition route or not.

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

I don't meditate per say, but I do do a lot of repetitive physical activity which forces me to spend a lot of alone time with my brain. I've found that when I need to work out particular problems (especially ones that seem initially insurmountable) long-distance running really helps me figure out my next steps. During some particularly stressful times in my life, I've ended up running marathons and ultra-marathons which also came in handy for when I wanted to eat my feelings.

With whom did you study?

I have been very fortunate with having incredible mentors! I have studied with David Finlayson, Per Brevig, Joseph Alessi, and Toby Oft.

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

I don't have a website, but you can follow me on Instagram: @thealexissmith

What are some of your favorite etude books?

Rochut! You can do so much with a Rochut book! It was the first etude book I ever bought and I still play out of it every day. You can transpose etudes into different clefs for range studies, you can learn how to stretch time and develop your musicality, you can use them to help with your alto or bass playing! They are incredible! I also really love the Bitsch book because it's just a lot of fun to work through, it's like a puzzle that will kick your ass!

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

I absolutely adore podcasts! I love listening to Twenty Thousand Hertz which is about sound design and I love Strong Songs which analyzes pop songs and why they're so good. I also love Behind the Bastards which highlights the dastardly deeds of the biggest bastards of history and current events. 99% Invisible and Radiolab are also other favorites.

How do you suggest balancing life with being a musician?

I think it's incredibly important to have a life outside of music—not only does it keep you sane, but also having outside experiences helps inform your craft of being a musician. Talk to people in other disciplines and learn about their processes—you'd be surprised what you can pick up from them!

Is anyone else in your family a musician?

I'm the only musician in my family, however my family adores music and I really think that their support and love of music was a huge catalyst for my becoming a musician. I remember as a kid, my parents taking me to see operas and classical concerts along with country concerts and Bob Dylan! I was lucky enough to have a ton of exposure to incredible artists from a young age, and that enthusiasm and love for music has influenced me deeply.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

This may seem ridiculous, but I really love what I am doing now! I am the Product Specialist for SE Shires and I absolutely love it. Whenever any of our artists or clients are looking to switch horns or tweak details, I get to work with them in designing their perfect horn—it's like a sound sudoku! I feel very lucky in that I get to work with the top brass musicians all over the world and that my colleagues are incredible and supportive. My job also allows me the flexibility to travel down to Florida where I play Principal Trombone in the Southwest Florida Symphony!

What are you listening to currently?

Wow, I listen to a wide variety of music! While I'm answering this questionnaire, I'm listening to a group called Son Lux, who I highly recommend! The lead singer of the group, Ryan Lott, was actually a composer at Oberlin, got super into sampling, and now has this incredible electronic group that I've loved for years—especially their albums 'Lanterns' and 'Brighter Wounds'! Aside from Son Lux, my listening list is absurd—it goes from Led Zeppelin to Radiohead to Rob Zombie and The Body which is this horrifying death sludge band that I absolutely recommend if you're ever looking to force secrets out of someone.

What projects are you working on right now?

I have a couple projects up my sleeve—I spent a large part of pandemic looking into acoustics, psychoacoustics, and the language of sound, and I believe that how we describe sound is an untapped field of study that I would love to delve further into over the coming years. Aside from that, we've got some pretty cool R&D things happening at Shires that you'll have to stay tuned to our social media for! I'm also completing my doctorate with Toby Oft, so all in all I'm pretty busy which is significantly more preferable than the alternative!

To become a great musician, what are things that you think a young musician should focus on when they practice?

I think the two main things that young musicians should focus on should be the same two things that a mature musician should focus on: fundamentals and keeping the

joy in practice. Fundamentals should be pretty self-explanatory, but keeping that initial joy and excitement alive is paramount to being a good musician. It's easy to get bogged down with daily minutiae and frustrations, but that defies why we went into music in the first place. Enthusiasm is contagious, being able to communicate that enthusiasm to an audience will ensure that you will have an audience for years to come.

What advice can you give about mental wellness?

Do not overlook mental wellness. I am a better musician and colleague when I am mentally well. Find something that is all yours and prioritize it in your day or week—don't be afraid to be a little selfish about self-care.

What life lessons have you learned through music?

The world is small, don't be a dick.

If you couldn't have a career in music, what would you do instead?

100% be a judge on The Food Network! That or the world's leading expert on cheese. I imagine that I would just give the thumbs up or down ala Gladiator and a crowd would go wild. I think I would also strive to make as many cheese puns on the show (yes, I envision my cheese judging as a reality show) as possible...thinking about it, I'm sure my tv star stint would be brie-f.

How could we make music education better?

I'm going to change this question a bit and address music education as more music awareness as a whole. I think we need to make classical music more accessible. Simply put, there's a lot of ass in classical music. I have a lot of ideas about this that I would love to talk to someone with over a beer, but I think at the end of the day, classical music tends to alienate new-comers and audiences; whether it's aggressively shushing someone who claps between movements or asking audiences to refrain from talking or moving or showing any signs of life, we need to stop taking ourselves so seriously and think of a performance more as us, the musicians, being

ambassadors for our instrument and industry, and in doing so, sharing our love and enthusiasm to a wide variety of people.

Do you have any tips on forming a chamber group?

There are plenty of incredible players in the world, but it's important to build a group where people are flexible and can work together in a respectful and intelligent way. Think of a chamber group as a relationship where you all can complement and build upon one another. You will likely spend a lot of intense time with your chamber group so find people that you also enjoy spending time with.

What is your favorite food?

I am very food motivated. So favorite food? Yes, I like food.