

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Austin Pancner



Austin Pancner is the founder and CEO of The Functional Musician, an online coaching company that helps classical musicians live and perform without pain. During his graduate studies, after switching to bass trombone, he struggled through a three year injury cycle that led him down a path to create a health and wellness system that can help musicians overcome tension, pain, or injury and sustainably support their lifestyle and career path. As a health and wellness professional, he holds several accredited certifications from the National Academy of Sports Medicine, Precision Nutrition, and Functional Movement Systems.

As a bass trombonist, Austin holds a position at The Orchestra Now. He has regularly performed throughout the midwest in a variety of genres, including orchestral, brass quintet, big band settings, wedding bands, and the occasional musical. Throughout his career, he has also performed internationally in Japan, The Dominican Republic, and Prague. Currently, Austin is completing his doctoral studies at Indiana University with an expected graduation date of Fall 2022.

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My injury story

The year was 2016. I just started a new degree, switched from tenor to bass trombone, and was ready to make the most out of my last 2 years at Indiana University. Not going to lie, life was great! I was practicing 3-4 hours a day, participating in three different ensembles, two different audition prep classes, and I was gearing up for a major dream audition as well as a recital.

But shortly into my preparation and education, **something started changing.**

I started experiencing muscle tightness, a little burning, some tingling, a few occurrences of sharp pain, and some dull pain. It wasn't out of the ordinary, but something didn't feel right. But I was focused,

dedicated to music, and shoved these symptoms to the side. Fast forward a few weeks and I am sitting in jazz band, tooting on some low notes as we sight read pieces for an upcoming season of performances, and as I bring my horn up after a short few measures of rest...

BAM!!

Searing pain radiated throughout my left arm.

I tried to lift my horn back up, but my arm couldn't bear any weight.

The pain was immense and luckily for me, the drum set to my right masked my painful scream. I composed myself the best I could and walked out of rehearsal.

Little did I know, this would start a 3-year injury cycle that would debilitate my progress, mental health, and lead me down a dark path.

As I went through my first rehabilitation, I was able to keep playing using an Ergobone. This allowed me to continue my education, however consistent improvement was hard as this ergonomic device brought its own unique technical challenges.

After my forearm recovery, I quickly built back up to around 3 hours of healthy practice a day, but quickly fell back into old habits and developed a left and right shoulder injury. **During this recovery, I tried a many different therapy options** - regular doctor visits (most of them told me to find a different career path or choose a different instrument), Physical Therapy, Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, and regular chiropractor and massage therapy visits. I would make some improvements, but would consistently fall back into old habits, regular pain, and more confusion about what was going on.

Even though I had all of this help, I also still felt isolated, misunderstood, and stuck. At this point, after 2.5 years, **I was ready to quit.** Determined not to drop out of school without a plan, I decided to get certified in personal training and corrective exercise as a side hustle until I figured out what I wanted to do with my life.

During my certification process, I started to apply the concepts to myself in order to adequately learn the material and crazy enough, I started to make some huge shifts! My posture improved, I had more energy, the pain started to subside, and within the span of 6 months, I was able to start practicing without pain! Long story short, add in a few more certifications and fast forward through three recitals and regular regional orchestra cycles, **I have been injury free for over 3 years!!**

As a result, I have dedicated my life to guiding and helping other musicians overcome their tension, pain, or injuries. As a coach, I believe the body has a miraculous way of healing itself if certain needs are met. I also believe that musicians need to have a safe space to grow and talk about their experiences.

I believe part of my role as a coach is to empower musicians to take control of their health through education, movement, and sustainable action.

Disclaimer: I do not treat or diagnose any medical condition as I am not a medical professional, but through my coaching and evidence-based methods, I've helped musicians rebuild their health and wellness

foundation and naturally overcome a variety of overuse injuries including tendinitis, bursitis, carpal tunnel, thoracic outlet syndrome, lower crossed syndrome, and chronic pain.

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

I started playing trombone in 6th grade! This was the first time I played a musical instrument! I had a choice between tuba, baritone, and trombone and I couldn't resist the fun tube slidey thing I awkwardly had trouble holding!

What equipment do you primarily use?

I play on an Edwards 454-V-E with a g-valve. I play on Greg Black Mouthpieces, usually on a 1 1/8g.

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

Christian Lindberg's *Romantic Trombone Concertos* had a huge influence on my early musical journey. I probably listened to this album on repeat for my entire high school education.

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

I have found the pandemic to be a great time to step back, focus on my physical and mental health. I also found it to be a great time to reflect on my priorities - what is important to me, where do I want my life to go, and how do I want to make this world a better place.

How have your practice habits changed over the years?

I find that as I grow older, my practicing becomes more effective. Because of my injury history, I have a huge focus on alignment, breathing, and making things as easy as possible.

What is your definition of success?

My definition of success can be defined as spreading love, positivity, and hope through music and health and wellness. As long as I am living my life through impact, I will feel fulfilled and successful.

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

I think it is extremely Important to be open to growth and change. As we grow older a human tendency can be to get stuck in our own thoughts, patterns, and habits. If we are constantly pursuing growth, getting out of our comfort zone, and reflecting inward on a regular basis (as well as owning your own definition of success), I believe that success and happiness is going to be a by product of your life.

What do you want your legacy to be?

I want to be remembered as someone who made an impact in this world. I also want to be remembered as someone who was caring, failed often, and constantly helped people grow and reach their potential.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

I LOVE bass fishing, hiking, playing video games, board games (if you have never played Wingspan, you are missing out!) spending time with my fiancé, and drinking a nice IPA. If you want to get into IPAs I would check out Sierra Nevada Hazy Little Thing IPA, Zombie Dust, or Dogfish Head.

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

Whenever my motivation starts to stray, I double down on my mental health. I'll increase my daily meditation, take more walks, and journal my thoughts. I'm generally an over-thinker, so the biggest challenge for me is to stay grounded and recognize why I am feeling down. Am I exhausted from constantly doing work? Am I resisting the motivation because I am scared of failure? Or maybe I have lost touch with how the activity I am doing is connected to my bigger vision or picture of life. I find that if I can take a step back and focus on my mind and ask these types of questions, my motivation or feelings of "not constantly working guilt" goes away and I can get back to focusing on living in the moment.

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

YES! I love meditation. I meditate daily for 20-40 minutes everyday in 20 minute blocks. I find that daily meditation helps wake up me, increases my focus (super important as someone who as ADHD), mental energy, helps me stay grounded in my thinking, and helps me develop a deep awareness of the emotions I am feeling in any

given moment. I also find that as an over-thinker, meditation is a great way to turn off the "thinking switch" in my brain that generally likes to pop on during the evening or in bed.

With whom did you study?

I studied with Paul Von Hoff, M. Dee Stewart, Carl Lenthe, Denson Paul Pollard, Brian Hecht, and Nate Zgonc.

What qualities do you think are important in a student?

I think some important qualities include curiosity, willingness to fail, willingness to ask for help, and a DEEP dedication to learning about yourself. I find that the more I learn about my tendencies, personality style, what I want with my life, and what is important to me, the easier it is to learn and improve in any given skill.

How much do you practice on a typical day?

I practice 2-3 hours in a given day. If I have an audition or recital coming up, I'll add an extra hour or two of mental practice combining visualization, singing, and score study.

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

www.thefunctionalmusician.com

Instagram handle: @thefunctionalmusician

What are some of your favorite etude books?

I love Kopprasch and Bordogni. I find that I can attack all of my fundamental and musical weaknesses between these two books if I approach my practice in a creative way.

Do you use any apps when you practice?

I use tonal energy most of the time, but will occasionally listen to backing tracks in particular keys depending on what I am working on.

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

PLAY CELLO! Just kidding! I would tell myself it's okay to fail and achieving a high level of success takes hard work consistently done over a long period of time. If you can find a way to enjoy the journey and feel fulfilled while doing so, everything will fall into place.

Where is your favorite place that you have traveled to?

I was fortunate enough to travel to Prague for a month during a summer festival in 2016 with Prague Summer Nights. I experienced life in the big city as well as the ins and outs of some of the outlying towns. The food, the beer (was light, refreshing, and oddly hydrating!), and the sights were amazing. I also was privileged to hear the Prague Philharmonic play a concert of Dvorak repertoire! I also have deeply rooted Czech heritage and felt a sense of belonging during this life changing experience.

Who are your main influences in your life?

My grandfather is an inspiring man. He encouraged me to pursue music, follow my dreams, and always chase impact. He is 85 and as a psychiatrist, still works 12 hours a day trying to help people. He has taught me many life lessons and something that I've noticed as I've grown older is how truly happy, fulfilled, and deeply passionate he is about his work and family.

How do you suggest balancing life with being a musician?

I think it is important to remember that as musicians we can have multiple identities. I've fallen into the trap of chasing the musician grind mindset and found myself feeling unfulfilled, unbalanced, and extremely burnt out on several occasions. You can LOVE music and still have a life where you do things that resonate with your soul. The beautiful thing about stepping away from any skill or passion, is that you can improve quicker, consistently feel more fulfilled, and experience different emotions and journeys that can directly influence your art and music making.

How tips would you give to a young musician that wants to become a soloist?

Start building a library of music of your favorite soloists. Listen, listen, and listen! If you are able to build awareness and distinguish between different musical expressions and interpretations, that is going to greatly influence your musical vocabulary and voice.

I would also start build a library of solo repertoire. This is going to naturally expand and grow as you grow older and continue through your career, but being prepared and having certain pieces that show off your strengths will only help you if you get a last minute call to solo with a group or organization!

What are you most proud of in your life?

I'm proud of myself for showing up for myself, embracing failure, accepting responsibility for my past actions, and growing as a person.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

I see myself performing in a major orchestra, continuing to grow the impact and reach of The Functional Musician, and having a beautiful family with two kids and a Sheltie.

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

Amazing! Go and do all of things. When you are deciding on a school, do your research! But what does that mean? It means asking yourself hard questions and getting clarity on where you want to go and why you want to go to college. For example, do you see yourself teaching high school? College? Being a performer? Or maybe you want to experience music on a broad scope - such as business, jazz, or other creative pursuits. Once you have clarity on where you want to go and why, start looking at schools that specialize and offer curriculum around these topics. Some schools are great for music education, while some are great for performance. Some are great for business and music, while others are great for jazz. It's also Important to have conversations with your potential lesson teachers to see if you are both a good fit (for each other, not just for you!). You will be spending a lot of time together of your undergraduate career and you don't want to be In a situation where you have to change schools because or a personality or pedagogical conflict.

What are you listening to currently?

I am listening to my own playlist of pop, rock, alternative, and almost always - Lucas Graham.

What non-music courses in college helped you with being a musician?

Mindfulness/Meditation, anatomy, financial, and a business course.

What projects are you working on right now?

I don't want to give any spoilers, but some exciting things are in the works, stay tuned!

Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?

Take this with a grain of salt, as I have not won a major orchestra position (yet...!). For me, the musical preparation is important, but something that I think gets overlooked is taking care of your mind and body. I've taken 8 professional auditions (before my injury cycle) and 6/8 times my body and mind held me back more than my playing capabilities that day. If you are able to be in control of your thoughts and have your body feel consistently great over your preparation period and audition day, imagine how confident you are going to feel presenting your audition material!

Do you ever get anxious for a performance? What advice would you give for dealing with nerves?

Of course! I struggled (and sometimes still do if my habits aren't in place) with debilitating performance anxiety. I have found that daily meditation, a consistent warm up routine, visualization, and nutrition to play a huge role in my ability to down-regulate (lower your heart rate and nervous system in a fight or flight situation) and focus on the musical product.

What advice can you give about mental wellness?

It's okay to feel scared and ask for help. Therapy is a great tool and can be a life-changing experience. I would also say the more you learn about yourself the better you will be able to take care of yourself. Mental wellness is a lifelong journey and it is always best to act before things fall apart.

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

I think I still would be an online coach. I love what I do and I would still focus on helping people live their best life. More specifically, I would probably be helping people w/ADHD manage and thrive in their life.

Who are your favorite composers?

I love Dvorak, Brahms, Bruckner, and Shostakovich. From a modern perspective, I LOVE John Williams and Hans Zimmer.

What advice can you share about physical wellness?

Physical wellness is something that is so easily neglected. I think It's important to recognize 5 things:

1. The body is always adapting to it's surroundings. This has profound implications when we are thrown in repeated situations where we aren't doing much exercise or movement. Over time, your muscles will start to atrophy, meaning they will break down and adapt to the lack of stimuli you are giving your muscles. MOVE!
2. The body was meant to move! Aim to move a minimum of 15 minutes a day. Exercising can be about appearance, but a much more sustainable mindset is exercising to FEEL great so you can perform and live like YOU want.
3. The physical and the mental parts of the body are deeply interconnected.
4. Gravity is a constant force that is always pulling down, therefore, your postural alignment (posture, organization, alignment, stacking, however you want to think about it) matters! Your body does have an amazing ability to adapt and take load, but over time, the body will break down in unorganized and instable positions.
5. In my opinion Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, and other movement modalities are fantastic ways to develop body awareness, which is essential to the longevity of your performing career. However, it is also important to recognize that these modalities are meant to supplement movement and physical exercise in your life, not replace it.

What is your favorite food?

Sushi rice w/ raw salmon + tuna with a side of seaweed salad. I could eat this meal everyday and die happy.

