

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Dr. Brian Wendel



Brian Wendel joined the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra as Principal Trombone in 2017. Winner of the Music International Grand Prix Winds and Brass category (2021), Online Trombone Competition (2020), Alessi Seminar Asia Competition (2018) and two International Trombone Association competitions (2014 and 2016), Brian has performed with the Seattle Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and the New York Philharmonic Brass Ensemble and has appeared as a soloist with the Vancouver and Prince George Symphonies as well as the Juilliard Trombone Choir. He has worked with conductors Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Valery Gergiev, Bramwell Tovey, Esa-Pekka Salonen, David Robertson, Alan Gilbert, and Jaap Van Zweden, among others, performing and recording in venues around the world. Brian received his bachelor's degree from The Juilliard School, where he was a scholarship student of Joseph Alessi.

Brian has performed as a solo recitalist and worked with students at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, Alessi Seminar Asia, and University of British Columbia (UBC) School of Music, to name a few. In 2019 Brian was appointed as Adjunct Professor of Trombone at UBC, and has since also been an Associate Instructor for the Alessi Seminar Asia. Brian's debut solo album, "This is Home", was released on June 18,

2021, and it features music representing his 'musical home' through works by Scriabin, Bach, Crespo, Prokofiev, and himself.

In the realm of chamber music, performances have taken him to venues including the United Nations; the Russian Embassy in Washington, DC; Madison Square Garden; and Rogers Arena. He enjoys performing with the VSO Brass Quintet and engaging with audiences through a more intimate setting. As a student, Brian spent summer months as an Orchestral Fellow at the Music Academy of the West; Pacific Music Festival; American Institute for Musical Studies in Graz, Austria; the National Orchestral Institute; and the Alessi Seminar, and he was an inaugural member of the 2013 National Youth Orchestra of the USA. In summer 2019, Brian was invited to return to Pacific Music Festival as a distinguished alumnus to take part in the festival's 30th anniversary performances of Mahler's Eighth Symphony.

Brian is passionate about working with students of all ages and backgrounds. In 2018, Brian worked with students at the Alessi Seminar Asia and returned in 2019 as Associate Instructor for the seminar. Since joining the VSO, he has enjoyed teaching at VSO's orchestral training program, Orchestral Institute, as well as through VSO Connects, an outreach program for high schoolers in British Columbia. The year 2017 marked the beginning of many collaborations with VSO Bass Trombonist, Ilan Morgenstern. Together they formed Vancouver Trombone Week (VTW), a seminar on trombone performance and education, as well as Holiday Slides, a collaborative holiday performance between all willing trombonists of the lower mainland and Vancouver's finest professional trombonists. As a duo, Brian and Ilan have taught at the UBC's Brass Fest and have appeared on various news outlets, such as CTV Morning Live and CBC Music, recognized for their influence on the Vancouver trombone and music education scene.

Starting on the piano at age six and the trombone at age nine, Brian studied both classical and jazz music from an early age. Growing up in the rural town of Conway, Massachusetts, he was a student at the New England Conservatory Preparatory School in high school. Some of Brian's early musical mentors include David Sporny, Norman Bolter, Andy Jaffe, and his dad, Renato Wendel. Outside of music, Brian loves to travel whenever and wherever he can and has been enjoying the sensational nature of British Columbia with his wife and stellar violist, Karen!

Please feel free to visit his website, brianwendelmusic.com, for more details and sound bytes!

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

I picked up the trombone at age 9, right at Christmas time when I got the instrument as a gift. I begged my parents to play! I previously had been learning piano starting at 6, and continued that through high school.

What equipment do you primarily use?

You'll see me playing my Edwards T-396 99.9 percent of the time, and I adore the warm, velvety sound it helps me to achieve, as well as the ease of playing all kinds of repertoire that it provides me. When I play alto trombone I use a Yamaha Custom with a gold bell—I have yet to see another model like that because it might be a prototype. I also play the Griego Alessi mouthpiece for tenor and alto.

What are some of your favorite highlights of your career?

Some moments I'll never forget are my first few Bolero performances. Even though the nerves give a fight or flight boost, I love that feeling when everything is in slow motion and I can express in a way that's unique to performing live in that moment. Other highlights include the emotional moment I got selected for my job in Vancouver, knowing my dream had come true. Memories I cherish are

my times in Japan at Pacific Music Festival, Santa Barbara at the Music Academy, and on tour in Russia and London with the National Youth Orchestra and Valery Gergiev. Most recently, I recorded my first solo album during a week I'll never forget—my boy was born the day before the sessions began!

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

This is nearly impossible to answer since I've been influenced by countless amazing players. If I had to choose one trombone album that speaks to my soul the closest, I would say Achilles Liarmakopoulos' *Tango Distinto*. I love the trombone in that setting, and his mastery of the Piazzolla style is phenomenal, not to mention his technical mastery!

Who inspired you to play your instrument?

I wanted to play trombone because I wanted to be just like my dad, who played in his youth, and *his* father, who played as well in the community bands of Switzerland. I never met him since he passed at an early age, and I felt a connection to him that way.

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

Knowing that I would have been in China when my son Desmond was born was a scary thought. So having so much time to be with him as he was born and in his first year was priceless. I also got to really focus on some solo projects, like recording my first solo album, and taking part in some online competitions.

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

Many others can speak to this far more eloquently than I can. We have a major lack of diversity in classical music, and it's a shame that there remain countless underserved and underrepresented communities, especially in an area as potentially powerful as music. Any and all incentives to improve these things in classical music are necessary and terrific.

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

My greatest technical challenge was soft and legato playing. I didn't understand just how physical the instrument was, and how proactive I had to be to move air

in and out of the phrases, up and down, front to back. The instrument is starving for air, and it absolutely loves when we fuel it! I also needed a lot of coaxing in terms of performance mentality. I've read the audition books and those were great, but what made the biggest impact was the iPhone app, Hypnosis for Musicians! It sounds kind of silly, but it positively reprogrammed my perspective of performing.

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

Absolutely! Even though I'm not a trained singer and practically none of us brass musicians are, singing is the path of least resistance to making music. The music is in our mind and soul first, and then it comes through our instrument. Bringing music to life with our own voice and without the complications of an instrument is liberating and informative. We can all sing a little bit, or at the very least we can hum. On top of the musical expression, it reveals answers to: do we actually know what the pitch is? Is our melody flat-lined or engaging? I absolutely love to encourage my students (and myself) to let loose and not be afraid to look silly! If you can sing in front of someone else, playing the trombone is also a whole lot more forgiving. Practicing in the shower is highly recommended.

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

I recommend an optimistic growth mindset and a humble attitude for a happy and successful life. Have a generous spirit aimed at helping, cherishing and learning from others. I find that a self-absorbed, egocentric attitude leads to disappointment because it requires a world that is revolved around the individual, and that simply does not exist. If you lead a life where you put in honest work, try your best, share in the joy of learning from others and also learning from your own failures and shortcomings, you will find much more happiness in your work, and you will be able to handle the imperfect journey to success. Also, your success in work-life will feel insignificant if your personal life is all out of sorts, so it is essential to take care of your mental and spiritual health first.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

Playing with my one-year-old, cherishing family time, visiting the beach, finding views, occasionally watching TV, and being creative. Spare time seems to elude me when I'm constantly trying to realize the next creative project on my mind.

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

I'm a goal-oriented worker and learner. Basically, I always need an end-game in order to get myself moving and keep things rolling. If I'm frustrated or down, there are always moments when I question my goal, but there's something in my mind that will not allow me to quit. I always have to see the end result of something and know that I uncovered every stone in the process. I guess I always go all in, and if I'm stuck in a rut I may need to come back to it a few days later. Removing myself from the process gives me a fresh perspective. If someone is lacking motivation it could be caused by a whole number of things. Assuming they are in good mental health, they should ask themselves what they care about most. I think everyone fights the notion of simply being a cog in a wheel of a big machine, and everyone wants their work to be meaningful. My recommendation is for them to figure out what their greatest talent is and what they enjoy doing, and find a way to apply themselves to doing that. If they're in a small motivational rut and not an existential one, I would say, make a project and set a timeline! Goals are everything.

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

Absolutely. For me that meditation is prayer, and it is my lifeline. It gives me purpose, grounds me, relieves stress, and reminds me to be thankful for the magic of being alive and furthermore, to be grateful for this life as a musician. I meditate/pray about all things big and small.

With whom did you study?

At conservatory I studied with Joe Alessi for four years, and prior to music school my teachers were Dave Sporny (ret from UMass Amherst and Interlochen), Norman Bolter (ret from Boston Symphony), Richard Hanks, and my dad, Renato Wendel! I'm sorry for all the frustration I put them through, but I promise them I think of their teaching every single day!

What qualities do you think are important in a student?

Curiosity, humility, attention to detail, and an open mind!

How has being a musician changed you as a person?

I can't see my life without music, so just about in every way...my pursuit of music has brought me around the world, it's been at the root of friendships, taught me about discipline and progress over a long stretch of time, and most of all it's brought an intangible dimension of sound and singing into my life each day I play.

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

brianwendelmusic.com! I'm also on the usual platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube.

What are some of your favorite etude books?

My favorites are Rochut, Arban, Schlossberg, Brad Edwards Lip Slurs, and Blazhevich Clef Studies.

Do you use any apps when you practice?

I love Tonal Energy Tuner and for mental preparation, Musician's Hypnosis. It honestly changed my life by adjusting perspective of performing and performance anxiety.

What are some ways to improve one's rhythm?

Rhythm is internal, and has to come outside of instrumental practice. If your pulse is inconsistent I would recommend closing the doors, listening to rhythmic music, and dancing, clapping, or singing to the beat. Even though classical instrumental performing is so removed from dancing, rhythm is expressed as a physical sensation, and a good performer extends that sensation through the instrument. Aside from that, I use the Starer 'Rhythmic Training' book to sing, conduct and clap simple rhythms. In your instrumental practice, have a metronome at the ready at all times.

Where is your favorite place that you have traveled to?

I love each different place I've been to for its uniqueness, but my favorite places have been Japan, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, and England. My travel bug is biting me very hard now and I can't wait to get on the move again.

Who are some of your musical heroes?

All of my teachers, including but not limited to Joe Alessi, David Sporny, and my dad, Renato Wendel, have been so impactful. On top of them, Achilles Liarmakopoulos, Jorgen van Rijen, Canadian Brass, and Chris Thile!

How do you suggest balancing life with being a musician?

That's a daily challenge, and it does change each day. There are seasons of life when music can be your absolute priority, and there are seasons where other things come first, even if your music is still part of your life. I never let my horn go untouched for more than a few days, but sometimes in periods of rest I'll usually do a simple maintenance routine for about 1.5 hours.

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

The most memorable places include Royal Albert Hall in London, Kitara Hall in Sapporo, Suntory Hall in Tokyo, Carnegie Hall, and Boston Symphony Hall.

Do you practice visualizing yourself performing?

Yes! I use this technique when preparing for something stressful like an audition, a solo performance, or a recording. I try to envision physical sensations like a calm heart rate and dry hands, and more importantly, feeling immense joy while sharing the music I worked so hard to prepare. I want to feel collected, focused, and remember to breathe. I also visualize things like feeling excitement as I walk on stage, and also seeing myself from the audience, performing in a meaningful and captivating way.

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

Have defined short and long-term goals. Being a music major, at least in my experience of being a performance major, allows you a lot of unstructured time. If you have current and future goals that are in the forefront of your mind it will be easier to structure that time and use it productively. Also, understand that you are lucky to be learning about music, so remember why you chose this path and enjoy it! Music school can be stressful at times with performance exams and seeking 'perfection'. Remember that the beauty of music is a gift to be shared,

not an fear-instilling opportunity to be dreaded. Also, not every day is going to be the most exciting practice or performance. The disciplined act of practicing every day will procure a bond with music that strengthens day after day, so it should hopefully always become more fun in the big picture! I can't even imagine my life without the trombone to be honest. Last but not least, while maintaining your visions for the future, also be flexible about the circumstances of your success. Have an open mind to new opportunities!

What projects are you working on right now?

I'm doing the odd bits remaining for my album promotion; I'm contributing to a book (info will be released sometime soon); and I just started making plans for an app. That's a new venture that I hope to share about sooner rather than later! It seems like my ventures always involve learning new skills on the job.

Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?

So many, it would take a lot to list them all here. My overall advice is give yourself plenty of time to get to know the music in and out. Preparation is the best way to defeat performance anxiety. I'm a huge proponent of mock auditions—even ones for your phone that take five minutes. Imagining your performance and simulating the feeling of being watched is so crucial in my mind.

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

Absolutely! I have learned that nerves are a wonderful thing however! If you weren't nervous before a performance, you wouldn't comprehend that the event is special, and also your adrenaline wouldn't be able to help you achieve greater feats than on your typical day. Nerves are to be embraced as excitement. Focus on your breath as much as possible, and make the decision to enjoy the moment! Share music as a gift, and accept that anything can happen, good or bad. A performance is a temporary experience and it never lasts for long.

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

That's a tough question, but maybe in some element of real-estate since I really do love homes and properties.

Do you like to teach? Why or why not?

I love teaching. Sharing music with a student who is hungry to learn is so enriching! Not only is it fun to watch them develop, but I also learn things about my own playing through the nature of describing it to someone else.