

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Catie Hickey



Illinois native **Catie Hickey** leads a multi-faceted career as a trombonist, educator, and arts advocate. Active as a jazz musician, soloist, chamber music artist, and orchestral player, her work has taken her to cities throughout Europe, Africa and the Americas. Before returning to Chicago, Ms. Hickey was a touring member of the Foothills Brass Quintet. She has performed with the symphonies of St. Louis, Calgary, Rochester and Sinaloa, Mexico. Locally, Catie is a frequent guest with groups ranging from Lowdown Brass Band to the New Chicago Brass. Committed to expanding the role of the 21st century musician, Catie's work often takes her beyond the stage and into the broader community. At home in Chicago, she is Instructor of Low

Brass for Loyola University, Brass Faculty for the Francis Parker School, and a busy studio instructor in the western suburbs. Each summer, Catie serves on the faculty of the Eastman Summer Trombone Institute. An alumna of the Youth Orchestra of the Americas, she is the CoFounder of the Taller de Trombones in Panama, Panama. Catie also enjoys associations with the Trombonanza Festival in Santa Fe, Argentina and the Urubass Festival in Montevideo, Uruguay. Catie previously taught trombone and jazz studies at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. Ms. Hickey is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music and Rice University with degrees in both classical performance and jazz studies, as well as obtaining a certificate in Arts Leadership. When not performing or teaching with her overgrown paperclip, Catie is working on her Spanish and faithfully rooting for the Chicago Cubs.

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

The trombone was my first instrument at age 12.

What equipment do you primarily use?

I'm a Shires Trombones Artist, usually playing on either an Elkhart Style 2RVE or a 1YM yellow bell depending on the occasion with a TruBore valve and a TW47 Bach style slide. I've been on something Bach 5G or 5Gish pretty much my entire professional career. I play jazz/commercial music on a Conn 6H from the early 1960s - Bach 6 1/2 for shows and an AR resonance piece for high/loud gigs.

What are some of your favorite highlights of your career?

As a young person, participating in the Grammy Jazz Band and attending the Grammy Awards in 2003 and most of the Youth Orchestra of the Americas European tour in 2006. As a professional,, Mahler symphonies with the Calgary Philharmonic, jazz and salsa panels at the 2019 International Trombone Festival, and all the work I've been fortunate to do with Trombonanza in Argentina (2014/2017) and the Taller de Trombones Panama (since 2014).

What are some of your favorite albums?

When I was 14, I picked up John Coltrane's Blue Trane from the library because it listed a trombone player (Curtis Fuller) on the back.

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

As a classical musician, I love working on the Bach Cello Suites. I also love working on song cycles from composers like Grieg, Brahms and Rachmaninoff. As an improviser, saxophonist Dexter Gordon's solos were some of my favorites as younger player. Now I love anything saxophonist Joel Frahm records.

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

Upward lip slurs were a real barrier for me for about the first year. I never had the same technical facility in my jazz playing (possibly because I started on a large bore instrument), which caused me to seek out improvisers whose approach was more

melodic than virtuosic.

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

I sing more when I teach than when I practice, but I do stop and listen back to the audio happening in my head, especially when trying to learn new solos or play improvisation games.

With whom did you study?

I had some on and off lessons growing up, but not really a consistent private teacher. Attending Birch Creek Music Camp (www.birchcreek.org) allowed me to interact with top call jazz artists from Chicago and faculty from the Eastman School of Music. My first real teacher was Mark Kellogg at Eastman, who convinced me that jazz musicians could also play classical music. At his encouraging, I went to graduate school for orchestral studies at Rice University, where I studied with David Waters.

Do you remember when you decided that you were going to be a professional musician?

I loved trombone from pretty much the moment I started to play it, but was afraid to voice this passion because it wasn't cool to like band. I can remember losing a high school basketball

How much do you practice on a typical day?

On days where I teach more than 4 hours, I try to get in a solid warm up and fundamentals sessions, there isn't usually time for a lot of my own work. If it's a lighter teaching day, I'll fit in a mid-day session or one after dinner. On the weekends I try to add 3-4 sessions of about a half-hour if I'm not gigging. That's when I get the chance to look at upcoming repertoire or explore new ideas.

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

catiehickey.com is coming soon, currently everything is at chickeymusic.com.

What are some of your favorite etude books?

Brad Edwards' books on Lip Slurs, Kopprasch, Jack Gale's Jazz Etudes, Blazhevich, Arbans for summer maintenance. Any and all duets that are well written – especially transposing Mozart/Telemann.

Do you use any apps when you practice?

My current tuner/metronome setup is called Tunable, though I'll probably get into Tonal Energy soon. Still seeking good metronome apps.

What are some ways to improve one's rhythm?

More so than rhythm, time feel is super important to me. This means understanding the relationship between the rhythms and the pulse that vary from genre to genre. Leading the metronome rather than responding to it is generally a good idea when working on classical/orchestral repertoire (thanks, Doc Marcellus!). For commercial idioms, I do a lot of recording to make sure what I think I'm playing/feeling actually relates to the beat. Especially in musical theater situations where I might be using headphones and playing into a microphone, it's important to go with the click more than my ears.

How do you suggest balancing life with music?

Have some activity, preferably a social one if you're an extrovert like me, that has absolutely nothing to do with music performance or the arts. For me it's social sports and a book club, plus some community volunteering.

Please give some tips for freelancing.

As someone who moved back to my hometown without going to college here, I had to accept that there was a long line of players ahead of me for the kinds of jobs that networking doles out. I taught through graduate school and took a few touring jobs that helped me wipe out my student loans early, so that when I was laid off twice in my late 20s I could live quite cheaply. Building my teaching resume during my time in Texas and on tour helped me gain steady employment when I landed back in Chicago, and has helped me wait out a lot of the freelancing. A positive attitude goes a long way; I'll try to see what I can give to the scene rather than waiting for it to give

something to me. Summarized: be in the mindset of “what can I contribute” rather than “how can I break in”.

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

I think both degrees prepare one for a career in music in different ways, but only one prepares people to be employees working at a school. I’ve never been a band director in the traditional sense, have a great deal of respect for those who choose that career path.

Is anyone else in your family a musician?

Not professionally, but my Grandpa was a bagpiper for a Chicago pipe band and my Mom played viola in school. My siblings both had a bit of musical training, but I’m the only one who pursued it.

Do you have any tips for memorizing a piece of music?

Start at the end and work to the beginning - the connective tissues of knowing what comes next is the most important part of retaining musical memory for me. Regardless of genre, I need to be able to hear the phrase more than imagining what it looks like on a staff. This aural memory can be refreshed and retained through work away from the instrument.

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

View getting a degree in music as the start of something rather than the finite ability to play your instrument well. The idea of a portfolio career where one has many different projects and roles is becoming an increasing reality, embrace this before you leave school. Summer festivals and opportunities, especially the free ones, are the main way you can grow your network off campus. Apply to all of them.

What are you listening to currently?

All the Tiny Desk concerts I can find - particular favorites are Los Hacheros, No BS Brass Band, Tower of Power and Lizzo. New albums by the Westerlies, Matt Ulery and

Lara Driscoll I picked up in the bandcamp.com sale. Prokofiev symphonies on vinyl thanks to our new record player.

Do you have a favorite genre of music?

More than favorite genres, I have favorite musicians/groups to play with - the music almost doesn't matter if the level is high and the company is good.

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

I took courses on grant writing, tax preparation, marketing and artistic planning to complete a certificate in Arts Leadership while I was at Eastman. These courses are run by the Institute for Music Leadership (<https://iml.esm.rochester.edu/>), which has many great resources on its website.

What are you working on right now?

Starting a baraat brass band with my friend Akshat Jain, transcribing [this](#) Leroy Jones trumpet solo, trying to learn how to teach effectively online during a global pandemic.

Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?

Celebrate the process, and make sure it has an end. It's easy, especially as a college student or younger professional, to get caught in a cycle of constant audition prep and applying for jobs. Whenever I've started prep for an audition or gained an interview for a job, I plan out a reward for myself when the experience is over. Usually it's some kind of restaurant I want to try or concert I want to go to, but some way to respect the work that was done.

How could we make music education better?

At the risk of sounding old, many of the young people I work with are wildly over-scheduled. Without the time to mess around on an instrument, it's hard to gain any kind of mastery. Playing some each day yields more success than grouping music into a big scheduled block. Engaging with a few concepts at a time rather than asking for advanced excerpts on youth orchestra auditions. We can foster a sense of community around players rather than feeding into honor band culture, especially at the amateur level.

Do you like to teach? Why or why not?

I love teaching! The level is less important than the student's motivation. Trombone lessons are a great way to connect with other people not just about music but life in general. Leading small jazz groups and bands teach us to share music making with an audience. Trombone pedagogy is such an endless rabbit hole of learning - I've had to learn how to teach as I take on more roles and keep trying to add to this toolbox.

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

It's not specifically a music book, but reading Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* every few years reminds me that the creative process is a messy one.

Do you have any tips on forming a chamber group?

It helps to have clearly defined jobs and roles - who is in charge of the accounting, who takes care of road logistics, policies for when someone books a gig. Getting along is more important than being artistically in the right (it better be worth fighting for). Record as much as possible and as many different spaces as possible to get an objective understanding of group sound. Know what level of commitment each group member is willing to undertake for each given season (how many concerts, how much rehearsing, what kind of unpaid workload goes with these tasks).

Do you have any tips on learning how to improvise?

You have to start somewhere - don't wait, do it now! In band culture we tend to equate band culture with learning how to play bebop because that's what's most available to us (and what was baked into jazz education when it started to find its way into schools). Learning to sing solos helps us internalize not just pitch/rhythm vocabulary but style, which is the hardest thing to teach off a page. I really like starting students with Bennie Green's "[Bennie Plays the Blues](#)", which has two entire choruses based on a middle B flat. A really easy path to getting started for trombonists is studying salsa music and the moñas that trombonists play while others are soloing.