

# AN ARTIST'S CORNER

*featuring*

## Christopher Smith



**Christopher Smith** brings nearly 20 years of major orchestral and ensemble experience to the role of Principal Trumpet of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. Prior to joining the SDSO, he was 4th/Utility Trumpet with l'Orchestre symphonique de Montréal (OSM) for 11 years, and served as Acting Associate Principal Trumpet from 2015-18. He has performed with OSM on eight international tours (two as Associate Principal Trumpet), numerous live broadcasts on Mezzo TV and Medici.tv (several as Principal Trumpet), and five recordings, including as lead trumpet on *MIKA et l'Orchestre symphonique de Montréal*. Prior to joining OSM in 2008, Mr. Smith performed for eight years in "The President's Own" United States Marine Band, one of the world's finest wind ensembles and America's oldest continuously active professional musical organization. The Marine Band's mission is to provide music for the President of the United States and the Commandant of the Marine Corps, performing at The White House for The Presidential Inauguration, events of national importance, holidays and

ceremonies. Members of The Marine Band also participate in state funerals and full honors funerals at Arlington National Cemetery, including live trumpet performances of "Taps" on national television, which Mr. Smith provided on numerous occasions. He also performed on five U.S. tours totaling over 40 concerts and, as an E-7 Gunnery Sergeant, supervised and mentored junior Marines. Mr. Smith also led small ensembles and was a co-founder of the Valor Brass quintet, which performed two tours and over 10 recitals, including a standing-room-only recital at The Midwest Clinic in Chicago. As a decorated veteran of the Marine Corps, Mr. Smith is a strong supporter of the United States military and is thrilled to connect as a member of the SDSO with the military community in the greater San Diego area.

In addition to his tenured roles in OSM and The United States Marine Band, Christopher Smith has served as Associate Principal Trumpet in the Seattle Symphony (2011-12 season), Acting Principal Trumpet in the Pacific Northwest Ballet (2017-18) and 2nd Trumpet with the Des Moines Metro Opera (2010-11). He has also performed as Guest Principal Trumpet with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra and

Grand Rapids Symphony; lead trumpet with the singer MIKA; guest performer with the group Pink Martini. He has taught as an adjunct instructor at McGill University, led over 30 masterclasses throughout North and South America and privately coached both professional and collegiate trumpet players.

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

I began playing the trumpet (actually the cornet) in 6th grade.

***What equipment do you primarily use?***

I play exclusively on Wedge Mouthpieces. All of the piston valve trumpets I play on are made by Yamaha. My piccolo is a VERY old Schilke P5-4 and I play on Weimann rotary trumpets.

***What are some of your favorite highlights of your career?***

The first full-time job I won - a position with "The President's Own" United States Marine Band - I won on my 24th birthday, so that was a very special day. Obviously all of the auditions I've won are special. SO much work goes into these endeavors and when it works out and they announce you as the winner - there is no better feeling after months and years of hard work! Some other highlights would include touring and performing in some of the finest concert halls in Europe, Asia, South America and the U.S. with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. A particularly memorable experience was when I got called at the very last moment to play lead on a series of concerts with Mika and the MSO which were turned into a fantastic album. One of my first concerts with the San Diego Symphony was performing Mahler's Fifth Symphony and most recently I was asked to act as the Associate Principal with the L.A. Phil with about 48hrs of notice on a recent concert of a piece by Michael Tilson Thomas - with MTT conducting. Exhilarating experiences and ones I am truly thankful for!

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

The Montreal Symphony Orchestra's recordings of Prokofiev's 5th Symphony and Holst's The Planets are some of my favorite orchestral recordings. Growing up I listened to a LOT of Tower of Power, Earth Wind and Fire, Chicago and Stevie Wonder. I absolutely love Motown and groups with horn bands!

***Who inspired you to play your instrument?***

My dad was a band director, so I grew up with music and band camps as a regular thing for as long as I can remember. As I kid, of course I looked up to the high schoolers - and I thought the drummers were just the coolest! When it came time to pick an instrument, I told my folks I wanted to play drums. Their response was that they weren't going to have me just banging on things and that I would have to take piano lessons in addition to learning percussion. There was NO WAY I was taking piano lessons! So - I picked what I thought was the next coolest and loudest instrument - The Trumpet.

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

Personally I had a LOT of time to practice and record myself - i.e. IMPROVE! Though I presented reference recordings for (going on 500) etudes, really these recordings were giant experiments that I allowed others to peek in on what I was working through in my playing. I experimented with equipment and with different ideas on air and articulation concepts - all of these things I wouldn't have been able to experiment with if I had been working a regular orchestral season.

Another strange byproduct of not working was that I was able to focus on some strength goals (I'm getting dangerously close to a 400lbs back squat) that wouldn't have been possible if I was performing regular concerts. Strength and fitness is a huge part of my life, but I do have to be careful how much energy I expend on days when I have concerts. More globally - it's been interesting and heartening to see musicians and musical institutions figure out how to continue to bring music into peoples lives.

## ***You have an amazing amount of videos of your performing etudes that you have recorded on your Youtube channel. When did you start recording them and why?***

I can't believe it, but I'm closing in on 500 etude videos! Though the bulk of these videos have been recorded during the last two years of the pandemic - I actually started recording etude videos in 2015. I got the idea after giving a masterclass in Bogotá where I asked a student if they had heard anyone play the etude they were working on. They answered that they had searched everywhere and couldn't find an example anywhere online. I didn't believe them, but sure enough - when I checked - there were no examples of anyone playing this well-known etude. So - I decided I'd take it upon myself to record some etudes as an example of how one professional might approach negotiating their way through some of this music that is studied by so many college students.

In the first few years, I recorded about five etudes a year. When the pandemic hit and we were forced offstage, I started recording five etudes a week! All of the etudes I've recorded are unedited and represent a "real world" example of how a professional would perform these onstage in a recital.

I've recorded most of the Vocalises written by Bordogni (Rochut for you low brass types out there), many of Phil Snedecor's etudes, many Blazhevich etudes, and the complete books of Wurm 45 Easy Studies for Trumpet and Balasanyan 25 Melodic Etudes for Trumpet. All of the etudes can be found here: <https://youtube.com/c/ChristopherSmithTrumpet>

## ***What etudes do you plan to record in the near future?***

Currently I'm recording all 169 "Mini Etudes" written by Phil Collins. These are fantastic etudes that are only 3-6 lines long. They challenge us in all the different keys and ranges and tempi and are a lot of fun to learn and play through!

## ***How have your practice habits changed over the years?***

I used to practice until I couldn't play anymore. I used to practice with the idea of learning something as quickly as possible and then try to repeat it X number of times "perfectly". It took awhile, but I finally realized that trying to play on chops that were constantly tired and

swollen was not a winning solution. I also realized that the endless repetitions weren't ingraining anything but a MIS-trust of myself. Now - I practice much more slowly and deliberately with highly defined and easily reachable daily goals. Since I know I have the ability to practice until I hurt myself - I've developed the "84" program for myself. 8 working minutes and 4 resting minutes. Working in these defined blocks of time allows me to constantly be in touch with how I'm physically feeling. These blocks also allow for defined time periods of working on different aspects of playing so I never get stuck too long on one thing.

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

Nothing has changed - I feel like I STILL struggle with multiple tonguing in the upper register. I'd also like to answer this a different way - as we progress and get better on our instruments - we also get asked to play more challenging music and play that music with better and better players. Think - Solo & Ensemble or All-State Band. It's very easy to go to these festivals or summer camps (later in life - attending college and auditions) and hear people doing things on their instruments that we can't do at the moment - and those experiences can be intimidating and depressing. A quick search on YouTube or other social media will show people doing freakishly amazing things on their instruments - HOWEVER - though it's human nature to compare ourselves to others, the key is to not let ourselves become insecure, but rather find inspiration in what others can do better than us and use that as a kickstart to practice a certain skill and improve our own abilities.

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

I don't always sing, but when I do it's usually when I find myself getting tired or not making a long phrase because I'm playing too loudly or if I'm "air balling" or wavering on notes in a soft passage. I sing because there is a direct connection between how much energy it takes to sing loudly/softly and how much energy it takes to play the trumpet loudly/softly. As brass players, we can easily slip into basically screaming through our instruments to play loudly and trying to whisper to play softly. By singing, it encourages better and healthier physical habits - which result in better and healthier sounds on our instruments.

***What is your definition of success?***

I think the most basic definition is to set a goal... and then achieve that goal. I wrote earlier about how I set easily achievable daily goals. I believe (because I've witnessed it in my own life) that setting huge goals and then breaking those goals down into smaller goals and then breaking those smaller goals down into even smaller goals and then etc etc etc... basically making a roadmap that reads backwards and at a granular level of decision making is just black and white - is this helping or hurting? When enough of these good decisions are made, the smaller goals are met. When continued good decisions are made and lots of smaller goals are met - bigger goals are met. When lots of good decisions are made and lots of smaller goals pile up and lots of bigger goals are met - it's reasonable to assume that an ultimate goal will be in reach at SOME point down the line.

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

In no particular order: Perseverance. Solid Work Ethic. Strength in mind and body. Kindness and respect to others and self. Understanding life isn't fair - and continuing on anyways. The

ability to set goals and follow through with doing whatever it takes to achieve them. The ability to work well with others.

***What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?***

When I don't have a trumpet in my hand or I'm not at the gym - I enjoy photography. Also - my wife and I enjoy going to the beach, traveling, trying new restaurants here in San Diego - and even though I've taken a year off of alcohol - we enjoy wine and beer tasting at the MANY wineries and breweries here in Southern California.

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

I don't do Motivation - I do HABITS. Motivation and inspiration are fleeting feelings - Habits are ingrained actions. Usually if I have a bad day of practicing or I'm feeling down about my trumpet playing - I'll take a break for the day. I already build in one day off a week, but sometimes I need more than that one day to recharge myself physically and mentally.

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

I don't daily meditate so much as keep a regular journal of my daily goals. When I'm particularly stressed, I'll write down and track how I'm feeling and how I want to feel. This came as a suggestion to me somewhat recently and I gotta say - with practice - it's a powerful tool that really works.

***With whom did you study?***

I studied with Scott Thornburg for my undergrad at Western Michigan University and Jim Thompson for a year at Eastman while pursuing a Masters degree. When I got serious about winning an orchestral audition I played extensively for Rene Shapiro and Andy Balio - both in the Baltimore Symphony. While in Montreal, I sat next to and very frequently played for Russ DeVuyst, who had an outsized influence on my training as an orchestral trumpet player. More recently, my mentors include Andrew McCandless (Toronto Symphony Orchestra), Jim Wilt (L.A. Phil) and Mark Hugues (Houston Symphony).

I include all of these people not only out of respect for how they've each helped me in different ways, but also so those reading this understand that I have a philosophy of continuing education. So many musicians win a job and then that's it as far as their willingness to accept outside counsel. I look at this more from the point of view of say someone like Tom Brady. Yes, he's the one doing all the work at the quarterback position, but he has a team of people helping him - a head coach, an offensive line coach, a quarterback coach, a strength and conditioning coach, a personal chef... All of these people are integral to his and in turn his team's success.

***What qualities do you think are important in a student?***

A curious mind. A willingness to work hard. A willingness to accept criticism.



***I know that working out is very important to you. Do you have a specific type of workout you like to do?***

Currently I am involved with CrossFit with a bit of powerlifting added in. In CrossFit - no two days are the same. The workouts are constantly changing and I like that someone else comes up with the workouts and I just need to show up and do the work. A CrossFit class is fun for me because it allows me to not only stay in shape, but also push myself to compete with others in the classes. The added bonus of living in San Diego is that I workout with a lot of Navy Seals and military special operators. If I can kind of keep up with these guys - I think I'm doing ok LOL!

***Can you please describe what a typical week looks like for you in the gym?***

If it's Sunday - we squat! In addition to attending five CrossFit classes a week, I also program my own strength training in as well. I'm closing in on a 400lbs Back Squat and if all goes to plan I will hopefully deadlift 500lbs by the end of the year. A usual week has workouts Sun-Weds. Rest day on Thursdays. Workouts on Fri and Sat.

***When you got started working out?***

I've always been active. As a kid I was into downhill skiing and was on the swim team. In high school I got into lifting weights and in college I added racquetball into the sports I enjoyed playing. While in the Marine Corps I got into triathlons and completed a Half-Ironman in 2008. Shortly thereafter I was introduced to CrossFit and was hooked as the workouts are constantly changing day-to-day and had I started to get bored with traditional weightlifting routines.

***How has being a musician changed you as a person?***

In many ways the two are inseparable. But I will say this about the lessons to be learned by studying a musical instrument - even if someone decides not to pursue music as a profession. The ability to be self-motivating and apply oneself and focus on incremental improvement coupled with the ability to set individual goals along with working well with others - these skills are not readily available to just anyone nor are they taught in a traditional school setting. However - these skills are most definitely sought after in the professional workforce.

***Discuss your early musical experiences. Why did you pursue music?***

I think I had a pretty traditional midwestern middle/high school musical experience. I was in the band in middle school, then in the marching, concert, and jazz bands in high school. I participated in Solo & Ensemble and All-State Bands. When I was a senior in high school I played in the Grand Rapids Youth Symphony and that was one of my first experiences playing in a large orchestra filled with excellent young musicians.

I graduated in the top ten in my class in high school. I probably could've been accepted at most universities majoring in anything I wanted - but the trumpet was the only thing that truly fascinated me.

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

I don't know that there was one particular moment that I decided to become a professional musician. I do know that I gave myself until the age of 30 to win a full time position or else I was going to find something else to do in life.

***How much do you practice on a typical day?***

I usually get between 2 to 2.5 hours of practicing in six days a week.

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

People can find me online on YouTube: <https://youtube.com/c/ChristopherSmithTrumpet> , Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/trombachris-105813240914537/> , and Instagram: @trombachris

***What are some of your favorite etude books?***

I'm currently recording all 169 "Mini Etudes" by Phil Collins. These are fun and challenging etudes that are between 3-6 lines long. They are great for working on just a few concepts without committing to an etude which is a full page or two.

***Do you use any apps when you practice?***

I use the Tempo App: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/tempo-metronome-with-setlist/id304731501>. It has a tuner I can use, but I mainly use it as a metronome. The best part about this app is that I can save the different things I'm working on as a "set list" and it saves the tempos I'm currently working with.

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

Just keep working and improving a tiny bit each day.

***Where is your favorite place that you have traveled to?***

My wife and I used to live on Maui for 4-6 weeks every summer for several years. We were married on a beach there, so that place is very special to me. At the opposite end of the spectrum - I love Tokyo and Paris. Just amazing energy in those cities.

***How do you suggest balancing life with being a musician?***

I'm not sure I will ever understand the term "balance". Playing in a symphony orchestra, and in particular sitting in a principal chair in a major symphony orchestra - requires a lot of time, thoughtful preparation and energy outside of rehearsals and performances. It can be all-encompassing at times, but I always make time to get to the gym, eat healthy food and spend time with friends and family. Being a professional musician is not necessarily a "normal" job - as we work when other people do not, nor is it for someone who wants to coast through life. The constant learning of new music and the constant maintenance of skills can be at the

same time exhilarating and monotonous. All of that to say - if I didn't enjoy it, and enjoy the "imbalance" of it - I wouldn't be where I am today.

***Please give some tips for freelancing.***

Always show up well before the downbeat as prepared as possible. Be a kind person. Be a positive person. While we should feel free to be ourselves and enjoy ourselves and the music and the company of others while onstage and after the concert - we'd do well to remember that we are guests and to conduct ourselves accordingly: Warmup before arriving - or at least away from others and not onstage. Don't play any part other than our own. Don't gossip or speak poorly of other people. We should leave our personal problems offstage - no one wants to hear about relationship issues or why you nearly missed the rehearsal. All of these things don't instill confidence in the people around us. In short - be the person that YOU'D like to work around.

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

This is a tricky question. One should major in music education because they they feel called to teach - not as a backup plan if they don't make it as a performer. There are too many bad teachers out there - don't contribute to that problem.

Majoring in music performance - I think someone should only do this if they can't imagine doing literally anything else in their life. Though I've had a tremendous amount of success in my career, most people will not see this kind of success. Most people will quit because they've run out of money or motivation to continue improving. The other problem a lot of people encounter is the cost of school - "Doctor debt for dishwasher pay" isn't exactly a great way to begin a career or go through life.

That said - either of these degree programs can be incredibly rewarding in the right hands.

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

Tokyo Opera City, Suntory Hall in Tokyo, Berlin Philharmonie, Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, Paris Philharmonic, National Concert Hall in Taipei, Cologne Philharmony, Palau de la Música Catalana in Barcelona, Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, Symphony Hall in Boston, Carnegie Hall, Maison Symphonique in Montreal and of course The Shell here in San Diego.

***What are your favorite things to do that make you happy?***

When I'm not playing the trumpet, I enjoy working out and photography.

***Do you practice visualizing yourself performing?***

In particularly stressful moments - auditions - I will visualize myself performing well along with all the things I want to feel while onstage. We tend to allow our thoughts to turn to all the supposedly terrible things that could happen onstage, but with practice - we can choose to visualize what success will sound, look and feel like.



### ***What are you listening to currently?***

Recently I've been listening to a lot of vocal groups - Voces8, Chanticleer, and Accent. I also really enjoy listening to Johnny Hartman and Laura Mvula.

### ***What projects are you working on right now?***

Currently I'm working on recording all 169 "Mini Etudes" written by Phil Collins. When I finish, I will have recorded over 500 reference etude videos for anyone who may be learning the etudes I've recorded.

### ***Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?***

This is a discussion that can go on for pages and pages LOL! Prepare as well as you possibly can - then just go play how you play. If you can, ask for feedback afterwards. Make any appropriate adjustments and repeat. Remember - an audition is not a competition - it is only an examination. It is an opportunity for everyone invited to demonstrate how well they know the music and how much control they have over their instruments.

### ***Do you ever get anxious for a performance?***

All the time! But the key is to channel that energy into positive energy.

### ***What advice would you give for dealing with nerves?***

As I wrote above, the key is to channel that nervous energy into positive energy. Something to keep in mind - harnessing the feelings of happiness and anger can be an incredibly powerful tool. Once we can harness and channel those feelings - they will cancel out the fear and lack of focus accompanied by nerves.

### ***What advice can you give about mental wellness?***

My only advice is to keep track of where you are and how you're feeling. Because it's so incredibly subjective - a career in the arts can be both exhilarating and monumentally depressing... within moments of each other! Seeking professional help to help navigate these highs and inevitable lows can be life changing.

I'd also like to say - this career isn't for everyone. If it isn't working out - there is no shame in quitting and moving on to something else. Every single one of us has a responsibility to put food on our tables and roofs over our heads. There is zero shame in finding another way to provide for ourselves.

### ***What life lessons have you learned through music?***

Success only comes by actually putting yourself on the playing field.

We can't be everything to everyone on our instruments, so just be yourself and you will find a place where you'll fit in.

If it's not the playing field it's the battlefield - and if we enter the battlefield, we should expect we are going to get scraped and bruised and cut and broken. The key is to use all the weapons at our disposal and then get up and continue fighting on.

The best player doesn't always win - deal with it.

In all scenarios - We choose how we want to represent ourselves - no one else.

Nothing goes perfectly. There are going to be mistakes and missteps. How we choose to deal with these setbacks says more about us than how we respond to successes. Choosing positivity over negativity is always going to yield more success.

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

I would want to be in a field where I could travel and still work with and help others. Since I enjoy fitness so much, I think I'd enjoy something like being the head trainer for a professional sports team.

***Who are your favorite composers?***

Of course Mahler, Strauss and Bruckner! I also really enjoy playing music by Messiaen, Gershwin, Copland, Williams and Ellington. I like to rumble and brawl on the trumpet - so anything with a great shout chorus is good with me!

***Do you like to teach?***

Yes! I enjoy working with college students and have recently enjoyed coaching professionals on how to prepare for auditions as well as how to get more out of their practice sessions.

***Do you have any tips on forming a chamber group?***

*Find like-minded people who you enjoy being around. Set clear goals for the group and let EVERYONE have a say in all aspects of the group. From programming to venues to where everyone should breathe - allow all the members to feel free to speak up and ask for what they need or would prefer to have happen. In short - find people who can COMMUNICATE incredibly well with each other.*

***Do you memorize your music?***

As a professional - I have so much music to learn in any one season, it would be impossible for me to memorize my music. Even when I play recitals, I don't have the time - in addition to my regular job - to memorize the music.

***What advice can you share about physical wellness?***

Do it. Get your body moving every single day. You don't have to run a marathon or set a world record in weightlifting - but getting your heart rate up every single day will improve your physical well-being and mental well-being. As musicians, so much of what we do involves sitting... and not really moving. Obviously this is not a great scenario for maintaining good health. So - we MUST take it upon ourselves to move our bodies. If we want a long and healthy career in music - we MUST take care of our whole bodies, not just our chops or fingers or bow arms.

***What is your favorite food?***

I can only pick ONE!? We eat fairly healthy food around here - but if it were healthy - I would eat macaroni and cheese with kielbasa for literally every meal!