

# AN ARTIST'S CORNER

*featuring*

## Chris Van Hof



A native of Grand Rapids, Mich., **Chris Van Hof** is the assistant professor of trombone at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, and serves as principal trombone for the Muncie Symphony Orchestra. Chris is a proud performing artist for S. E. Shires Custom Brass Instruments and Facet Mutes

Chris leads an active and varied career as a performer in all styles on the trombone and euphonium; a teacher and clinician in brass, chamber music, and jazz; and a writer and arranger of music for ensembles from trombone choir to symphony orchestra. He has performed regularly with the Fort Collins Symphony (CO), the Cheyenne Symphony (WY), and the orchestras Madison, WI, Rochester, NY, as well as the acclaimed Boulder Brass. He recorded two albums with the funk band

the Po Boys Brass Band that also included many of his original compositions. He co-founded the Emerald Brass Quintet and still performs with that group throughout the United States. He has played in big bands backing up Johnny Mathis, Slide Hampton, Stefon Harris, Clay Aiken, and Frank Sinatra, Jr. He was principal trombonist on the Eastman Wind Ensemble's 2008 recording collaboration with the Canadian Brass called Manhattan Music. He has performed internationally as a chamber musician at venues in Panama, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Finland. For three years, he was the Afternoon Drive Time host of the all-classical-music radio station WXXI Classical 91.5 in Rochester, N.Y. And he has been an associate producer for recordings by artists including flutist Michelle Stanley, tubist Stephanie Frye, euphoniumist Matthew Mireles, and the Madison, Wis.-based Isthmus Brass.

An experienced educator at the collegiate level, Chris has previously taught at Colorado State University (Assistant Professor, 2013-2017), the University of Wisconsin-Platteville (Adjunct, 2012-2013), and Nazareth College (Adjunct, 2008-2011). His students have earned scholarships to reputable music institutions and prominent trombone workshops including the Pokorny Seminar and the Alessi Seminar. He has presented master classes for both college and high school students throughout Colorado, California, New York, Texas, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin. Chris is able to teach in both

English and Spanish, and was also a faculty member of the 4th Panamanian Trombone Workshop in May 2017 (el 4o Taller de Trombones Panamá).

Chris is passionate about his career teaching college trombone students. He strives to create a nurturing yet challenging environment in which students set and achieve professional and personal goals. Each student gets individual instruction while studying at Ball State, with a unique curriculum designed to help them grow steadily as a musician. Chris places the highest priority on creating art and connecting with an audience, with technique always focused on serving that ultimate end.

As a frequent recitalist and soloist, Chris programs ambitious and engaging repertoire, all presented in a personal and intimate manner from the stage. He has participated in recent consortium premieres of a new concerto by Dana Wilson, and has recently performed the concertos of Jeff Tyzik, Launry Grondahl, Georg Christoph Wagenseil, and Lars-Erik Larsson with various ensembles at Colorado State and Ball State. Along with his friend Evan Conroy of the Louisiana Symphony, he is commissioning a number of new works for tenor and bass trombone duo, with world premieres occurring frequently over the course of 2018. He revels in interacting with the audience, collaborating with other performers of all styles and instruments, and broadening his own and his listeners' musical horizons. His collaborative solo performances range from Renaissance dances to modern jazz.

The 2017/2018 seasons includes a concerto performance with the Ball State Symphony Band, recitals and master classes at Texas Tech University, the University of Delaware, and Louisiana State University, two world premieres with Evan Conroy at the 2018 American Trombone Workshop, the first-annual Ball State Trombone Fest in April 2018 (with special guest artists Natalie Mannix of the University of North Texas, and Freddie Mendoza, jazz trombone faculty at Ball State), a workshop with the St. Louis Low Brass Collective, and frequent performances in east-central Indiana in solo recital and as a member of the Muncie Symphony Orchestra.

Chris earned his degrees from Western Michigan University (Bachelor's of Music Education and Bachelor's of Music Performance), the Eastman School of Music (Master of Music) and the University of Wisconsin (Doctor of Musical Arts). His primary teachers were Steve Wolfinbarger, Mark Kellogg, and Mark Hetzler as well as Scott Cowan (arranging and jazz) and Johannes Wallmann (jazz).

He lives, bikes, cooks, and compulsively watches both Food Network and "House of Cards" in Muncie with his wife Andrea, and their sons Dexter and Fritz.

Chris Van Hof's website - <http://www.vanhofmusic.com>

***How old were you when you began playing your instrument?***

I was 12

***Did you start playing another instrument before your current one?***

I started on piano at 7, but mostly I sang in choirs in church and in school. I sang a TON, all the way through middle school.

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

I play a Shires Chicago Model with a dual-bore rotor valve and a Shires alto. I also occasionally play a vintage Olds Recording.

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

The first time I subbed in the Rochester Philharmonic, sitting next to my teacher Mark Kellogg. Performing the Boehm "Sextet" with another teacher, Mark Hetzler, and the Wisconsin Brass Quintet on a live radio broadcast. And I still distinctly remember the first time I had a college student of mine perform a solo recital--Kristen Muldoon (now Paruta) at Nazareth College in Rochester, NY.

***What or who inspired you to play your instrument?***

My mom. She was an organist, choir director, and music teacher. My earliest memory is sitting on the organ bench with her, and she would have me play the pedal note on the last chord of a hymn with the congregation. I think those experiences helped move me towards always having a love of low, rich tones, and harmonic voices, so trombone was a natural choice!

***What were your practice habits in high school, college, post-college, pro career?***

I was an awful practicer in high school, something I still regret. I got marginally better in college and grad school but I still was very inefficient. Now that I have kids, more responsibilities, and less time to practice, find I am much more focused on efficiency in my practice, and on working primarily on what I CAN'T do, rather than playing through what I can. Young players should know: you'll never have more time to practice than when you're in school. Take advantage of it!

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

Steve Wolfinbarger (bachelor's) Mark Kellogg (master's), Mark Hetzler (doctorate). I also count Scott Cowan, my jazz ensemble instructor and arranging teacher in college, as an important teacher for me.

***Who are some of your musical heroes?***

Stefan Shultz, Jorgen van Rijen, Marshall Gilkes, and Slide Hampton on the trombone. Otherwise I find myself drawn to Thad Jones, Duke Ellington, Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss, and Igor Stravinsky.

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

I sang in choirs constantly. I entertained myself by sitting at the piano and figuring out how to play the chords written in the Real Book. I listened to Bernstein recordings of "Appalachian Spring," "The Rite of Spring," and Shostakovich 5th Symphony over and over again. I would camp out at the Detroit Jazz Festival for entire days in high school. And my family were all musicians in some way or another. I was surrounded by music of all kinds from the time I was conceived.

***How old were you when you decided that you were going to be a professional musician?***

When I was around 10th grade. It was mostly because I couldn't imagine doing anything else with my life, and fortunately I still feel that way!

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

Two hours. My family and teaching schedule rarely allow for more, so I seek to be as efficient a practicer as I can be. Occasionally I get up to three.

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

[www.vanhofmusic.com](http://www.vanhofmusic.com)

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

I assign almost exclusively out of Arban's, Rochut, and Brad Edwards' "Lip Slurs." Other than that, I help students create their own etudes and exercises based on a particular challenge in a piece of repertoire, or to address a specific deficiency in their playing. For advanced players between auditions or recitals, I will assign work from Bitsch or Boutry etude books.

## ***Who are your main influences in your life (not just music!)?***

My wife Andrea (and I am not saying that for brownie husband points!). She has an incredible work ethic, a low tolerance for bull you-know-what, and a determination to achieve at the highest expectation from all around her (students in particular). I would not be who I am nor where I am today without her (we have been together since freshman year of college). I am also humbled by my older brother and sister, who are both brilliant people and incredibly well-read. I can only try to keep up with them. In music, my three teachers have all had a profound impact on me: Steve shaped me into a far better technician on the instrument and provides constant professional guidance, Kellogg showed me what it means to play with a true symphonic sound and also encouraged my love of non-classical playing, and Hetzler "unlocked me" in terms of what I was capable of as a musician.

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

Be ready to speak whatever musical vernacular is put in front of you. Do your best to make others around you feel better about their current situation-- whether it's tuning a major triad, dealing with a diva lead singer/conductor, or navigating a tricky passage, always be part of the solution and not an addition to the problem. Always have your music prepared in advance, unless you have to sight-read (in which case, practice sight reading a lot!). Always check to have your mutes. If you're playing at a new venue, plan extra time to get there, just in case. And above all: just be a good guy (gender-inclusive use of "guy"!)

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

I have strong thoughts about this. I feel very much that a student should only major in music education if they a) have some idea of the work load required both during college and after and b) they have a strong conviction to teach.

While some students develop that conviction, I have rarely seen it. Majoring in music education as some kind of “fallback” or “plan B” is, in my opinion, not a good idea. Doing so will not motivate you to do your best in your studies, it can lead to a sense of entitlement, and it ultimately will not benefit your future students.

Having said all that, I also feel strongly that a music education major can (and should) play at a very high level by the time they leave college. There are certainly more pressures in terms of credit load for music ed, which can make it hard to simply find as much time to practice as a performance major, but I believe firmly that a great teacher of music must be able to express themselves as an artist on their instrument. College is the time to do that growing, because once you get a job teaching it can be VERY hard to grow your “chops” due to the incredibly busy schedule most music educators maintain. That is not to say that band directors can’t be awesome players--many are! But they got there through hard work and diligence during college.

The performance major is a great option, and if you have a burning passion inside you to play music despite having to endure lots of travel, low wages, inevitable frequent disappointment and failure, and constant self-doubt, then go for it! I am not kidding: it is HARD to make a living as a performer, but for those that have the drive, dedication, and work ethic, it is possible (and can be immensely rewarding). I also encourage my performance majors at Ball State to take our entrepreneurship and careers classes as electives so they can begin to plan their careers and, sometimes, to even find alternative means of income in the arts while still allowing for them to perform as they like.

For reference, I have a double Bachelor’s in Music Ed and Performance, plus two graduate degrees in performance. My careers is truly split 50/50 between teaching and playing, and I am grateful every day that I studied music education and then dedicated myself to growing as a player through my performance degrees (and my freelance work).

***Is anyone else in your family a musician?***

My wife is a band director and flutist. My sister is an organist and violist (and teaches middle school English for her regular job). My aunt is an organist, my mom was an organist and public school music teacher.

***What is your favorite place that you have performed?***

I LOVE playing the Ropartz "Piece in Eb Minor" with a truly gifted pianist. There are few things better. I also love playing the music of Astor Piazzolla and songs by Johannes Brahms.

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

Take private lessons. Learn some piano and study some music theory (both will be useful, even if you start at the introductory classes). Get good grades in high school. Take at least one lesson with the trombone teacher at every school you're considering. In my opinion, the trombone teacher should be one of the most important factors in your choice, as you will spend the most time during your four years with that single person. It is essential you have a good relationship with them.

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

Literally right now I am listening to Stefan Shultz's album "Songs Without Words." In general, I have been listening to a lot of Ruben Blades, my favorite *salsero*.

***Do you have a favorite genre of music?***

Whatever pays! I love everything, and I think that's key. For a freelancer, it's important to find joy and value in any style of music, and to perform it authentically. But I am partial to chamber music, especially brass quintet. I love that setting.

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

I'm starting the process of learning how to use a looping station, and other kinds of electronic manipulation of my trombone. It's exciting.

***Please list some of your favorite websites for musicians.***

[www.trombone.net](http://www.trombone.net) If you are an ITA member, you can read EVERY ITA Journal ever published, which is priceless. I also like Jay Friedman's articles on his website.

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

I'd be a chef. I love food and I love to cook.

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

Richard Strauss, Igor Stravinsky, Bela Bartok, Johannes Brahms, and Gustav Mahler. I also really like Pat Metheny, Duke Ellington, and Maria Schneider.

***How could we make music education better?***

If music were more a part of our daily lives, music education would be stronger. Too many people are disconnected from singing and other forms of home music making. And I think we put way too much focus on band instruments being vehicles for competition and glory (concert band festivals, drum corps, etc.), and not nearly enough on band instruments being vehicles for communal art-making and community gathering. As I travel the world more, I find that many other cultures (Germans and Panamanians, in my personal experience) simply enjoy playing together for fun and entertainment more than we do.

***Do you like to teach? Why or why not?***

I love teaching. Every week I grow as a person, performer, and musician because of my students. I also treasure helping a motivated student identify and then move towards accomplishing goals, both big and small.