

# AN ARTIST'S CORNER

*featuring*

## Dr. Deb Scott



Dr. Deb Scott is the [professor of trombone and bass trombone](#) as well as the Director of Jazz at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. She is a performing artist for [Rath Trombones](#) and is active world-wide as a soloist and clinician. She has also conducted jazz bands for over 30 years and currently conducts SFA's top jazz band, the [Swingin' Axes](#).

Scott's solo CD, [Playing Favorites](#), was released in 2017 by Navona Records. She has been described as "one of the premiere soloists for her instrument" (Cinemusical 2017). She was part of Christopher Bill's YouTube sensation featuring 28 trombonists from throughout the world performing Queen's "[Bohemian Rhapsody](#)". In 2016, she was a featured soloist and faculty member in Santa Fe, Argentina at *Trombonanza*. She is also regularly featured in radio broadcasts throughout North America. At the International Trombone Festival in 2010, she and the SFA trombone choir were described as

playing a "fantastic performance...of some of the most challenging works in the trombone choir repertoire". She has performed several times as a soloist and within groups at the International Trombone Festival.

Dr. Scott joined the administration of the [International Trombone Festival](#) in 2019 as the Director of the Composers Workshop. She finds it very rewarding to help promote new music for the trombone and coordinates all aspects of the workshop including performances of the new music selected to be featured at each festival. For a dozen years, she reviewed solos for the U.I.L. prescribed music list for trombone and bass trombone in the state of Texas. Over twenty jazz etudes composed by Dr. Scott have been accepted as audition material for the Texas All-State jazz trombone and bass trombone auditions; she also regularly

selects all-state band and orchestra audition material for trombone. She is active as a clinician and performer for All-Region jazz ensembles and jazz festivals. She reviews CDs for the [International Trombone Association Journal](#). As a conductor, Scott has twice directed the Texas All-State Community College Jazz Ensemble at the Texas Music Educators Association Conference.

Scott has been a member of the Shreveport Symphony, Shreveport Opera, Longview Symphony, the Twentieth Century Unlimited Orchestra in Santa Fe, the New Mexico Music Festival Orchestra in Taos, the Orchestra of the Pines, the Lubbock Symphony Orchestra (Texas), the Greeley Philharmonic (Colorado), as well as the Barnum and Bailey Greatest Show on Earth Circus Band.

As a jazz artist, Dr. Scott performed frequently in the Houston area as the lead trombonist for the Ronnie Renfrow Big Band where she also free-lanced often. She has performed with such artists as J.J. Johnson, Louis Bellson, Diane Reeves, Frank Mantooth, Phil Woods, Lee Greenwood, Kay Starr, the Mills Brothers, and the Ink Spots.

She graduated with top honors from Texas Tech University and received the top award for her master's degree at the University of Northern Colorado. She was the first woman to complete a doctorate in trombone performance from the University of North Texas.

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

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

I started playing trombone at age twelve in 7<sup>th</sup> grade which was beginning band. We got to pick the instrument we wanted to play, and I was already in love with the trombone before I even played it. Also, at age 5, I started taking piano lessons and continued through high school.

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

Rath R4F and a King 2B

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

Teaching and performing at *Trombonanza*, which is a huge fun trombone festival in Argentina, the biggest in South America. It was amazing in every way.

My CD, *Playing Favorites*, released in 2017.

Performing with my university trombone students at the International Trombone Festival in 2010.

Currently, serving as the director of the International Trombone Festival's Composers Workshop. My goal is to help encourage new quality compositions for the trombone.

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

Well, I wanted to play either trombone or flute. I remember seeing someone playing trombone when I was about six, and it looked cool to me. My best friend called me up out of the blue and asked if I wanted to pick trombone with her. I'm so happy she did. I don't think I could have stuck with the flute!

However, at the time, the band director actively tried to get me to switch to flute or clarinet. He even called my mom in for a conference about it. He didn't think it was appropriate to put girls on low brass instruments. She was ahead of her time with gender equality and told him that I would be playing trombone because that is what I wanted to play.

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

There are definitely silver linings for me. I was fortunate that my university provided giant outdoor tents so that I could teach my students face to face. It basically became "the trombone tent", a community where students were helping one another, playing duets/quartets, practicing together day and night. They could walk over and listen to me teach another student. It was a ton of fun to be around my students all day instead of cooped up in my office! They keep me laughing which was great during the pandemic. It was fun for them to practice together at night. It made me realize how beneficial that was to their development in so many ways. There is a long history of group learning and mentoring that I want to explore more. I'm trying to figure out how to continue a version of that.

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

I do! I grew up singing a lot in my own family, and I think it emulates so much of playing the trombone. It helps internalize the music. Singing is very expressive. It's also great to sing and conduct to help with rhythm.

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

My dad was an amazing person, a philosopher, and I subscribe to what he taught me. There are four relationships in life: your relationship to yourself, your relationship to others, your relationship to God, and your relationship to nature. To me, a successful and fulfilling life is striving each day to be better at these relationships.

I think it's really important to set small daily goals. I'll use practicing as an example. If you are having trouble with motivation, try playing for five or ten minutes four times a day or something like that. Even just getting your horn out of the case could be a good goal for some!

***What do you want your legacy to be?***

I hope that when I leave this planet, I've made it a better place--more beautiful, and that I've enriched others' lives through my music and teaching. I hope that I've taught my own children and students to be self-supportive and to help take care of those who can't take care of themselves.

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

Travel is a top priority! I've been to 25 countries. I love to snow ski, work-out, cook, bake, and I love to garden--mostly plants and flowers but some vegetables. I obsessively read about health and nutrition.

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

Yes, usually at night. It calms down my mind and teaches me focus which I can definitely apply to performing.

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

Because I did my doctorate only in the summers, I spent eight years studying with Vern Kagarice at North Texas. I studied with Buddy Baker for my masters degree and Robert Deahl for my undergraduate.

I'm so happy that I studied from different people. Each brought their own prospective to my playing, and I took something very important from each.

Mr. Deahl just basically put up with me in my undergraduate years; I had a lot of growing to do. I basically sight read lessons, but I was good at that. I'm pretty sure he knew. He started giving me harder and harder etude books and solos. He was brilliant, gentle, and very patient. He could sol-fege everything I played.

Mr. Baker was much more demanding for my master's degree. He was adamant about a daily routine and fundamentals. When I got to graduate school, I really started practicing and doing as he asked. Amazingly, practicing made me better, ha ha! I learned a lot about getting in a routine and practice habits. He also fostered my interest in extended techniques.

I feel really fortunate that I studied with Dr. Kagarice for eight years. Because I already had a full time college teaching job after my masters degree, I could only do my doctorate in the summers. But his long mentoring of my playing, was really good. He constantly tried to remind me why I was playing—to express something. In the end, it's really about what we are "saying" through our music. I learned that from him. I really miss him and Mr. Deahl who passed in the same year, and that was really difficult for me.

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

My grandmother always told the story that I leaned over the piano as a baby and touched middle "C", and then I was off. Music has always been a part of my life. My family always got together at the holidays to sing and most of them played the piano as well. My father was an English Professor; he loved music. He constantly graded papers with Classical music or jazz playing. I was exposed to so many different kinds of music early. I have always loved it, and I just couldn't do anything else.

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

I remember the very day. In my first year of band, there were separate classes for woodwinds and brass. We were preparing for our first concert after school by combining the full band for the first time. We played Battle Hymn of the Republic, and I thought it was the most amazing sound to hear. I said to myself, "I'm doing this for the rest of my life."

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

It depends a lot on what I have coming up. I try to get at least an hour and a half, hopefully two and a half. There were times in my life that I was so busy, (raising children with a husband that worked out of town) that I could only play along with my students during the day.

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

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

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

Bordogni, anything from Pederson or Uber, LaFosse--School of Sightreading and Style is totally underrated, Bitsch, Couillaud

***What are some ways to improve one's rhythm?***

I really think some students don't understand the math of it. You have a constant beat which is like a pulse, a heartbeat, moving through time. The beat is divided in 2's or 3's, etc. Practicing those divisions while singing and conducting or even dancing to music has worked with my students. Once the lightbulb is on, every rhythm makes sense. I also think playing in jazz band is a great way to learn advanced rhythms.

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

I so wish I could do this! I've struggled with a lack of confidence in my life. I would tell myself that so much of what I worried about wasn't true or didn't ultimately matter. I think I've always had somewhat of an "imposter syndrome" thinking that I don't deserve success. It is so great to look around now at the International

Trombone Festival and see professional women. I'm super excited to be playing soon in the ITF's Women's Trombone Choir. I realized that this will be the first group I have ever played in that is all women!

I would tell myself to get more organized and plan more of my day—waste less time. It also took me a long time to learn that success doesn't just fall in your lap. You have to work hard for it—not just practicing, but learning to get along with others and networking.

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

I have traveled to so many great places in 25 countries. I think my favorite, though, was kayaking for a week in the ocean off Alaska's Kenai Peninsula and Valdez. I got to see so much sea life right by my kayak: seals, puffins, starfish, otters, sea lions, whales. It was incredible.

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

Abbie Conant and Ava Ordman were literally the only women I ever knew about making a career on trombone as a woman. I read about them in the ITA Journal when I was in college. At the time I didn't even realize how important that was to me.

### ***Who are your main influences in your life?***

My parents and grandparents were all terrific and supportive. I had one brother, Alan, born with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. He was three years younger than me and went into a wheel chair at age 9. I felt very protective of him since he was bullied by other kids. He passed away right after his high school graduation. I learned empathy, caring, teaching, tenacity, and how to walk through adversity from him.

All of my trombone teachers were supportive of me. They never once made me feel like I shouldn't be pursuing a career as a female trombonist. I was rather naïve about what that would ultimately mean. It was a shock to me when I started gigging professionally and had band leaders literally turn their back to me when I was trying to introduce myself as a trombonist. At that time, many of them wouldn't hire females or minorities. Thankfully, a few of them would!



My undergraduate jazz director, Alan Shinn, has been quite influential on the jazz part of my career. He taught me how to “program” a band and was a great model for showing students how to love jazz. I hope that I have been able to bring that feeling to some of my students like he did for me. I’ve now been directing a jazz band for thirty years.

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

My husband and I wanted children. I didn’t know of any female trombonist that had done it before me. I really had nobody to turn to, so I just went forward blindly hoping it would work out. I had two children during my doctoral studies (since my biological clock was ticking). I already had a full time teaching job, so it was so freaking hard at times. I just woke up every day and did what I needed to do. I knew someday I would finish if I kept forging ahead.

I now try to have an organized day. The key to doing anything is small systematic steps. Usually it begins early with a work out and a warm-up. I tried to spend quality time with my children when they were growing up, and my university job was perfect since I had every summer and holiday off with them. I have an incredibly supportive husband, but he worked out of town much of the time. I made sure that I spent as much time with them as possible which many times meant forgoing practice. It’s a good thing I’m a strong sight-reader! I definitely had to give up things to get it all done. Prioritizing is the key, but I also think you have to be very determined.

I think it’s very important to have a life outside of music. I encourage my students to find a hobby, and one day a week, work on that hobby instead of trombone. You are just not going to be a very interesting person, frankly, if all you have in your life is music and practicing. You need life experiences to enhance your musicianship.

### ***Do you have any suggestions for working on one’s range?***

Range has not come easy for me. I tell my students that I have struggled for every half step. I think many students think it should magically appear (and for some it does), so I remind them that range is something that has to be practiced most days. My biggest tip is playing glissando scales and arpeggios in ascending half steps and



learning to “hang on” to the highest notes for as long as possible, making sure to rest afterwards. Try to stay relaxed and work on breathing and support. Play along with loud high drones so that the pitch is in your head as you play the note. Finally, work on playing etudes up a perfect fifth (tenor clef) or octave. Play higher regularly than your solo or excerpt goes.

Make sure that your embouchure is correct. Spend time with a good teacher helping you with that. Fix it if it needs correcting! -remember small steps.

### ***What are you most proud of in your life?***

When I was growing up, I literally thought I would marry, my husband would provide for me, I would raise children, and play bridge. Ha! As my life evolved, I realized that wasn't going to happen, I had too much of a passion for playing trombone. By succeeding in my chosen career, I unintentionally became a role model for other women to fulfill their own dreams.

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

I'm going through the list of current jazz Grammy winners, just to hear what's new! I'm loving Emmet Cohen.

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

All of them! We aren't here just to be musicians. The more educated you are, the more you can express in your musicianship. I believe in a university education which means a “universal” education. I don't like the trend of thinking of college as a trade school. We should all be working to expand our minds and knowledge. *“The cultivated mind is the guardian genius of democracy” Mirabeau B. Lamar*

## ***To become a great musician, what are things that you think a young musician should focus on when they practice?***

Well, slow and steady wins the race as I've emphasized many times previously. I think it's important to practice fundamentals every day and have dedicated practice times. It's amazing what even 15 minutes a day can do if you're consistent. At the same time, you want to have fun while you practice. I'm not saying goof around, but play things that you love and enjoy, things that will make you want to practice.

I highly recommend playing as many different styles of music as possible. Playing in ensembles is a great way to learn that. I was so fortunate that my junior high school offered concert band, orchestra, and jazz band. By the time I got to college, I was playing in every ensemble I could find in every style. During college, I played in nine hours of ensembles on some days--that is incredibly valuable on so many levels. I hate to hear students say they can't be in an ensemble because they don't have time. I find that hard to believe. After college, I was able to play in professional orchestras, jazz bands, salsa bands, and jazz combos, any gig that came my way!

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

Yes, very much! I love watching college age students grow from their freshman to senior year. It's so rewarding to see substantial growth musically and also personally. I'm old enough now that they call me "Mama Scott" lol. Whenever I don't want to go to work (like during the pandemic year), it's my students that help me have a great day!

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

When you think about it, physical wellness is more important than practicing. I believe in working out every day. Whenever you hear any research or study, it almost always says..."but the people who exercise have a \_\_\_\_% fewer chance of getting \_\_\_\_\_". I try to put my health above my work or playing the trombone. Somedays, it's impossible, but most of the time there is a way to do it. I believe in doing a mix of strength training, yoga, and cardio. I think a foam roller is great for massaging

muscles connected with playing like your forearms, shoulders, and back. Laying on the foam roller along your spine can also help open up your chest for breathing.

I know there are different philosophies, but my research has led me to believe that a low carb nutritional plan is best for me. I cook my own food from organic sources most of the time, and I don't eat fast food.

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

The darker, the better chocolate!