

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Dr. Steve Wolfinbarger



Steve Wolfinbarger, professor of music at Western Michigan University, where he teaches trombone. He earned the Bachelor of Music Education degree from Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri, and the Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees in trombone performance from the University of North Texas.

Students in his studio have competed successfully and have won a number of important competitions. Since 2001, students have been selected as finalists in the various International Trombone Association competitions on 20 occasions (including 19 times in the last 14 years), and they have been selected as an Alternate or Honorable Mention selection another 20 times. Over the past 14 years, WMU trombone students have been selected as Winner in their respective ITA competitions eight times. In addition, they have been invited to compete as semifinalists or finalists at the American Trombone Workshop's National Solo Competition 13 times since 2005. Two separate

students have recently been chosen as winner and honorable mention in the Yamaha Young Performing Artists Competition. His students have been selected as finalist in the Minnesota Orchestra's Steve Zellmer Orchestral Excerpt Competition, as well as Associate Trombonist of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago. Since 2000, graduates of his studio have been admitted to some of the most competitive music programs in the United States, including The Juilliard School, Yale University, The Eastman School of Music, Cleveland Institute of Music, New England Conservatory, Cincinnati Conservatory, Oberlin Conservatory, Northwestern University, University of North Texas, Florida State University and Indiana University, to name a few. Former students now teach at over 20 universities across the country, while many others play professionally in top military bands, orchestras or chamber ensembles.

Over the past few years Professor Wolfinbarger has won several major teaching awards, honors and recognitions. In 2020 he was featured in an hour long international podcast by the Third Coast Trombone Retreat, recognizing his career teaching success. In 2019 he was selected as the first recipient of the International Trombone Association's Kenneth Hanlon Award, given to an individual who has made significant contributions to the worldwide trombone community. He was selected as the Michigan Professor of the Year for 2013 by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) in Washington, D.C ([see article](#)). He was also one of 15 nominees statewide for the 2013 Michigan Distinguished Professor of the Year Award. Wolfinbarger was the recipient of the 2010 Western Michigan University Distinguished Teaching Award, the highest award given to any professor at WMU. Wolfinbarger was selected as the WMU College of Fine Arts Greg Roehrick Distinguished Professor for 2014, and he was also presented with the College of Fine Arts Dean's Teaching Award in 2009. He was the sole recipient of the 2009 International Trombone Association's prestigious ITA Award "in recognition of his distinguished career and in acknowledgement of his impact on the world of trombone performance," the highest prize awarded by the International Trombone Association. He has also been named a finalist for the International Trombone Association's Neill Humfeld Award for Teaching Excellence, presented to one person yearly. And earlier in his career, he was selected by Evangel University as the Outstanding Young Alumnus recipient.

Wolfinbarger was president of the International Trombone Association from 1994-1996. He is currently the Treasurer of the International Trombone Festival Board and was the Director of the International Trombone Festival and Chair of the International Trombone Festival Site Selection Committee from 1992 to 2001. He also hosted and organized the 1990 International Trombone Workshop, which was held at WMU. He served 17 years as chair of the ITA Governance Committee, and he has published articles in the International Trombone Association Journal. He served on a steering committee with six other leading trombone teachers to develop a national trombone pedagogy manual for public school music teachers in an effort to increase the quality and quantity of trombone students in the United States. He was also the subject of a feature article in Director Magazine. Locally, Wolfinbarger is serving a three-year term as a member of the Kalamazoo Concert Band Board.

He has appeared as a guest soloist or clinician at numerous regional, national and international conferences, including the Midwest Trombone Workshop, National Fine Arts Festival, Midwestern Music Conference, the Arizona Low Brass Symposium, several Brazilian National Trombone Symposiums, and the Latin America Trombone Symposium. He has been featured as a guest performer or clinician at major music conservatories in The Netherlands, Finland and Mexico and in the United States at the Chautauqua Institute, The Eastman School of Music and more than 25 colleges and universities. As a member of the Western Brass Quintet, Wolfinbarger has performed in Canada, Germany, Russia, and The People's Republic of China. He has also performed as an extra with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, and with the Springfield (Missouri) and Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestras.

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

In 5th grade I initially wanted to play trombone. However my dad really wanted me to play trumpet, so trumpet was my first instrument. At the band director's request, by 7th grade I switched to baritone horn with the intent of eventually moving to tuba two years later. However I still wanted to play trombone so, as a high school freshman, I switched instruments again. Moving from baritone horn to trombone was an easy transition, as I immediately placed 2nd chair in the top band my freshman year (out of roughly 10 trombones).

What equipment do you primarily use?

I own a 1962 vintage Elkhart Conn 88H as my primary instrument. It was always an excellent instrument for performing in our faculty brass quintet here at Western Michigan University.

What are some of your favorite highlights of your career?

In a broad sense, my favorite highlights have been following the success of my current and former students. I've been fortunate to have taught many exceptional students here at Western Michigan University. And helping to guide a student to a high level is an exceptional experience. Otherwise, I would say that my highlights include being selected as the recipient of the ITA Award, "in recognition of his distinguished career and in acknowledgement of his impact on the world of trombone performance" (the highest prize awarded by the International Trombone Association), as well as being selected as the 2013 Michigan Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) in Washington, D.C. Being elected President of the International Trombone Association was also certainly a big honor.

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

As a student growing up, the few classical trombone recordings available at that time were very influential to me. The early recordings of Ralph Sauer were notable. Otherwise, several of my jazz/pop influences at that time include trombonist Jimmy Pankow of the rock group Chicago and amazing jazz trombonists such as Bill Watrous, who really showed young players like myself what the trombone was capable of doing.

Do you have any tips on becoming better at transcribing?

Just do it! As a young student in junior high, I heard a Dixieland recording of That's a Plenty that I really loved. Over time I was able to write out the parts by "dropping the needle" multiple times on the vinyl recording. Looking back, it was a very positive experience in my musical development, as it really helped me to develop my ear.

How have your practice habits changed over the years?

I've always believed in following a very organized and regimented practice routine. For me, an ideal practice day would consist of three sessions (morning, afternoon and evening), with about ½ of my first session containing my warm up. Obviously it's not always possible to follow an "ideal" practice routine (depending on my day), however I was always conscious about getting in my practice. During those times when my lip wasn't working the way I wanted it to, or I needed to develop some element of my playing for a particular solo (i.e., endurance, facility), I usually would change my practice routine in some way to develop that element of my playing.

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

I was fortunate in that things came pretty easy for me. But looking back, I think I tended to avoid the musical elements of playing (line direction, phrase shape) in favor of developing technique. My intonation was "okay," but not great. And endurance was sometimes a struggle.

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

Yes! Singing is great for developing your ear. And now in lessons with my students, I frequently sing lines (and have them sing).

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

Things like discipline, determination, good organization, and taking care of business quickly. I was not a particularly good student in high school. But it was music that helped me to develop the elements to succeed in life.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

Biking (about 2,500 miles each summer).

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

When my students have difficulty practicing, I tell them that the first step is getting into the practice room. Otherwise, setting both short term (daily) and long term goals is important.

With whom did you study?

My most influential teachers were Dr. Joe Nicholson at Evangel University, Vern Kagarice at the University of North Texas, and John Kitzman, Dallas Symphony Orchestra. Each offered something different, which made me into the player and teacher I am.

What qualities do you think are important in a student?

I have many, but here are a few:

1. Excellence is an attitude, not a skill.
2. Give up believing in the "magic bullet."
 - a. Overnight success is a myth. Successful musicians know that making small continuous improvement every day will be compounded over time. Focus on the day ahead, and improve just 1% every day.
3. Give up on excuses
 - a. It's not about the cards you're dealt, but how you play the hand.
 - b. Successful people know they are responsible for their life, no matter their starting point, weaknesses, and past failures.
4. Success requires HARD WORK, common sense and persistence.
 - a. Success is getting up one more time that you fall.
 - b. Success is also going from failure to failure without a loss of enthusiasm

5. Give up on saying YES to things that don't support your goals.
 - a. Successful musicians know that in order to accomplish their goals, they will have to say NO to certain tasks, activities, and demands from their friends, family and colleagues.
6. First be a person of quality, then a musician of quality
7. Avoid hanging around those who affect you in a negative way;
 - a. Give up toxic people. People you spend the most time with add up to who you become. If you spend time with those who refuse to take responsibility for their life or always find excuses and blame others, you will go down with them
8. Guard your attitude;
9. Don't go through life with a chip on your shoulder
10. Guard your health
 - a. Avoid drugs
 - b. Avoid smoking
 - c. Eat healthy
 - d. Exercise
 - e. Get your sleep
11. Limit your time on social media
 - a. Avoid blogging or posting ANYTHING on social media that could be viewed as controversial by a potential employer or others, or that could reflect badly on you. I've seen it affect careers.
12. TAKE CARE OF BUSINESS
 - a. Be organized, respond quickly to e-mail and texts, complete assignments EARLY, be proactive, get in your practice.
13. Earn and maintain the respect of others

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

I knew early on that I wanted to pursue music as a career. My first university teaching job was at McNeese State University. And at that time I was still considering playing for a living. I remember being invited for the live audition round for the solo chair of the US Air Force Band in Washington, D.C. After giving it some thought, I decided I wanted to teach at the university level the rest of my life, and I canceled my audition.

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

<https://wmich.edu/trombone>

What are some of your favorite etude books?

I grew up using the traditional etudes books, and I still love them! (Rochut for legato, Voxman or Tyrrell for technique, and Sauer or Blazhevich for clef studies). There are many other excellent choices out there, but those are the ones I use.

Do you use any apps when you practice?

Yes! Tonal Energy is of course my favorite. Lots of trombonists use it, but it seems that not that many use some of the more important features, such as the recorder and slow speed playback. Those are invaluable, and I use them in lessons frequently in an effort to get students to HEAR problems in their playing.

What are some ways to improve one's rhythm?

I love having the student conduct the meter and then sing the lines at the same time. It builds a strong sense of time and helps them associate the rhythm to the time.

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

Be more disciplined, organized and determined.

What is your favorite place that you have traveled to?

Just about any place in Europe. So many great places there.

Who are some of your musical heroes?

I still look back at Chicago (rock group) trombonist Jimmy Pankow as someone who influenced my career. As a high school student, I'll never forget listening to his solos and lines and trying to imitate them. Otherwise it's hard not to love Joe Alessi's playing. Stefan Schulz is one of the most musical bass trombonist on the planet.

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

If a student really has the desire and determination to succeed as a performance major and really wants to pursue it, then I encourage it. Personally, I majored in music education and then pursued performance for my master's and doctorate. I have a slight

preference for going that route just because it offers more security, while still allowing the student to practice and perform as much as they want.

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

In my free time I enjoy road biking. I typically bike about 2,500 miles in a typically year (mostly during the summer months).

Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?

Prepare the music and then play it for LOTS of people before the audition. The more opportunities you have to “perform” the music in advance, the more prepared you’ll feel for the audition.

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

I recommend they spend more time listening to great players. When they can “memorize” what great playing sounds like, they can then try to imitate that sound.

What life lessons have you learned through music?

Many! It was the discipline required in music that taught me to succeed in other areas of my life. I was a weak student throughout high school, with a GPA just barely high enough to get me into my undergraduate school. For my master’s and doctoral degrees, my GPA had improved to a 4.0. I credit the discipline required for music with my success. Who knows where I would be without it.