

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring
Dr. Jessica Butler



Dr. Jessica Butler is currently an Associate Professor of Practice of Low Brass and Music History at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. She also serves as the Director of Undergraduate Studies and the Brass Area Coordinator at the School of Music. Dr. Butler has performed and presented her research at the International Trombone Festival, the International Women's Brass Conference, the Midwest Trombone Euphonium Conference, and the Savannah Trombone Seminar. She has had the honor of routinely performing with the Southeast Trombone Symposium's Professors Choir as well as the esteemed Cramer Trombone Choir and the International Women's Trombone Choir at the International Trombone Festival. As a performer, Dr. Butler is an active freelancer and enjoys performing with the Paducah Symphony. In 2010, Dr. Butler won the grand prize in the S.E. Shires Solo Competition at the Southeast Trombone Symposium. Dr. Butler is the first American performing artist with LITTIN trombones. Dr. Butler achieved her D.M.A. and M.A. degrees with Dr. David Gier at the University of Iowa and her B.M. with Dr. Bradley Palmer at Columbus State University. Jessica enjoys spending time hiking in beautiful Southern Illinois with her family.

www.jessicatrombone.com

Southern Illinois University SOM: <https://music.siu.edu/>

LITTIN Trombones: <https://www.littin-musik.de/>

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

I began playing trombone when I was in 6th grade. My older sister, who was in high school at the time, told me that I should play the trombone, so naturally, I listened to her! I am so glad that I did! My first trombone

was a shiny silver Bundy. I remember being so excited bringing it home from the instrument store, and then I realized I had no idea how to put it together!

What equipment do you primarily use?

I play on a custom LITTIN trombone. It has a screw-bell, which allows me to exchange different bells to achieve my ideal sound. Right now, I'm working on some orchestral repertoire, and I am practicing with the un-lacquered bell, which helps me achieve a darker sound. I have never really been an "equipment" person— I tend to stick with the same thing for a long time, so the fact that I have a new trombone is something I am getting used to! What I love about my LITTIN is that I feel more myself as an artist. Is it crazy to say that I feel a true connection to this instrument? It's as if my trombone allows me to communicate and express myself in ways that words fall short.

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

I can sometimes get bored of typical trombone music. My favorite instrument to borrow from is actually voice. I approach my trombone playing in a very singing style, and I think that the trombonist can learn so much about expression and phrasing from vocalists. I wrote a method book about the process that I use to adapt vocal works for trombone, and in it I include some of my own adaptations. https://cherryclassics.com/products/butler-songs-for-the-lyrical-trombonist-for-trombone-and-piano?_pos=1&_sid=37fa9d505&_ss=r

I love to play vocal art songs – anything by Mahler, Brahms, Ravel, Debussy, Schubert... I also enjoy adapting cello works.

How have your practice habits changed over the years?

Once I became a mom, my practice habits changed drastically. I no longer had the luxury of having all day to practice. I learned very quickly that I had a limited amount of time and I needed to make the most of it. My kids taught me how to become extremely efficient when practicing. Non-parents can also feel this, but my children truly taught me that my life is not about me. I believe that realization has made me a better teacher. It's not about me— it's about teaching my students how to be the best that they can be.

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

I struggled most with air flow and confidence. I think the two are very much interrelated.

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

Yes! I think that singing is vitally important in the practice room. I have never had a singing lesson (I probably should), but I will sing loudly and proudly in the practice room— just ask my students! I think that our singing voice is a direct reflection of the musical (or unmusical) thoughts that we are thinking. Can we “voice” these musical thoughts? If not, then the trombone is only going to make things more convoluted. If we sing a phrase musically, then that is an indication of sound musical thought. Don’t underestimate the power of your own mind (and voice)!

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

- Grit. Doing the hard thing day after day. It’s not about perfection but persistence.
- Get comfortable with discomfort. I’m not talking about pain, but we must spend time at the edge of our abilities. We should not sound amazing in the practice room at all times. There is a stoic mantra that “the obstacle is the way.” That means that we should be spending time with the things that are difficult for us.
- Celebrate others. Be genuinely happy for others in their successes. Their achievements don’t subtract from your own.
- Do small things with great love. Genuinely will the good of the other— because, why not?
- I once had a high school teacher whose motto was “Passion. Balance. Grace.” I’ve carried that with me ever since.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

I enjoy spending time with my family. We love to do outdoorsy activities like hiking and biking in the beautiful Shawnee National Forest. We love visiting with friends and making dinner for them. And board games! I’m in a book club and really enjoy reading.

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

Think about the big picture and take a step back from your problem. Remember your "why." Try not to internalize your disappointments or struggles. Sometimes I simply have a bad playing day– that's OK! On those days, I simply put in the work and then move on. Your self-worth should not be determined by how well you play. Music requires that we learn to be in the moment. Playing the trombone means that we are constantly taking a new breath with every new phrase. Perhaps the previous phrase did not go well; let your next breath be a reset and don't dwell on the past– stay in the moment and be thankful that music allow us to practice humility and start anew with each breath.

With whom did you study?

In my early years, I studied with Donald Strand, Dr. Philip Jameson, and Dr. James David (and all the David brothers). I then went on to do my undergraduate studies at Columbus State University with Dr. Brad Palmer and followed in his footsteps when I pursued my graduate degrees at the University of Iowa with Dr. David Gier. I stayed at Iowa for my Master's and Doctorate. I am so proud to be a student of both Dr. Palmer and Dr. Gier. They taught me so much and are such good people. They are the reason I wanted to become a university professor.

What qualities do you think are important in a student?

Are you willing to learn? Are you open-minded? Can you work hard? Are you curious? In my experience, curious and hardworking students have the most success.

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

You'd have to consult my 7th grade journal :D

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

www.jessicatrombone.com

What are some of your favorite etude books?

This is not an etude book, but David Vining's Flow Studies is how I start every day of practice. I will recommend this book to any and everyone who will listen.

Who are some of your musical heroes?

In general, I try to steer away from this way of thinking. It's important to remember that musicians are still people, complete with both flaws and charms. It can be easy to equate great musicianship with character, but that is not always the case. This is especially important for young musicians to understand. With that said, the person who most closely embodies "musical hero" for me is Abbie Conant.

Please give some tips for freelancing.

Be someone that people want to work with. Show up early and know your part. Adapt quickly and be able to problem solve. The musical world is small, and the trombone world is even smaller— word spreads fast.

Is anyone else in your family a musician?

Yes. My grandmother was a wonderful piano player who could play anything by ear. She was always so proud and supportive of my musical accomplishments. My mom was a clarinet player and the drum major of her high school marching band. My dad is a great guitarist. I am very thankful that my parents gave me musical upbringing and encouraged my musical studies.

Do you practice visualizing yourself performing?

Absolutely. The brain is so powerful, and your imagination can really help when practicing and performing.

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

I was in the Servant Leadership Program when I was at CSU. I did a ton of volunteer work and learned a leadership style that coincides with my values and strengths.

Do you ever get anxious for a performance? What advice would you give for dealing with nerves?

Of course! My teaching is very much inspired by Arnold Jacobs, and Jacobs really preached the simple concepts of song & wind. That's what I focus on when nerves show up. It really helps. I also focus on what I know to be true: I am prepared. I have worked hard. I am ready for this. I get to share my music with people. I love playing my trombone. The audience wants me to do well.

Do you like to teach? Why or why not?

I don't like to teach– I love to teach! (I learned that from my 4 year old) I feel so lucky that I get to make a living doing what I do. I love teaching because I love learning. I love working with my students and colleagues. I love seeing and hearing the growth that my students achieve week to week and year to year.

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

I often read non-fiction books and think about how I can apply the principles to my teaching and playing. A few titles that stand out include:

Atomic Habits, James Clear

The Slight Edge, Jeff Olson

Better Than Before and The Four Tendencies, Gretchen Rubin

Zen Habits (blog: zenhabits.net), Leo Babauta