

# AN ARTIST'S CORNER

*featuring*

## John Romero



John Romero is the Principal Trombonist of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra since 2018, and is also an S.E. Shires Performing Artist. He previously held the same position in the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra from 2016-2018. In addition to his work with the MET Opera, Romero has played in orchestras all over the country, such as the New York Philharmonic, Houston Symphony, London Philharmonic, Dallas Symphony, San Antonio Symphony, and many more. A local of the small town of Longview, Texas, he has a Bachelor's Degree in Music Performance from Baylor University, and a Master's from Rice University. As an educator, Romero teaches privately at Rutgers University, Bard College, and the Mannes School of Music.

Romero is also an active soloist and clinician, presenting recitals and masterclasses at the International Trombone Festival, the Blast of Brass Festival, the Juilliard School, Manhattan School, Indiana University, and many others. As a student, he focused heavily in solo and chamber competitions with great success. His most recent competitive

experience was at the first ever Brass division of the XVI International Tchaikovsky Competition in 2019, where he made it to the top 33% in the semifinals. He hopes to get a second chance at the Grand Prix at the next one in 2023.

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

I started piano when I was 5, but quit a year later because I thought it was boring. Then I had a choice of band, orchestra, or choir in 5th grade (10 years old), and since my two older sisters played trumpet, naturally I chose band so I could beat them. Of course, I ended up on trombone because they said "my lips were too big," but I think they just had too many trumpet players already.

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

I have played on a Shires since 2012, first a heavier, more rose brass version of the Colin Williams horn, and now a lightweight screw bell horn with the new Twin Valve. The specs are a TII7YLW detachable flare bell, Twin Valve with the skeleton cap on the bottom valve, TW47LW slide, and a 2 brass leadpipe. I used to play on a Greg Black 4.5GM New York model mouthpiece, but I've recently switched to a custom Long Island Brass mouthpiece.

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

Definitely winning the Fort Worth Symphony and MET Opera jobs! Both represented monumental achievements for me not just because of the jobs themselves, but because of how much I improved in the couple years before I won them. I feel like I really figured out how to play efficiently right before winning FWSO, and I learned how to play with ultra refinement and control before the MET. Qualifying for the Tchaikovsky competition and competing in Russia was also one of the coolest experiences I've had as a musician because of the prestige of the competition and the insanely high level of the other competitors. It felt like something out of the movies. But I have to say, my favorite experience out of all of them has to be the first time I won a solo competition at the collegiate level, the 2012 Wiehe ITF competition held in Paris. It was my first flight, just about everything went wrong that could have (they lost my trombone for starters), and I won anyways. It was the first moment where I really felt like I could do this whole music career thing.

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

The most influential recording has to be Joe Alessi's first recording of Blue Bells of Scotland. That convinced me to work on my range and technique and really showed me what the trombone was capable of back in middle school. Then I think it was the Bernstein New York Phil 73 recording of the Planets that opened me up to the

incredible world of orchestral music. I would listen to that album on repeat for months just absorbing every detail. Other than that, I'm actually a pretty terrible listener! I was way more into prog rock and metal and EDM and punk and stuff like that back in high school through college.

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

That's a hard question cause I was initially disappointed to not get to play the trumpet, so no one? But my bandmates and rivals in other districts inspired me through competition, and Joe Alessi represented the ultimate competition. When I heard Blue Bells for the first time, my thoughts were "wow that was amazing! I'm gonna beat him!"

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

Definitely Sibelius violin concerto, Tchaikovsky's 1st piano concerto, the Ravel Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, Liszt Un Sospiro, Beethoven anything for piano haha.

### ***Do you have any tips on becoming better at transcribing?***

Sure, and I'm assuming you mean transcribing by ear. 1st, it's infinitely easier to transcribe if you have good studio headphones. Something in the \$200 range is probably gonna be enough of a quality boost from earphones that it's very worth it. And you want something that doesn't add unnecessary bass or treble. 2nd, knowing some music theory helps tremendously because if you know classical theory or jazz theory and you know what notes generally go together, that can help you make educated guesses when you can't quite hear a note. 3rd, sometimes close enough is close enough. Not every note is equally important, and if you can't tell what a note is, then just make up something in the ball park and keep going. As you get better, you'll have less and less of those to deal with.

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

Oh gosh, they've changed a lot. When I first started seriously practicing in 6th grade, I would take a lesson or grab the Arban's book and just attack the exercises/concepts like a rabid dog. My go to model was Goku; just push through your limits through sheer willpower. After I got to college, I figured out that organizing my practice into separate categories and hitting all of my fundamentals every day made progress much more consistent, and towards the latter part of my undergrad degree,

I started taking ownership of my own progress and stopped waiting for other people to tell me how to fix my problems. That whole practice smarter, not harder thing. A big shift was truly learning to believe in my ability to find a solution to every single problem I faced. By my graduate degree, I had to learn what it meant to balance my endurance against freshness for optimal sound and control, and I actually cut my practice time in half, but spent a lot more time actually sounding good. And now that I'm a professional, I actually practice way less than I used to unless I'm working up a recital or opera or something and focus less on improvement as much as refinement. I'm sure I'll go through different phase shifts in the future as well.

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

Patience. I only wanted to practice the high fast and loud stuff, so my soft playing, lip slurs, sound, and basically all the stuff that makes you sound refined was really lacking. When I got to college, I realized just how far behind I was on those things pretty quickly and had to catch up.

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

Oh yeah! I sing frequently, mostly when working on solos. It's easier to think creatively when I don't have to operate the instrument, so a lot of times, my musicality comes from my singing first, and then I try to mimic what I sang on the horn. I think you're doing yourself a disservice as an instrumentalist if you don't sing.

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

For me, success was any kind of steady wages as a performing musician, and I didn't really care what kind. Broadway, freelance, big band, orchestra, whatever. I just knew band directing and/or 40 hours of private teaching wasn't a sustainable career for me, and if I didn't achieve some kind of success by 30 ish, I probably would've gone back to college to get a computer science degree.

***What are some things that you have focused on during the pandemic?***

Speedrunning! I have two world records in the niche console category of the niche game Hollow Knight, any% and low%. Other than that, just trying to keep my head above water.

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

Perseverance/grit is talked about a lot for a good reason. The ability to survive and thrive in a lot of failure is necessary for self improvement, and you won't see a lot of successful people who haven't worked on their fear of failure unless they never had a chance of failing in the first place (looking at you rich family dynasties). It's also really difficult to be successful on your own, so learning to rely on others when you don't have the answers can sometimes require a lot of humility and, frankly, some social skills that not everyone is born with. Intelligence is really helpful because everyone gets into ruts, and ruts are hard to get out of by brute force. And by intelligence, I don't mean IQ, I mean stuff like critical thinking skills, self awareness, analysis skills, etc. But even if you're a genius, I go back to my 2nd point which is that we all need help sometimes because no one is good at everything.

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

No idea. I'm just trying to put one foot in front of the other. But if I had to pick something I want to be known for at the end of my career, I'd like to be known as a strong creative force soloistically, orchestrally, and maybe compositionally, as well as a kind and effective teacher.

## ***Can you describe preparation for the Tchaikovsky Competition? What was it like to be part of this competition?***

It was tough! I had the busiest part of the Opera season coming ahead with the Ring Cycle and frankly, my job was more important, so I prioritized that. Between learning about 1.5 hours of solo rep and that, I was perpetually fatigued, mentally and physically. Getting the visa was also a process. The competition was more of the same, really. St. Petersburg in the summer doesn't have a true night, only 4 hours of twilight, so we were all jet lagged and sleep deprived and exhausted physically and it showed. Even the career soloists had to take stuff down an octave. But still, it was a super fun experience!

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

Video games, rock climbing, biking, hiking nature trails, watching TV, playing guitar and piano, hanging out with friends.

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

Honestly, I'm terrible with motivating myself. I have to get someone else to do it for me. In other words, I understand that if I don't have external accountability, I won't work nearly as hard, so I just constantly scheduled competitions and auditions and recitals and lessons so I never had a chance to relax. So generally speaking, this goes back to self awareness. Just put yourself in an environment where you don't really have a choice but to be motivated. That environment may be entirely internal, but with enough thought, I think everyone can find it. It's not at all about willpower.

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

Nope! I would say going on walks alone is similar for me, though, and it just gives me a chance to let my mind work on my problems in the background. I often find myself more refreshed and motivated after a good walk.

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

Steven Moss, David Applegate, Brent Phillips, Allen Barnhill.

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

Receptivity! It always blows my mind when someone pays me for a lesson and then doesn't want to listen to what I have to say. You can disagree with me, sure, I even encourage it sometimes. But I believe you should never completely dismiss something that a teacher says until you've tried it a few times, because it's always possible that you misunderstood or that it will only make sense with time. I can't tell you how many times I've had that "ahhaaaaa that's what they meant!" moment several weeks to months later.

Other than that, creativity, work ethic, and positivity. It's hard to progress when you're constantly beating yourself up and sending your self esteem to the pits.

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

I don't think there is a version of me that has ever been anything but a musician. I was singing hymnals in church since before I can remember. But as far as pursuing it as a career goes, I think it's made me more understanding of others and appreciative



of those who think differently than me. People are complex creatures who can hold contradictory things inside themselves.

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

Because I wanted to be the best. That's basically it.

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

Yes. I had just made All State for the first time and hadn't picked a major yet and I figured "okay, I'm kinda good at this. Maybe I have a shot. And if I don't take that shot now, then I'll never get another chance"

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

These days? Maybe 30 minutes. When the MET is in session it's more like an hour of individual practice plus a lot of little 2-5 minute sessions, or a long session of working out an opera, so maybe that averages out to 1.5-2 hours a day. 4-5 when working on a recital or competition.

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

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

Believe it or not, the Bordogni books, especially book 2. Slama is really good. Arban Characteristic Studies, and the Charlier trumpet etudes.

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

Tonal Energy Tuner, Time Guru, piano apps, recording apps

***Before the pandemic, what was a typical week like for you at the Metropolitan Opera?***

Busy. 4-5 services a week of 3-4 hours each, plus maybe 2-5 rehearsals of anywhere from 2.5 to 6 hours. Plus teaching which sometimes includes a 2 hour trip by train one way.

***Do you listen to any podcasts and if so, which ones?***

Lots! Some of my favorites are Slate's Political Gabfest, My Favorite Murder, the WellRed show, Coffee Break French, Welcome to Nightvale, My Dad Wrote a Porno (hilariously NSFW), and a smattering of other news podcasts.

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

Record yourself against a visible click track in a DAW (digital audio workstation) so you can see exactly where you fall behind and ahead. Metronomes only take you so far because they don't really do much to build that internal sense of rhythm. Also, don't neglect the power of physical movement! Sway your body back and forth in time, pound your chest to the beat hard enough to make it sound a bass note, etc. Rhythm and timing are both strongly correlated to one's physical balance and sense of motion.

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

SLOWER! PRACTICE SLOWLY! Also, take a break every now and then, cause you're gonna injure yourself otherwise. Also, your physical and mental health exists, take care of both!

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

Paris probably, but Colorado is a close second. It's just really exhilarating immersing yourself in another culture and speaking the language.

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

Christian Lindberg, Joe Alessi, Ian Bousfield, Arthur Pryor, Robert Isele, Marshall Gilkes, Wycliffe Gordon, Mnozil Brass

***How old were you when you first began transcribing solos?***

I started playing stuff by ear in 6th grade, never really put them down on paper until college in jazz improv class though. it's not a big part of my life now.



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

No idea where to even begin there, but I'll say fictional characters like Link from Zelda, Goku from Dragonball Z, Drizzt Do'Urden from R.A. Salvatore's Forgotten Realms series, just basically characters that exemplified heroism, excellence beyond what anyone thought possible, pushing through your limits, and just generally being a badass.

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

Depends on the life part of things. If you have kids or not makes a big difference, but I would just say that you can spend so much time trying to be the best possible player you can be, that when you get the job you forget what it was like to just exist without the constant pressure for self-improvement. It's okay to not want to literally be the best because there are only 24 hours in a day, and to be the best, you probably won't have time for anything else. So being realistic about what you want out of your career is going to help with the balance thing tremendously.

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

Be cordial, don't kiss ass unless your contractor is someone who has an ego to stroke, be on time and know your music, and just generally be someone who people don't mind being around. You don't have to be the life of the party, and a lot of people don't want you to be if you're just subbing in. Worst case scenario, stick to talking about the weather, shut up, and don't complain unless you're part of the group.

## ***What tips would you give to a young musician that wants to become a soloist?***

Work hard, figure out how to be interesting musically, and *really* learn your licks. You will have to master the hardest techniques, so don't allow yourself excuses. In a competition, every missed note, every boring phrase, that's a point against you.

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

I think it's more or less fine as a backup, but please don't do music ed if you actually aren't okay with being a band director. There are enough bad directors out there who take out their regrets on their students.

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

Not professionally, but everyone but my dad can play an instrument and sing. My dad can't hold a tune to save his life.

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

Everywhere that has an audience.

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

It's better to practice range with the right technique and airball than to force the notes out with bad technique. Get fatigued every day, but don't hurt yourself. Then, rest, and come back to it. You'll probably notice an improvement, much like working out.

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

Probably the semis of the MET audition, played a note perfect round.

***Where do you see yourself in 10 years?***

Hopefully out of this pandemic and still employed!

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

Yes

***Do you prefer to learn solos by ear or by transcribing or both? Why?***

If you mean jazz solos, then transcribing, It's just quicker that way for me.

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

If you don't know something, just ask. Musicians aren't like Gordon Ramsey, we're generally very willing to help.

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

I've really gotten into Phoebe Bridgers and The Japanese House recently, as well as Sevish, a microtonal EDM composer.

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

Not really, just depends on my mood.

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

Girl from Impanema music video, 2 compositions and 2 arrangements for ITF, learning how to write microtonal music, speedrunning.

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

Do not hide. Do not play it safe. I think that's terrible advice. When you play it safe, you play cowardly, and that can be heard through the bell. You should instead play it as if you are the only one who knows how the piece really goes and you're proud of your interpretation. No one wants to play next to a guesser, they want someone who will add value to the organization.

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

Oh yeah! I get the shakes and everyone. Breathing exercises really help, and I focus on focusing through the nerves, not on being less nervous. You can play well even if you are nervous, but you have to believe that to be true for you personally for it to actually be true.

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

Therapy is not just for the mentally ill or the weak. It shows courage to seek out help when you're struggling.

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

Excellence isn't magic, it isn't just talent, it can be learned and practiced.

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

Either some kind of quantum physics or astro physics research, or computer programming

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

Perform more! Students should have a concert or two every week! It makes no sense to rehearse for months before a show because that's not how professionals do it.

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

Yes! It's very gratifying to see students reach new understandings of themselves and their instrument and grow as people. But also no, students can be and are frequently disappointing and frustrating. When you have the same exact lesson over the same stuff 10 times in a row, it's very disheartening because it makes you feel like a failure as a teacher.

***What are your favorite solos for your instrument?***

Grondahl, Arrows of Time, Ropartz, Bozza Ballade

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

I'm Here to Win by Chris McCormick

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

Go to your doctor! Tell them about any and everything that bothers you. It's probably nothing, but it's also possible it is and you'll run into bigger problems down the road.

***What are some of the challenges you face performing in the Metropolitan Opera?***

Mostly just chops and managing the immense workload. You have to have herculean endurance to last at the MET. But also, you have to juggle keeping 16-24 hours of music in your head while learning more every week, so that just comes down to organization and professionalism.

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

Tacos