

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Dr. Karen Marston



Karen Marston is currently on the full time faculty at Mt San Antonio College in Walnut, CA, where she works with brass players in both applied and chamber settings and teaches music history courses. Prior to this position, she spent 15 years on the full time faculty at San Jacinto College in Pasadena, TX. Karen holds degrees in trombone performance from the University of North Texas and Rice University, and both a masters and doctorate in music education from Columbia University, where she was the recipient of the Elin B. Stein Graduate Fellowship. Her teachers include Jan Kagarice, Dr. Vern Kagarice, Dr. Royce Lumpkin, and David Waters.

She is the founder and Artistic Director of two successful brass chamber ensembles, Omni Brass and the Resonance Brass Choir, and in that capacity has performed and taught both nationally and internationally, giving master classes at Cal State Los Angeles, the University of Texas at Tyler, Baylor University, Lamar University, Texas A&M University Corpus Christi, Texas Christian University, and numerous middle and high school programs across the country. Her ensembles have also been featured at the TCU Trombone Summit, the Houston Symphony League Chamber Music Series, the San Jacinto College Brass Symposium, Menil Fest (Houston), Café Corotu (Panama City, Panama), the Clarion at Brazosport College, and the International Trombone Festival (Redlands, CA). She has also commissioned and premiered numerous works, including brass and percussion ensembles by Charles Halka (*Northbound*, 2017), Stephen Bachicha (*Three Sculptural Impressions*, 2016), Joseph Schenck (*Fanfare*, 2015), Henry Darragh (*Levelled Out*, 2013), and Isiah Castro (*Close Call*, 2017).

Outside of chamber music, Karen is also active as a freelancer, and has performed with the Houston Symphony, the San Antonio Symphony, the Ebony Opera Guild, Orchestra X (Houston), the American Radio Chamber Orchestra, the Composers Orchestra of Houston, the Millennial Choirs and Orchestra (Orange County, CA), Alliance Brass, Ambient Brass, and the Texas Brass. In 2020, she was scheduled to perform as guest soloist with the Youth Wind Ensemble of the Pacific Symphony, and has also been featured numerous times at the International Trombone Festival, most notably as a founding member of the Composers Workshop, an initiative for new music.

As a researcher, Karen has completed an extensive dissertation project focusing on the causes and pedagogical interventions relevant to focal task specific embouchure dystonia, and her work has twice been published in the Journal of the International Trombone Association. In 2020, she also completed an open

source textbook for college-level music appreciation courses, currently available for free use online. Dr. Marston's arrangements can be heard on both Omni Brass releases – *The Red Album* (2014), and *Omnify* (2016) – and are available commercially through *Brassworks4*. Karen has received performance and pedagogy grants from the San Jacinto Foundation, the Brown Foundation, the American Chamber Music Players of New York, and the Houston Arts Alliance.

As Director of both the International Trombone Festival and SoCal Trombone Day, Dr. Marston is at the forefront of the trombone community, and enjoys collaborations with students, teachers, and artists from around the world.

Karen is an artist for Rath Trombones, England.

Bachelor of Music, B.M., Trombone, the University of North Texas, 1994

Master of Music, M.M., Trombone, Rice University, 1999

Master of Education, M.Ed., Teachers College, Columbia University, 2011

Doctor of Education, Ed.D.C, Teachers College Columbia University, 2011

www.trombonekaren.com

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

I joined band in the sixth grade. Almost everyone in my family is a musician, and it seemed like the right thing to do! My big brother played the euphonium, and like every little sister, I wanted to be just like him. When my band director asked me what instrument I was interested in, I asked about the euphonium, and he replied with the funniest comment – “Play trombone – you’ll get more gigs!” Who knows why he told a 12-year old that, let alone why he told a 12-year old GIRL that, in the 1980s, in the South (I grew up in Texas), but he did, and I owe him so much for those words! For whatever reason, as soon as I picked up the trombone, I was absolutely hooked, and I haven’t put it down since!

What are some of your favorite highlights of your career?

My experiences as a chamber musician are absolutely the highlight of my career. When I was younger, I really saw myself becoming an orchestral player, but over time, I figured out that just wasn’t the best fit for me. As early as college, I was already nagging all my friends to form a chamber group with me, and I tried over and over to find that magical combination of personalities that coalesces into a great ensemble. It took many years into my professional life before that would actually happen, but along the way, I played lots of gigs with many fine musicians, and am very grateful for everything that chamber music has brought into my life!

I think my favorite thing about chamber music is how much you get to use your creativity. I've arranged literally hundreds of pieces for various brass ensembles. I learned this skill out of necessity – I was fortunate to play with many groups that needed repertoire, so I figured, why not do it myself? It was a big challenge and a learning curve for sure, but over time, and many groups willing to play my work, I now feel pretty solid as an arranger.

When I was living and working in Houston, which is where I have spent the greatest number of years in my career, I founded a group called Omni Brass, which was comprised of two trumpets and two trombones (later, a trombone and tuba), with a multi-style percussionist. Over the course of about six years, we did three studio recordings together, commissioned all sorts of new music, toured both nationally and internationally, and became the best of friends. My time with that group has definitely been the highlight of my career.

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

I love the Brahms Cello Sonata in E Minor. It is so expressive and beautiful. Ironically, the first time I heard it was in a trombone recital! Trombonists love to steal this piece, but I think it sounds the best on cello (sorry everyone). It is so mournful and lyrical and I love the counterpoint between the piano and soloist. Brahms had a really conservative personality, but was surrounded by all these Romantic composers who wanted music to be all about emotion, and you can hear this tension in his music – it's like he wants to let go and hold back at the same time – I love it! The cello is also such a wonderful model for trombonists to learn a legato, lyrical playing style.

I am also a huge fan of the Scottish Fantasy for violin and orchestra, by Max Bruch. It is full of simple, tuneful melodies, but it's also really exciting to listen to, and has some wonderful virtuoso playing for the violin. String players have a few centuries on brass players, in terms of learning solo playing, and I think these pieces and their performers can offer some great inspiration.

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

For sure, hands down, my absolute biggest challenge was confidence! I had this weird response to being successful – it made me *less* confident. In time, I learned that this was because being successful made me feel like I was under more pressure...a common response, but not something I understood well when I was

younger. Eventually, I also developed some pretty debilitating performance anxiety, which was so bad that I had to finally face up to it and get help. It took a long time, and I still sometimes have moments when my confidence tanks, but over the years (thanks to some really helpful teachers) I have learned effective coping skills. I am happy to say that these days, my performance experiences are almost always exhilarating and fun, instead of terrifying and demeaning, as they used to be. To anyone reading this who has anxiety or confidence challenges, take heart! These issues can be overcome. There are so many wonderful resources to help now – The Bulletproof Musician, Don Greene's books. Nerves should not stop anyone from pursuing their goals as a musician – you can get past it!

What do you want your legacy to be?

I work with the International Trombone Festival, and so have a hand in directing the biggest trombone event in the world. This is a huge honor for me, because I remember my own teacher, Vern Kagarice (at the University of North Texas) tirelessly dedicating his time to this organization. He was an incredible model for what it looks like to actively support the culture of trombone playing, and his memory inspires me to keep at it! I hope that I can have a hand in making the international trombone community a more diverse, inclusive, and welcoming place.

With whom did you study?

I have been fortunate to have wonderful teachers, who not only taught me trombone skills, but helped me to grow as a human being. My lifelong teacher is Jan Kagarice. I started working with her as an undergrad at the University of North Texas, and I am not ashamed to say that she truly changed my life! She taught me that trombone playing is always about making music – this was so freeing and energizing for me, and it is something I always try to pass on to my students, first and foremost. I also studied with Vern Kagarice at UNT and loved his approach as well. His method was to ask questions, forcing you to come up with your own conclusions – often giggling at you a bit, once you “got it!” Sadly, Vern passed a few years ago – I know I join many in missing him.

I attended Rice University (in Houston) for my masters degree, and had the opportunity to study with David Waters, then bass trombonist in the Houston Symphony. He was very different than the Kagarices, and it took some time to

adjust to that, but David and I had a great rapport, and I just loved him. He was super-supportive, and went all-in on championing his students as they worked to find a place for themselves in the world. I really loved that about him – he wasn't just about trombone playing. He wanted everyone to maximize all of their talents. We lost him about 10 years ago. I have had many moments since then when I wished I could call him up, and let him know what I'm up to, because I know he would be interested and supportive! It is an honor to have known great musicians like Vern and Dave.

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

I do remember this! When I was about 15 years old, my older sister gave me a cassette tape called the Classical Hit Parade. It was basically a Pops recording, meaning it had all the most popular and accessible pieces for symphony orchestra – composers like Kabelevsky and Tchaikovsky. I listened to it so many times that it stopped working! From there, I went on a binge, and started buying up Classical recordings as fast as I could, listening to each of them over and over. I eventually amassed a pretty impressive tape collection. For those of you who don't know, this amounted to basically nothing, since tapes were eventually replaced by CDs! In any case, one day it just hit me – I wanted to play that music!

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

My personal website is www.trombonekaren.com. I also run the website for the International Trombone Festival, at www.trombonefestival.net, and SoCal Trombone Day, at www.tromboneday.com.

What are some of your favorite etude books?

My absolute favorite book to play out of is the Telemann Flute Fantasias, transcribed by Ralph Sauer (available through Cherry Classics). I have been playing these since I was about 18 years old, and there is still plenty to work on! They are similar in style to the Bach Cello Suites, but since they were written for a wind instrument, they lay much better on trombone, in terms of phrasing. They are great for both practice and performance, and I've used them for auditions on many occasions.

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

I would love to go back and tell myself to lighten up! I know that sounds crazy, but I was so hard on myself for so many years. I often set impossible standards – things I wouldn't expect from anyone else – and then was pretty negative when I decided I didn't measure up. Part of that was born out of a fear that I wouldn't be able to support myself as a trombonist, and in that regard, I suppose a little fear is healthy, but I wish I would have been more positive about it. The funny thing is that I am generally a pretty positive person! But in that one area, I definitely struggled. I think a better approach would have been to practice believing in myself, and having a little faith that things would work out – which they did. I could have saved myself a lot of anguish that way!

How do you suggest balancing life with music?

This evolves a lot, over time. When you are a student in high school, you are being pulled in many different directions. It's more about finding a place to fit music in, as you can. When you get to college, you will have many opportunities to really hone in on your musical studies, so this is definitely when you want to put the most time in! As my friend Tony Baker says, practicing when you're young is like "money in the bank!" The more you can get done at that stage, the easier things will be for you, as a professional. After college, that's when things start to get tricky. You might be working – in music, or otherwise – have a family, kids, etc. Time for yourself starts to become a premium, and you need to spend it wisely. On top of that, if you are busy as a performer, you're likely to have a lot more music to learn in a much shorter period of time than you had in school. Hopefully, you've already developed great practice habits, so that you can both maintain your own playing, and get yourself prepared for performances. If you spent your college years wisely, it should all work out!

Outside of that, I try to always remember something that Vern Kagarice would often say – trombone playing is something you do, not who you are. That probably sounds counterintuitive, but the truth is that I think it's most healthy for musicians to establish a sense of self that is outside of music, and then to bring that confidence to your playing, instead of the other way around. This means diversifying your life – gathering different experiences, and meeting new people whenever you can. Interestingly, I recently heard an interview with Paul McCartney, in which he said the very same thing!

Please give some tips for freelancing.

It's incredibly important to remember that freelancing is about people and networking. Yes, you need to be a great player, but that alone won't really get you anywhere. More important than your playing, people need to know that working with you will be a positive experience – you will show up on time, with the right horn, clothes, and equipment, and you'll have your music learned. These are the so-called "soft skills" that make a successful musician. Without them, your freelancing career will be very short!

When I was right out of graduate school in Houston, a friend asked me last minute to sub with a big band in town. I met two important people on that gig – a guitarist with his own Top-40 band, and a trumpet player with his own brass quintet. It is not an exaggeration to say that that these two contacts lead to literally hundreds of gigs in the following years. I even spent some time touring with the Top-40 band. What's the moral of the story? Always be ready to put your best foot forward, on every gig, every time. You never know who might be there!

Is anyone else in your family a musician?

Everyone in my family is a musician! In fact, one of my very earliest memories is of hearing my mother sing in the chorus for a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, with the Toledo (Ohio) Symphony. I was very young – maybe four years old. I had no idea what I was hearing, or what it meant, but the Ode to Joy melody was stuck in my head for years. My dad was an engineer but sung and played the piano – his favorite was Joplin Rags, which he used to play by the hour. My younger sister has a degree in piano performance, and my older sister has also played piano professionally.

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

Right now, my life is pretty focused on my kids, and I spend a lot of my time involved in their lives and activities, but I also enjoy swimming (I was a competitive swimmer for many years, as a kid), and more recently, I have picked up photography. I especially love hiking and nature photography! I have a lot to learn yet, but I find the process very relaxing and fun! All that being said, playing my trombone in any setting still makes me very happy. I am writing this at the close of 2020, when playing has been all but gone for months. This makes me

even more grateful for the opportunities I've had as a performer, and hopeful for a future when some of these opportunities return!

Do you have a favorite genre of music?

I am a brass-music nerd and listen to anything I can get my hands on, but my favorite is large brass choirs, especially the Washington Symphonic Brass, Summit Brass, the National Brass Ensemble, the Graham Ashton Brass Ensemble, and Superbrass!

Please list some of your favorite websites for musicians.

www.bulletproofmusician.com

I have spent a lot of time working through the Bulletproof Musician course, and highly recommend Dr. Kageyama's work! He has researched-based resources for everything from performance anxiety, to practice skills!

www.trombone.net

I also recommend that any young trombonist join the International Trombone Association, and take advantage of the Journal, and all of its resources.

www.trombonefestival.net

You can read about the ITF Artists and Festival goings-on!

Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?

I used to think that my perfectionism and its accompanying negativity was the exception to the rule, but over the years, after working with so many different students, I have learned that almost everyone is too hard on themselves! This is not conducive to doing your best in performance or at an audition.

I use a rating system with my students, which helps to short-circuit some of our natural tendency to nitpick our own performances. All practice sessions should include a "dry run" of whatever music you have under your belt. If you've just spent thirty minutes working out a particular section of a piece, your practice should conclude with a "performance" – mentally put yourself into a performance

headspace, and give it a whirl – no stopping, no matter what. When you're done, rate your performance on a scale of 1-10, 10 being **your** highest potential, for the target section. Realistically, you aren't really ever going to hit a 10 – this is okay. A perfect 10 is a level to aspire to, and may happen momentarily, but almost never consistently. This is normal, because we are human! Instead, we are shooting for 8-9, consistently. When we take "perfect" out of the equation, and instead focus on keeping ourselves at a consistent 80-90% of our potential (hopefully more on the 90% side), we find that we are setting goals we can achieve, and our confidence grows over time. Try it!

Do you have any tips on forming a chamber group?

I have two tips, actually. The first, is to have a clear vision for what you want to accomplish. Do you want to play local gigs, like weddings or parties, or do you want to play recitals, in places like colleges or in chamber music concert series? If you are just starting out, the first option – getting a lot of local gigs under your belt – is the best place to begin. Talk to people you know, and get the word out about what you are doing. Record some demos, and put them online. Post to social media about your group, and send some introductory emails to contractors, churches, or other people who might be in a position to hire you. Once you build up some momentum, you will be surprised how quickly things can grow!

Secondly, stick to it. It can take time (sometimes a lot) to find a group of people who share your vision. Don't worry if not everyone wants to do the same things you do with a given group. This is normal, and it really can take some time to find the right combination of people to make things work. Just keep moving forward!