

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Melissa Brown



Melissa Brown (she/her) is a trombonist, brass teacher, and podcaster now based in the Midlands of the UK (Leicestershire to be precise).

She is a graduate of Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance and is now a freelance professional trombonist with a lot of her work focussed on educating future musicians either as a classroom music teacher or low brass specialist instrumental teacher.

Melissa is also the host, producer, and editor over at **Bold as Brass Podcast** where she interviews fellow brass professionals from around the world about their jobs. There are now almost 80 episodes to listen to!

Her website, to find out more, is: melissabrownbrass.co.uk

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

In the UK it's quite common to start playing recorder in primary school so it'd be fair to say that was my first instrument. I was 9 when I was first able to play a brass instrument – a cornet. I grew up playing in brass bands so I moved around the band for a while spending a few years on tenor horn and aged 13 I discovered the trombone and set up camp with that one!

What equipment do you primarily use?

I play a Conn 88H with a Bach 5G mouthpiece, a Besson Sovereign euphonium, and a Miraphone alto trombone with a Denis Wick 10CS.

What are some of your favorite highlights of your career?

The first time I played at the Royal Albert Hall was as part of the offstage band with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. It's such a special venue and I think that feeling of total awe will stay with me forever. And my first proper tour as a professional musician was to India – a travel destination I might never have chosen otherwise but an amazing, eye-opening opportunity.

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

Oh gosh – how long is the list supposed to be? Brass wise I think *Bones Apart* and Carol Jarvis's first album *Smile* made such an impression on me in my early studies when I realized that there were fantastic female role models in my field.

Who inspired you to play your instrument?

Lindsay Shilling (Royal Opera House). He is the president of the brass band I grew up playing for and it was his visit to perform as soloist with the band that convinced me that the trombone was the instrument for me.

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

We'll probably come more to this later on but I've made friends across the world who I'd never have had chance to make genuine contact with previously and this all mostly thanks to pandemic-project Bold as Brass Podcast.

How and when did you decide to make your wonderful podcast, Bold As Brass?

Bold as Brass Podcast is mostly a pandemic project. I'd been interested for some time in having some sort of music-related journalistic output and I hadn't decided if it would be a blog, podcast, YouTube channel or what. I wasn't seeing any UK-based brass interviews at the time of beginning and, as a beginner, only worrying about audio seemed like a sensible jumping off point. I had extra time due to Covid and the inability to carry out some of my teaching and, living in a flat at the time, there was only so much practice I could do. So I thought it was time to give it a go. 76 episodes later and here we are!

Was it challenging to make your own podcast?

Absolutely! As I say, I was a total novice (still am!). I didn't know the first thing about hosting sites, editing software, microphones, interviewing. But, as they say, if you never try something new, you'll never know if it works for you. I don't know if I'm any good at it but it keeps me busier than I could have imagined!

What are some of your favorite interviews that you have conducted on your podcast, Bold As Brass?

All of them! Honestly it'd be a disservice to my guests to single any one guest out but I've learned so much from speaking with each guest and made new friends across the world whom I'd likely never have crossed paths with if it weren't for the pandemic and the podcast. I know we've not got much to thank the pandemic for but this is one thing that comes out as a positive for me!

How have your practice habits changed over the years?

Firstly I don't have as much time to practice as I did when I was a student! So I have to be a lot more efficient and sensible with what I choose to spend my time playing. I don't have much need for playing lots of solo repertoire so etudes, technical exercises, and melodies that I can enjoy are my go-to!

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

Volume. I couldn't play loud properly when I got to college. Also confidence but I feel like that might be a lifelong struggle!!

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

I do and I'm sure lots of folks here have said it – if you can sing it (or at least vocalise how you intend for it to sound) you can play it. That said, I don't encourage it of all of my students unless they are comfortable or confident using their voices.

What is your definition of success?

These are deep questions! I think if you are content and happy with the path you've followed and the opportunities you've taken then you can consider yourself successful. As a musician this can take all sorts of different shapes and it can change and as long as it's right **for you** at any given time then it's all good!

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

Be nice, be reliable, be dedicated to whatever it is you do, find things you enjoy, learn who you are and be that person.

What do you want your legacy to be?

That I did interesting things in my own way.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

I like to bake but I'm still learning how to make baked goods look good (I don't think you'll see me on the Great British Bake Off any time soon!). I learn and practice Greek. I love to travel (go away, Covid) and spend time with loved ones. Simple things, really!

With whom did you study?

Prior to college I studied with freelancer Duncan Wilson. My principal teachers at college (Trinity Laban) were Mark Templeton (LPO), Carol Jarvis, and Phil White (Philharmonia). I took occasional lessons and masterclasses with Graham Lee, Don Lucas, Denis Wick, Lindsay Shilling and Byron Fulcher.

What qualities do you think are important in a student?

Focus, respect, curiosity, and an open mind.

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

My dad is an amateur tuba player and it was his playing in a brass band that initially piqued my interest for brass. I grew up in brass bands primarily and they still hold a very fond place in my heart. I took to it quite naturally (that sounds very bold, I know) and it was the thing I enjoyed most and felt like I'd clicked with the most.

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

I was 12. Though my today job looks quite different than 12-year-old me imagined!

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

I'm at melissabrownbrass.co.uk and hopefully soon there'll be one for Bold as Brass – watch this space.

What are some of your favorite etude books?

Bordogni/Rochut and Kopprasch.

Do you use any apps when you practice?

Yeah, I use a metronome app religiously and I'm new to tuning drones but I'm finding them really helpful. I've found playing along with backing tracks and recordings useful for motivation during lockdowns when we couldn't play with anyone else, too!

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

Figure things out your way and don't compare yourself to others.

Where is your favorite place that you have traveled to?

I'm Cypriot by heritage so whenever I get to go and visit my family back in Cyprus it's always special; the people are so nice, it's so beautiful, and the food is incredible.

How do you suggest balancing life with being a musician?

I think there's no hard and fast rules and you've got to figure out what can, and does, work for you. So for me, I've recently condensed my teaching timetable into 4 days, I

take one day a week to work on the podcast, and fit the playing in if and when it comes along. I often keep at least one day free on a weekend (or try to – I don't actively avoid a gig or anything to do so, just to be clear!) and don't teach any later than 8pm. This way I get to eat properly, spend time with my partner, have time to walk the dogs, and have some down time every single day. This helps with motivation, feeling rested, and ultimately is (hopefully!) going to remove any risk of burnout.

Is anyone else in your family a musician?

Yes, my dad and brother are both brass players (tuba and trumpet respectively) and I used to sing in a choir with my grandma.

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

Royal Albert Hall, Ronnie Scott's (though I have no place in a jazz venue – I'm very not jazzy!), and the Royal Festival Hall (this may be surprising to Bold as Brass listeners...)

What are you most proud of in your life?

Continuing to work as a musician after mental health difficulties and several large relocations. And, of course, starting and growing Bold as Brass Podcast.

What advice can you give about mental wellness?

Know your limits and know what your warning signs are to take time off and avoid burnout. Each week try to schedule in time for things that are not work or work related. Ask for help if you need it. I now speak quite openly about this but during college and my early career I struggled fairly extensively with my mental health (I live with a formal diagnosis of OCD and it's a sorely misunderstood condition) and it took me a long time to ask for help, learn how best to manage it, and ultimately live with it. It's taken me 5 years since my last treatment to discuss it openly and hope that my doing so makes it easier for someone else to own any diagnosis of theirs. It doesn't affect my ability to be a reliable, working, musician but I didn't believe that at my worst. (Also if you have questions pertaining to OCD and specifically being a musician with OCD, feel free to get in touch!)

What life lessons have you learned through music?

Reliability, dedication, patience, ambition, team work and how to be pleased for the successes of others.

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

It's wild but I'm fascinated by engines. I'd love to train as a mechanic if being a musician falls through and then maybe I'd be able to fix my own car!

Do you like to teach? Why or why not?

100% - it is what makes up most of my income. If it weren't for good role model, helpful, inspirational teachers I'd not be where I am today and, as I've got the skills and the interest, it seems like I ought to pay it forward. I do one-to-one, group, and whole class instrumental teaching and classroom curricular music lessons, too. It keeps my schedule varied – I'll never be bored!

What is your favorite food?

Thai food!