

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Sam Woodhead



MSG *Sam Woodhead* is the solo and principal trombonist and trombone section leader of The U.S. Army Band "Pershing's Own" Concert Band, a position he has held since 2004, and a member of the Concert Brass. Prior to winning the position in concert band, Woodhead served as a trombonist in the Ceremonial Band of "Pershing's Own". In addition to his duties with the concert band, he has performed with the Brass Quintet, Blues, Orchestra, Chorus, Herald Trumpets, and Down Range, with whom he toured Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan as part of the Sergeant Major of the Army's Hope and Freedom Tour in 2006. He is also chairman of the Eastern Trombone Workshop, founder and director of the Washington Trombone Ensemble, and is currently serving on the board of advisors for the International Trombone Association. Woodhead is in great demand as a freelance musician in the greater D.C. area, performing with groups from the National and Baltimore Symphonies to the Washington Symphonic Brass and musical productions at Signature Theater. He has appeared as soloist with "Pershing's Own" on the tour of California in 2005 and at concerts on the steps of the U.S. Capitol. Woodhead has also presented masterclasses and solo appearances at Boston University's Tanglewood Institute, Bowling Green University, Brown University, and Yale University. His primary teachers were John Swallow, Milton Stevens, and Mark Manduca and has also studied with Matthew Guilford, Craig Mulcahy, and David Taylor.

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

I started playing the baritone horn in the 6th grade, 11 years old, and switched to the trombone in the 7th grade, 12 years old

What equipment do you primarily use?

I am a Shires artist and have an assortment of their instruments. My main tenor is a screw rim 7GLW with the Twin Valve, a TW47L Slide, with a Butler Carbon Fiber outer slide and a Greigo Alessi 3F mouthpiece. I have 2 other full tenors, with some extra bells and valves too. I also have an alto and bass trombone.

What are some of your favorite highlights of your career?

Playing for the troops in Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan as part of the USO Tour for the holidays in 2006. Trips to China, Norway, California - where I was featured as a soloist. Performing Full Honor Funerals in Arlington National Cemetery for our fallen heroes.

Can you please describe how you got into Crossfit? How were you introduced to it? How long have you done it? What are the benefits you have found doing it? Has it helped your playing at all?

I found CrossFit from a recommendation of a friend, but had no real idea of what I was getting myself into. I was not someone who had an athletic background, I had to lose weight just in order to audition for the military bands and failed my first PT after completing basic training. I did enough exercise after that initial failure to make sure I wouldn't fail again, but as I aged, started a family, and finished my DMA, I started getting more out of shape. On my 38th birthday, I decided to do something about it and just walked in to my first CrossFit class and it changed my life. What initially drew me to it were the results, I quickly lost weight, got stronger and faster and saw my Army PT scores higher than when I was 10 years younger. Other than that, the variety of workouts, professional coaching, and community aspect really kept me coming back. I've been doing it now for almost 10 years and don't every see myself stopping as I'm now still outperforming myself from 20 years ago! The benefits are both obvious and hard to describe. The obvious changes of just being in better shape leads to improvements in posture, my ability to hold and play my instrument without pain, and better breath control. The less obvious benefits are things like confidence, better energy throughout the day, being able to be a student again and take that mindset back to the trombone. Also, I've developed as a CrossFit coach and the benefits to my teaching through becoming a better coach are huge. I work with a much wider swath of humanity as a coach and that has really helped me work with a much more diverse group of people and lets me understand more perspectives and communicate better.

Can you describe what it is like to perform in the US Army "Pershing's Own"? What is a typical week like for you? How long have you been in the Pershing's Own?

I've been in The U.S. Army Band "Pershing's Own" for just over 20 years now. I started in the Ceremonial Band and after 3 years, I won my position as solo and principal trombone of the Concert Band. I routinely sub into other parts of the band like the Brass Quintet, Army Blues, and still play with the Ceremonial Band and other small groups as needs arise. We are a mission driven unit, meaning our work week changes depending on what we are getting ready for. Sometimes that means a fairly regular rehearsal schedule and a concert, but sometimes that means all day rehearsals over the weekend, early mornings before the sun is up, and late nights. With all of that understood, a typical concert week looks like this: Monday - Thursday rehearsals from 0930-1200, concert Friday evening with a 1800 call time, sound check, and a concert at 1900, done by 2030. Now that is just the trombone part of my job, in addition to that, I may run a PT session one day that week from 0630-0730, I may have some online training requirement, and have responsibilities as a rater and senior rater. In addition to that, I am expected to still do my own personal practice and my own PT, but the total time commitment is still probably less than what most people would think of for a full time position. With the military bands, it's pretty well understood that the newer people have less extra work and can focus more on their instrument, while the longer you stay in, the more work you are expected to do. With higher rank comes greater responsibilities.

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

Holst the Planets, I have a vivid memory of taking the record with me to show and tell, probably around 2nd or 3rd grade, long before I every took up an instrument. I was a huge fan of the Phillip Jones Brass Ensemble and had several of their recordings. Christian Lindberg's CDs like The Criminal Trombone, The Romantic Trombone, and the Virtuoso Trombone; John Swallow's A Little Trombone Music; Joe Alessi's Slide Area; 4 of a Kind

Who inspired you to play your instrument?

My high school band director, Mr. John Neal. I was fortunate to have had such a passionate teacher, he just put me on the path that led me to my first trombone teacher, youth orchestra, all state, and the rest!

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

Learning new skills. I decided to see what I could do with home recording and creating videos. It was a steep learning curve and I still have a long way to go, but each project I try to learn a new aspect of the process. I also got certified as a nutrition coach.

What are your thoughts on the social justice movement in regards to music and music education?

I'm in full support of better communication, understanding, and caring. I am an ally and will always do my best to try to understand and help in any way that I can.

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

The Tomasi Concerto

How have your practice habits changed over the years?

I've gone through periods of very rigid practice schedules and routines and other periods with less structure. What I find works for me now is to make sure that I get in a decent warm up each day, if I have a morning rehearsal, I will then probably have an abbreviated practice session later in the afternoon or early evening. If I do not have a rehearsal, I will try to make sure I get enough time on the trombone to keep myself in shape, probably 2 hours total, but broken into 20-30 minute segments.

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

Intonation when I was very young, but then as a college student and younger professional, it was more about learning my place.

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

Not that much in my personal practice, though I use it a lot as a teaching tool. For me, my voice is the trombone and hearing myself sing just doesn't match what I hear in my head.

What is your definition of success?

Leaving things in a better place than when I arrived.

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

Realistic expectations and being able to ask yourself what you're really trying to accomplish and putting in the work to get there.

What do you want your legacy to be?

That I was someone who helped.

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

I love hiking with my family, spending time on the water in our kayak, cooking, and family movie nights.

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

This might sound silly, but I truly believe that looking for some way to help someone else is all I need to do. These dark episodes tend to happen when I spend too much time just thinking about myself and I need to open myself up to those around me and do what I can to make their day a little better.

With whom did you study?

John Swallow, Milton Stevens, David Taylor, Matt Guilford, Mark Manduca, Craig Mulcahy

What qualities do you think are important in a student?

Perspective - the ability to see and hear from different points of view. Humility - being able to understand that your part isn't always that important, while still being able to give everything in support of what is important. Adaptability - most of my job as a professional is to play something the way that a conductor wants it to go and that isn't always how I would play it left to my own devices.

How has being a musician changed you as a person?

It has given me everything.

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

I fell in love with music pretty early, by the time I was a sophomore in high school, I knew that I wanted to be a professional trombonist. I was single minded in my pursuit. I grew up with a very close friend who was, and still is, an amazing hornist, Andrew Pelletier. We played duets together all the time, did youth ensembles together, summer band camps, etc. We listened to music constantly and talked about music non-stop. It's hard to describe a passion as it defies logic, but we both fell for music hard.

How much do you practice on a typical day?

2-3 hours depending on rehearsal schedule

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

yes, though it's still a work in progress <https://samwoodhead.com/>

What are some of your favorite etude books?

Bitsch, Marsteller, Blazevitch, Edwards Lip Slur Melodies

Do you use any apps when you practice?

I try to not use my phone when I practice, so I rely on a Peterson Auto Strobe Tuner and a physical metronome - when I'm away from home, I will use a tuner app for those functions.

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

Ian Bousfield's and a bunch of CrossFit ones.

What are some ways to improve one's rhythm?

I've found multi-track recording to be very helpful.

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

Make fitness a part of my life sooner

Where is your favorite place that you have traveled to?

Norway and China

Who are some of your musical heroes?

John Swallow, Joe Alessi, David Taylor, Alex Iles, Jim Pugh

Who are your main influences in your life?

Mark Manduca, John Swallow, Peter Martin

How do you suggest balancing life with being a musician?

If you want to be a better musician, having a balanced life is integral. Music is more than just being proficient at one's instrument, you have to have experience and context to relay and that can't be done from the perspective of someone who hasn't lived a full life.

Please give some tips for freelancing.

Be professional - always be on time (meaning early and ready to go), dress appropriately for the event, be respectful of everyone on the gig, have all of the equipment you may possibly need (mutes, pencils, etc.), do the job you've been hired for without trying to audition for another job (showboating or practicing rep for another gig can turn people off).

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

It takes a tremendous amount of time to keep one's skills at the level of a professional soloist, be prepared for that commitment. Create an audience and do your best to cultivate a relationship with them. Work to create a unique body of work that is unique to you, collaborate with composers and arrangers so your solo act is different than anyone else's.

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

I've never seen much of a difference at the professional level. Some of the best players were education majors and some of the best teachers were performance majors. Study

what interests you, but also know that your professional career may take different paths than you originally thought, so having a wider educational background is just another tool in the box.

Is anyone else in your family a musician?

Growing up, I was the only one in my family, but I married a harpist and both of our children play. My son plays cello and my daughter plays piano.

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

Norway, China, California, Midwest Band Clinic, Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center, Carnegie Hall, U.S. Capitol

What are your favorite etude books and solos written for your instrument, as well as etudes/solos/albums not originally written for your instrument?

Bach Cello Suites, they are never far from my music stand

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

Range is less about strength than it is about leverage. Knowing how the embouchure works is more helpful than just pounding away. Limit the time spent on range development and always focus on clarity of pitch and focus of sound.

What are you most proud of in your life?

My family

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Getting ready to retire from the Army and take on my next phase of life, hopefully teaching at a university closer to Maine.

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

Spending time with my family, working out, hiking, kayaking, reading, crossword puzzles.

Do you practice visualizing yourself performing?

Yes, it is extremely valuable.

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

I don't transcribe, but I do like to memorize my solos. I find memorization really helps me own the piece as opposed to reading it.

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

Go for it! But don't become so single minded that you aren't open to other options that present themselves to you along the way.

What are you listening to currently?

Glen Gould, particularly his recordings of Bach; Clark Terry, because he just makes me happy.

Do you have a favorite genre of music?

Less and less these days, I find I appreciate more genres now than when I was younger.

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

World history, for how it opened my eyes to a much bigger perspective.

What projects are you working on right now?

American Trombone Workshop 2022 and some more video projects for my YouTube channel.

Please list some of your favorite websites for musicians.

Alessi Studios <http://alessimusicstudios.com/>

Google Metronome <https://www.google.com/search?q=metronome>

Orchestra Excerpts <https://orchestraexcerpts.com/>

Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?

Treat it like your job, put in the time, own that list. Be able to play it any time of day or night and under any circumstances or in any order. Be able to play the list with different styles, tempos, and dynamics. Be able to play it in ways that a conductor might ask during a rehearsal. Play your audition in front of people, record yourself often, get feedback and work on implementing it.

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

Yes, but preparing as I do, I know that even my worst performance will still be something I can be proud of.

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

Listening and being able to play with those around you.

What advice can you give about mental wellness?

Take it seriously and know that being human means that we change. Ups and downs are a part of everyone's life and to know that it's ok to get help when you need it.

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

At this point, I would be a CrossFit coach full time.

Who are your favorite composers?

Mahler, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Stravinsky

Do you like to teach? Why or why not?

Yes, though I don't do as much of it as I would like. I tend to do more masterclasses than private lessons and I actually feel more comfortable in those settings.

What are your favorite solos for your instrument?

Grondahl, Tomassi, Crespo Improvisation No.1, Stojowski Fantasy

Do you have any tips on forming a chamber group?

One of the best formats for honing ensemble skills!

Do you memorize your music? Do you have any advice for young players on how to memorize?

Yes, I love it! Learn music phrase by phrase, instead of note by note.

What advice can you share about physical wellness?

Your physical wellness is probably the most important aspect of your life. The better you eat and your body feels through exercise, the better your mental state will be and that just makes everything work so much better.

What is your favorite food?

Peanut butter