

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Matthew Neff



Matthew Neff joined the North Carolina Symphony as Bass Trombonist in January of 2020. A native of Hollidaysburg, PA, Mr. Neff came to North Carolina following a 27-year career in the United States Navy Band in Washington, DC. Highly versatile, Master Chief Musician Neff held positions with the Concert & Ceremonial Band (1992-2009) and the Commodores Jazz Ensemble (2009-2020). In addition, Mr. Neff performed with the Navy Band Brass Quintet for 6 years and served as the National Tour Director from 2009-2019.

Mr. Neff has enjoyed a wide variety of opportunities including performances with Atlanta Symphony, National Symphony, Annapolis Symphony, Delaware Symphony, and more. He was a member of the Metropolitan Jazz and frequent performer with Smithsonian Jazz Orchestra.

A strong advocate for music education, Mr. Neff has performed as guest artist/clinician at high schools, colleges, and conferences across the country. He served as adjunct professor of trombone at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA from 2003-2019. Multi-talented, Mr. Neff has composed and arranged for various brass ensembles and has publications with Ensemble Publishing, including his newly released etude book 'Solo Studies for the Bass Trombone'. Mr. Neff holds a Bachelor of Science in Music Education and the Performer's Certificate from Penn State University and a Master of Music from Catholic University.

Mr. Neff and his wife, Tricia, live in Apex, NC with their four daughters.

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

I started VERY young! Around first grade I told my dad I wanted to play trombone – my older brother tried it briefly and decided it was not for him. We had a trombone at the house, so I picked it up. My dad talked Jack Sears into teaching me. Jack was a great teacher and trombonist – he was funny and above all – patient!

Realize he was not only teaching me to play trombone, but in many cases he was teaching me to read the titles and words on the page too!

Best nugget/advice Jack instilled in me “if you can sing it, you can play it”! **I have further added – “if you can’t sing it, it is not likely you can play it”.

What equipment do you primarily use?

I’m proud to be an S.E. Shires Performing Artist! I have been playing Shires Bass Trombones for 20+ years. I currently play on Dual Independent True Bores – LOVE them! – paired with Blair Bollinger Tuning Slide and Hand Slide. I have 4 different bells that I switch between depending on what I’m playing and the outfit I’m wearing. Mouthpiece? I still do about 75% of my playing on an old Bach 1¼ G mouthpiece. Sometimes when I want a little more room or need to open up, I use a Griego GP6 ... and if it is a lot of pedal work, will use the GP7.

What are some of your favorite highlights of your career?

I could write pages and pages on my 27 years in the Navy Band! I was with the Concert and Ceremonial Band for 17 years, the Commodores Jazz Band for my final 10. We played many memorable national events – some celebrations, some very solemn memorials. I have also performed at hundreds of Full-Honors Navy Funerals at Arlington Cemetery – probably the single most demanding job of the Navy Band.

I very much enjoyed our national concert tours – seeing and performing for family and friends. I have performed and visited many, many communities across the entire country! So many small towns, so many gorgeous views!

Aside from the Navy, I loved my time at Penn State with Mark Lusk and my Nittany Quartet bros! I spent a couple years in the Blue Band and playing in a lot of ensembles. One of my greatest summers (1991) was playing in the Disney All American College Marching Band – what a great summer gig for a college student!

I'm hoping there are many great performances to come! I had only just started with the North Carolina Symphony when Covid hit and things came to a halt! I am really looking forward to getting back to normal and doing many performances with this orchestra!!

How have your practice habits changed from when you were a beginner until now?

Having a Routine or variety of structured warm-ups helps keep me honest and productive. I do not require an extensive warm up, but having a routine that addresses all my fundamentals helps me stay in shape and allows me a good basis to do real practice and make progress.

No secret – you need to play long tones, slurs and articulation exercises – there are plenty of great resources and examples. I also address scales & arpeggios with range building. Occasionally I use Drones and /or play-a-longs – and I regularly use a metronome – especially as I address articulation.

With whom did you study?

I began my studies with Jack Sears (Altoona, PA), studied with Mark Lusk at Penn State, and finally with Matt Guilford (NSO) while completing my Masters at Catholic University. Of course, I have also had the benefit of using the ears of my friends throughout my college studies and years in the Navy Band!

What are some of your favorite etude books?

I love having a variety of materials!! Lots of etude books – solos, duets, chamber music.... My 'go-to' etude collection for bass trombone includes : Aharoni, Gillis (both the 20 etudes & 70 progressive studies), Blazhevich (tuba), Pederson, Maenz, Bach Cello Suites..... MORE! For jazz play alongs – check out Snidero and McChesney!

And of course you should check out my new [Solo Studies for Bass Trombone](#) (Hickeys has it). I wrote an etude book with solos suitable for study or as unaccompanied solos on a recital or masterclass.

Do you use any apps when you practice?

Tonal Energy, Acapella, iReal Pro and Smart Music.

What are some ways to improve one's rhythm?

Clap, snap, conduct and sing LOUDLY. Simple dance/ swaying to the beat... Being able to feel time is a huge advantage (if not requirement)! If you have any desire to teach – practice conducting – easy patterns – and carry a conversation at the same time!

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

After many years of teaching privately and at a university I remain supportive and optimistic for students in the pursuit of a music degree. That said, I have seen a significant number of students start down a path in music – especially music education – only to change majors. In these instances, I have seen a common thread – students that were ecstatic about their high school band experience! Each would describe band as fun, or family, or the place they felt they best to fit in --- these are all the exact reasons I encourage all my students to continue playing at any age/ grade level! When you are entering high school, college or a new community (future job), you put yourself in a great situation when you play trombone (or any instrument)!! You instantly gain friends and contacts that share interests with you! Very few situations allow freshmen the opportunity to interact and mingle with seniors – in high school or in college! All you have to do is join the band! (or jazz band, orchestra, community band, etc)

Entering college, you should definitely pursue opportunities to perform and play in ensembles, even take lessons! And if you choose to major in music – please realize it is not only about fun and having a place to fit in! While music is rewarding, it is not always fun. You must commit to significant chunks of your life to be in a practice room – mostly alone! And for fitting in, often the music teacher is the 'one musician' in the school – you will spend a significant part of your day doing many things other than music – you may even find yourself in a

constant fight to maintain and justify music in your school. At the end of the day, it will be on you to provide the kind of positive, music-rich environment that inspires future musicians!

If music is something you know you want to do – then by all means – do it! Be 100% committed! Be creative! Have many musician friends! Try many things – ensembles, instruments, classes, teachers --- just be sure to be a true master of your primary instrument!! And above all – be MUSICAL!

Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?

I will address this on multiple fronts –

College auditions? First off – the college audition (at 99% of the music schools) is more like an assessment. The panels are truly interested in you and want you to succeed! They are seeing how you will fit in – so if you do the work, practice diligently, it should be a positive situation!

Military Band auditions? LISTEN. Most folks do not spend much time playing marches – but they are a required part of the military band gig, so you have to be good at them! Find the small march books – Sousa, King, and Fillmore --- read them cover to cover! If you are comfortable with these, you should have no trouble reading marches!

Focus on articulation – be able to comfortably use double/triple tongue at various speeds.

Check out some of the concert band works – Grainger, Holst, Maslanka, Mackey, Stamp, Claude Smith, more... you can listen to most of the bands by just visiting their web-site. It's a great way to hear some of the current works the groups are playing.

Auditioning for the Commodores Jazz Band. For bass trombone, the audition was about 85% reading, 10% prepared (difficult) stuff, 5% improv.

My audition was 45 mins with Bone section, 10 min break, another 40 mins with full big band, 10 min break, then opportunity to improv – I did blues and 1 standard tune. This band reads. I had two resources I used to prep my sight reading – Snidero's Jazz Conception for Bass Trombone Book & CD (You should also check out Bob McChesney's "Harmonic Dexterity"!) and Smart Music. If you get beyond the young stuff, Smart Music is awesome for reading! You can play great challenging stuff! Alan Baylock (former arranger for Airmen of Note) has charts, as well as Gordon Goodwin and many more... You read the chart and play

'in the band'. Not only is it challenging – it's FUN! Of course, you really cannot learn swing or all the different big band styles if you do not immerse yourself in it and really listen!

Orchestra auditions? I took a bunch of auditions while I was in the Navy Band. I always found auditions to be a great motivator to practice. *Practice with purpose* and specificity! (Big word!) Most importantly it caused me to broaden the range of music I was exposed to in a military band (concert or jazz). By far, THE MOST important thing I needed to do in my preparation was to LISTEN!! I would approach this four ways --- 1. LISTEN to the excerpt, 2. LISTEN to the work/symphony, 3. LISTEN to another great player (Jim Markey, Paul Pollard, Brian Hecht have many YouTube videos and recordings!), 4. record and LISTEN to yourself!! LISTEN! LISTEN!! LISTEN!!!

Just to re-emphasize, so many times I would hear amazing trombonists play absolutely flawless excerpts (orchestral, symphonic and jazz band) with beautiful sound, blazing fast tempos and articulations – truly impressive technique – but would immediately ask myself 'what recording were they listening to?' 'Have they ever even heard this?' There is absolutely NO SUBSTITUTE for an extensive 'mental library' of sounds, styles, feels, articulations!

If a picture is worth a thousand words --- then a musical 'picture' is worth 10,000!!! LISTEN!!!!

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

Yes, I do. Even after 27+ years as a professional performer I still get nervous. Most times it is just 'edgy' and serves to keep me on my toes --- but other times, the self-doubt and little voices kick in and it can be pretty debilitating. One thing I would want students to know – they are not alone. It is pretty common. Also, while there are physical reactions, the root cause? It's all in your head! Just remember, folks listening to you want and expect the best from you! – and especially in auditions!

Do you like to teach? Why or why not?

Yes! I think teaching and performing goes hand in hand. Quite often the things I focus on with my students comes to mind while I'm sitting in rehearsals or

performances. At the same time, when I notice things in my playing – slide speed, accuracy, specific articulations – I will often focus on those areas in my teaching.

If you could go back in time, how would you practice differently when you were in high school?

Well, let's start with 'I was an idiot'. I had a huge advantage of getting an early start and studying with a really great teacher. Unfortunately, I was good enough that I did not feel a 'need' to work very hard. My practicing was limited to the weeks prior to Districts/Regionals/ and States.

I was so lax in my practicing that Mr. Sears had no idea I was contemplating a music career even through my junior year in high school. I finally told him I was interested in being a band director. I thought he was going to kill me. He was pretty upset – which commenced into a serious chat about 'lack of work ethic' and motivation. He then assigned Arban's Characteristic Study #1 and said '...and it better be perfect!'

Following that I started practicing more - but it was not until I got to college and started using regular warm-ups and routines that my playing started to really improve. I wish I would have started that kind of practice 10 years sooner.

Do you have any tips on forming a chamber group?

If you are fortunate enough to have friends that play the 'right' instruments – trombone quartet, brass quintet, jazz combo, etc... then it's easy! Just get together – set a time and do some playing! More often it is an issue of having friends of odd instrumentation – but that can present some really cool opportunities to arrange and come up with your own repertoire.

Other times it is a collaboration of the right instrumentalists – so then it is a good opportunity to work on your interpersonal skills. Yes, it's easy if one is in charge – but for total group 'buy in' it has to be a shared ownership. Divide responsibilities – time, pitch, rhythm, articulation, style, etc... also each person can bring or suggest repertoire. Lastly – treat each other with the same respect and deference you would show your trombone hero if he/she was sitting in with the quartet and was having an off day.

Do you have any tips on learning how to improvise?

Best quote I ever heard was given by Jamie Way – formerly Jazz Trombone in the Navy Commodores. Jamie is an awesome improviser – gifted in the art of creating melodies and playing beautiful lines – all while making the changes! Jamie went to school at Eastman and studied with Bill Dobbins. During a lecture Professor Dobbins said (I paraphrase), “you know, there have been plenty of good jazz musicians that could not read music. But there has never been a good jazz musician who did not have a good ear.”

Far too many of the youngsters that want to talk to me about improvising have spent little to no time investing in critically listening to the masters. Find a ‘name’ player that you really like – JJ Johnson, Wycliff Gordon, Slide Hampton, Frank Rosolino, Dexter Gordon – yes even a sax player! Listen to an album 10 times. Pick your favorite cut and listen to it 10 more times. Then sing along with it – 10X! Finally, get your horn out and try to figure it out by ear.

Jazz began as an aural tradition and it’s still the best way to pursue this language!