

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Dr. Jose Leonardo Leon



Trombone artist & clinician, music entrepreneur, and educator, **Dr. Jose Leonardo Leon** is one of the leading trombonists of our generation having garnered both the Global Music® Awards and a Musician Certificate for the 16th Annual Latin GRAMMY® Winning Album for Best Instrumental Album, *Mamblue*. Furthermore, Dr. Leon is a Warwick Music® Published Arranger and Composer.

As one of South Florida's most active and proficient trombonists possessing equal mastery on both bass and tenor trombones, Dr. Leon has worked with reputable professional music organizations such as the Florida Grand Opera, the Miami Symphony Orchestra, the Bilbao Symphony Orchestra (Spain), the Orquesta Filarmonica UNAM (Mexico City), the Jalisco Philharmonic (Mexico), and the New World Symphony (Miami). Dr. Leon has performed as a first-call trombonist for acclaimed artists such as Andrea Bocelli, The Manhattan Transfer, Wicked and Frozen super star Idina Menzel, Arturo Sandoval, Wycliffe Gordon, Bob Mintzer, Paquito D' Rivera, Eddie Daniels, Dr. Ed Calle, David Foster, and the Kravis Center Pops Orchestra, just to name a few.

In August 2018, Dr. Leon released his first album entitled, "Journey", utilizing his bass trombone as both a solo and chamber instrument, and the album was awarded the 2018 Global

Music® Award Outstanding Achievement medal for Instrumentalist and Original Compositions by American (U.S.A.) and Latin American composers.

Some of Dr. Leon's international festivals and conference performances include residencies at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville (AK), the University of Costa Rica School of the Arts (San Jose de Costa Rica), the Alabama Bandmasters Association Low Brass Day (Tuscaloosa County), the URUBRASS Summit in Montevideo (Uruguay), the International Trombone Festival in Valencia (Spain), the International Trombone Week at the Universities of Oaxaca and Aguascalientes on 2012 and 2013 (Mexico), the Jazz Education Network Conference, and the Carlos Chavez National Youth Orchestra's Academic Week in Mexico. While residing in Venezuela, Dr. Leon's performed with Simon Bolivar's Symphony Orchestras of Venezuela, also known known as "El Sistema".

Academically, Dr. Leon received his Bachelor of Music (B.M.) in Trombone Performance under the direction of Mark Hetzler at Florida International University, a Master of Music (M.M.) in Instrumental Performance under the direction of Timothy Conner at the University of Miami Frost School of Music with a joint-full scholarship from

the Studio Music/Jazz department, and most recently his Doctor of Musical Arts (D.M.A.) in Trombone Performance and Pedagogy under the direction of Dr. William Stanley at the University of Colorado Boulder College of Music. Currently, Dr. Leon performed with with the Florida Grand Opera and Opera Naples, and the Palm Beach Symphony as bass trombonist, the Ft. Lauderdale's Premier Orchestra the Symphony of the Americas as the utility tenor and bass trombonist, and the Miami-based Raices Jazz Ensemble with two albums released in digital distribution sites and is also the first call recording session trombonist for the Unity Record Label, which lead by two-time Latin GRAMMY® Winning Producer, Tony Succar. As an educator, Dr. Jose Leonardo Leon serves as the Applied Professor of Trombone at Florida Atlantic University, Florida Gulf Coast University Bower School of Music, and the Trombone Artist-in-Residence at the Alexander W. Dreyfoos School of the Arts in West Palm Beach, FL. **Dr. Jose Leonardo Leon is a Bach Brass & Conn-Selmer Centerstage Performing Artist. For more info, visit:**

<http://www.joseleonardoleon.com>

<https://centerstage.conn-selmer.com/artists/jose-leonardo-leon>

<https://www.fau.edu/artsandletters/music/faculty/leonjose2019/>

<https://www.fgcu.edu/cas/bsma/music/musicadjunctfaculty>

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

I was around 10 years old when I first started on the trombone. Before trombone, I played a traditional Venezuelan small guitar called the "Cuatro" which sound is very similar to the ukulele, just a bit bigger. Also, I started in music by singing in choir both at the local school of music (before el Sistema arrived at my hometown) and my Dad's choir at church.

What equipment do you primarily use?

I primarily use Vincent Bach trombones.

What are some of your favorite highlights of your career?

I think it would depend on the circumstances or the goal I wanted to achieve at specific times and parts of my career. However, I think my favorite highlight has always been having loving people by my side to thank for their support during every single step throughout the journey at every achievement. Every successful story has been the result of team-work and that blessing I think is my favorite highlight.

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

I think the list would not fit here, so I'll try to choose on top of my head:

1. Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Shostakovich Symphony No. 7 "Leningrad", Leonard Bernstein. conductor.

2. Siembra, Ruben Blades/Willie Colon.
3. The Very Best of Chicago, Only The Beginning.
4. "Anything for You" Glorinda Stefan and Miami Sound Machine.
5. Charles Vernon/ Eric Ewazen, piano
6. Eric Ewazen, Bass Hits
7. Michael Davis/Bill Reichenbach Bonetown
8. Earth, Wind, and Fire / Serpentine Fire
9. Guaco, Archipelago.
10. Hector Lavoe / El Cantante
11. Eddie Santiago / 25 exitos
12. Sir Simon Rattle, City of Birmingham, Mahler 8
13. Empire Brass – Bernstein/Gershwin/Tilson Thomas
14. Beatles: Magical Mystery Tour, Revolver, Yellow Submarine
15. The Canadian Brass / All you need is Love
16. Joseph Alessi, Slide Area/New York Legends

Who inspired you to play your instrument?

My Dad and Scott Hartman, Lol!!! Long story short: I didn't want it to play the trombone. By the time I was accepted into it, El Sistema has been in my hometown for about six months already. I first wanted to play the cello but, strings instruments were already assigned a few months before. Then I wanted to play the flute which, I was expecting to be assigned that Saturday morning. As the day passed, it was around noon when all the woodwinds and most brass have been assigned. The music teacher came to me and said: "Jose, we gave the flutes to other students, so all I have left is percussion and a trombone." I choose percussion. I went to my Dad's office pretty nearby the music school, sad and sobbing (He is both a retired accountant/bass and guitar player). My Dad inquired about the flute, to which I answered, "there was no flute available, I got percussion." He then asked me if I was happy about it, to which I obviously responded, No. He then said, so why did you pick up percussion, to which I answered: "It was the only instrument left" (Notice how I never said anything about a trombone).

My Dad knew the music teacher distributing the instruments, this teacher used to be my Dad's student in the past. So, he went and inquired while asking me to wait at the office. About 30 mins later he came back and asked me: "Did Carlos offer you a trombone also?"

I, very timidly said, yes... Dad: and why didn't you choose the trombone? Me: Because I don't like it, it sounds horrible and will damage my lips and mouth. (The only example I have heard of trombones were not the best from the locals

in my hometown, and the comments about the physical damage I have heard it from one of those musicians. (As an adult educator, I always think about this time to remind myself about the enormous responsibility we have when we share any information with our students, especially the younger ones)

The story gets better here; my Dad locked the office and took me back home. He had a collection of tapes that he has recorded from the public radio station late night shows. These tapes contained tons of music from brass specials they have been airing for a few days. As I became a more serious brass student, I found out who the ensembles were in those tapes: Empire brass (Mostly), Canadian Brass, German Brass, the Simon Bolivar Brass Ensemble, the Venezuela Brass Ensemble. Then I focused mostly on the Empire pieces and asked my Dad pointing a specific part in which the trombone was more prominent (the trombone solo from Empire's version of Maria's West Side Story, just to cite one example) and my Dad said, yes, that's the trombone. I fell in love with Scott Hartman's sound immediately. End of the story, Monday 7:00AM, before going to school, I passed by the school of music, the teacher was there, and I asked for the trombone, it was there at the same corner it was Saturday. Nobody wanted it. As per the flute? A few months later, the kid that got the flute returned it and it was assigned to my little sister which a few years later became the principal flute of the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra that everyone knows today.

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

Horn Solo – Tchaikovsky 5th Symphony
Cellos intro – Rossini's William Tell Overture
Serge Koussevitzky - Double Bass Concerto.

Do you have any tips on becoming better at transcribing?

Singing, lots of solfège, and conducting ourselves. Take lots of music dictation.

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

By focusing more on short-term and mid-term goals instead of long term.

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

Developing a good sound and air production.

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

Big time, I consider singing to be to the instrumentalist as a scale model is to the architect.

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

First, I think we need to have a clear concept of what success is.

Then I think the most important qualities are:

Being respectful

Being able to recognize and honoring other's virtues

Being humble

Recognize our own virtues and weaknesses, so we can work on improving said weaknesses up to the level of our virtues.

What do you want your legacy to be?

I would love for everyone that crossed paths with me to have a smile in their face when they remember their interactions with me.

How do you stay motivated? Do you have any tips to help stay motivated?

We make music, we make music for a living. The reason we practice is to be able to honor what the composers created as much as we can and at the highest possible level. I focus on the future and in how I might fit in it if I prepare enough to be ready to face the new challenges on my path within to what the new normalcy might be.

With whom did you study?

Different teachers for different stages in my career.

In Venezuela: Antoine Duhamel, Jose Romero (My first teacher), Joseph Pardal, Luis Collins, Jose Zerpa, and last during a program I was accepted into in which we had an intermittent teacher coming from out of town every three months and a permanent one while he was away. The intermittent was Michel Becquet and the permanent was Domingo Pagliuca.

In the USA: Mark Hetzler, Art Sares, Tim Conner, John Marcellus, Hal Janks, Charlie Vernon, and I think my biggest and most recent influence Bill Stanley.

Who are some of your musical heroes?

Charlie Vernon, Barry White, James Pankow, Scott Hartman, Joe Alessi, Renee Fleming, Yo-Yo Ma, Gloria Stefan, Placido Domingo, Luis Miguel, James Markey, Bill Reichenbach.

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

I come from a numerous musical family. My Dad bass/guitar player used to make us do music games since my siblings and I were babies. My mom is a really good singer as well. My brother became a double bass player at the Bilbao Symphony in Northern Spain, my sister, as mentioned before, became principal flute at the Simon Bolivar Symphony, I became part of one of the professional orchestras in the main city and unofficially the bass trombonist of the National Philharmonic of Venezuela for a few months just during the time I was offered my first scholarship to move to Miami to pursue music here. However, I think what finally made me decide to pursue music professionally was the fact that I really wanted to be a musician in the US.

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

Very young. Around the time I joined the Caracas Youth Orchestra. I discovered then that not playing really made me very empty; something was missing. At the age of 16 I was put into surgery due to appendicitis. The time I was not allowed to play showed me how much I missed it.

How much do you practice on a typical day?

I would normally have a longer session in the morning, starting around 7:30 with breathing exercises. Then 8:00 AM to 10:00 between warm-ups, fundamentals, etudes. Always try to have sessions that allow me to play my first notes in the morning hours, no matter what the schedule looks like for the rest of the day. Then go onto teaching or rehearsals, etc. then early afternoon one or 2 hours if possible, I do solo repertoire, excerpts, and/or practice for the gig.

Then early evening warm down session (If there is not a rehearsal/performance) if there is, I do the warm down session at the end of the rehearsal or gig in a corner behind stage, always setting down my muscles for the next day.

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

<http://www.joseleonardoleon.com>

What are some of your favorite etude books?

Marco Bordogni, Kopprasch, Blume.

Do you use any apps when you practice?

Yes, Tonal Energy, Cello Drones

What are some ways to improve one's rhythm?

The daily use of the metronome, use it in subdivision mode, conducting ourselves, singing. Making sure to identify all the possibilities that can rhythmically occur while playing a long note.

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

Slowing down in the practice room, give yourself time to rest, be more patience.

What is your favorite place that you have traveled to?

Europe (Spain-Paris-Italy)

Who are some of your heroes in life?

Definitely, my Parents. Both Mom and Dad, and my Wife, whose life experiences have been so similar to my mother's.

How old were you when you first began transcribing solos?

Between 14 – 15 yrs old. I used to set up different tape-recording devices my Dad owned and also record every voice I transcribed to finalize with some trios

or quartets on a last very low quality recording Lol hahaha. Hey, that was waaaaaaayyyy far back in the early 90's Now kids have all these apps like acapella, etc.

Who are your main influences in your life (not just music!)?

My parents, my younger brother, my Grandma Augusta (She was not my blood grandma, but she played a major role in rising me) My uncle Dr. German Leon, my high school English/Math/Physics/Chemistry teacher Mariana Bernette.

How do you suggest balancing life with music?

It was once that I came into lessons super stressed out from a restaurant/bar tending work while in undergrad that Mark Hetzler gave me one of his many the best advices: Trombone is your main resource to communicate music, it is part of your life, yes, but not part of your body. You were born without a trombone; instead, you were born with a heart, a brain, etc. Take care of those first. Since that day, I always make sure to have time for my loved ones, including myself.

Please give some tips for freelancing.

I was given my first shot as a freelancing very early during my undergrad years. For this reason, I had to learn very early the do's and don'ts of freelancing. There are several musical and non-musical aspects that we need to always have in place:

- 1) Usually, our first freelancing jobs are as subs. Respect that your responsibility is not only to perform well as a representation of yourself, but that you are representing someone who trusted you to temporarily fill his/her chair.
- 2) Arrived early and prepared for the occasion. Music should have been learned and practice (If handed before). If not, you should be really good at sight reading, after all, if they call you is because they know you qualify.
- 3) Be respectful to your peers, section members, colleagues. Greet them, show that you are grateful to be there without having to saying it, but through your actions instead.
- 4) Greet the contractor and always thank him/her for counting on you. Make sure they remember the "Face and name behind the sound"
- 5) If music was not handed before, make sure to always carry a bag with your mutes and a music stand in the trunk of your car.
- 6) Always carry a pencil.

- 7) Never accept a gig that you don't feel capable and confident of doing at your highest level; for example: When I get called for a jazz band gig, I always accept if it is to fill in the bass bone chair, third at the most. If they call me for lead, which has very rarely happened, I say no without saying that's the reason.
- 8) Your reputation is like a perfume; It arrives first than you and stays lingering after you leave.
- 9) Be reachable.
- 10) Be kind and respectful to others.

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

In many occasions, there has been a misleading towards students that those who pursue music education do it in lieu of performing their instrument at their highest level possible. I teach my music ed. majors that, as educators, their responsibility is even greater. They will have hundreds of souls under their responsibility, to learn, among many aspects in music and in life, how to produce a great sound; however, what quality of sound should they expect their students to produce, how will they teach their students to create a good quality performance if they never managed to produce it themselves. I have been a band director, both Middle and High school, as well as choir director in elementary school. If it wouldn't had been for my performance experience, I would not had been successful as I was teaching all those students and exposing them to a great musical experience. The best band directors, music educators, and orchestral conductors I have known and worked with, have been really good at their instrument or were really good at some point before retiring from playing. I have not yet experienced the opposite.

Is anyone else in your family a musician?

Yes: Dad, Mom, Brother, Sister, all Uncles from Dad's side, three cousins. A couple of nephews and one niece.

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

Euskalduna Palace – Bilbao, Spain
National Center of the Arts – Mexico City
Teatro Teresa Carreño – Caracas
Teatro Nacional Sodre – Montevideo
American Airlines Arena – Miami

Arsht Center for the Performing Arts – Miami
Kravis Center for the Performing Arts – West Palm Beach
Teatro Degollado – Guadalajara Mexico
Harbourfront Centre West Jet Stage – Toronto, Canada
Benaroya Hall – Seattle.

just to mention a few.

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

Ewazen Concerto
Spillman Concerto
Sulek Sonata Vox Gabrieli
Tommy Pederson Etudes
A Short Account of a Long Journey - Rodriguez

What are you most proud of in your life?

I think the most I am proud of is the fact that, although I arrived to the US, on my own, at a very young and susceptible- to -temptations age, I lived up to my parents advices and have honored them every day to the best of my abilities. Have never deviated from the initial goals, and have never succumbed into my failures, on the contrary, have always use them as steps to keep moving forward. Like Rocky Said: "It's about how much you can take and moving forward. That's how winning is done."

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

I would love to see myself surrounded by the people I love, and waking up every Monday early in the morning with a smile in my face, drinking my coffee just because I get to go doing what I love, making music both playing and teaching it, hopefully. And then every summer, traveling the world submerging with my wife into different cultures and food.

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

The smile on the face of the listener after a performance. Going to have a nice dinner with my wife after a performance. Traveling.

Do you practice visualizing yourself performing?

Yes, specially playing orchestral excerpts or solo rep.

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

Both, Transcribing gives me an idea for patterns writing. Listening gives me an audible row map.

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

To double major, especially if majoring in performance. Make sure to diversify. One of the degrees have some other components, either in education, business, theory, musicology, etc.

What are you listening to currently?

Lots of Smooth and fusion jazz towards a project I am working on. 😊

Do you have a favorite genre of music?

I love good music regardless the genre. Meaningful music.

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

Math

What are you working on right now?

On diversifying my outreach abilities. Recordings, improving my non-classical abilities.

Please list some of your favorite websites for musicians.

<http://kimballtrombone.com>

<https://www.trombone101.com>

<https://angelabeeching.com>

<https://alessimusicstudios.ca>

Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?

Make sure to focus on your fundamentals in daily basis, take care of your health to the point that it becomes the norm. Practice excerpts in regular basis, do not wait until the audition time to start working on them. Enjoy the process.

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

Preparation is the key. Lots of slow practice at the initial preparation time. Then progressively improving. Always count two weeks before the actual performance as your due date, never the actual performance day. Spend those two last previous weeks practicing "Performance" in front of people/friends/family if possible.

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

To not focus on becoming a great musician or live out music but, instead, focus on learning how to make music great, learning the technique with music as the ultimate goal; honoring the music, what the composer intended. To serve music and not the other way around.

What advice can you give about mental wellness?

Organize your thoughts, ideas, and activities. Set short term and mid-term realistic goals. Do not set too many long-term goals. Exercise or engage in some physical activity that involves breathing.

What life lessons have you learned through music?

It feels amazing and more rewarding to serve and help than being served or helped.

Do you promote the idea of learning licks and patterns in all keys to become better at improvising?

Yes, definitely. I do it myself.

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

Cooking, I love it as a form of art; and I love learning about other cultures and I think both music and the culinary arts are equally amazing sources to achieve this. Both my wife and Mom love my cooking hahahaha.

Who are your favorite composers?

Gustav Mahler, David Foster, Quincy Jones, Beethoven, Bruckner, Bach, Simon Diaz, Ruben Blades, Aldemaro Romero, Ilan Chester, Maurice White, Bill Chaplin.

How could we make music education better?

In our culture, music education still being seen as a recreational subject, when in reality it is a powerful science and artistic form. Other countries have understood this for which they have included Music as part of their curriculum at the level of a science course. The day society understands how necessary music is as part of the cultural being of their surroundings, music education will be officially at the level of academia it needs to be.

Do you like to teach? Why or why not?

I love it. I think both performance and education are two sides of the same coin. I learned from my students as much or more as what they learn from me.

What are your favorite solos for your instrument?

In jazz: Bill Reichenbach's bass bone solos in Michael Davis' albums, Anything George Roberts, Charlie's Bass solo on Mahler 7th after he came back from recovery from his bell palsy. It was incredible.

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

The Inner Game of Tennis/Inner Game of Music
Fight Your Fear and Win - Greene

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

I would set up small goals, more like immediate and realistic goals that I could achieve in twenty minutes, like learning a specific rhythm or phrase.

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

I have had to do it sometimes and the best I have done to achieve that is through constant repetition and learning not only my line but, all around, specific accompaniment or other section's parts.

What is your favorite food?

Venezuelan food Arepas, Spanish foods based on meats, southern Texan style barbecue food, French Food.