

AN ARTIST'S CORNER

featuring

Dr. Megan Boutin



Dr. Megan Boutin is the Adjunct Professor of Trombone at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. She received her bachelor's degree in Music Education from Ithaca College, Master of Music degree in Trombone Performance and Literature from the Eastman School of Music, and her Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Texas at Austin. Principal teachers include Dr. Harold Reynolds, Mark Kellogg, Dr. John Marcellus, and Dr. Nathaniel Brickens.

Based in Texas since 2012, Megan Boutin is currently the principal trombonist with the Temple Symphony Orchestra, and previously served as Principal Trombonist of the Austin Civic Orchestra and the Tri-Cities Opera Company Orchestra (Binghamton, NY). As a freelance trombonist in Texas she has performed with the Austin Symphony Orchestra, Austin Opera, Austin Symphony Brass Quintet, Central Texas Philharmonic, the Georgetown Palace Theater, and also with local theater companies and bands.

In addition to performing, teaching has consistently been part of Dr. Boutin's musical career. In her position at TAMUK she works with a vibrant and active studio whose members are ITA quartet competition finalists (2021), were awarded Second Runner-up in the ITA Remington Trombone Choir Competition (2020,) and are invited performers to the 2021 Midwest Clinic. She has given presentations at the Big 12 Trombone Conference, The Ohio State University, the Texas Low Brass Academy (upcoming summer 2021), and the inaugural 2020 Virtual Trombone Workshop. Additionally she has performed and given masterclasses at Butler University (IN), Ithaca College (NY), and been a clinician for the Association of Texas Small School Bands for Concordia University (TX).

Dr. Boutin is active as a soloist and chamber musician, performing at festivals and conferences throughout the United States. She is the winner of the 2019 International Women's Brass Conference Tenor Trombone Category II solo division, and also winner of the Austin Civic Orchestra's 2016 concerto competition. She has performed at multiple International Trombone Festivals and American Trombone Workshops as a member with the Ithaca College, Eastman, and UT Austin trombone choirs. Dr. Boutin has been featured as a guest artist as part of the Eastman at Washington Square Concert Series, been invited to perform at the Music by Women Festival in 2018, and toured with the Mirari Brass Quintet on their fall 2018 tour series. In 2019, she was an invited guest conductor at the International Trombone Festival.

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

I was in 5th grade and 9 years old when I started trombone. Before trombone I played piano for several years. I played both trombone and piano through middle school, and in high school I focused exclusively on trombone.

Who inspired you to play your instrument?

I had a lot of different people who inspired me to play when I was young. Before I started trombone, my older brother and two older boys on my street all played trombone. I think I had the idea that I would play trombone so I could show them that I could do it better! My elementary school music teacher played trombone, and she encouraged me and a friend of mine (another girl) to play trombone. I think the camaraderie of having a close friend playing trombone helped make me even more excited about it. My high school didn't have a great band program, so what really kept me inspired to play was participating in a regional youth wind ensemble and orchestra. I loved the music we played and the challenge and excitement of playing with others who were better than me.

Do you meditate? If so, what benefits do you get from meditating?

I don't exactly meditate, but I do take time most days to sit in a quiet way and do some big picture reflection. I assess where I am at, where I want to go, and how I am going to get there. For me, being honest about where I am at is an important starting point for envisioning where I want to be in 5, 10, 20, or 30 years. When considering where I want to be and what I want out of life, I try to

be extremely precise. I don't want to settle for "good enough", so I aim to make my vision as specific as possible to help me achieve those goals.

With whom did you study?

Primary teachers include:

Nathaniel Brickens (UT Austin)

Mark Kellogg (Eastman School of Music)

Hal Reynolds (Ithaca College)

I studied additionally with:

John Marcellus (Eastman School of Music)

Mark Salatino (former 2nd trombone, Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra)

Jeff Gray (bass trombone, Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra)

Who are some of your musical heroes?

A person who is a huge inspiration for me is Megumi Kanda. I literally did not know a single professional female trombone player until I saw Megumi Kanda perform at the 2004 ITF in Ithaca, NY. Seeing her helped me to see the possibility that I could become a professional player. I remember being so inspired by her beautiful sound, and it fueled my drive to want to improve and gave me confidence that it might be possible for me to become a professional player myself.

Do you use any apps when you practice?

Tonal Energy Tuner is my go-to app for practicing. In addition to the tuner and metronome, I like to use the recording and analysis features. For recording, I try to use it frequently to record small chunks then listen back immediately. I also use the feature for slowing down the playback, and when listening back to the slowed recording I might use the analysis features to help assess pitch, rhythm, and note quality. I use ForScore for all of my reading.

Please give some tips for freelancing.

Be a good person! You do not have to be the best musician in town, but people have to want to work with you. Be genuine to who you are, treat others with respect, kindness, and generosity, and in general, follow the rule of 'treat others how you want to be treated'. Some important and specific things to also

remember are to be early, know your music, know the details of the gig, and be respectful.

Be early: always leave plenty of time to arrive early. If you have an hour to kill before a gig, no big deal, but if you are late, you probably won't be hired again. If most of the players show up 30 minutes before the gig starts, show up at the same time as them – don't walk in 10 minutes before.

Know your music: look at all of your music ahead of time, even if it seems sight-readable or easy. There might be note mistakes or roadmap issues to consider. Check to make sure page turns are possible. If you don't know a piece, listen to it and play along with a recording if possible. To really do your homework, especially for challenging repertoire, look at the score and understand how your part fits in, especially paying attention to what other instruments you might be doubling, and what happens during rests or at entrances.

Know the details of the gig: know what to wear, plan your driving route ahead of time, know how long it will take to get there, know where to park, know whether you need to plan ahead for weather if it's an outdoor gig, and generally be prepared to be flexible.

Be respectful: especially if you haven't played with the group or haven't played at the venue, don't assume anything! You may not know the stories/background situations of the other players, so be respectful of them as people and as musicians. Respect that they may have habits or traditions that you don't know yet. Listen and ask questions more than you talk. Again, you may not know anything about the other players and it is best to learn and listen before stating all of your beliefs.

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

Especially now with the need for musicians to be versatile, it is so important to not only perform at a high level but also to be able to teach. In a lot of ways neither degree on its own suits the needs of students preparing to graduate or currently looking for positions. There are so many demands on musicians now – being a good player is not enough, and often simply an education degree or performance degree alone is not enough. Having an understanding of marketing, social media, recording, music business, etc., and also being proficient in multiple styles of playing are all very valuable assets that you might

not get from one degree or the other, or even both! My undergraduate degree is in music education, and my masters and DMA are in music performance. I did teach public school for one year, and what I gained out of the music education degree was extremely valuable, even if I hadn't taught in public education. For practical purposes, I think an education degree is very valuable. It takes some extra work and extra classes to get through it, but a student can still do everything that performance majors do while pursuing an education degree (or students can double major). The skills like basic conducting and basic educational concepts that one learns through an education degree will pay off.

Is anyone else in your family a musician?

No one else in my family is a musician! I have a really large family (both parents are from families with 5 and 6 kids), but literally not a single relative – aunt, uncle, grandparent, sibling, cousin – is a musician!

Do you have any tips for preparing for auditions?

Preparing for auditions is a lot of work, and work that involves more than just learning the repertoire. The first step of learning the repertoire to the highest level of preparation is crucial. Your technique and fundamentals must be flawless to advance in orchestral auditions. You must have a good sound, play in tune, and play with perfect rhythm. If these aspects are not there you must work until they are solid. Once the fundamentals are there, you can address the style aspects of the repertoire. This requires an understanding not only of what is on the page, but what is not on the page, and in some ways this takes some extra research – know the composer's general style, understand the characteristic aspects of the historical period the work is from, and know not only your part but also how it fits into the piece. Study the score and listen to many recordings to obtain a grasp of these elements.

On top of simply learning the music, you also must learn how to deal with the potential challenge of performing in a high stress, high stakes situation where performance anxiety might have a huge impact on your performance. Learning to navigate this is a personal challenge for many and often takes a lot of practice taking real auditions to learn how to deal with it.

Also, learning how to prepare and plan your preparation over a long period of time is important. Know how much practice time you can devote each day and make this your priority. Create a plan for when, how long, and where you will

practice to ensure your greatest efficiency and effectiveness. Plan how often you need to play each excerpt (or section of solo) and have a schedule if necessary. One strategy for this is to categorize your excerpts in groups: the ones you are best at, not great at, and the ones that need the most work. Simply because we only have a finite amount of practice time, rotate through these having a plan to practice your worst excerpts most often (every day) and your best excerpts perhaps a little less frequently (every other day, two days on one day off, etc.).

Additionally, taking care of yourself physically and mentally is extremely important. You want every practice session to be efficient and you want to allow yourself to play your best. Have a schedule that ensures you will take care of your body and mind: get enough sleep, eat well, exercise, meditate, journal, and limit excesses like drinking. You want to ensure you are at your peak and that you know how to at any time create the situation in which you can play your best.

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

I dealt with insanely awful performance anxiety for a long time. It took a LOT of work and many professional auditions where I fell flat on my face to start to get a handle on my anxiety. Some things that have helped me most seem pretty basic, and although I understood them intellectually, it took me much longer to be able to put them into practice and learn how to make them work for me, so remember to be persistent but patient! A few concepts/ideas/strategies that helped me are:

- Know your fears, identify them, acknowledge them. Ask what are you afraid of, and what is the worst that will happen? Know your physical and mental responses to fear, stress, and anxiety.
- Be prepared. The best way to feel confident is truly to BE confident because you know you are prepared. If you can honestly say that you know you can play excerpt "x" ten times in a row, and every time it is up to your standards, then you can rely on your practice and your consistency, and trust that you will perform up to your standards every time.
- Practice strategies for calming down BEFORE the audition/performance. Don't wait until the day of, or when the anxiety hits, to try a new strategy.

Learning to relax, calm your body, and focus your mind takes practice just like polishing and refining the music takes practice.

- Simulate the experience in a way that simulates the stress/anxiety reaction you have. Run up and down flights of stairs or play in front of someone who makes you nervous to get your heart racing and your hands sweaty. Once you have the physical reaction, you can learn to control your mental response, and you can even learn to control your physical response, too.
- Envision the performance every step of the way so you are prepared mentally for anything. Have a "road map" for how you will think through your music.
- Plan on the details: know what you will wear, what you will eat, where you will park, etc. so that nothing is an uncertainty. You want your brain to be focused on the job at hand (playing), not worried about if you need to eat or that your pants are too tight.

**Recently I was able to see Dr. Karen Marston's presentation on performance anxiety – this was truly one of the most well organized, easy to follow, and practical presentations on this topic I have ever seen, and I wish I had seen it when I was younger! (You can check her out on this website!)

What life lessons have you learned through music?

Be a good person, be honest, be genuine, be caring, be thoughtful, be sincere. These are all essential life lessons I see manifested in being a good musician. Be passionate, put the music first, focus on the students, and the rest will follow.

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

I see myself as a teacher in so many ways, and perhaps I would find myself in education in some other capacity. If I could no longer play my instrument I would certainly continue to teach! However, if music as a performer or educator were totally off the table, I could envision myself turning to food in some way. I actually spent a fair amount of time working in restaurants and also as a bartender, so I could see exploring that in some capacity. I could see being involved in the farmers market or farm to table aspects of food as well. Other areas I might explore would potentially be working with organizations that offer help and assistance for families or children in need, or even with animal shelter/animal rescue/pet therapy organizations.

Do you like to teach? Why or why not?

I really enjoy teaching! For me teaching is almost inseparable from playing, and I love how the two feed into and support each other. When I teach I can identify and pull apart the smallest details of a problem and think about it analytically to diagnose the issue, or I can also take a big picture approach and address musical and expressive issues. Most of the time I am addressing both of these because they are of course intertwined – we can't have only one or the other - we must have both to be great musicians. This process of teaching I apply to my own playing, and so often I realize something new about my playing, my practice habits, my approach, etc., that I initially addressed with a student. Likewise, I apply what I learn in my own practicing and performing to my teaching. For example, I might be working on a particular fundamental, discover a little new detail in how I play or find way of thinking about it, and this will spark an idea that I can then bring to my students. I love how this seamless transfer between teaching and my own playing occurs, and I constantly discover new things about myself and also new ways to help a student because of this.

Additionally, I really enjoy teaching for the human connection it brings to us. We are all musicians, so I find it so rewarding to work towards a musical goal with a student, and their success and growth is very satisfying to see take shape. The personal element of seeing a student grow as a person – whether the growth is directly related to music or not – is a genuinely incredible part of teaching for me.

If you could go back in time, how would you practice differently?

I would do so many things differently! I would have used a metronome and tuner SO much more. I would have not shied away from recording myself but embraced it and used it frequently! I would have listened more to great music (more trombone players and more great music in general). I always had put in lots of practice time but it was not always efficient, and frequently I focused on the amount of time rather than the quality and content of my practice sessions.

One concept that I did not truly grasp for awhile was that I needed to spend a significant amount of time on fundamentals, and in particular that those areas of my playing that were my weakest needed to have the most attention. One important thing I would have done would have been to write out my routine, and then assess what parts of my routine could have been fleshed out or limited based on my strengths and weaknesses as a player. For example, I would spend

large amounts of my practice time on Bordogni etudes or working on solo repertoire, and when it came to Arbans and technical studies I would do little more than play through some exercises, rather than really work on refining them. Sitting down and writing out your routine can be extremely beneficial to see where you might unconsciously (or consciously!) be favoring some aspects of your playing while ignoring others.

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

I actually really enjoy memorizing music and have found a lot of benefit in doing so. What I like about memorizing music is that I feel it allows me to know the music better, to connect to it more intimately, and to perform it in a way that allows me to sing through my instrument more freely. When I first started memorizing music I didn't do it intentionally – it just happened through practice that I began to realize I had little chunks of my music memorized. I then simply expanded those chunks and filled in the harder sections.

To memorize in a more intentional way, begin with music that you know really well – music you can sing. Do a lot of singing and air patterning/moving the slide so you connect the music you hear in your head to the physical skill of playing the trombone. If you come across difficult sections break them down into small pieces that are digestible, then do basic drill work/repetition. Start to piece together the small sections into bigger and bigger chunks. Also, be sure you know your technique and have those skills memorized: key signatures, scales, and patterns like thirds, Clarke studies, intervals, etc. Much of music is made of these patterns, so when you find them in the music they are much simpler to execute. If you know your way around your instrument effortlessly, then applying it to the little snippets of scales or patterns that you find in the music will be easy.

What advice can you share about physical wellness?

For a very long time I did not realize the strength of the connection between physical wellness and mental health. Both affect each other and are intertwined, and for me I need to take care of both to function at my best. I often pushed aside physical wellness for the sake of something I wanted to achieve, neglecting sleep or not exercising. I thought if I just worked a little harder or longer I could be more successful, but by neglecting to take care of myself I actually slowed my progress and didn't function emotionally, physically, or

intellectually at my best level. For me, the advice I wish I had heard earlier in life is that balance is important. Taking care of your body is crucial to functioning not just physically, but emotionally and intellectually as well. I feel my best when I have a daily routine that involves some amount of exercise, yoga or time for mindfulness, good quality food, and enough sleep!

What is your favorite food?

I really enjoy food, so it's hard to narrow it down! For me food is often about the experience of a meal or the time spent sharing a meal with others. One of my favorite meals was at the restaurant Isot in Philadelphia. This was absolutely one of the most delicious meals I have ever had! Another great meal was at an Indian restaurant in Phoenix. I do also really enjoy gardening and when I can make a meal from the produce in my garden I am always very excited about that!