



## An Interview with Abbie Conant: Part One

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Abbie Conant is a trombonist of remarkable talent and versatility, and a human being of immense strength and creativity. Confident enough to take her own road through the immense forest of creativity, she, along with husband William Osbourne, are creating a new musical expression through the marriage of classical trombone technique, multimedia and electronics, mythology, theatre, and pure energy.

If all you know about Abbie Conant is her [experiences with the Munich Philhamonic](#), consider taking a few minutes to learn about the other 99% of this great musician. If you have the opportunity, be sure to hear her play, talk, and teach on her upcoming [Southeastern United States tour](#). You may never look at your trombone the same way again.



Do you remember when you discovered that music was important to you?

My mother started taking piano lessons at night school when I was five. She would play Debussy's "Claire de Lune." When she got to the quick arpeggiated section after the introduction my whole body and being felt overcome by the beauty of the music and I would stand there and weep because I was so profoundly moved.

Tell be about your first trombone. When and where did you start playing?

My father had been transferred from his job at Los Alamos Scientific Laboratories in New Mexico to a facility outside of Sacramento, California. As a physical chemist he worked on rocket fuel during the "space race" so he had to follow the industry. The whole family was just crushed about the move from Santa Fe - I have three older sisters and a brother. I attended Mitchell Junior High School in Rancho Cordova after my seventh grade year at Santa Fe Preparatory School which had no music program.

I intended to go to college so I enrolled in typing as my only elective the second

semester of my 8th-grade year. I was not talented at typing. The girl next to me was soon typing 60 words a minute with no mistakes while I was typing 25 words a minute with 15 mistakes. Afraid of ruining my grade point average and thus "hurting my chances for college," I realized that I had to transfer out. The only other elective offered in that time slot was beginning band. In science class we sat three to a desk and either side of me sat a trombone player. On my left sat the star quarterback and first trombonist in the concert band and on my right the star defensive lineman and third trombone.

They got wind that I was contemplating switching to beginning band and had to choose an instrument. They campaigned heavily for the trombone though I sensed that there were some exchanged winks behind my back and possibly a wager was negotiated.

In other words, I think they were pulling my leg. Nevertheless, I was intrigued with the idea and suddenly remembered the ill-fated summer after third grade where I somehow ended up in a summer band program, had a flute stuck in my clueless little hands and was made to sit down in the middle of the band while a beady-eyed, choleric, pear-shaped man with lips like two layers of liver waved his baton at us like a fly swatter. Having had no instruction whatsoever, I sat staring at the whole notes I was to somehow produce on this nickel-plated mechanical salami I was holding like I was going to bunt instead of swing while this angry, deeply frustrated tyrant (who was a professional flautist!) screamed at me for not being able to produce a sound on the thing. He dramatically brought the cacophony to a screeching halt and ordered me to go sit in the stairwell and practice until I could play the two notes we were working on.

It was dark back there, I was terrified of him. Frantically trying to make a sound and having no success I dared not return to my chair. Finally someone came and got me and the whole thing started over. I was sent back several times to "practice" in the stairwell until I was weeping with fear and humiliation. At one point I looked behind me and saw a lone but very serene looking trombonist in the back row and I thought the instrument looked very mysterious and elegant. As for my flute terror, someone informed my mother what was going on and she asked a fourth grader to give me a private lesson. The older girl very efficiently explained how to blow and hold the thing and how to read a fingering chart. God bless Dolores Ayala. I limped along as a talentless flute player until I was allowed to quit in 6th grade. Oh happy day. So in junior high when my desk mates were pushing the trombone, I said to myself, why not?

The only trombone left was an ancient Olds Ambassador upon which the remaining lacquer looked like a map of Micronesia. It had very bad trombone breath. Even still, I was in love. I quickly stuck it together and produced a nice middle B-flat. Somehow I just knew how to do that. For fifty minutes a day we beginners picked a corner in the band room and practiced out of our beginning band method books. Once a day the band director would come around and hear our etudes and mark them off or not. I got no instruction but got some encouragement. After one semester I was assigned first trombone in the band much to the chagrin of my football playing trombone colleagues.

Those familiar with your career, and in particular your experiences with gender bias in the music profession, will know that it takes a great deal of hard work, pain, and dedication to become a professional musician. What is the reward – what makes it all worth while for you?

Occasionally I move people to tears and am myself moved to tears while performing. It is as if I disappear for a while and the music just takes over. This is sometimes very embarrassing! When people really get what I am trying to express and feel transformed by it, it is a spiritual experience for both. A profound validation that the path I have chosen, strange and difficult as it is, is the right one for me.

When people are asked about their past "achievements" a list of successes is usually supplied. However, one learns much more by trying those things which we initially fail at, and then pursuing success. What have been some of your biggest learning experiences - things you have taken the leap into and had to work very hard at?

Oy veh. My husband, the composer William Osborne, wrote a 45min. long music theater piece (really a small opera!) for an acting, trombonist/soprano. I had to learn to sing at a professional level as well as act. For someone who could hardly speak, who is naturally shy this was something of a miracle. By way of the Alexander Technique, an excellent and patient voice teacher and lots of painful failure I learned to sing.

One of my voice teacher's major battles was trying to get me to stop making an embouchure when I sang! In the piece I had to go from playing fast technical passages to singing and or speaking within a millisecond -- that was very hard for me. Two different kinds of breath support as well as switching brain halves. I managed to premiere the work successfully in Rome of all places. It was immensely gratifying that the reviewer just assumed I was a professional singer as well trombonist. The visceral and deep understanding of line, legato and sound one gains through vocal training is pure gold. I encourage all my students to study voice and the Alexander Technique. Luckily, we have a top notch professional trombonist/Alexander teacher at our school.

Which is more difficult for you as a trombonist, the mental aspects of music making or the physical ones?

It goes back and forth. When I am very clear about a piece and have prepared enough, I rarely have physical problems. If I understand the piece and have great affinity for it then it makes the technical aspects much easier. One finds a way to solve any and all difficulties if there is enough love, I suppose. It is necessary to create music despite and with your weaknesses, as well as with your strengths. Intensity isn't necessarily a dynamic such as fortissimo or a kind of relentlessness and physical energy. We create intensity just as an actor creates it, through immersing ourselves in an inner emotional environment and knowing that we are coming from that place and having faith that anything we do on the instrument will help reveal that inner world. We sense the thoughts

and intentions of a performer -- they are "louder" than the sound. Come to think of it, music isn't really sound. Sound is just one aspect of it. But that is getting into left field -- where I make my home.

I am always nervous before and while I am playing but I no longer see this as a negative thing. Music requires special and sometimes subtle energies. As musicians, we are "wired" for music so we have to expect that it will flow through us. If we clutch and block this flow it will feel terrible and frightening. We have to let ourselves be the medium for these special energies. I always take comfort in knowing that even the great coloratura soprano Lily Pons threw up before every performance as did Jasha Heifitz. Rudolf Nureyev picked a fight right before going on stage--he was convinced that the anger focused his energies and made him dance better. The Alexander Technique has been a tremendous help over the years, as has yoga and exercise in general. I avoid coffee, sugar and lack of sleep as much as possible.

Tone, intonation, articulation. Which one is absolutely first and how can a teacher use that to build the other two?

Tone and intonation are aspects of the same thing. The instrument simply won't vibrate optimally if the slide isn't in the right place and thus the sound won't be rich and full. If your sound is a bit dull or fuzzy, chances are you are not correcting intonation with the slide but actually "lipping" notes. The positive aspect of this is that it means you have a good ear. The negative aspect is that the constant "lipping" which is sometime very subtle can hurt your endurance and your sound. Never try to please the tuner by playing at it and getting the needle to stay in the middle. Look away, blow freely and create what you think is in tune by glissing up to and down to the note in question (String players do it all the time!). You will hear where the trombone opens up and centers, then look at the tuner. But I am getting ahead of myself: this is taking for granted that one has a sound in one's imagination or a sound to try and imitate in the real world, say a teacher or favorite performer. Mouthpiece practice works wonders.

A very helpful principle is the discovery that we are born either as natural "in-breathers" or as natural "out-breathers." The in-breather type of person has less "standing air" in the lungs. They tend to inflate and expand more to become full. The area most capable of expanding is the upper chest. They tend to sleep on their backs or at least fall sleep on their backs so that the upper chest remains free to expand. Out-breathers types, by contrast, have more standing air in the lungs and expand more in the flanks, the middle of the back. They tend to fall asleep on their side and sleep on their stomachs to free up the expansion of the back of the ribs. They tend to be a bit barrel chested and don't seem to need to breathe. You don't see a lot of movement when they breathe, while an in-breather will really expand and tank up.

I mention this because if you are an in-breather teacher and teach all your students to breathe like you, the out-breathers will suffer. Tanking up makes out-breathers feel tense and uncomfortable. What they need to focus on is using lots of air, blowing. Then at the end of the air they need to learn how to instantly

relax all the breathing muscles and just let the air go into the vacuum that is left. An in-breather, on the other hand, needs to focus on relaxed tanking-up and letting the volume of air in the lungs do the work and take great care never to push the air. I have noticed that in-breathers tend to have rounder, purer sounds (if they don't push the air,) while out-breathers have warmer sounds but have to work on clearing up the sound. In short, for in-breathers efficiency and free and deep inhalation are the keys, while for out-breathers it's using lots of air blown freely as possible, then just letting the air go into the lungs and not creating isometrics trying to pack more air in.

Put another way, in-breathers should think of active inhalation and passive blowing. They should start their breathing exercises with inhalation and relaxed capacity expansion. Out-breathers should think of active blowing and passive inhalation. They should start their breathing exercises with blowing all their air out and then just letting go. Obviously we use all areas of our lungs for playing, but the simple principle of understanding that there are two types of breathers can save a lot of time and frustration whe*Sonne, Mond und Stimme* by Romeo Alavi Kia and Renate Schulze-Schindler (Braunschweig: Aurum Verlag, 1998.)

As for articulation, it is in direct relationship to sound production, or how you blow. Once the free blowing is stabilized then the idea that the tongue is an effect of the air flow and not an initiator becomes easily grasped.

Some of your teachers include: Karl Hinterbichler, M. Dee Stewart, Per Brevig, John Swallow, Branimir Slokar, and Vinko Globokar. What did you learn from each of them, and what has been the consistent message (or messages) you have gleaned from all of them?

You are wanting a book!

Karl Hinterbichler: He was the first teacher to tell me I was talented and could make it as a professional. He got me caught up in terms of technique during my freshman year at University of New Mexico and then urged me to leave my status as big fish in a small pond (which felt so good after all the superstars at Interlochen Arts Academy) and study with a teacher in a major symphony orchestra. He was and is a brilliant, dedicated, fun and super intelligent teacher and player. He exposed me to contemporary music. I felt respected and taken seriously by him.

Dee Stewart: He taught me the basics upon which my entire career is founded. My first lesson down in his basement was a revelation and each subsequent lesson built upon consistent variations of the same theme. In a nutshell: create a huge vibrant sound by understanding the difference between air speed and air pressure. Everything you play should be the result of a musical impulse and not just an exercise. He taught me how to take auditions and the importance of the low register--he gave me the Persichetti *Tuba Serenade* to work on. He was very realistic about practice efficiency--if you can't do it in an hour and a half then it probably isn't going to happen. Leave it for the next day when you are fresh and mentally engaged. This advice helped get me through my full load at Temple U. and my part time job I had in a small factory in downtown Philadelphia. Plus, he

was so calm! That helped a lot.

Per Brevig: He was very picky and analytical. He emphasized technique with me and that was just what I needed and wanted at the time. He helped me sharpen my intonation skills. He was famous for tapping (quite hard) the rhythms the Blahzevich *Sequences* on your left shoulder. He suggested I work with Persichetti on the *Parable for Trombone* which Per had just premiered at an ITF and wasn't yet published so I got to do the New York Premiere with Persichetti in the audience. Per was a fantastic player and had incredible musicianship. I will never forget the huge, amazing and utterly musical sound he made with that old 79H he played in the Met.

John Swallow: He was my trombone mentor. I had him as a chamber music coach several summers and probably got as big a dose of his teaching as many of his regular students at the many institutions where he taught. He was known for being controversial and opinionated. To me he just made plain good sense because he had excellent reasons and years of professional experience to back up his ideas. Believe it or not, using natural slurs (not tongue assisted) was practically a sin in some quarters. Taking brass chamber music seriously as an art form was new and he was one of the most important pioneers through his founding membership in the New York Brass Quintet and Arthur Weissberg's Contemporary Chamber Ensemble. He commissioned a lot of music. I loved his rants about arrogance, pretention and snobbishness directed towards brass players usually by certain elitist string players and ultra-concevative blue haired lady patrons of the arts. He was wild about chamber music and that was contagious. I was also very impressed with his articulateness, his talent for psychology and his philosophical bent. He is a genuine, humble, self-ironic human being as well as a great raconteur.

Vinko Globokar was a rather scary but kindly person for me. Scary in the sense that he was a real, hardcore new music trombonist and composer, Kindly in the sense that he really cared about you. He showed me the importance of clear articulation that is really doing the articulation instead of making everything sort of vaguely tenuto/legato and calling that musical. I still get a lot of mileage out of that idea. His ideas on breathing and sound production were and still are deep mysteries to me--my observations at the time went something like this: The guy is built like a brick outhouse, has boundless energy, smokes cigars, drinks, etc. so probably I shouldn't try to imitate his way of producing sound. I heard him do the Berio *Sequenza* countless times and worked on it with him. I found it humorless and self-consciously "objective" which is often a modernist and even post-modernist de rigour affectation. It didn't suit this wonderful Italian music in my opinion. It needed more Fellini, more chiaroscuro, more depth and humor. I could never understand Vinko's musical aesthetics, though I tried very hard. I think his generation was rebelling against and reacting to something that my generation has already put to rest or at least had moved to another anathema. He has since developed a great musical sense of humor and I can relate to some of his later works. He is a fantastic trombonist and a great inspiration to many younger players who are into improvisation and new music.

Branimir Slokar: The first time I heard a recording of Branimir playing I was riveted by the utter aliveness in his sound. I could take in that it wasn't the "ideal" American or British trombone sound and still hear the clear, joyful, musical intention in it. Wow, a trombone soloist who didn't sound like an orchestral player! I studied with him at the Cologne Musikhochschule where he had taken over after Globokar. Branimir had a very well thought out teaching style which was a mixture of Paris Conservatoire, James Stamp, Erik Penzel (the famous German horn pedagogue) and his own thing, plus he was just a natural teacher. His energy, vitality and enthusiasm for music and everything else rubbed off on all of us and motivated us to work hard. I learned more about how to infuse all my musical phrases with life, direction and energy. He helped me form an identity as a soloist and told me I was good at a crucial time in my life when it seemed that everyone else was implying just the opposite! I am eternally grateful for that.

Each one of the above teachers contributed immensely to my trombone knowledge and gave me new insights and approaches to playing and thinking about myself as an artist. Growing up when I did, taking yourself seriously as a young woman was not the rule but the exception. I still struggle with this. I believe that all of us have a treasure inside to share with others through our playing. It is way beyond the puny confines of the ego and is important for re-shaping the world into a more humane, life-enhancing and peaceful place. The sound we make is the light of our hearts. Consider right now the utter privilege it is to have a teacher, a person who is dedicated to helping you realize your highest ideals. What a gift.

When will we have a new Abbie Conant CD to listen to?

Thank you for asking! I really don't know because I am a lousy business person and self-promoter. I am open to suggestions and help. I am more interested in creativity than ambition. I have lots of really interesting pieces through my "Wired Goddess Project." I want to impact the expressive powers of the trombone, to recontextualize it--free it from its "machismo" if you will. I have often said that the trombone is the instrument of the 21st century. Have you noticed how it has been creeping into Hollywood films in the last years? It is being recognized as the icon representing the great wake up call, the voice of the soul, the power of transformation, character and forgiveness. It is the icon of world peace, the herald of the new paradigm.

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Readers may learn more about Abbie Conant and her musical projects at her web site: <http://www.osborne-conant.org/>.

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