

# Conor Bell, *bassoonist*

conorbell.com ◇ conor.bassoon@gmail.com ◇ 972-804-7647

Music is one of the most profound modes of expression, unimpeded by the barriers of language. I strive to educate students to be complete, thoughtful musicians and to awaken their passion for exploring music and harnessing its expressive qualities. I am passionate about exploring new ways to refine my own performance and using that to inform my teaching. Core aspects of my teaching include establishing strong fundamentals, making reliable reeds, incorporating music theory and history to form cohesive interpretations, treating students as individuals, teaching them to practice effectively, and encouraging independence.

I build a strong foundation so students can express themselves clearly through the music. Their instrument should not be a hindrance, but an ally. To that end, I ingrain fundamental skills into the core of their playing with a structured, progressive curriculum that has proven effective. Believing that the most important aspect of playing a wind instrument is controlling the airstream, I teach a daily fundamentals routine that begins from a long-tone (allowing complete attention to the airstream and support systems), then slowly adds layers of note-changes, articulation, and vibrato. This approach teaches students to make sure their airstream and support systems are not influenced by any other aspect of their playing.

Reed-making is another vital skill for every bassoonist. Aside from self-sufficiency and economy, reed-making allows bassoonists to customize reeds to better suit their current repertoire. I teach younger students to replicate my reed style, while developing the fundamentals of all good reeds: symmetry and balance. Once students become consistent reed-makers, I encourage experimentation, not only to help them find their ideal design, but to equip them to understand how to adapt to their changing needs for years to come.

Another skill set essential to informed music-making is knowledge of music theory and history. While students learn these subjects in other classes, I feel it is the role of the private teacher to guide them in synthesizing this knowledge and applying it in a thoughtful manner. Understanding the structure of a work and its historical context leads to clear, confident performance.

I work to be flexible and thoughtful in my instruction. Since everyone learns in a different way, explanations that lead to breakthroughs with one student might stymie the next. Accordingly, it is my responsibility to address each student as an individual, tailoring my teaching to meet their needs. While each student needs to develop reliable fundamentals and discover their artistic voice, part of an undergraduate musical education is to be exposed to the variety of musical career paths and to encounter new ways of thinking about music. Beyond the traditional careers in performance and teaching, students should learn about paths in entrepreneurship, arts administration, recording arts, and the intersection of music and health. Beyond broadening students' career options, these concepts are complementary to any individual's musical career.

Another core element of my philosophy is teaching students to practice. Far too often, music students are just told to “go practice,” without being taught efficient practice techniques. This leads to shallow, unfocused practice sessions that fail to adequately reward students for their time investment. To combat this, I teach periodic “practice lessons,” observing students practicing and providing advice on how to practice more effectively. Such lessons can guide the student to better practice habits and greater success. Beyond this, I regularly reference practice in lessons. Often when a student struggles with a passage in a lesson, my first question is, “How did you practice this?” We then analyze the effectiveness of their approach, and—if needed—devise a new practice strategy to facilitate growth.

I also encourage students toward independence. One helpful approach is requiring them to record their lessons as well as some of their practice sessions and to write reflections. In addition to fostering self-evaluation, these lesson reflections help me establish a dialogue with the student and to learn what concepts are being taken away from each lesson. Another way I help students take responsibility for their development is by encouraging them to explore the repertoire, finding works they are passionate about learning. This helps them take ownership of their musical development and find their own voice.

To be an effective teacher, one must be a dedicated, life-long student. The longer I play my instrument and the better I become, the more inspired I am to seek out new challenges, new ways to solve problems, and new ways to affect my audiences. It is my great joy to share that quest with my students.