

Regional

Trumpet professor known for giving inspiration

The trumpet is one of the oldest and most popular instruments in the history of music. Despite its popularity, many kids initially choose either piano or violin when getting into music. That was not the case for John Korak.

Born in Youngstown, Ohio, Korak was inspired by his high school band director and his love for music.

"When I was 10 years old, my family moved from Ohio to New Mexico," Korak said. "To me that was traumatic, and my parents thought it would be good for me to join the local music band. They took me to the music store and I saw a trumpet and fell in love with it."

He went on to receive his bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees in music from the University of North Texas. Today he is a professor in the department of music at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Korak has performed throughout the world, including Australia and Thailand. Yet, whether performing abroad or here in Edwardsville, he is capable of adapting to different acoustic conditions.

"You can ascertain the acoustics of the room," Korak said. "Rehearsals or listening to others play helps you to understand how things are going to sound so you can adjust."

The same goes for playing to different audiences with different backgrounds and expectations.

"Most of the time I like to communicate a lot with my audiences. It is a give and take. I

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

like to engage with the audience prior to the performance," Korak said. "In some cases, that discussion helps the audience to feel more at ease. It's not only the performer who can feel nervous. The audience can also have that feeling."

In his career Korak has been both a live performer and what in the trade is called a "studio musician." Is it difficult to be both?

"A great musician is a great musician whether it is a recording or a live performance," Korak said. "The live performer has to be able to adjust to the circumstances. In the studio you can use technology to adapt. In a live performance, you not only strive for perfection but also for a connection to inspire your listener."

Despite his many years as a professional performer, Korak still remembers one of his earliest performances.

"The performance that keeps coming to my mind was when I was a junior at a high school in Albuquerque, N.M., when I was selected as principal trumpet. That was the first time when I experienced making music," Korak said. "From then on my desire to continue in music was enhanced. That was truly special despite the fact that since then I have had many rewarding performances, including the ones with the St. Louis Symphony."



Jennifer Korak

John Korak, left, plays baroque trumpet at St. Peter's Episcopal in Ladue with students, from left, Colin Galvin, Timothy Hassall and Michael Chiapetto.

Korak not only plays the trumpet but also conducts.

"At one point in my life I was a high school band director and I found that the experiences I gained there at the podium helped me to be a better musician by, for example, relating instruments with each other. Today I keep doing it is because of my love of teaching.

That is what I do at SIUE."

When it comes to solo performances Korak has invaluable advice for his students. "There is always a fear as you perform," he said. "I teach them to channel the extra energy into their performances."

In addition to being a performer and a conductor, Korak has also been a successful

author of music books.

"My publications are, most of them, a result of trying to find meaningful ways to improve my teaching," he said. "Over the years my books have become successful even at the international level. I have been very fortunate."

One of the courses he has taught at SIUE is "Introduction to Music History."

Although to most people all trumpets look the same, the fact of the matter is that trumpets have changed a lot over time.

"If we go back to early times, trumpets were made of animal parts," Korak explained. "With time, we learned how to make alloys, and by the 15th century we were able to bend them, creating the shape or curvature of the trumpet. By the time of Bach, the instrument was standardized but still lacked valves. By the 19th century, we see the addition of valves, which allowed the instruments to be shorter, allowing them to play the whole scale. From then on, it opened to all types of repertoire."

Today Korak is known as an inspiring teacher, attracting students from all over the country to his classes, where he passes on the same love for music he developed as a kid growing up in New Mexico.

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.