

MEET A MUSICIAN

JOHN ILIKA

The Bottom Line

John Ilika has played the trombone since he was 10 years old and has held the Principal Trombone position with the North Carolina Symphony since 2001. He has played the most popular pieces in the classical repertoire many times over — he counts, for instance, more than 30 performances of Mozart's Requiem over his career. But now, he's seeing the music in front of him in a whole new way.

Actually, he's seeing new music altogether.

After the retirement of veteran bass trombonist Terry Mizesko at the end of the 2016/17 season, John took on a one-year appointment as Acting Bass Trombone at NCS. His reasoning was simple: "I thought it would be fun!" he says. "It's a chance to have a different voice within the greater low-brass sound."

Also among the low brass is the tuba, and John explains that "the bass trombone and tuba are really a team — the parts are inseparable and work as a unit." With Seth Horner newly appointed as Principal Tuba, part of the thinking behind the "musical chairs" was to allow Seth time to settle into his position and then participate in the hiring process when it comes time to permanently fill the bass trombone position.

The bass trombone is certainly not unfamiliar to John. Although he primarily studied the tenor and alto trombones, he also performed on the bass while an undergraduate at Luther College and in graduate school at the Philadelphia College of Performing Arts — now called University of the Arts. He has mainly held principal trombone positions since then, but has played bass trombone during summers at the Eastern Music Festival in Greensboro (where he met his wife, a violinist, with whom he has two children) as well as during his 15 years as a freelance musician in Philadelphia.

John has experienced the benefits of versatility firsthand, so in his faculty position at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem, he teaches his students to play all three trombone parts — tenor, alto, and bass. But even in the realm of tenor trombone (the highest pitched trombone, which John plays in the principal position), changing instruments is a way of life. "I have four tenor trombones of different sizes and manufacturers that I switch between based on the repertoire," he explains. "It gives me a full palette of sound colors, from bright to dark — the tones are all slightly different."

That range is important since John sees the trombone as being the brass instrument closest to the human voice; he describes the bass trombone's particular voice as "growly." "To me, the vibration is visceral; it's very engaging," he says.

It seems likely that Mozart equated the trombone with the human voice, as well: The trombone parts in his Requiem — which NCS performs November 16-19 — double the alto, tenor, and bass vocal parts. "That means that we get a lot of melody," John says, adding that melodic lines are a somewhat rare treat for trombonists.

As it happens, there are a quite a few shining moments for the bass trombone this season. "All the great repertoire we're playing was one of the reasons I jumped at the chance to play bass this year," John explains, pointing out works such as Respighi's *Fountains of Rome* and *Pines of Rome* (March 21-24, 2018), Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben* (May 18-19, 2018), and the *Music of Star Wars* program featuring many movie-music hits by the Oscar-winning composer John Williams (November 9-11, 2017). "He just understands how to use brass," John says of Williams. "All the music for *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* is like steak tartare for us!"

With new notes, a new pitch register to work with, and a significantly larger instrument that requires "a heck of a lot of air," making a switch to the bass trombone is not without its challenges — but as John says, he's "just having a great time!" And that's the bottom line — no pun intended. 

This season, John is most looking forward to playing Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben* ("A Hero's Life") on May 18-19. For details and tickets, visit ncsymphony.org or call 919.733.2750.

John shows off his trombone at an NCS Education Concert.

