

Is There a Doctor in the Orchestra?

By Lawrence Posner, MD



Dr. Posner (center) rehearsing with the Marin Symphony

I grew up in a home where there was always live music. I felt music deeply as a child, so it was logical that I would start playing an instrument. My choice was easy: the man behind the counter at the music store in Pasadena recommended the clarinet (it turned out that he was a clarinetist). As I remember, I started taking clarinet lessons when I was 11 or 12 years old.

My high school years were not exactly an up period in my life. I was a nerd before the word existed. It was a lonely time for me, and I found solace in playing and practicing my clarinet. My more well-adjusted high school classmates were busy socializing and having fun. They generally ended up not having time to practice and quitting whatever musical instrument they were learning to play. While their instrumen-

tal skills lapsed, I just kept plugging away, building technique.

My weekly lesson with my clarinet teacher, a caring and supportive adult, was an important part of my life during high school. I enjoyed the meditative, Zen-like quality of daily practicing, and most of all, I loved playing music. One of my more pleasant memories from that time is of playing in a polka band that met in the studio of an Eastern European woodcarver. When I arrived, I received a large stein of beer, and then our band played waltzes, polkas and ländler (Austrian folk dances), while the leader's European friends danced

in his wonderfully spacious studio. The more beer I drank, the better I played.

Besides getting me through one of the leaner periods of my life, playing the clarinet helped me develop musical skills. These are a wonderful addition to my life as an

adult, bestowing lifelong enrichment and pleasure—not to mention the fact that I met my wife, who is also a musician, while playing clarinet quintets with her father's string quartet.

I first began orchestral playing in the Pasadena Symphony, sitting next to my clarinet teacher, doubling non-solo parts. In college, I played in the UCLA orchestra (and also took a few pre-med courses). As a second-year medical student at UC San Francisco, I found the time to commute to UC Berkeley and play principal clarinet in the university orchestra. After internship, when I lived

Dr. Posner, a Sausalito internist, plays clarinet in the Marin Symphony.

in Paris, I played in an amateur orchestra called "Le Violon d'Ingres."

Upon opening a medical practice in Mill Valley in 1970, I began playing with the Marin Symphony, which was then a largely amateur group supplemented with a few professional musicians. Over the years, the symphony has slowly transformed itself into a professional orchestra, with a superb conductor (Alasdair Neale) who guest-conducts orchestras all over the world. I now find myself surrounded by professional musicians, including many who play in the San Francisco Symphony, Opera, or Ballet.

Performing live in front of a large audience is an emotional high. As an orchestral musician, I am expected to play all passages with facility, no matter how difficult. I am simultaneously watching every movement of the conductor's baton, while listening to the rest of the orchestra. If I am navigating a passage that has flutes, oboes and clarinets playing the same melody, I must match the other players' exact intonation and phrasing—even if I am sitting 20 feet apart from them. Making entrances and tempo changes happen in perfect unison requires the entire orchestra to be constantly aware of the tip of the conductor's baton. The woodwind section tends to automatically breathe in unison.

Maintaining that level of concentration for an extended period of time is not easy. If I realize a difficult exposed passage is coming up soon, I can feel my adrenaline start to flow. Such rushes make concentration and focus difficult and often cause a hand tremor. I can only partially control this "performance anxiety" with my intellect. Knowing that a squawk, wrong note or missed entrance is as nothing compared to the consequence of a medical error helps somewhat; yet my intellect is unable to fully control my deep primitive reflexes. Thank God for propranolol, which blocks my tremor and keeps my mind from going blank at crucial moments. I prescribe this drug for many Bay Area musicians

and lecturers. (Picture holding a laser pointer in front of an audience of 500 and developing a tremor; propranolol is fantastic at suppressing tremor.)

Keeping up the technique and skills needed to play in a professional orchestra is a stretch for a full-time physician. I can only practice 30 to 40 minutes (usually starting around 10 p.m.) three to five times per week. That schedule is marginal for maintaining full concert readiness. Fortunately, the baseline technique grooved into my brain during my many hours of practice in high school makes it possible for me to perform with limited practice time.

Being a physician in an orchestra brings an added dimension: that of being the ensemble's Medical Maven. During the intermission of one concert in the symphony's early days, the personnel manager asked me to consult with our then conductor Sador Salgo, who was in his mid 80s. I knew that Maestro Salgo had chronic atrial fibrillation and was on Coumadin. He told me that he had just had a small nosebleed. We were due to play Brahms' Fourth Symphony in a few minutes. "Larry, what should I do?" he asked.

I thought what a gushing nosebleed might look like on anticoagulants. If the nosebleed did occur, it would happen in front of 2,000 people.

What could I do in the next five minutes? My bag was in the trunk of my car in the parking lot. I could go out to my car and get some cotton balls and pack them up the maestro's nose. Then I thought, "No, you can't conduct Brahms' Fourth Symphony with cotton stuffed up your nose." So I told him, "Maestro, let's do nothing. If the bleeding starts again, I'll deal with it."

The subsequent performance was the first time I have played all four movements of Brahms' Fourth Symphony without ever looking at the conductor's baton: I was watching his nose the whole time! Thankfully, he did not bleed, and he really did conduct well with his nose!

My wife, who is a cellist, also plays in the Marin Symphony. With the regular rehearsals and concerts, we spend more time with the symphony musicians than we do with our own siblings. Besides the concert season, there are music festivals in the summertime, where we spend two or three weeks living and playing in a setting like Mendocino or Mammoth. We have developed wonderful, deep and lasting friendships with many of our fellow musicians, and I remain in awe of their skills.

The true payoff for those many years spent in the practice room is that of playing chamber music. This type of music is written for a small number of musicians, to be played in an intimate setting. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Dvorak and other musical giants wrote music to be played by both professional musicians and talented amateurs in their own homes. In the days before modern electronics, music in the home was the music that you performed yourself. Mozart and Haydn, for example, met weekly with two other composers to play string quartets. The chamber music of the great composers includes some of their most perfect works, just as inspired and masterful as a Keats sonnet or a Rembrandt painting.

Playing music in our own home with a few other musicians, with friends listening, and then sitting down to good food, wine and conversation is one of my greatest pleasures in life. There is none of the pressure felt in the concert hall looking out at 2,000 people. If one of us loses our place, we stop and start over. If we like something, we play it again. We have our choice of masterpieces written by divinely inspired composers.

It is a remarkable experience to play a florid melody by Mozart ... to transmit musical notes written on manuscript over 200 years ago into live music. In a country that has become a society of listeners, I feel blessed to be a performer. □

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