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Music and medicine

As the world thanks its medics, we meet the World Doctors' Orchestra

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Music, medicine, and healing

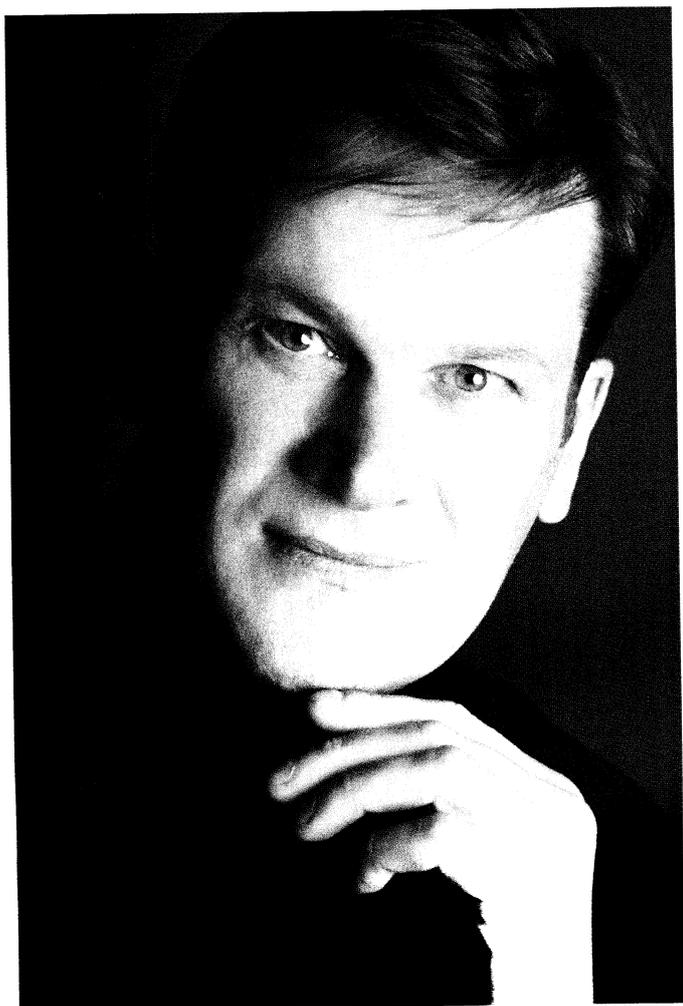
In the first of a two-part series, **Jon Tolansky** considers the relationship between music and medicine and explores why many doctors are drawn to making music

Medicine covers the full range of human emotion: from excitement and happiness, if you are an obstetrician bringing babies to birth; to sorrow and pain in dealing with disease and even death – and music does the same: it covers the entire range of emotions in humanity.’

Professor Dr Stefan Willich is the director of the Institute for Social Medicine, Epidemiology and Health Economics at the Charité University Medical Center in Berlin. A revered surgeon, cardiologist, and author of research publications, he is also a highly skilled musician, as are the members of the remarkable World Doctors’ Orchestra that he founded in 2008. ‘I think that one of several reasons why many doctors feel particularly passionate about music as well as medicine is because it reflects in a certain way their daily lives,’ continues Professor Willich. ‘Furthermore, music is soothing and comforting.’ Which is surely why there is a strikingly long list of medical professionals who apply to be accepted as members of the World Doctors’ Orchestra, of which Professor

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... listening and conducting Professor Dr Stefan Willich

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Willich is the principal conductor – and if you want to sample how remarkably skilfully this non-professional orchestra plays under its gifted conductor, who studied violin, chamber music and conducting at the Stuttgart University of Music and Performing Arts, try this: www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMLk4a_oFfg, or this: www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_dXsC8lhDA.

Ironically, their link between medicine and music, clinically and emotionally, could never be more powerfully topical than it is in the present time of Covid-19 when the medical profession is

facing maybe its greatest global challenge of the last 100 years. That link is conspicuous in the sheer number of doctors, surgeons and others involved in medicine who play and sing in orchestras and choral societies, not to mention also making chamber music, such as Dr Timothy Yap, Clinical Research Fellow in glaucoma and retinal neurodegeneration at Imperial College, London. As well as playing in the World Doctors' Orchestra, he gives violin recitals and plays chamber music, and he views music and medicine as strongly complementary to each other.

'I went to medical school first,' says Yap, 'but I also then studied to pursue a musical career, and there have been many like me who when they left school were divided as to whether they would go into the arts or into medicine. For them there was and is a mutual link between the two worlds and it is their feeling for people. I think a lot of people take up medicine because they like people and want to help people, and a lot of people, in fact probably most people, who take up music are fired by the wish to communicate with people and share their love of music. Of course, there is much more to it than just that, but the two professions do have those elements in common, and one certainly finds that a lot of medical people have always had a great love of music.'

And Stefan Willich elaborates on actual practical parallels between the performance of music and the application of medicine: 'Both music and medicine are at their core very precise matters – there is mathematical structure in a music composition and the notes that musicians play or sing have to be performed with precise technical and musical accuracy, while medicine is a natural science that demands absolute precision of knowledge in the mechanisms of action in whatever therapy you make. However, on top of this precise structure in both fields, in medicine as well as music there is a lot of emotion and a lot of subjectivity – interpretation in fact. As a musician you have to interpret the mathematical structure, otherwise you won't reach your audience, and as a doctor you need to interpret the natural sciences in order to reach your patient. There is clear similarity between both fields.'

That shared mindset in both fields is surely one reason why the standard in the World Doctors' Orchestra is so high, and also another reason why so many medical experts feel drawn to music – not just as a diversion from the intense pressure of their professional lives but very much as a related activity that they feel deeply involved with. John Hadley, head and neck surgeon and ear nose and throat consultant at the Royal Surrey County Hospital, has been singing in choirs since he was a boy, including at Kings College Cambridge, and his answer to my question about parallels between the science of medicine and the art of music strongly reinforces Willich's outlook.

'Your comment about medicine being a science is I think only partially true,' Hadley says. 'I often say to patients that medicine is not a finite entity and there is a significant art in it. When I was a clinical student at John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford, Sir William Osler had been the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University and he had drawn a concept of medicine through a humanist approach, emphasising that it wasn't all science, and a very important medical element was finding an empathy with your patient through personal feeling. I find that is a similar situation to the kind of personal empathy that one seeks in music, both with one's audience and with one's fellow performer – certainly it's the case when I sing in a choir, and I am sure it's the same if you are a solo or orchestral instrumentalist or a solo singer in a recital or on an opera stage.'

Timothy Yap authenticates and elaborates on this from both the soloist's and orchestra player's perspective. 'The vast majority of problems that patients or those looking after them at home present



to us and the solutions we have to offer are taken on as one human speaking to another human,' he says. 'Regardless of whatever specialist knowledge we might have, we are there to listen to people, and to do so actively: you have to pick up on verbal and non-verbal cues and convince a patient that you are listening and responding to them and that you care about what they are saying to you. To be a successful musician in the chamber, orchestral, concerto, choral, or opera field, you need to listen to the people around you, both as people as well as musicians: you have to listen eagerly to what they are doing and convince them that you are listening and understand how they are performing. And even as a solo instrumentalist, you have to listen to yourself critically and continually assess and re-evaluate what you are doing and thinking in the same way that you have to when you are a doctor or a surgeon.'

The related personal empathy with people through medicine and music that both Yap and Hadley identify is a central reason why the two worlds co-exist especially closely as vital instruments of therapy, as Stefan Willich comments: 'Music has traditionally been used as therapy for patients with certain disorders. In addition, many World Doctors' Orchestra participants use music as therapy not only for some of their patients but also for their own wellbeing. After a routine day in the hospital or in practice, to dive into music in the evening is a tremendous joy. You could also do sports, which is very beneficial – but there is a healing aspect in music that seems almost unique. And this is even beyond soothing. Music can reflect medical issues and mental disorders pretty accurately to a certain degree, and its power to help people to cope with and face those issues can be very potent.'

And John Hadley adds a further dimension: 'For people who have had health-care issues, singing in a chorus is strongly beneficial in helping them to overcome their issues and integrate in the community.'

Quite separately from the comfort the music can give them, being in the chorus is a great help to their life and therefore their health in general.'

A powerfully compelling incidence of this is related by Carolyn Woods, who has been singing in choirs for many decades. 'I sing in a small local choir in Surrey, and in 2015 we had the opportunity of singing in a community choir that was being set up to perform in a community opera commissioned to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the sealing of the Magna Carta. Several hundred of us were involved and it took six months to learn before we finally performed it at the Royal Albert Hall. At that time I was in an acutely traumatised condition as I had undergone a frightening experience that had left me with almost paralysing panic attacks. I was very unsure whether I would be able to face up to anything in public, let alone even singing, much as I loved it, but I felt it was an opportunity I could not miss. In the event, although I was highly apprehensive, I managed to do the rehearsals – and then when it came to the performance, I had a revelation that I will never forget. The entire experience restored my confidence. My panic attacks subsided. I'm not saying I don't get them occasionally, but doing this performance gave me my life back.'

And in the second part of this two part feature, John Hadley and also Dr David Ratcliffe, clinical trials specialist at the National Institute of Health Research, and Evelina Hepp, senior audiologist at Barts Health NHS Trust reveal some of the remarkable physical cures that music has brought to serious illness, while Stefan Willich and Timothy Yap elaborate in more detail about the World Doctors' Orchestra ahead of the orchestra's UK concerts in 2021, postponed from this autumn because of coronavirus. ^{CM}

www.world-doctors-orchestra.org