

# MUSIC FOR THE LOVE OF IT

APRIL 2000



Arrival at the Moulin d'Andé (Bernie in white shirt)

## CLOSING OUT THE MILLENIUM ON THE WORKSHOP CIRCUIT by Bernard Gondos

One of the joys of retirement is the opportunity to indulge one's lifelong interests, which in my case include chamber music and travel. Faced with an abundance of riches in the ever-increasing number of chamber music workshops in this country and abroad, I planned my year by selecting those that would satisfy my twin cravings. By the end of the year I had attended a total of ten workshops in a variety of locations, settings and formats.

The year actually began for me playing chamber music in the south of Spain in an absolutely delightful setting, Jane Carhart's *Musical Passages* workshop at *Jimena del la Frontera*. Extending over New Year's, the week-long workshop included daily assigned playing, afternoon sightseeing, festive dining and two concert performances in the town where we stayed, including the Vivaldi *Gloria* with a local chorus. Since the year ended at the same place, I will reserve the description of this workshop, still fresh in my mind, for the end of the article.

In May, it was off to Europe again, this time to France, for a workshop organized by Jane Carhart at the *Moulin d'Andé* in Normandy, about 60 miles from Paris. The site was the picturesque setting of several French motion pictures including Truffaut's *Jules et Jim*. The setting, an old, well-maintained estate along the Seine, was magnificent, the accommodations charming, the food first rate and the wine abundant. Works and groups were pre-assigned, but participants for the most part had not met one another beforehand. There was daily coaching by members of the Paris-based Arpeggione Quartet. We were introduced to them at the opening night concert where they gave a marvelous performance of the Ravel Quartet. Their exceptional

continued on page 10

## IS THIS DRUG ABUSE?

by Sydney Rott

"Thank you for coming to our concert," I said to my oboe teacher at my next lesson. "I was glad I could. You looked so relaxed this time." "I'm afraid I have a confession to make." "What?" "I took a beta-blocker." "You took a beta-blocker?!" His voice expressed dismay and disapproval. I had feared he was going to react that way, and to an extent I shared his feelings. People had been offering me Inderal at chamber music workshops for years. I had been surprised at how many workshop participants used the medication before every performance. I had always refused. I would never take a

prescription drug without my doctor's advice. I don't like taking medicine under any circumstances and I found the whole idea repugnant. "This is my hobby," I'd say. "If I have to drug myself to do it, I'd better take up needlepoint or something instead."

But I do get very nervous when I perform, and it often causes me to make mistakes. As much as I love playing, I generally dislike performing because of the anxiety involved. Several coaches at the workshop also suggested that I try a beta-blocker. One told me flatly that all that stress was doing my body a lot more harm than Inderal possibly could. Still, I refused even to consider it.

This fall I returned from a vacation to read about an opening for an oboe in an orchestra I'd been playing in for a year. It said to call and arrange an audition. I had never auditioned for that orchestra, and wondered if they were going to replace me if I didn't audition at this time. I haven't auditioned for anything since 1963 — and that was on a different instrument — so the

continued on page 9

## INSIDE

IN BOX: news, workshops, books, opinions	2
LIMERICK by David Goldstein	4
ME AND MY PICCOLO by Lior Eitan	5
BRASS CHAMBER MUSIC by Mark Anderson	6
TWO TEACHERS by Helen Spielman	8
OPINIONS ON BETA-BLOCKER USE	9

## TWO TEACHERS *by Helen Spielman*

Terry came to visit yesterday, and I gave her the grand tour of the music studio that my husband and I recently built. She exclaimed over the lovely setting in the woods, the cathedral ceiling, the comfortable waiting room. Then we spent the rest of her visit at my kitchen table, talking about various things — her upcoming wedding, my trip to the National Flute Convention that same weekend, and, of course, our students.

After she left, I reflected on what a great professional colleague she is. Other flute teachers have come and gone in this town, along with the flute performance majors at the university who sometimes take students, but Terry and I remain the two well-established private flute teachers in Chapel Hill. She was here first, staying on after getting her masters in flute, and opening her private studio about seven years before I came along. When I started my studio, I invited Terry to lunch so that we could get to know each other, and found her to be gracious, generous, and supportive. In those early years, I called her several times with questions about running a studio or teaching a particular rhythm or producing a student recital. She always answered my questions kindly and open-heartedly.

During the ten years I've been a private flute teacher, children have switched from my studio to hers, and vice versa. Often we refer students to each other when our own schedules are too full to take on someone new, and whenever someone calls who's been a student of hers, I make sure to apprise Terry. I like to keep these things "on the table," and so does she. We talk about difficult and sometimes humorous issues, such as the time two years ago, when I asked a teenaged student to leave my studio due to her lack of practice over a long span of time. Her mother subsequently called Terry and reported that they'd left me because of "scheduling problems"!!

Terry and I have similar teaching styles in that we treat our students with care, respect, and positive regard, and have high expectations for their musical growth and development. But our teaching methods are extremely different. Terry is a Suzuki teacher who is deeply committed to that form of musical education. She spends her summers at Suzuki institutes and has even studied the method in Japan. She has a group class on Saturday mornings, to give her students experience in ensemble playing and other musical activities. In my more traditional approach, I offer master classes with well-known teachers and other group activities throughout the year, including a flute trip to London this coming winter.

Terry has more than forty students, almost all children and teens. I have about 28 students maximum, with an

equal number of children and adults. Terry teaches 45-minute lessons, and charges by the semester. I teach 30-, 45-, and 60-minute lessons and charge by the month. Terry is university trained, while I'm an amateur. We both participate in our local and national flute associations, but Terry is involved in the local music teachers' group and I'm involved in Flutewise. I often think that the community of Chapel Hill is lucky to have a choice between such diverse teachers. I'm not the right teacher for every student, and neither is Terry.

I've heard many stories about how competitive music teachers can be, speaking poorly behind each other's back or trying to "steal" students from each other, bragging about whose students have won the most competitions or the highest chairs in band. Terry and I have never competed with each other, and I'm grateful for her professional integrity.

Teaching a musical instrument in a private studio can be lonely. To a great extent, I've satisfied my need for colleagues by joining the Internet FLUTE discussion group, through which I've met many teachers who deal with the same issues I do. But Terry is special to me, because she operates in the exact same social, economic, and cultural region as I do and draws her students from the same population.

Terry and I haven't become intimate friends who socialize together, nor have we ever played music together. But we are an ensemble of sorts we work to bring the ability to make music to the people in our community. We treat each other like musicians who play together, listening for the melodies we have in common, and enjoying the sounds of different themes as well.

*The author wishes to thank Terry Patrickis for her permission to share this information.*

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### INDERAL

continued from page 1

idea of an audition was terrifying. I had to see my doctor for an unrelated reason and took advantage of the opportunity to ask him about the drug. He explained how beta blockers work, and strongly encouraged me to use them. I had the prescription filled, but didn't need it: the orchestra sent me a contract for the year — they'd just been looking for an English horn player.

I had the pills now, I'd been assured that they wouldn't hurt me and I was curious. Would they have helped? I tried one of them on a Saturday when I wasn't playing anywhere and suffered no side effects that would hamper a performance. Then I wanted to see how it would affect my playing, so I took one an hour and a

half before my next concert — not a very demanding one. I didn't notice any difference during the first half of the program. I was typically nervous and consequently made a normal number of stupid mistakes. On the second half of the concert I found that I'd stopped making mistakes, and that, what's more, I was really enjoying playing the music. Was it the Inderal or just the fact that I loved the piece and had practiced it a lot?

I performed several concerts without even considering trying the drug again. Then came the last concert of the fall season with the Community Orchestra. The dress rehearsal went very badly. I messed up a difficult solo passage, came in a measure early after a rest and played far too many wrong notes. I was really worried about the concert. On the day of the performance, by 5:00 I felt sick. I decided to give the Inderal another try. I remembered how long it took to work the other time, so I took one two hours before the concert. It didn't seem to change anything. I was extremely nervous during the string piece that opened the program. Then I started to play, and everything went right. I didn't miss notes or entrances. I felt like I was always in control of the technical difficulties and could concentrate on the musical aspects of the performance. I also enjoyed playing to an extent I hadn't thought possible. I was sorry when the concert was over because I'd been having so much fun. This is a reaction I usually experience only when I'm playing in an informal setting — to enjoy an important concert this way was a new experience for me.

However, I felt rather guilty about it — especially when my teacher appeared after the concert and exclaimed about how relaxed and confident I'd looked and how well I'd played. Then the conductor told me how well I'd played. Had I cheated? I felt like I had.

Is this like an athlete taking steroids, or more like taking an aspirin for a headache? If I continue to take this drug, I won't ever know if I'm capable of performing without it. I might come to feel that I depend on it and have to have it in order to play — I would not want that to happen. On the other hand, I know that I was having more fun playing than I ever had before in similar circumstances. It was such a pleasant experience to enjoy performing. It was also wonderful to feel pleased with my own performance instead of depressed because I hadn't played as well as I knew I was able to.

My teacher made his viewpoint very clear. He is absolutely against beta blockers and will be disappointed in me if I continue to use them:

"If a musician uses a drug to enhance performance, he becomes a mere mechanic, only concerned about starting at the beginning and getting to the end without making any mistakes along the way. Are we really delivering an honest performance while under the influence of a drug?" I haven't made up my mind.

*Sydney Rott of Fresno, CA, writes often for these pages.*

## OPINIONS ABOUT THE USE OF INDERAL FOR PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Editor:

In regard to your question about Inderal for performance anxiety, my opinion is that it is a drug that should be avoided because of its potential side effects. However, I'm aware that many musicians use it and really do benefit. So it's obviously a personal decision.

Bernard Gondos, M.D.  
Santa Barbara, CA

Dear Sir,

The medical literature has ample evidence supporting the use of small doses of beta blocking agents (e.g. propranolol, atenolol, etc.) before events that create the syndrome of "stage fright." This includes driving tests, public appearances (speeches, performing arts) and any transient tense situation.

There are at least six scientific double blind studies where string players played in front of a jury as if in a competition. They all took a small dose of the study drug or a placebo and performed twice, once with the active drug and once with the placebo, without judges or player knowing which was which. The results were amazing. Jury and players alike judged the performances to be much better under the medication. The effect was clear: better bow control, less anxiety tremor, better intonation, etc.

For the last 25 years I have been prescribing 10-20mg of propranolol to be taken 40 minutes prior to a performance with amazing response from the players, who call it a wonder drug. I myself, being an amateur violinist, have taken it prior to several solo performances given in front of thousands of people (to raise money for my department) and it is great! To all musicians who suffer from stage fright I can say: it is absolutely safe, and may be enormously helpful, to take a small dose of propranolol (or similar medication) once in a while.

As to the ethical issue, the medication does not improve playing artificially. It only enables the musician to express what he already knows! The athletes who take steroids are changing their muscle mass and become different people: it's like sending a tape of Perlman in place of your own playing. What you don't know or can't do, the beta-blocker will not improve. But by avoiding the terrible heart beating, the devastating tremor and sweating, you can perform what you know already as best you can.

Elieser Kaplinsky, M.D.  
Director, Heart Institute; Professor of  
Cardiology, Chaim Sheba Medical Center  
Tel-Hashomer, Israel

Editor:

Several years ago Inderal was prescribed for me for medical reasons unrelated to performing music. My musician friends were disbelieving that I had never tried it, and assured me I would learn to love it. And love it I did! The side effect of reducing my anxiety was real and welcome since I performed often and experienced anything from mild to relatively strong “fight or flight” symptoms before and during performance. In fact, I really had a good time performing during the year I was under the influence of Inderal.

In addition, I derived an unexpected long-term benefit. I stopped taking the medication, but still had a great time performing — and still do today, many years later. I apparently had learned to relax and enjoy performing in such a way that it stuck. While I usually have a healthy adrenaline rush associated with performing, for the most part I have a good time, really enjoy what I am doing, and am not undone by the anxiety generated by the performance itself. Food for thought!

Janet Telford  
San Jose, CA

Editor:

It's unfortunate that Sydney Rott's oboe teacher had such a negative response to her “confession” about having ingested a beta-blocker prior to a performance. Would he also have objected to her taking a Tylenol for a headache? A headache is often a physiological response to stress, just as excessive anxiety is.

Taking a beta-blocker to suppress annoying, if not harmful sympathetic nervous system outflow (“fight or flight” response) is in no way similar to an athlete taking steroids. There is no sound medical reason for taking anabolic steroids for athletic events; the risk/benefit ratio of these compounds is exceedingly high, and no responsible practitioner would prescribe them in this way.

Beta-blockers are entirely different. They are widely used to control cardiac arrhythmias, essential (familial) tremors, and most commonly, hypertension (high blood pressure). They reduce mortality rates when taken by patients who have survived the acute phase of a heart attack. For decades they have been taken by public speakers, actors and professional musicians to ward off the less desirable effects of stage fright.

Nevertheless, a beta-blocker is a medication, requiring careful patient screening and prescriptions for use. One should not “lend” this drug to a fellow musician. It should not be used if one has asthma, congestive heart failure, very slow heart rate or very low blood pressure. It must be used with care by persons with diabetes and by those with certain types of very fast heart rates. Like

many medications, it needs to be used cautiously by those who are taking certain other medications. That's why it's important to obtain it, as Sydney Rott did, only from a physician who knows you well enough to determine whether you can take it safely. The physician should also work with the patient to determine the appropriate dosage. As with all medications, the safest beginning is taking the smallest dose possible.

Excessive performance anxiety can be a serious detriment to performing one's best. I do feel there is plenty one can do to offset this: learn the piece exceedingly well, participate in practice performances, check the performance site beforehand, practice meditation, relaxation or breathing techniques. However, I also think that a legitimate part of the performer's armamentarium may include beta-blockers. If one can quell one's tremorous hands and feet, slow and soften one's racing heartbeat, become calmer and more confident, and above all, relax and enjoy performing, why not?

Joanne De Phillips, M.D.  
Kensington, CA

## MILLENIUM

continued from page 1

musicianship was matched, as we soon discovered, by their coaching, among the most enthusiastic and stimulating I have encountered. The overall musical experience was extremely rewarding. A closing night concert by participants reflected the progress we made during the week. This workshop will be repeated in the coming year and I highly recommend it.

The end of June found me at *Apple Hill*, in the mountains of southern New Hampshire, for a workshop that I have attended regularly for a number of years. The format here is more intense than most: two assigned pieces are worked on over a 10-day period with the coach in constant attendance during daily hour-and-a-half sessions, followed by concert performances on the last two days. There is an approximately equal mixture of students and adults among the 50 participants. Living facilities are cabins that are definitely not for those interested in luxury. The special feature of this workshop is the superb coaching. Although the rehearsal sessions involve hard work, there is also time for informal playing, hiking, swimming and other activities in this beautiful rustic setting. Another nice feature is that there are five sessions throughout the summer, providing the option of choosing a convenient time.

The timing was particularly nice for me because I was able to move right on to the *Raphael Trio Chamber Music Workshop* in neighboring Vermont, at Adamant, a scenic, wooded area near Montpelier. Here there are also