From the Editor

“It’s the Music, Stupid,” or Why Are Performers So Conservative?

In my editorial in the previous issue of Medical Problems of Performing Artists (MPPA),¹ I observed that there appears to be a real difference in people’s inborn abilities to memorize, although in some this ability can be developed and improved upon as a skill. My purpose in writing about memorization was to question the wisdom of requiring solo musical performers to play from memory since the fear of memory slips appears to be a significant and for many the major cause of performance anxiety. I further questioned why, since memorizing is so difficult for some, all musicians are subjected to this added stress, by expecting them to play from memory. Is it not about how they play and interpret a piece of music rather than whether they choose to have the music in front of them? When I’ve questioned teachers and some performers about this, they say that playing with the music prevents the musician from performing with maximal interpretive skill, and the performance is less exciting. This seems to be remarkably without insight, because clearly if the musician is terrified, for whatever reason, including of having memory lapses, there may not be much energy left for interpretation, and the excitement may come instead from the musician’s embarrassment. I’ve had some further reflection on the question of playing from memory as well as some general observations about how difficult it is for performers to be nonconformists. This is not meant in the sense of performers’ being rebellious but about deviating from some abstract traditional norm rather than being their own persons. I’ve also written about that in the past in an editorial where I questioned whether people had to look alike, and asked whether vocally qualified singers with major deformities and disabilities should be excluded from opera.² So this may seem like rehearsing old issues, but I think there is more to be said than could be contained in only two editorials.

A further note about playing from memory: I was privileged to be at a Ravinia Festival performance this summer in which the Chicago Symphony accompanied two different eminent, experienced soloists in two concerts, on different instruments. The repertoire was Mozart. It so happened that both soloists chose to use music, although I dare say that each had played these pieces many times in the past. But do you know what? They played beautifully, the audience vigorously applauded both of their performances, and I heard not a word mentioned, from the audience or from the potentially more severe critics backstage, about the fact that they had used music. Bravo! No one cared. It was about the music.

Also this summer there was an article by Peter Dobrin of Knight Ridder Newspapers³ about a young Canadian violinist who entered Curtis Institute this fall. He auditioned along with some 80 others for one of seven available spots and no one knew in advance that he was anything other than an able violinist candidate for admission to this prestigious conservatory. The fact that he was born with only a vestigial right hand was not known and, once known, never entered into the decision to accept him. He has played since he was in 4th grade and has a unique prosthetic device that allows him to handle the bow, obviously very well! In fact, he wowed the auditioners and won admission to Curtis based on his musical talent, not his physical disability. His future teacher, Ida Kavafian, plans to treat him no differently than she does her other students, including, for sure, working on perfecting his bow technique. The young man, Adrian Anantawan, has an interesting take on his own situation. He of course wants to succeed, and succeed based on the same criteria for success as his fellow students. He also said, “I hope to show you can achieve things as great as other people. I guess in a way letting people see you as someone who has a challenge is almost a good thing. You’re showing them the potential for humanity.” In other words, all people have great potential for success, no matter if they are different. I have had the opportunity to work with a number of other talented and successful young performers with physical disabilities, all of whom strive to have their disabilities overlooked. I am impressed with the maturity and insight reflected by Adrian’s comments. His disability is a part of him, just as is his musical talent. Neither can nor should be ignored. Rather than detracting from his musical talent, his ability to overcome the disability says something about him, about those who helped him along the way, and is an important statement of encouragement to many others, with and without problems to overcome.

In a 2000 MPPA article,⁴ Christopher Donison makes a strong case for the disadvantage of small-handed pianists, himself included, playing much of the standard piano repertoire on a regulation keyboard. As support for his thesis, he points to the fact that there are significantly fewer women with major piano careers than men. As a result he teamed with an inventor and helped develop a smaller keyboard with full dynamic range and that is well accepted by those who have tried it out. Why should not talented musicians

¹ MPPA newsletter, 1999
² MPPA newsletter, 1998
³ Knight Ridder Newspapers, 2000
⁴ MPPA newsletter, 2000
with small hands have access to an instrument that passes muster soundwise and on which they can successfully compete against those with large hands on larger keyboards?

Blum and Ahlers reported\(^5\) that violists are at particular risk for injuries because of the size and dimensions of many violas, and the discrepancy, once again, between the demands of the instrument and hand size, finger length, and arm length. Responding to the difficulties of the viola, an innovative instrument maker has made a viola that some liken to a creation of Salvador Dali, which is significantly more user-friendly and meets musical demands. However, at least when it first appeared, only one orchestral violist (Don Ehrlich of the San Francisco Symphony) was willing to play on it. Others apparently feared criticism, ostracism, and ridicule from their peers and music directors more than they wished for ease of playing if they used the nontraditional-appearing viola.

Some people can play the violin in spite of lacking a hand; others can play a solo performance better with music than without; some players have smaller hands than others but are reluctant to try more ergonomically sound but nonregulation instruments. Each has a disability with which to contend, but has available a means to at least partially compensate for the problem. Why are musicians, in particular, faced with so many other challenges about which they can do little, so hightied to tradition that they will not take advantage of help when they can get it? Does the problem reside within the affected musician, the peer musicians, management, educators, or the audience? I may be accused of bringing up a specious argument, but in fact I think it is absolutely relevant. If we as health professionals are looking for means to help musicians in particular, and performers in general, lessen the many risks they face in pursuing their careers, it is inevitable that some of the potential solutions will be similar to those I’ve discussed above, that is, nontraditional. In addition to helping develop these solutions, if my analysis is correct, it appears that we will concurrently have to devise means for attitude and behavior modification to be successful in promoting innovative changes in performance habits.

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REFERENCES

3. Dobrin P. Meeting the challenge. Learning to play violin was not teen’s toughest hurdle. Chicago Tribune Jul. 17, 2001, p. 3.