

# A Musician's View of Music Medicine

Tom Hall

Although orchestra musicians have been plagued for years by occupationally related health problems, such problems have only recently begun to receive serious and widespread attention from the medical community.

Musicians are often reluctant to admit to and deal with health problems, fearing that ingrained performance habits may be causing or aggravating their ailments and that they will have to alter long-established techniques. When seeking help, musicians often encounter doctors who have little knowledge about, or sympathy for, musicians' medical problems and who simply advise giving up musical activity.

The growing communication between musicians and physicians, and the incipient development of a coherent body of knowledge of music medicine, is heartening indeed. The most visible signs of this development are the symposia held in recent years in Aspen and Denver; the formation of music medicine programs at a variety of medical centers; the attention that major periodicals have given to the hand problems of well-known pianists and to the whole subject of music medicine generally; and of course the publication of this, the first journal of performing arts medicine.

The International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM), the national representative organization of 48 major U.S. orchestras, has been an active force in the development of the music medicine movement. ICSOM president Melanie Burrell served on the board of the 1984 "Biology of Music Making" conference in Denver and assisted in the planning of that event. The ICSOM newsletter, *Senza Sordino*, has been a major force in giving national visibility to musicians' health problems and keeps member musicians informed of current developments. The 1985 annual ICSOM conference convened a panel of physicians from major clinics in the U.S. and abroad to address musicians.

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During the 1984–1985 season, ICSOM conducted pilot studies and informal surveys of its member orchestras to determine musicians' perceptions of their health problems. Deepest concerns were about the many manifestations of overuse injuries and about the discomfort and damage resulting from exposure to high volume levels on stage. The response to these surveys has paved the way for more sophisticated studies in consultation with medical experts.

Unionism has played an important role in the development of music medicine. Many orchestras now offer comprehensive insurance coverage, which makes medical diagnosis and treatment financially feasible. The increased job security that musicians have been able to negotiate has helped them to be less fearful of airing their medical problems, and the sympathetic involvement of the scientific community has further helped to create a climate in which musicians are less vulnerable to reprisals when their health temporarily fails.

Musicians and managers are becoming more keenly aware of the need for general physical fitness to cope with the demands of professional orchestra life. Awareness of the importance of preventive measures has risen with health insurance costs. The recently negotiated Chicago Symphony contract provides for a \$200 annual allowance for musicians who regularly participate in a physical fitness program; the St. Louis Symphony has had

a similar informal agreement with its management.

Although musicians may be more willing to acknowledge and do something about their health problems, we do have serious concerns about the future of music medicine.

- We need to understand and develop healthy ways to practice and perform based on sound physiological knowledge. There are many misconceptions about what is done physiologically to produce desired technical and musical results on different instruments. Professional musicians, students, and teachers must acquire knowledge of ways to prevent and avoid injury.

- We would like to see a systematic identification and classification of maladies experienced by performers on different instruments.

- We need to better understand each other's specialized terminology and to eliminate imprecise and inaccurate terms and concepts.

- We must know where to turn with confidence for help. We look to the medical community to let us know where the best music medicine facilities and experts are to be found.

- Above all, we do not want music medicine to be merely a fad. Musicians must continue to have clinics and specialists to whom they can turn for sympathetic understanding and qualified treatment.

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Tom Hall is a violinist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and editor of *Senza Sordino*. Address correspondence to Mr. Hall, Chicago Symphony, 2800 Lake Shore Drive, # 4001, Chicago, IL 60657.