



Above: Ronald Braunstein conducts a September 2019 rehearsal in Boston of the Me2/Orchestra, which is specifically for musicians diagnosed with mental illness. Braunstein, who has bipolar disorder, is co-founder of the orchestra.

Healing Chords

by Michele C. Hollow

Orchestras and musicians are helping to destigmatize mental illness. And increasingly, their efforts are being backed up by scientific research.

A patient placed a blanket over his head to keep everyone away. He rocked in his seat while a string quartet from the Lima Symphony Orchestra set up in a room at Mercy Health–Saint Rita’s Medical Center in Lima, Ohio. As the musicians played, the man listened intently, removed the blanket, and began to let go of his fears and panic. The quartet is part of the orchestra’s Healing Through Music program, designed for people struggling with mental illnesses and opioid addiction. It’s one of an increasing number of programs run by

orchestras in the United States that bring music to people with mental illnesses. Many of these programs educate the public about mental health issues—and they also can help some musicians destigmatize their own mental health diagnoses.

“Orchestras are more than just about performing in concert halls,” says Elizabeth Brown-Ellis, executive director of the Lima Symphony Orchestra. “In addition to performing at Mercy Health, we perform at a mental health clinic, a drop-in center for at-risk youth, and a low-income housing complex. In the near future, we hope to

bring our music to prisons. We're offering our music to our community and presenting music in a way that affirms others."

Ohio has one of the highest rates of opioid overdose deaths in the country. Brown-Ellis credits the concerts with getting people to talk about their mental health. "These conversations will hopefully benefit people on their journey to building a healthier life, away from their illness and addiction," Brown-Ellis says. The two violinists, violist, and cellist that make up the Lima Symphony Orchestra's quartet find the small rooms they perform in far more intimate than a concert stage. It's not just the intimate space: "After the concerts," Brown-Ellis said, "the audiences and performers talk about music, mental health, and other topics. It's a safe space. They audience trusts us."

Teri Brister, a professional counselor who serves as director of information and support for the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), sees a need for such programs. "Research shows that listening to, performing, or creating music can improve mental health and well-being," Brister says. "Music can also act as a medium for processing emotions, trauma, and grief. Specifically, music provides benefits for various mental health conditions by creating an opportunity for expression. There is also joy and comfort in playing music, and listening to music can create a healing environment." According to NAMI, approximately one in five adults in the U.S. (that's 46.6 million Americans) experiences mental illness in a given year.

For children ages 13 to 18, the percentage who will go on to have a severe mental disorder at some point during their life is also one in five.

Despite the number of Americans affected by mental illness, the topic was ta-

"Orchestras are more than just about performing in concert halls," says Elizabeth Brown-Ellis, executive director of the Lima Symphony Orchestra, which performs at a medical center, mental health clinic, drop-in center for at-risk youth, and low-income housing complex.

boo in many communities not long ago. But today, in tandem with gradually more open public conversations about mental illness, orchestras are stepping in by creating programs for people experiencing mental illness. And a host of scientific studies support NAMI's findings that music can positively impact people with mental illness. The National Institutes of Health and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts are studying music's effect on brain circuitry, and ways that music can be used to improve health and well-being, through a program called Sound Health: Music and the Mind. Ohio's Toledo Symphony Orchestra is working with local university researchers to learn how classical music can help people with post-traumatic stress disorder. In Colorado, the Fort Collins Symphony Orchestra's B Sharp program with Colorado State University, underway for five years now, has studied people with Alzheimer's and dementia. B Sharp participants were

invited to live performances and post-concert receptions; the study's initial findings showed a reversal of cognitive decline from listening to classical music. In the U.K., a neuropsychology researcher at University College London has formed a choir for

people with dementia as a way to study the effectiveness of music in reducing symptoms such as depression and agitation.

Among orchestras with ongoing programs or individual initiatives aimed at people with mental illness are the Wil-



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liamsburg Symphony Orchestra in Virginia, which recently reached out to Liz Popovich—an 82-year-old violinist with Alzheimer's who was experiencing confusion, agitation, and disorientation—and invited her to attend rehearsals, which improved her ability to hold conversations and talk about music. Musicians from Ohio's Akron Symphony Orchestra have performed at inpatient behavioral health settings at Summa Health, an Akron-based hospital system, as part of the orchestra's Music and Mental Health initiative. In 2011, former Los Angeles Philharmonic violinist Vijay Gupta co-founded Street Symphony, a nonprofit that presents live music in prisons and with the city's homeless community, many of whom have mental illness. In Virginia, the Winston-Salem Symphony's principal percussionist, John Beck, uses drum circles to help behavioral health and cancer patients. (Beck won a 2018 Ford Musician Award for Excellence in Community Service from the League of American Orchestras for this work. The Ford Musician



In addition to performing in mental-health centers and clinics, musicians from the Lima Symphony Orchestra perform at drop-in centers for at-risk youth, low-income housing complexes, and facilities including the Allen Oakwood Correctional Institute (in photo).

Awards for Excellence in Community Service, given annually by the League of American Orchestras and supported by Ford Motor Company Fund, honor those in the orchestra field using music to benefit the greater community. See sidebar.)

Below is a look at some of the orchestras that are addressing mental health issues through music.

Safe Spaces for Musicians

One high-profile initiative is an orchestra created by Vermont-based conductor Ronald Braunstein, who has a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. In 2011, he founded Me2/Orchestra specifically for musicians with mental illness. It got its name because “Whenever we told people we have a mental illness, they responded by saying, ‘me too,’” Braunstein says. Me2/Orchestra has expanded beyond its original Burlington, Vermont location to Boston

Musicians Making a Difference

The League of American Orchestras’ Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service honor professional orchestra musicians who provide exemplary and meaningful service in their communities and make a significant impact through education and community engagement. Winston-Salem Symphony Principal Percussion John Beck, a 2018 Ford Musician Award recipient, profiled in this article, uses drumming to help patients with behavioral-health and other medical conditions. Other Ford Musician Award recipients have been recognized for their work in hospitals, schools, correctional facilities, museums, and more. Each award recipient receives a \$2,500 grant, with an additional \$2,500 grant going to the musician’s home orchestra to support professional development focused on community service and engagement for musicians.

The Ford Musician Awards, now in their fifth year, are made possible by the generous support of Ford Motor Company Fund. Learn more at americanorchestras.org/conducting-artistic-programs/the-ford-musician-awards.html.

and elsewhere in the U.S. The Me2/Orchestra predates the #MeToo movement founded to help survivors of sexual assault and is not related to it.

Being part of the Me2/Orchestra in Boston allows Nancy-Lee Mauger, a French horn player, to take risks. “I know I won’t be judged,” she explains. “Even the sign on the rehearsal door reads, ‘This is a stigma-free zone;’ it puts everyone at ease.” Mauger, who was diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression, says, “There’s always someone to lean on here. I’m looking forward to sharing my story at one of our upcoming concerts because the more we talk, the less we are stigmatized.” At each performance, two or three musicians briefly talk about their mental illness and take questions from the audience. “Instead of thinking people with mental illnesses are lazy or dangerous, they see what we’re capable of,” says Braunstein. “It has a positive effect on all of us.”

Braunstein, an accomplished conductor, won the Karajan International Conducting Competition in Berlin decades ago after graduating from Juilliard. He was 23 years old. Following his win, his career took off. He worked with orchestras in Europe, Israel, Australia, and Tokyo. At the time, he didn’t have a diagnosis. “My bipolar disorder was just under the line of being under control,” he says. “It wasn’t easily detected. Most people thought I was weird.”

As his career progressed, things started to unravel. He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age 35. When Braunstein told his manager, he was dropped as a client. Then he was fired from a conducting job in Vermont. It was there that he met Caroline Whiddon, a French horn player, who had been diagnosed with depression and anxiety disorder. Together, they formed the Me2/Orchestra in Burlington, Vermont. Me2/Boston and



Erik Patton

French hornist Nancy-Lee Mauger (center in photo) says being part of the Me2/Orchestra in Boston allows her to take risks. “I know I won’t be judged,” she says.

Me2/Manchester (New Hampshire) followed, then affiliate groups in Atlanta and Portland, Oregon; there are plans to expand to 20 more groups throughout the U.S. Whiddon serves as Me2’s executive director, and Braunstein and Whiddon are married. The musicians in each of the orchestras range in age from 13 to more than 80. Some have a mental health diagnosis and others have family and friends who do. Me2’s Boston affiliate recently launched a percussion ensemble; a documentary about Braunstein and the Me2/Orchestra called *Orchestrating Change* opened in select theaters in October 2019.

Drumming Out Depression

A 2016 study by the Royal College of Music in London found that drumming reduces depression by as much as 38 per-



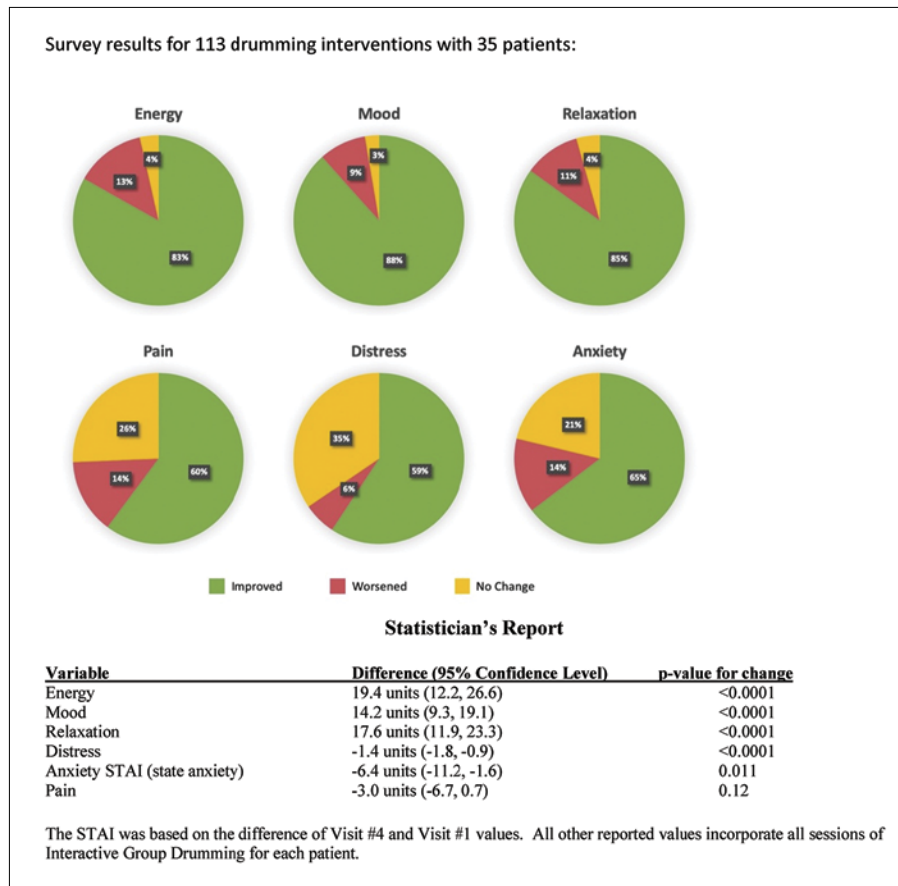
John R. Beck, principal percussion with the Winston-Salem Symphony, works with behavioral health and cancer patients and has been active in Comfort Sound Drumming, a research study developed by scientists at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center. In photo, Beck with a Parkinson’s patient.

cent and anxiety by 20 percent. John R. Beck—principal percussion with the Winston-Salem Symphony and professor of percussion at University of North Carolina School of the Arts and Wake Forest University—has seen the positive effects drumming has on the participants in his drum circles. Beck works with behavioral health and cancer patients and has been active in a program called Comfort Sound Drumming, a research study developed by scientists at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center. At the Center, stem cell transplant recipients participate in small drum circles led by Beck. Initial data from the study showed that more than 80 percent of patients reacted positively to the drumming and showed improvement in energy, mood, and relaxation and decreases in distress and anxiety, with over 60 percent reporting decreased anxiety and distress, and a majority with less pain. Results will be published in *Percussive Arts Society* journal in 2020.

“I like making connections with each

person in the drum circle,” Beck says. “This isn’t about getting them to talk and share their feelings. It’s about having fun, letting one’s guard down.” He starts with a traditional song from Guinea, West Africa. “We drum and call out our names,” he says. “It’s a way to make eye contact, for them to tell me their names, and to get a smile.” He doesn’t know anyone’s diagnosis. Instead, the doctors and nurses tell him on his return visits how much more open the patients were with sharing their feelings. “Drumming isn’t a cure-all,” Beck says. “It can certainly help counteract depression by offering some relief from negative thoughts. It’s a lot of fun. I can see it from the smiles on the faces of those in the drumming circles.”

Below, results of a study Winston-Salem Symphony Principal Percussion John R. Beck conducted with scientists at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center, tracking the positive effects drumming has on the participants in his drum circles.



Vijay Gupta (center in photo), co-founder of Street Symphony, speaks at the organization’s 2018 Messiah Project, a singalong of Handel’s *Messiah* at the Midnight Mission, a twelve-step recovery shelter at Skid Row in Los Angeles.

Offering Hope

Violinist and social-justice advocate Vijay Gupta is co-founder of the nonprofit Street Symphony, where he spends much of his day among the people on Skid Row in Los Angeles County. Gupta attended Juilliard and Yale and was hired in 2007 as one of the youngest members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, a position he gave up in 2018 to focus on Street Symphony. “Street Symphony was organized for the presence of those that are often ignored,” Gupta says. “Here in L.A., we’re home to the largest homeless community living on the street in the U.S. We also have the largest incarcerated population of anywhere in the country. Our jails are effectively the nation’s largest psychiatric institutions. That’s why we have to take our role as artists seriously. That role is to heal, inspire, and to disrupt and provoke. I ask, why should great art only happen on a concert stage?”

At the end of the first Street Symphony concert in 2011, a young man in the audience got up and told the musicians he could feel their hearts, Gupta says. The man later told them his mother used to beat him. He was homeless and suffered from mental illness; the people in the crowd got up to hug him. “When we play, the audience hangs on every single note,” Gupta says. “There’s no us and them. We’re all broken in different ways. That’s how we understand who we are.”

This past summer, Street Symphony held a block party on Skid Row. They worked with the Midnight Mission, a human services organization in downtown Los Angeles’ Skid Row, to feed more than 2,000 people. People came for the



Kennedy Center

Soprano Renée Fleming, artistic advisor at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., drums with others during the Kennedy Center's Sound Health weekend in September 2018. Sound Health is a Kennedy Center/National Institutes of Health initiative studying music and neuroscience. Two goals of the Kennedy Center/NIH Sound Health initiative, Fleming says, are to “move music therapy forward as a discipline and educate the public and enlighten people about the power of music to heal.”

food and for the music, which included the West African drumming circle Ashe Drummers from the Heart, the all-female Mariachi band Las Colibri, Street Symphony's jazz ensemble, and DJ Sir Oliver with a string ensemble.

Since its inception, Street Symphony has presented nearly 300 free performances for communities affected by homelessness and incarceration in Los Angeles County. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (branch of the U.S. De-

“We’re bringing neuroscientists together with musicians to speak each other’s language,” says National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins, at right.

partment of Health and Human Services), between 20 and 25 percent of the homeless population in America suffer from some form of severe mental illness. “We need to be human beings of the highest quality,” Gupta says. “Performing amongst the people allows us to do that. We can reclaim our mental health when we claim our wholeness as people.” (Gupta gave an address about his work with Street Symphony at the opening plenary session of

the League of American Orchestras’ 2018 National Conference in Chicago. [Visit the League website to hear the speech.](#))

Music-Brain Connections

Musicians from the Toledo Symphony Orchestra and researchers from the University of Toledo’s Department of Psychology will examine ways that classical music can help those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) better manage and direct their emotions, leading to improvements in mood, functioning, and quality of life.



Nick Karlin

Merwin Siu, principal second violinist and artistic administrator of the Toledo Symphony Orchestra, said the two-year study will have two parts: the first centers on recorded excerpts and the second will incorporate live performances from symphony musicians. (The Toledo Symphony Orchestra is one of nineteen U.S. orchestras to receive a 2019 grant from the League of American Orchestras to support innovation and organizational learning. The two-year American Orchestras’ Futures Fund grants, in the amount of \$80,000–\$150,000 each, are made possible by the generous support of the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation.)

“PTSD is a serious mental health disorder,” says Matthew Tull, professor of psychology at the University of Toledo. “Although there are a number of effective psychological treatments available for PTSD, some clients may find it difficult to connect with and process their emotions during these treatments. This collaborative project between the Toledo Symphony Orchestra and the Department of Psychology at the University of Toledo is exciting in that it may identify a novel way to facilitate and improve PTSD treatment.”

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has teamed up with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts to explore how listening to, performing, and creating music involves brain circuitry that can be harnessed to improve health and well-being. The initiative, Sound Health: Music and the Mind, grew out

What About Autism and Alzheimer’s?

You might think autism and Alzheimer’s are mental-health issues, but they’re not. Autism spectrum disorder is a developmental condition that affects communication and behavior, while Alzheimer’s is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder that is one of the most common forms of dementia. Music improves the lives of people with these conditions as well. A study at the University of Delaware shows how music helps children with autism understand emotions, which is quite significant since many on the spectrum have difficulty with social cues. People with dementia and Alzheimer’s who listen to music they are familiar with have somewhat improved communication skills. For people with autism and other sensory disorders, there has been a blossoming of sensory-friendly, “relaxed” performances offered by orchestras. These events are designed to make the concert experience less stressful by adjusting lighting, sound levels, seating, and other factors. In many cases, those events mark the first time it was possible for a person with autism to attend a live orchestra concert.



Tom Munn

Liz Popovich, a violinist with late-stage Alzheimer's disease, attended rehearsals of Virginia's Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra two years ago. Her daughter, Marcia Munn, reported that the rehearsals improved her ability to hold conversations and talk about music. Popovich died in May 2018.

of a 2013 year-round community engagement initiative by the National Symphony Orchestra. The program sends musicians into local hospitals, pediatric units, and military health centers in the Washington D.C. area to bring music and personal interaction to patients, their families, and medical providers.

"We're bringing neuroscientists together with musicians to speak each other's language," Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D., and NIH Director, says. "Mental health conditions are among those areas we'd like to see studied. We've seen when you sing or play an instrument, it doesn't just activate one part of your brain. A whole constellation of brain areas becomes active. Our response to music is separate from other interventions such as asking people to recall memories or listen to another language." Soprano Renée Fleming, who is an artistic advisor at the Kennedy Center, is working with Collins on SoundHealth. "The first goal is to move music therapy forward as a discipline," she says. "The second is to educate the public and enlighten people about the power of music to heal."

The NIH/Kennedy Center initiative is new. So far, scientists are investigating how music could help patients with Parkinson's disease walk with a steady gait, help stroke survivors regain the ability to speak, and

give cancer patients relief from chronic pain. The goal is to improve mental health. "We know music shares brain areas with movement, memory, motivation, and reward," Collins says. Research from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York found people with mental illness seem to have an increased risk of stroke. Music has played a significant role in helping stroke survivors speak. As Collins says, "These things are hugely

important to mental health, and researchers are trying to use this same concept of an alternate pathway to address new categories of mental disorders." **S**

MICHELE HOLLOW writes about autism, Alzheimer's, mental health, and animals. Her byline has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Parents*, and other online and print publications. She's the author of a biography for kids on the Grateful Dead.



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