



Laken Emerson

A Fort Smith Symphony rehearsal for live concerts (with COVID-19 safety protocols) featuring Concertmaster Er-Gene Kahng conducted by Music Director John Jeter at the ArcBest Performing Arts Center, Arkansas, February 26, 2021. This summer, the orchestra will move to the campus of the Arkansas Colleges of Health Education.

# Restorative Notes

The pandemic ushered in a prolonged period when many musicians could not perform with their orchestras. This time has been psychologically and emotionally fraught not only for musicians, but for orchestra staffers as well, and it has brought heightened attention to the importance of health and wellness. Instrumentalists, composers, orchestras, and therapists are stepping up to help their colleagues by creating programs that provide solace, support, and a space to talk.

by Michele C. Hollow

Many musicians subscribe to the myth that a tortured psyche creates great art. “We’re all familiar with it,” says composer Julia Adolphe, “and it’s heightened due to the pandemic.”

Last year was especially rough on musicians. The uncertainty of the pandemic, not being able to perform, losing income, being isolated, and feeling anxious and depressed were overwhelming for many. Others felt numb and exhausted.

In the midst of the pandemic, Adolphe says she lost her creative drive. Deadlines loomed for four orchestral compositions, but she wondered if the works would ever debut. When she expressed her concern to the orchestras that commissioned the works, they reassured her the compositions would be part of their next season’s concert offerings—when it was safe to perform again in person. COVID caused a fair amount of rescheduling. “The uncertainty hit hard,” she recalls. “But talking to the people who commissioned the works and to other musicians, I knew I wasn’t alone.”

In February 2021, Adolphe launched a podcast called *LooseLeaf NoteBook*, in which she interviews performers about mental health and creativity. “It started as a creative outlet for me to connect with other performers,” she says, “and it’s grown.” *New Music Box*, the online publication of New Music USA, began posting the interviews on its website, with artist interviews on the second



Guests on Julia Adolphe’s “LooseLeaf NoteBook” podcast included discussions with singer and librettist Aiden Feltkamp (bottom left, about transgender identity, neurodivergence, and equity) and composers Cindy Lam (top left, about voicing trauma and connecting with your inner child) and Sarah Kirkland Snider (top right, about anxiety, creative process, and support).

and fourth Wednesdays of the month. Adolphe says listener feedback has been positive. Adolphe has spoken openly about her own generalized anxiety disorder, with which she was diagnosed in college, and for which she receives therapy and medication. The podcasts are a place where Adolphe can help fellow performers to express their feelings and share ways to cope. Recently, Adolphe interviewed conductor Daniela Candillari, who talked about how she connects her identity to her work on the podium and as a composer and pianist. Once that work vanished, Candillari

in her garden. We also discussed how play, meditation, letting go of control, and deep listening impact creativity and mental health.” The topics covered in Adolphe’s podcast are varied; in a February podcast, Adolphe reflected on the importance of asking for help and ways to create safe spaces. Among those who have been featured are composers Billy Childs and Samuel Adler, pianist Gloria Cheng, librettist and singer Aiden Feltkamp (who is also American Composers Orchestra’s emerging composers and diversity director), and percussionist Sidney Hopson.

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asked herself, “Who am I? How well can I express myself now?” She told Adolphe, “For artists, what we do from an early age inherently becomes who we are. It shapes us.”

Losing that connection has left many performers feeling adrift. “Daniela found pottery and gardening as outlets,” says Adolphe. “She talked about the joy of pottery and being outdoors

In one of Adolphe’s interviews, composer Jessie Montgomery discusses her work and the diverse musical styles she loves; she also speaks about how systemic racism affects her perception of her own musical identity, and how it is often a challenge being the only musician of color—or one of just two. “I struggled a lot when the Black Lives Matter movement broke out,” she says.



During the pandemic, composer Julia Adolphe created “LooseLeaf NoteBook,” a virtual interview series with musicians, focusing on mental health and creativity.





“Talking about taking the stigma out of mental illness proved to help me and others,” says composer **Julia Adolphe**.

“I was not able to go to protests because of health concerns.” She says she asked herself, “What is the best way to participate? If I don’t say anything, nobody will say anything. We have to practice anti-racism. You have to look at things you do, say, and think that are framed by White supremacists and by history. It’s a shared discomfort talking about racism, but in order for the conversation to evolve, everyone has to participate.”

Adolphe says planning, hosting, and putting the podcasts together have broadened her connection to other artists. “Talking about taking the stigma out of mental illness proved to help me and others,” she says. When we spoke this spring, she had two big compositional deadlines to complete and said she feels motivated and content.

### Putting Health Front and Center

Holly Mulcahy, concertmaster of the Wichita Symphony, noticed the anxiety, fear, and depression among her peers during the past year, which had included canceling the end of the 2019-20 season, delaying the start of the current season to January 2021, and creating Zoom recitals by the orchestra’s musicians. With approval from the orchestra’s board, she came up with Wellness Wednesdays, a weekly series of videos that debuted in January 2021 on the Wichita Symphony’s website. Among those featured on the series were Music Director Daniel Hege and psychiatrist Shannon Loeck.

Wellness Wednesdays proved so popular, Mulcahy says, that it continued through April, although it was originally set to end in February. The videos, which are a mix of music and chat, “give people a point to pause in their day, so they can feel a little better,” Mulcahy says. Each episode starts off with an introduction of the artist or expert, and there is a brief performance.

“When we first started, the assumption was it would be meditative kinds of music, and relaxation kinds of pieces,”

says Mulcahy. “But our approach was to acknowledge that everyone was experiencing some really powerful emotions, and we felt in order to bring a sense of complete wellness, acknowledging those emotions and experiences was authentic and sincere.”

The series—aimed at orchestra musicians, board, and staff, but also available to the public—covered relaxation and breathing exercises as well as coping with negative emotions. “It’s oddly comforting to know everyone had a variation of those emotions at one point or another during this crisis,” Mulcahy says, “and it was comforting to allow music to be the focal point of healing for vastly different reasons.” The popularity of the series grew by word-of-mouth. “People would comment on the site and email their friends, colleagues, and families telling them to try the relaxation and breathing exercises,” Mulcahy says.

It’s clear that Mulcahy put a lot of planning into each episode, including discussing ideas with a therapist. Everything centered around mental health wellness—even the more unusual topics, such as weighted blankets (blankets filled with plastic pellets or glass beads, with the weight designed to relieve stress and anxiety). In that episode, Mulcahy asked, “If music was a weight-



“Our approach was to acknowledge that everyone was experiencing some really powerful emotions,” says Wichita Symphony Orchestra Concertmaster **Holly Mulcahy**. “We felt in order to bring a sense of complete wellness, acknowledging those emotions and experiences was authentic and sincere.”



Throughout the pandemic, **Lauren Aycock Anderson**, a licensed therapist, noticed that many musicians “beat themselves up emotionally. It’s common and most people don’t realize they’re doing it.”

ed blanket, what type of music would you think of?” Sibelius was one answer. “Listening to his music, you can feel the warmth that you get from a weighted blanket,” she explains. Another Wellness Wednesday episode featured Wichita Symphony cellist Susan Mayo performing on her farm for her two goats. The idea was to listen to the calming sounds of nature.

The Wellness Wednesday site also featured a recipe for spiced chicken-ginger stew that Mulcahy compared to the music of Aaron Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* because of its richness. “The recipe is a super food that has healing qualities that help us maintain a healthy life and a balanced wellbeing,” she says. “Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* weaves so many emotions and feelings throughout the 20-plus minute work. It offers calm, peace, joy, energy, textures, colors, flavors,

**The Fort Smith Symphony’s office move to the campus of the Arkansas Colleges of Health Education “benefits both Fort Smith Symphony musicians and staff and the faculty, staff, and students at the college,” says Music Director John Jeter.**

etc. All of that in one singular work.”

The series is free and according to Mulcahy, many patrons are watching, too. “Wellness Wednesdays are a respite from the negatives of the pandemic,” she says. At press time, there were thirteen episodes posted on the Wichita Sym-

phony’s website, and the program was on pause for an encouraging reason: the orchestra was rehearsing for upcoming concerts this spring and summer.

#### **A Holistic Approach**

The staff at the Fort Smith Symphony took time during the height of the pandemic to devise a game plan that fuses music with holistic wellness. This summer the orchestra, based in Arkansas, is moving its administrative offices to the campus of the Arkansas Colleges of Health Education (ACHE). The move, according to Fort Smith Symphony Music Director John Jeter, “benefits both Fort Smith Symphony musicians and staff and the faculty, staff, and students at ACHE. It provides opportunities for interaction between our two organizations. The school’s osteopathic medicine program is one of the largest in the

country, and the college wants to have its medical students more engaged in music. The researchers at ACHE want to study how music and art affect us on all levels.”

This comes at a much-needed time, Jeter notes; after a year of limited con-

## **LEAGUE WEBINAR ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS**

On February 24, the League of American Orchestras hosted a webinar entitled “Mental Health and Wellness: A Conversation,” moderated by Stephanie Wagner, a trainer and program specialist at Healthy Minds Innovations (affiliated with the University of Wisconsin-Madison). The 90-minute virtual discussion offered first steps in normalizing conversations about mental health for those in the orchestra field; panelists included a musician, composer, orchestra administrator, and licensed therapist. The panelists included Julia Adolphe, composer; Lauren Aycock Anderson, therapist/owner, Counseling for Creatives, LLC; Aiden Feltkamp, emerging composers and diversity director, American Composers Orchestra; and Sidney Hopson, musician and arts strategist. The session included tips backed by science to support and nurture mental and emotional well-being during this challenging time, as well as a Q&A with the panel. The session was recorded and made available afterward on-demand.

**For more information, visit <https://americanorchestras.org/mental-health-wellness-a-conversation/>**





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Top photo: The Fort Smith Symphony, Music Director John Jeter, and Concertmaster Er-Gene Kahng rehearse at the ArcBest Performing Arts Center, Arkansas. Above: Arkansas Colleges of Health Education President Brian Kim (left), who is a violinist in the Fort Smith Symphony, with Jeter (right) outside the new ACHE Research Institute Health & Wellness Center. The orchestra will move to the Colleges of Health Education campus in the coming months.





Michael McEvoy

New World Symphony musicians rehearse Adolphus Hailstork's *Fanfare on Amazing Grace*, coached by the composer (on video monitor) at New World Center in Miami Beach, Florida. Leading the rehearsal (standing) is NWS Dean of Chamber Music and Fellow Development Michael Linville. The World Symphony recently created a Resilience Fund to support mental health services for its participating musicians.

The recently launched Sound Health Network is a partnership among the National Endowment for the Arts, the University of California, San Francisco, the Kennedy Center, and the National Institutes of Health.



The network brings together scientists, music therapists, artists, and the public to study music's impact on brain health and overall wellness.

certs, musicians in masks, and keeping socially distanced, it's a welcome change to have researchers seek to collaborate with orchestra musicians and staff. Thanks to vaccines, everyone is starting to see a positive change. "With this move," Jeter explains, "the orchestra will be involved in numerous research and educational projects specific to music and the arts as it pertains to wellness. The researchers will look at how music contributes to overall wellness—both physical and mental."

The list of research projects and activities is long. It's in the developmental stage and includes more outdoor concerts, a summer music and health camp program for young musicians, rehearsals followed by yoga sessions, healthy-cooking workshops, mindfulness programs, outdoor hikes, and painting and sculpture classes for orchestra musicians, staff, and others at the college. Jeter's excitement is palpable when he talks about the orchestra's involvement with the college's osteopathic medicine

division. "Osteopaths focus on prevention," he says. "They look at your lifestyle and environment, rather than just treating your symptoms."

Brian Kim is president of Arkansas Colleges of Health Education and a violinist in the Fort Smith Symphony. He sees the move as a logical step for both organizations. "With the arts and wellness initiative that ACHE has begun to pursue, along with our close relationship with the symphony, it made sense to relocate their offices to our Research Institute Health & Wellness Center," Kim says. Both Jeter and Kim say the decision to move was made jointly by the orchestra and the college. "With ACHE's new arts and wellness initiative, along with our very close relationship with the symphony, it just made sense to relocate their offices to our Research Institute Health & Wellness Center," Kim says.

### Stop Beating Yourself Up

Maryland-based therapist Lauren



Aycock Anderson, owner of Counseling for Creatives, LLC, focuses on providing treatment for artists, musicians, and other creatives. During the pandemic, her practice has been conducted entirely through telemedicine. In March 2021,

she wrote on her Facebook page, “It’s been a year since the world stopped. We’re living in the middle of a trauma anniversary. If you’re feeling strange, anxious, on edge, can’t sleep, or maybe particularly sad, depressed, or angry, it

could be your body remembering what happened a year ago.”

Aycock Anderson, who’s also a musician, was among participants in the League of American Orchestras’ February 24 webinar, “Mental Health and Wellness: A Conversation.” (See sidebar.) Throughout the pandemic, she’s noticed that many musicians have been extremely hard on themselves. “They beat themselves up emotionally,” she says. “It’s common and most people don’t realize they’re doing it.”

One of Aycock Anderson’s goals is to see artists become aware of their feelings. “When you say you hate yourself or ‘I’m such an idiot,’ it’s important to stop for a second and take a breath,” she says. “Look at what’s going on right now. Ask yourself, ‘What made me have that thought?’ And then ask yourself, ‘What do I need?’ It can be something as simple as a break.” Aycock Anderson says artists can be extremely critical of themselves. “Sometimes, they just need to stop and take a break. In that moment, they can let go of those negative feelings.”

Aycock Anderson says it’s important for everyone to understand “our worth is not defined by what jobs we have.” Her recommendations to boost mental wellness include breathing exercises, meditation, exercise, connecting with others, going outside and connecting with nature, and being kind to yourself and toward others. If you’re not feeling well, talk to a friend, doctor, or therapist. “Listen to your body,” she says. “A headache may be your body telling you something emotional is going on. Ask for help. Anxiety only goes away when we address the problem.”

### **Bouncing Back**

In response to the devastating impact of COVID-19 and the consequences of systemic racism in the performing arts, New World Symphony, the orchestral training academy in Miami Beach, Florida, recently created a Resilience Fund to support mental health services for its participating musicians, who are referred to as fellows.

“Resilience is the capacity to bounce back from crises more quickly and effectively, to learn from them, and to trans-



**Cassidy Fitzpatrick Carlson**, the New World Symphony’s dean and senior vice president for musician advancement, says the organization’s new Resilience Fund supports a mental health platform for its musicians.



**Judith Rodin**, a New World Symphony trustee, seeded the organization’s new Resilience Fund, which supports a free therapy program where musicians can talk about anxiety, stress, and other issues that have been heightened during the pandemic.

form as a result,” Dr. Judith Rodin, a New World trustee who seeded the fund with \$500,000, says. Cassidy Fitzpatrick Carlson, the New World Symphony’s dean and senior vice president for musician advancement, adds, “The Resilience Fund gives us budgetary freedom to create an environment where fellows can continue learning.” The Resilience Fund also supports areas such as emerging digital technology as well as a “teletherapy mental health platform where individuals are paired with a licensed therapist,” says Fitzpatrick Carlson. “They’ll receive regular talk therapy as you would in person.” The platform is called Better Help and “allows New World Symphony fellows to talk about stress and anxiety, racial injustices, social isolation, and being in an industry that emphasizes perfection. All of this is magnified due to the pandemic.”

According to Fitzpatrick Carlson, about 50 percent of orchestra fellows are taking advantage of the online therapy. “The feedback is positive,” she says, “and it’s free to participate. We will be doing an enrollment again in the fall as new fellows join New World Symphony.”

The pandemic played a major role in the decision to create the Resilience Fund. In addition, the New World Symphony found real-world inspiration in the National Endowment for the Arts’ partnership with the University of California, San Francisco; the Kennedy Center; and the National Institutes of Health. That union created a program called Sound Health Network, which brings together scientists, music therapists, artists, and the public to study music’s impact on brain health and overall wellness. While uncertainty about the path of the pandemic endures, orchestras and musicians are finding ways to perform. And there is reason for optimism for the coming season, with vaccines and many venues offering concerts with limited seating. Research continues and changes are occurring. [S](#)

MICHELE C. HOLLOW writes about health, mental health, climate, and animals. Her byline has appeared in *The York Times*, *AARP*, *The Guardian*, *Parents*, and other publications.



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