



GIVING MUSIC A PULSE & PURPOSE

BY DAVE ALLEN

■ BOSTON'S JORDAN HALL REGULARLY HOSTS SOME OF THE WORLD'S TOP MUSICIANS: CHAMBER ENSEMBLES DRAWN FROM THE WORLD-RENOUNDED BOSTON SYMPHONY, STUDENTS AT THE NEW ENGLAND CONSERVATORY, AND FAMED SOLOISTS ON RECITAL TOURS. A GROUP OF TALENTED AMATEURS ALSO CALLS THIS SPACE HOME.

The members of the Longwood Symphony Orchestra deal with life-and-death situations each day; more than 80% of the orchestra's 120-person roster work in the field of medicine. They come from the faculty of the medical schools at Harvard University, Tufts University, Boston University, and from the staffs of more than a dozen hospitals and private practices throughout New England. The group began in 1982 as a laid-back outlet for musicians hoping to keep up their skills.

Lisa Wong, a violinist who joined the orchestra in 1985, is now in her 16th year as its president. A pediatrician with Milton Pediatric Associates and a clinical associate at Harvard Medical School, she reflects on just how far the orchestra has come since she first joined. "When it was started, I thought 'I miss my violin. I should get it out once a week to play,'" she says. "As the orchestra improved, I thought, 'I gotta practice!'"

The orchestra is named for Boston's Longwood Medical Area, home to many hospitals and medical schools. It typically plays four concerts per year, often with professional guest soloists, as well as a summer concert on the Charles River Esplanade. Each fall around 75 musicians typically audition for only four

or five open positions. The orchestra no longer advertises openings. Wong, 50, explains that five or six years ago, she forgot to place the audition notice in the newspaper, but e-mails and calls still came in. Since then, she says, “We’ve not needed to advertise at all.” The orchestra is never closed, regularly taking auditions even when no spots need to be filled. Some musicians end up as alternates, though. “You never know who’s going to walk through the door,” Wong says.

For each of the LSO’s concerts, the proceeds from ticket sales go to medical charities and nonprofit organizations in the Boston area. Each organization gets a block of tickets to sell, and supporters help fill Jordan Hall. This charitable element has been part of the LSO’s mission since 1991, modeled after the work of famed doctor, Nobel Laureate, and musician Albert Schweitzer, who founded a hospital in Africa and supported its work through musical performances. The first benefit concert featured cellist Yo-Yo Ma as a soloist, and LSO cellist Nancy Chane, then playing her first concert with the orchestra, still remembers the impact he made.

“I’ll never forget, Yo-Yo Ma stood up and spoke. He said there are empty seats—though the concert was a sellout—and they would have been filled by women from a local shelter for abused women, but they didn’t come because the concert would have ended after the shelter’s curfew,” Chane recalls. “It was just stunning; it really made it about the community.”

Chane, 54, of Framingham, Massachusetts, has played in other community orchestras in the Boston area since graduating from Boston College in Chestnut Hill. “It has a whole other dimension you don’t get in other orchestras. It’s about more than just the music,” she says.

Her work as a hospice nurse in end-of-life care might seem emotionally taxing, but Chane feels tremendously rewarded by it; she doesn’t put the events of the day behind her when she comes to rehearsal. “Palliative care is the best job I’ve ever had,” she says. “When I come to orchestra, I already feel rewarded and renewed by my job.”

For other LSO musicians, rehearsal helps them to decompress after the daily rigors of patient care. Tom Sheldon, an oboist and radiation oncologist who travels from Concord, New Hampshire, to Boston for LSO rehearsals, finds that he feels some residual tension from his routine. “I need some time to decompress,” Sheldon, 53, says. “You go from a busy day in a clinic, in a very stressful working environment, into being artistic.”

He lists the activities of his typical day: “two new patients, six follow-up appointments, three procedures, a bunch of patients on treatment—at least 10 of those.” At the orchestra’s Saturday dress rehearsals, held on days without patients, Sheldon takes a more relaxed approach to playing. “I’m a completely different player when all I have to worry about is the concert,” he says.

This approach, taken orchestra-wide, has led to a steady increase in the orchestra’s quality, helping the orchestra to take a huge step: its first-ever tour. A group of musicians from the orchestra traveled to London in June both to perform and to share their research and medical knowledge with English doctors. Sheldon gave a joint talk on prostate cancer therapy with fellow orchestra member Stephen Wright that included a woodwind duet, with Wright on bassoon and Sheldon on oboe; Chane gathered information from hospice nurses to prepare educational materials for Partners Hospital back in Boston; and Wong spread the word about the orchestra’s joint goal of promoting community health and awareness through its musical mission.

Before the trip, Wong expressed excitement about the opportunity to hear her musical colleagues share their areas of interest and research in medicine. “I’ve never heard our first trumpet talk about stem cells,” she says. “I’ve never heard our first flute talk about chronic myeloid leukemia.”

That flute player, Daniela Krause, helped organize the LSO’s London tour. As a medical student, Krause worked at the Marie Curie Cancer Center, and returned to the Center during the tour to present leukemia research she’s now doing at Massachusetts General Hospital. Krause began her life in music at age three, playing recorder, and started playing



TOM SHELDON



DANIELA KRAUSE



flute at 10. She dreamed about a career in medicine throughout childhood and had to choose between science and music. “I seriously thought about getting into music, but I stayed true to my dream,” she says.

That choice led her to medical studies in Berlin, elective study in London, and eventually to Boston, where she has researched cell therapy and its impact on leukemia and lymphoma. The research requires extensive lab testing and experimentation, but Krause still finds time to practice two hours each day.

“They’re passions that feed into each other,” she says. “It’s two different brains that are definitely closely connected. They might seem to be contrary, but really they’re not.”

The orchestra is filled with seasoned professionals like Krause, but also includes students from the medical schools. “Affiliations don’t matter,” Wong says about the LSO. “Attending [physicians] and medical students might be stand partners for a night.”

Wong says that the doctors and nurses in the orchestra make special arrangements to have Thursday evenings free, but due to the demands of internships and residencies, the medical students in the orchestra will sometimes miss rehearsal. “They always have a great excuse,” Wong says. “Like, ‘I’m stuck in the OR’ or ‘I’m presenting research on Capitol Hill.’”

Occasional excuses aside, the LSO musicians are unquestionably devoted; some players have even returned to Boston for residencies and teaching positions after playing in the orchestra as students. This dedication contributed to the LSO becoming a case study for the League of American Orchestras’ Vision and Values workshop in April 2008 and to receiving the 2007 MetLife Excellence in Community Engagement Award from the League. “It’s such a vital part of our lives, but it’s also become such a vital part of the community,” Wong says. “We ask how each of the musicians interacts with the community, making it essential,

rather than viewing it as the orchestra versus the community.”

Sheldon played oboe throughout high school and college, but gave it up while pursuing medicine and went nearly 20 years without playing. He returned to play when his son became interested in music, and the two soon began taking oboe lessons together. “I knew in my head what I wanted to do, but getting my embouchure and my hands together was a different story.”

His playing isn’t the only thing that’s improved since he picked up the oboe again. “Since I started playing again, I think my memory is better,” he says. “That helps me make better decisions to benefit my patients.”

When LSO started, Sheldon was working at Harvard Medical School, after studying at Tufts Medical School and doing post-doctoral work at Harvard. “I didn’t even know it,” he says. “I was right there, and I wasn’t playing.”

It’s Jonathan McPhee’s task to guide these musicians in rehearsal and performance. McPhee, director of the Boston Ballet, became director of LSO in 2004, after having served in an advisor capacity following his move to the Boston area in 1994. McPhee’s task is to take people who are used to working primarily as individuals or team leaders and turn them into followers.

It’s a different world from the professional orchestras McPhee has conducted throughout his career, and members of the orchestra recognize the invaluable leadership he provides. “My view is, this guy is an absolute saint to be doing this with amateur musicians,” Sheldon says.

McPhee says that one of his stock comments during rehearsal is, “You sound like you’re playing in 90 telephone booths” and notes the difficulty of getting so many individuals to listen and to play together. He also identifies a unique kind of discipline among the orchestra’s players. Because of who they are, he says, “as soon as you identify the problem, it’s fixed.”

McPhee hopes to help the musicians reach another goal in the coming years: a tour to third-world countries, where they can put their skills to use among impoverished people. The orchestra’s charitable mission fuels McPhee’s dedication to the LSO, as he introduces concertgoers to both familiar favorites and overlooked gems in the classical repertoire.

“There are people who come [to concerts] just to support this organization,” he says. “Three-quarters of them have rarely been to a concert before and it simply turns them on to the musical experience; they’ll become subscribers or come back for another performance.”

Every time he leads the orchestra, McPhee is reminded of the musicians’ extra level of commitment: that they play because they love it, not for gain or glory. Their attitude, according to McPhee, is not “Oh, I need to prepare for a concert.” They say, “I need to play every week for my own health—my mental health release.” They haven’t forgotten what it’s like to have a connection with their instruments.

DAVE ALLEN PLAYED TROMBONE IN ORCHESTRAS DURING COLLEGE AND GRADUATE SCHOOL AND HOPES TO FIND A SPOT IN A COMMUNITY ORCHESTRA SOON.

JONATHAN MCPHEE

