

NEW YORK Ruth Ann McClain, a flutist from Memphis, Tennessee, used to suffer from debilitating onstage jitters. "My hands were so cold and wet, I thought I'd drop my flute," McClain said, remembering a performance at the National Flute Convention in the late 1980s. Her heart thumped loudly in her chest, she added, her mind would not focus, and her head felt as if it were on fire. She tried to hide her nervousness, but her quivering lips kept her from performing with sensitivity and nuance.

Right remedy

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.. [< PREV PAGE](#)

[> NEXT PAGE](#)

concert, the nerves always stayed with her. But in 1995, her doctor provided a cure, a prescription medication called propranolol.

"After the first time I tried it, I never looked back," she said. "It's fabulous to feel normal for a performance."

McClain, who was then teaching flute at Rhodes College in Memphis, started recommending beta-blocking drugs like propranolol to adult students afflicted with performance anxiety. And last year she lost her job for doing so.

College officials, who declined to comment for this article, said at the time that recommending drugs fell outside the student-instructor relationship and charged that McClain asked a doctor for medication for her students. McClain, who taught at Rhodes for 11 years, says she merely recommended that they consult a physician about obtaining a prescription.

McClain is hardly the only musician to rely on beta blockers, which, taken in small dosages, can quell anxiety without apparent side effects. The little secret in the classical music world - dirty or not - is that the drugs have become nearly ubiquitous. So ubiquitous, in fact, that their use is starting to become a source of worry. Are the drugs a godsend or a crutch? Is there something artificial about the music they help produce? Isn't anxiety a natural part of performance? And could classical music someday join the Olympics and other athletic organizations in scandals involving performance-enhancing drugs?

Beta blockers - which are cardiac medications, not tranquilizers or sedatives - were first marketed in 1965 in Britain for disorders like angina and abnormal heart rhythms. One of the commonest is propranolol. By blocking the action of adrenaline and other substances, these drugs mute the sympathetic nervous system, which produces fear in response to any perceived danger, be it a sabre-toothed tiger or a Lincoln Center

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audience.

Beta blockers' application to stage fright was first tested on London music students in 1976 by a British physician, Ian James, who was also an amateur violist. In a mock audition at Wigmore Hall, two judges from the London College of Music found that the performances of 24 musicians improved up to 73 percent with the use of beta blockers. In addition, the musicians' average pulse and blood pressure dropped significantly. Musicians around the world have quietly embraced their use ever since.

"I only use beta blockers for auditions," said Andrew Michael Simon, principal clarinetist of the Hong Kong Philharmonic, who first tried propranolol when he advanced to the finals during a Metropolitan Opera Orchestra audition in 1993. Simon said he did not know if Asian musicians in the Hong Kong Philharmonic used beta blockers, but that several Westerners took them for auditions. The stage fright drugs are also widely used among European and American musicians.

"Beta blockers are a valuable tool and I wouldn't hesitate to recommend them to anyone," said Joseph Koczera, second trumpet of the Düsseldorf Symphony, who added that his colleagues didn't openly discuss their use of beta blockers.

"Before propranolol, I saw a lot of musicians using alcohol or Valium," said Mitchell Kahn, director of the Miller Health Care Institute for the Performing Arts, describing 25 years of work with the Metropolitan Opera orchestra and other groups. "I believe beta blockers are far more beneficial than deleterious and have no qualms about prescribing them."

But the use of drugs is still largely secretive. Propranolol "is like Viagra," a woodwind player at a major orchestra said. "No one admits to using it because of the implication of weakness." Robin McKee, acting principal flutist of the San Francisco Symphony, agrees, saying, "It's too bad we're reluctant to talk about using such a great tool."

Indeed, the effect of the drugs does seem magical. Beta blockers don't merely calm musicians; they actually seem to improve their performances on a technical level.

For the last two decades, such use of beta blockers has generally been met with approval from the medical establishment. "Stage fright is a very specific and time-limited type of problem," said Michael Craig Miller, editor of The Harvard Mental Health Letter. Miller, who is also an

amateur pianist, noted that beta blockers are inexpensive and relatively safe, and that they affect only physical, not cognitive, anxiety. "There's very little downside except whatever number you do on yourself about taking the drugs."

But now that the drugs have established themselves as a seemingly permanent part of the classical music world, some musicians and physicians are beginning to question the acceptability, safety, efficacy and ethics of using them.

Stephen Gottlieb, a professor of medicine who published a study on the effects of beta blockers in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 1998, says the drugs should be obtained only after a medical examination, since people with asthma or heart disease could develop problems like shortness of breath or a slowing of the heart rate.

"One-time use of low doses of beta blockers should be safe in healthy people," Gottlieb said, adding that the fatigue, hallucinations, tingling and vivid dreams listed as side effects in the *Physicians' Desk Reference* would be unusual in those using propranolol only occasionally.

But some performers object to beta blockers on musical rather than medical grounds. "If you have to take a drug to do your job, then go get another job," said Sara Sant'Ambrogio, who plays cello in the *Eroica* Trio. Chemically assisted performances can be soulless and inauthentic, say detractors like Barry Green, author of *"The Inner Game of Music,"* and Don Greene, a former Olympic diving coach who teaches students at the Juilliard School in New York to overcome their stage fright naturally.

Some musicians are also grappling with the ethics of better performing through chemistry.

"If you look at the logic of why we ban drugs in sport, the same should apply to music auditions," said Charles Yesalis, a professor at Pennsylvania State University who studies performance-enhancing drugs.

Speaking from the Athens Olympics in August, Steven Ungerleider, a sports psychologist and the author of *"Faust's Gold,"* said that beta blocking medications were prohibited for some events, like riflery, in which competitors use the drug to slow the pulse so that they can fire between heartbeats to avoid a jolt. The drugs are banned in a number of other sports.

But Miller, the Harvard physician, points out that beta blockers differ significantly from steroids, which use testosterone to increase muscle mass, strength and speed.

As McClain's firing demonstrates, the use of beta blockers by students is a particularly delicate issue. Those who openly use the drugs believe they have a responsibility to mention them to students suffering from severe stage fright. "If I'm looking out for the welfare of my students, I cannot in good conscience not tell them about beta blockers," McClain said, adding that she would be more careful about how she represented the information in the future.