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Better Playing Through Chemistry

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Indeed, the high stakes involved in live performance are part of what makes it so thrilling, for both performers and audiences. A little onstage anxiety may be a good thing: one function of adrenaline is to provide extra energy in a threatening or challenging situation, and that energy can be harnessed to produce a particularly exciting musical performance. Performance anxiety tends to push musicians to rehearse more and to confront their anxieties about their work; beta blockers mask these musical and emotional obstacles.

Some musicians are also grappling with the ethics of better performing through chemistry. In auditions, which are even more nerve-racking than regular performances, do those who avail themselves of the drug have a better chance of success than those who do not? Should drug testing apply to performers, as it does to some athletes and to job applicants at some companies?

"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. But the issue receives little attention because, unlike athletes, classical musicians are seldom called on to represent big business ventures. "If Nike offered musicians ad contracts," Dr. Yesalis said, "more people would pay attention."

Speaking from the Athens Olympics in August, Steven Ungerleider, a sports psychologist and the author of "Faust's Gold," said that beta-blocking medications are 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, including motorcycling, bobsledding and freestyle snowboarding.

But Dr. Miller, the Harvard physician, points out that beta blockers differ significantly from steroids, which use testosterone to increase muscle mass, strength and speed. Inderal enables rather than enhances, by removing debilitating physical symptoms; it cannot improve tone, technique or musicianship, or compensate for inadequate preparation.

As Ms. 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," said Ms. McClain, adding that she would be more careful about how she represented the information in the future.

Some teachers believe that coping with performance anxiety is an essential part of a classical music education and that early use of beta blockers deprives students of the chance to confront their stage fright. Robert Barris, a bassoonist and a co-chairman of the music performance studies faculty at Northwestern University, encourages students to address the roots of their anxieties while avoiding psychological dependence on chemicals. Unlike



Rollin Riggs

Ruth Ann McClain lost her job for recommending beta blockers.

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previous generations of musicians, these students can draw on a rich array of nonchemical treatment options. The new field of performing-arts medicine includes some 20 centers across the country, many of which treat stage fright with therapies that range from Inderal to more holistic approaches like hypnosis, yoga and aerobic exercise.

But several musicians interviewed for this article expressed impatience with these treatments, which can seem slow and uncertain compared with the instant gratification and convenience offered by the beta blockers. "Holistic solutions take work and time to be effective, whereas Inderal is a quick fix," Mr. Barris confirmed. As it happens, he takes Inderal by prescription for a heart ailment, and he said that he works to combat any soporific effects the drug might have on his musicianship by putting extra energy into his concerts. "No one wants to listen to a secure, accurate but disconnected performance," he added.

Jim Walker, a former principal flutist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic who has recorded more than 400 movie soundtracks, says that preparation is the best medicine. Still, he describes himself as an Inderal advocate, with the caveat that the drug be approved by a physician. Some of his best students at the University of Southern California, he said, are too nervous to deliver a representation of how well they really play and might stand to benefit from beta blockers.

"It's absolutely legitimate to recommend Inderal to a student who's unable to perform because of nerves," he added. "If I'd never heard the story about Ruth Ann McClain, I'd be far more blatant in recommending it."

Blair Tindall, a professional oboist, is writing "Mozart in the Jungle" for Grove/Atlantic Press. Elaine Aradillas contributed reporting for this article.

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