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Better Playing Through Chemistry

By BLAIR TINDALL

Published: October 17, 2004

RUTH ANN McCLAIN, a flutist from Memphis, used to suffer from debilitating onstage jitters.

"My hands were so cold and wet, I thought I'd drop my flute," Ms. McClain said recently, remembering a performance at the National Flute Convention in the late 1980's. 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.

However much she tried to relax before a 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," she said, "I never looked back. It's fabulous to feel normal for a performance."

Ms. McClain, a grandmother 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 Ms. McClain asked a doctor for medication for her students. Ms. McClain, who taught at Rhodes for 11 years, says she merely recommended that they consult a physician about obtaining a prescription.

Ms. 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 1967 in the United States for disorders like angina and abnormal heart rhythms. One of the commonest is propranolol, made here by Wyeth Pharmaceuticals and sold under the brand name Inderal. 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 audience.

Even the most skillful and experienced musicians can experience this fear. Legendary artists like the pianists Vladimir Horowitz and Glenn Gould curtailed their careers because of anxiety, and the cellist Pablo Casals endured a thumping heart, shortness of breath and shakiness even as he performed into his 90's. Before the advent of beta blockers, artists found other, often more eccentric



Rollin Riggs

Ruth Ann McClain lost her job for recommending beta blockers.

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means of calming themselves. In 1942, a New York pianist charged his peers 75 cents to attend the Society for Timid Souls, a salon in which participants distracted one another during mock performances. Others resorted to superstitious ritual, drink or tranquilizers. The pianist Samuel Sanders told an interviewer in 1980 that taking Valium before a performance would bring him down from wild panic to mild hysteria.

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Musicians quietly began to embrace beta blockers after their application to stage fright was first recognized in The Lancet, a British medical journal, in 1976. By 1987, a survey conducted by the International Conference of Symphony Orchestra Musicians, which represents the 51 largest orchestras in the United States, revealed that 27 percent of its musicians had used the drugs. Psychiatrists estimate that the number is now much higher.

"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."

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