

Vital Signs

Many doctors and healthcare workers perform with vocational orchestras, but during the pandemic these caregivers found themselves at the center of a global health crisis—without a musical outlet to forge connections and relieve grief. Here, **John Masko**, co-founder and music director of the National Virtual Medical Orchestra, explains how an ensemble of healthcare professionals from around the country rehearses and performs together—at a distance.

The first time I stepped onto the podium in front of the Yale Medical Symphony Orchestra as a college student, I felt a special energy in the air: the energy of musicians playing not as a hobby or out of professional obligation, but because they needed music. In careers that demanded perfection and emotional stability, these musicians needed the orchestra to exercise a different part of their brains, to connect with each other, to express themselves, to heal.

Over the decade since, I've held onto the feeling of that rehearsal. After graduating with my master's in conducting in 2018, my first conducting project was to help start the Providence Medical Orchestra—an ensemble of doctors, nurses, paramedics, techs, and medical students in my hometown of Providence, Rhode Island. In March of 2020, that group, like all of the 30 or so medical orchestras across America, was suddenly silenced. For medical musicians, the timing could not have been worse. While they faced the greatest stresses of their careers—witnessing mass death and suffering daily—the vital musical outlet they relied on was gone.

Inundated with correspondence from



Hunter Starnes

The National Virtual Medical Orchestra performs in Carnegie Hall's December 2020 "Live With Carnegie Hall: Music as Medicine" concert.

medical caregivers desperate to return to a musical ensemble, I contacted Richard Logothetis, an expert Boston orchestra administrator and friend. We generated a plan to recruit a National Virtual Medical Orchestra for monthly online performances, and in May we had our first roster. We managed the artistic process meticulously, marking parts and iterating back and forth with musicians. In June, our first performance—of the achingly hopeful slow movement of Beethoven's Fourth—hit Facebook and YouTube.

Over the ensuing months, we dialed up the difficulty: Brahms's *Academic Festival* Overture, Márquez's *Danzón* No. 2, the finale of the *Symphonie Fantastique*. As the group grew to 80 players in 30 states, we

were able to share the musical talents of our medical communities with a national audience. We shared the stories of remarkable musicians like Tracey Welborn—a tenor who left professional opera in his 40s to become a nurse at a VA Hospital. Tracey joined us for Puccini's "Nessun dorma" and Ponchielli's "Cielo e mar."

For me, the most rewarding thing about the NVMO has been the difference it has made in the lives of our players. As one of our clarinetists put it, "The NVMO came from out of nowhere and has enriched my life with new friendships, music making, and well-being. It has connected me to so many at this time of distancing."

I have been amazed at the number of people—musicians in the orchestra and audience members—who have told me that playing in or listening to an NVMO performance was one of the most meaningful musical experiences of their lives. There's a line in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* when the Ghost of Christmas Present says that the water he sprinkles on Christmas meals carries its greatest blessing when the meal is given to a poor family, because they need it most. I believe music works similarly. Of course, we'd all prefer to be performing together in person. But at a time when the medical profession was facing its darkest days in memory and its greatest need, music was there for them. That I could help fill that need has been the greatest gift of my conducting career. **S**

JOHN MASKO is the founding music director of the Providence Medical Orchestra and the National Virtual Medical Orchestra and associate conductor at the Wellesley Symphony Orchestra. As an assistant and cover conductor, he has worked with the San Francisco Symphony, Boston Ballet, and Symphony New Hampshire, among other ensembles.



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