Deep in the reeds

BY CARMEN PEOTA

Mayo Clinic hand surgeon Allen Bishop, MD, has his twin brother to thank for the fact that he plays the oboe.

When the two were 11-year-olds choosing band instruments in their hometown of Milwaukee, Wis., Bishop’s brother nabbed the flute. Their music teacher suggested that Allen try the oboe, explaining they sounded well together.

It wasn’t long before Bishop was seriously studying the instrument, first with Milwaukee Symphony players and then, while a biology major at St. Olaf College in Northfield, with Rhadames Angelucci, former principal oboist for the Minnesota Orchestra. “It just turned out to be something that I had a talent for,” he says. “And I loved the sound of the instrument and kind of kept it going all these years.”

Actually, Bishop has more than “kind of kept it going.” He has been a member of the Rochester Symphony since 1975. He assumed the principal oboe position in 1978, his first year at Mayo Medical School and has held it ever since. He also is a principal oboist for the World Doctors Orchestra, which performs benefit concerts for medical aid projects around the world. “I think I’ve reached a level of proficiency that allows me to play in an orchestral setting with a reasonable degree of success,” he says humbly.

Playing with these orchestras is such a big part of Bishop’s life that he lists his musical credentials—principal oboe, Rochester Symphony and World Doctors Orchestra—next to his medical one—professor of orthopedic and neurosurgery, Mayo Clinic—at the top of his LinkedIn page. Further down the page, he calls oboe playing “My chief avocation!”

(And his twin brother, the kid who took the flute first? Today he is a pediatric gastroenterologist at the University of Iowa. “Nothing like identical genes,” says Bishop.)
Playing for joy

Although Bishop is a seriously good player and works hard at his instrument, he plays because he enjoys it. He practices several hours a week, typically at the end of the workday or on weekends. “I have to motivate myself if I’m too tired to go upstairs and do something musical,” he admits.

He spends as much (or more) time making reeds. It’s the aspect of being an oboist he finds most challenging. “It’s not that tough to play [the oboe],” he says. (Others might argue with that.) “The biggest problem is the reeds.” The oboe, along with the bassoon and English horn, is a double-reed instrument. Reeds consist of two pieces of cane cut or scraped a certain way and tied together. Get it wrong and you have squawks and hisses rather than a warm tone. “I have to really work at it,” Bishop says, noting that about one in five turns out well. Even so, he might have an edge on other oboists, as the fine motor skills he’s developed performing microsurgery are useful for reed making. “It’s a little technical—just like the [surgical] work that I do.”

Preparation pays off when Bishop takes his seat in the middle of the orchestra and begins to play. “I just enjoy it,” he says, explaining that it allows him to express himself. He also enjoys the camaraderie that comes from making music with others. “I try to make every time I go to either rehearse or play with the orchestra be almost a celebration for me,” he says.

And although oboe parts are among the most exposed in orchestral music, Bishop rarely gets nervous. “That’s the joy of playing a woodwind in an orchestra,” he says. “You’re the only person on a part, and you can express things and shine and play the solo parts,” he says. “After going to the surgery, invading people’s bodies with knives, arthoscopes, and the like, the like, for me a musical performance is not at all daunting.”

Playing for good

A few years ago, Bishop’s musical career took a new turn. A colleague at Mayo Clinic, neurologist and cello player Shelby Cross, MD, told him about the World Doctors Orchestra. Bishop played his first concert with the orchestra in Yerevan, Armenia, in 2010. Since then, he’s been a regular, playing concerts one to two times a year. Most recently, he played with the orchestra in Cracow, Poland.

The World Doctors Orchestra was founded in 2008 by Stefan Willich, a German cardiologist and conductor, the idea being to bring physician-musicians from different countries together two to three times a year to perform music and raise money for various health care-related causes. The players cover their own expenses and pay a fee to cover some of the event’s expenses, such as the venue rental. All profits from ticket sales go to the charity.

Musicians get their parts in advance and are expected to know them by the time they arrive in the country where they’re playing the concert. They generally arrive a few days in advance so they can practice together. “We need that time to gel and play as an ensemble,” Bishop says. Rehearsals are conducted in English, although players come from many parts of the world.

Most of the time, Bishop stays a few extra days in order to give a talk at a local medical school or hospital. At those, he shares about his research on bone and joint transplantation or his clinical expertise, for example, in repairing injuries to the brachial plexus. He also describes how Mayo Clinic specialists collaborate. Through these talks, he’s recruited fellows to Mayo and formed a network of colleagues around the world.

Musically, the World Doctors Orchestra has provided Bishop an opportunity to play the grand pieces, such as Mahler symphonies, that he otherwise wouldn’t get to play with the smaller Rochester Symphony. And it has offered him a chance to meet people who are doing what he’s always done—mixing music and medicine. “We are all musician-nerdy people who... share the love of music and the commitment to providing the best possible health care that we can,” he says. “And to further that mission through the orchestra—that is something everyone is proud to be part of.” MM

Carmen Peota is a Twin Cities freelance writer and editor.