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Better Playing Through Chemistry

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But use of drugs is still largely secretive. "Inderal 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, the 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. In the late 1970's, Charles Brantigan, a vascular surgeon in Denver, began researching classical musicians' use of Inderal. By replicating performance conditions in studies at the Juilliard School and the Eastman School in Rochester, he showed that the drug not only lowered heart rates and blood pressure but also led to performances that musical judges deemed superior to those fueled with a placebo. In 1980, Dr. Brantigan, who plays tuba with the Denver Brass, sent his findings to Kenneth Mirkin, a frustrated Juilliard student who had written to him for help.

"I was the kid who had always sat last-chair viola," said Mr. Mirkin, whose bow bounced from audition nerves. Two years later, he won a spot in the New York Philharmonic, where he has played for 22 years. "I never would have had a career in music without Inderal," said Mr. Mirkin, who, an hour before his tryout, took 10 milligrams.

For the last two decades, such use of beta blockers has generally met with approval from the medical establishment. "Stage fright is a very specific and time-limited type of problem," said Michael Craig Miller, the editor of The Harvard Medical Letter. Dr. 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. One concern is that many musicians use beta blockers without proper medical supervision. The 1987 survey of orchestra musicians revealed that 70 percent of musicians taking beta blockers got them from friends, not physicians. Mr. Mirkin, the Philharmonic violist, first obtained Inderal from his father, who took it for angina. Others buy it while touring countries where they are sold over the counter.

Stephen J. 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 beta blockers 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," Dr. Gottlieb said, adding that the fatigue, hallucinations,



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tingling and vivid dreams listed as side effects in Physicians' Desk Reference would be unusual in those using Inderal only occasionally. The risks are far more serious for those who use beta blockers consistently and take up to 700 milligrams of Inderal a day. Musicians typically take 5 to 20 milligrams in isolated doses.

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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, the author of "The Inner Game of Music," and Don Greene, a former Olympic diving coach who teaches Juilliard students to overcome their stage fight naturally. The sound may be technically correct, but it's somewhat deadened, both men say. Angella Ahn, a violinist and a member of the Ahn Trio, remembers that fellow students at Juilliard who took beta blockers "lost a little bit of the intensity," she said. Ms. Ahn doesn't use the drugs, she said: "I want to be there 100 percent."

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