



# VIOLA

## Looking for a Place to Play? Try the Nursing Home

by Justin Knoepfel

There are pinnacles of one's performance career that carry a lot of weight: New York Debut, Carnegie Hall, first concerto performance with an orchestra and so forth. Granted, these are wonderful accomplishments that many strive for in their meteoric career trajectory. However, I am also fascinated with the not-so-distinguished venue: the nursing home. Assisted living residencies, nursing homes, retirement communities and long-term care medical facilities are fantastic places to play your viola, or any musical gift.

As a young child, I remember visiting nursing homes on a variety of occasions to visit relatives, especially grandparents. Most recently, my grandfather was in a nursing home for a short period of time before he passed away in October of 2017. My dad and I made a trek down to Nebraska to visit with him shortly after he became ill and was placed in the facility. I thought, "I should bring my viola. It would be nice to play for him, perhaps for the very last time." In fact, it was the last time I ever played for him while he was alive. A decorated WWII vet and expert carpenter, he had a love for hymns and old country tunes. I remember vividly the occasions when he asked if I could play this waltz or that tune or something by Hank Williams. He was always astounded when I said, "No." So, I would continue playing my rendition of a favorite hymn or two.

What is it that makes playing in these sorts of venues so inspiring, uplifting, meaningful? I believe it is all about the people and their lives.

### Inspiration

You could not ask for a more captive audience! Some are quite healthy, while others may only have a short amount of time left on this Earth. What is fascinating to me is that no matter their situation, the amount of appreciation they have for what you do is astounding. I have played numerous hymns, show tunes, country tunes and classical pieces all unaccompanied. Though sometimes you will get lucky and have a resident play a piano with you in the massive dining room or the chapel. Those are

special moments.

Back in October of 2017, at my grandpa's nursing home, I remember playing for him at dinner time (probably at 4:00 P.M.). I was playing some unaccompanied Bach. My aunt asked, "Do you have anything a bit more upbeat?" *Well, sure, I can do that. I might as well play a gigue and all will be happy!* Nevertheless, what he and the residents wanted was music from their past, their childhood, their experiences in life.

I was asked by another resident who wheeled over, "Do you know the *Tennessee Waltz*?" "Can't say that I do," I responded. "But I'll look through this book of waltzes and see what I can come up with." It was in there. Crisis averted. Turns out she got up out of her wheelchair and started dancing with my dad as soon as I started to play a not so waltzy *Tennessee Waltz*. After I was done she said, "I grew up in Minnesota. I knew Lawrence Welk! We went on a date once." She was very proud of that fact. And I was proud that I knew who Lawrence Welk was from my relatives years before.

### Therapy

I am not a trained music therapist, but I applaud all of those who are and who have gone through the tireless years of education and experience. There was a recent film from 2014 called *Alive Inside: A Story of Music & Memory*. It was a documentary on the effects of residents listening to their favorite music, with the goal of determining if it brought back memories and improved their overall quality of life. I encourage you to seek it out (Apple iTunes for rental or purchase). What I have noticed in my short-lived musical career is that, from an anecdotal perspective, music has the ability to make connections back in one's life. To recall fond memories, to brighten one's day, to sing the hymns and the old tunes; music is paramount to their well-being.

I have seen firsthand the value and importance that music has on individuals in the most therapeutic of ways. From studies done recently, musical exposure to seniors living in facilities has shown to help lower blood pressure, increase cognitive ability, improve memory recall in patients dealing

with Alzheimer's and dementia, and so forth. So, if that means performing more *Tennessee Waltzes* or *On the Wings of Eagles*, then I am ready for the challenge.

### Practical Performance Benefits

I recently wrote an article (*String Notes* Fall 2018) about performance anxiety and some possible ways to cope with such maladies. One of the ways mentioned was to play for an audience as many times as you could, preferably before a recital or big performance. Playing at a nursing home is a low-stakes environment, a place of no judgment, pressure, or ridicule. They are incredibly forgiving audiences, mistakes and all. They are just grateful that you are there!

It probably goes without saying that you should contact a facility ahead of time if you want to perform there. I know individuals who get paid/hired for playing at nursing homes as part of the music therapy sessions once a week. That would be a matter that you would have to look into if getting paid was of importance to you. Generally speaking, the sort of playing that I do at nursing homes is not 60 minutes of entertainment, but rather an opportunity to visit a family member or friend and to share with them the music that will lift them in their time of difficulty.

### Just Play for Them

I encourage you that when the next time you visit someone in a facility, bring your instrument. Ask the staff if it is okay that you play, and then just go for it. I have actually honed my improvisational skills from such informal performances, just from trying something new. You might be surprised with what you create. And just perhaps you will brighten someone's day, bring back a memory for them, and show them that they are important, valued, and worth every minute of time you can give.

Last piece of advice: bring a waltz book. You can thank me later!

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