



## CELLO

### Reflections on Musical Volunteerism

by David Holmes

I live close to a hospital, and have been a patient there a number of times. I noticed that it had several warm, welcoming lobbies that I imagined a cello could fill with music. Perhaps this could be the answer to my persistent but unrealized desire to play my cello as a way of providing comfort and beauty to some who might appreciate and need it.

First, I filled out a volunteer form online. This was followed over several weeks by a series of steps: an interview, a draw of six vials of my blood (which revealed I needed a mumps vaccine!), an electronic finger printing at an off-site location, and finally, a brief performance in a lobby for several volunteer employees. This vetting makes sense for hospital volunteers, since most, unlike me, have close contact with patients. My first two-hour shift was November 2018.

Several pianists perform as volunteers at this hospital, but they never had a cellist. The issue of how loud to play was an important consideration. Should I always be in the background (“musical wallpaper”), or do I project more? I have found that my volume depends on what social interactions are occurring near me. A meeting at a nearby table persuades me to play softly. The same applies when there are a number of people conversing nearby. However, when the lobby is nearly empty, or when people are silently on their phones, I will increase the level some. When I sense that someone is really interested in the cello music and is watching me intently, or if someone has shared with me that they are really enjoying it, I might then be inclined to play out more.

What musical selections to play was another issue I had to consider. I decided to avoid any modern dissonant music, heavy

romantic music, or complex Bach. What I came up with has mostly stayed the same. I often start with the Otto Deri *Solos for the Cello Player*, almost all of which are palatable to a larger audience. Many of the *Solos for Young Cellists*, compiled and arranged by Carey Cheney, are beautiful and less well-known, including the five Couperin *Pieces from the 10<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 14<sup>th</sup> Concerti*. I perform the classic slow works for cello, too—*The Swan*, *Arioso*, *Vocalise*, *Chanson Triste*, *Gabriel's Oboe*, and even the Pachelbel *Canon*, as well as others. From the Bach *Suites 1-3*, I include some slow movements or faster less complex dances. The *Minuets*, *Bourrées*, and *Sarabandes*, as well as the gorgeous *Prelude to Suite No. 1* are all well-received.

For variety in style I have a book of Disney hits with a fun *Be My Guest* from *Beauty and the Beast* (one of the hospital employees says it's her favorite piece), *Part of Your World* from *The Little Mermaid* and others. I perform from a book of Beatles hits, too (*Hey Jude*, *Eleanor Rigby*, et al.), and from a book of upbeat and heart-wrenching Irish tunes.

I perform for two hours on Monday mornings in a lounge on the ground floor near a main entrance. I have put in sixty hours so far. Like any new endeavor, both expected and less expected events occur. My first day I heard the ominous announcement of “Code blue, infant”, which means a patient is in cardiopulmonary arrest and a medical team should come ASAP. This was unexpected and upsetting to me but normal for a hospital. Also on the first day one of my student's dads, who is a surgeon, happened by to say hello after he heard cello music wafting down the halls. Over the months I

have reconnected with a former cello family whose dad stopped by to say hello when he saw me. I taught his child from ages 7-16 and she is now in Australia and 39 years old, which made me to realize, yet again, that I have been aging. Several musician colleagues have spoken to me during my Monday morning shifts, which is always uplifting.

So many strangers have gone out of their way to express their gratitude for my cello playing at the hospital. Some are people sitting in wheelchairs waiting for an appointment and some are folks just walking by in the hallway who stop to say thanks. Occasionally, people spontaneously burst into applause at the end of a piece, which always surprises and, yes, delights me. The positive feedback has been very validating and was more than I expected. One person recently said they were anxious about getting some procedures that day and that my music had calmed them down. This meant a lot to me.

*David Holmes spent his first twenty-one years in Texas, but has lived in Minneapolis since 1993. He holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Houston and a Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Kansas. A Suzuki teacher for the past 25 years, he has been quest clinician at over 50 institutes. David teaches at the North Star Cello Academy and was chosen the “2014 Master Studio Teacher” by the Minnesota String and Orchestra Teachers Association. He is an artist member of Thursday Musical and a member of the Northern Lights String Quartet. †*