

# Blocking out the noise

To combat performance anxiety, musicians turn to medication.

WRITTEN BY **SARAH LIN**  
DESIGNED BY **GRACE CHANG**

In the days leading up to an audition, Bienen fourth-year Luisa Brown-Hernandez would do her best to prepare. She'd make any last annotations to her sheet music, put in extra practice hours and do deep breathing exercises, all to ensure her performance would be perfect.

But somehow, she would always choke.

As soon as the judges' eyes centered on Brown-Hernandez, it was as if fire and ice hit the double bass performance major at once. Her cold, sweaty palms made the bow slick between her fingers, causing shivers and skitters across the strings. A hot burning sensation in her chest induced an uncomfortably rapid pulse and left her short of breath.

"Mentally, it can be really hard to focus because I'm so nervous," she says.

Nothing could quell her nerves — until she tried drugs.

Brown-Hernandez is currently prescribed 10 milligrams of propranolol for her performance anxiety, a beta blocker commonly used to treat heart problems. Beta blockers regulate heart rate, treat tremors and cure chest pains, symptoms of both a short-term feeling of heightened anxiety and a long-term heart issue.

Due to beta blockers' ability to subdue the physical manifestations of performance anxiety, combined with minimal side effects if taken in small doses, many professional musicians choose to rely on such a prescription. They've become a "nearly ubiquitous" secret within the classical music world, *The New York Times* writes.

Within the pre-professional music world of elite conservatories and music schools, this medicating culture is expanding. Students are opening dialogues around mental health struggles like anxiety and destigmatizing medication as professors and employers demand high standards.

## Your own worst critic

Bienen fourth-year Caroline Weiss has one major weakness: crowds.

In her mind, the toughest crowd of all is her peers.

Weiss says when playing in her studio practices, she used to shake, sweat and her mouth would go dry — anxiety symptoms that greatly diminished the quality of her instrument's sound.

"I was so anxious playing for other people that I felt like all my hard work went down the drain," Weiss, a clarinet major, says. "I was getting better studying at Bienen with my professors, but if I went to play

a solo in front of my peers in studio class, it would just sound like trash."

Little did she know, some of her peers felt the same way playing in front of her. After Weiss saw classmates taking a pill shortly before evening studio classes in her freshman year, she asked her friends about them.

Her peers' positive opinion as well as a professor's recommendation of the drug motivated her to consult her doctor for a prescription of propranolol.

Manhattan School of Music second-year and violin major Cecilia Martin says she also feels nervous playing in front of her peers and would worry for days before an actual performance that she could mess up on stage.



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"A lot of people don't realize how some people feel when they perform. I don't think they can understand what it feels like to have an actual panic attack when you're trying to play," Martin says.

But what was scarier for Martin than any potential negative peer feedback was fearing she would not perform to the standards she had set for herself. As her own worst critic, the pressure she placed on herself to "be perfect, every single time" was all-encompassing.

"There was a period of time where it was hard to even listen to myself play," she says. "People would tell me it sounded good, but it just sounded so bad to me."

Alec Mawrence (Bienen '20) says he never took beta blockers while studying tuba at Northwestern because he never felt abnormally anxious performing for his peers. However, he says the "miracle drug" helped him quell the physical symptoms of a dry mouth and shakiness once he started auditioning professionally, two things he says "are not conducive to playing the tuba."

The first time Mawrence used beta blockers for an audition was for his current job with the West Point Band. He says it was "confirmation bias" after the audition ended successfully and proved the drug could enhance his playing.

Mawrence says those who don't take beta blockers for auditions may be at a "big disadvantage."

"You will get caught in a professional audition for a quivering lip or the smallest little thing that could have been very easily prevented by this drug," he says. "There's definitely no way to know what percentage of audition winners use them, but it seems to me like it's most."

Julian Stiles (Bienen '23) also takes beta blockers to soothe audition nerves.

"Auditions are really brutal," Stiles, a French horn player, says. "In the orchestra world, there's usually hundreds of applicants, and there's only one person getting the job at the end."

Although Stiles began taking beta blockers as a student, his usage has recently increased, as he feels the need to take one every time he auditions.

"If I mess up in a school performance, I'll probably feel a little sad and feel bad but everything will be okay," he says. "When it's your profession, you want to give it your all, and you don't want anything to be in the way if you can avoid it."

University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign second-year Indya Reed recently started taking beta blockers after blacking out on stage during her freshman solo showcase.

"There were a lot of things that went wrong for me because of my nerves," she says. "There would be mistakes I never made before. ... I would second guess myself and I couldn't think straight."

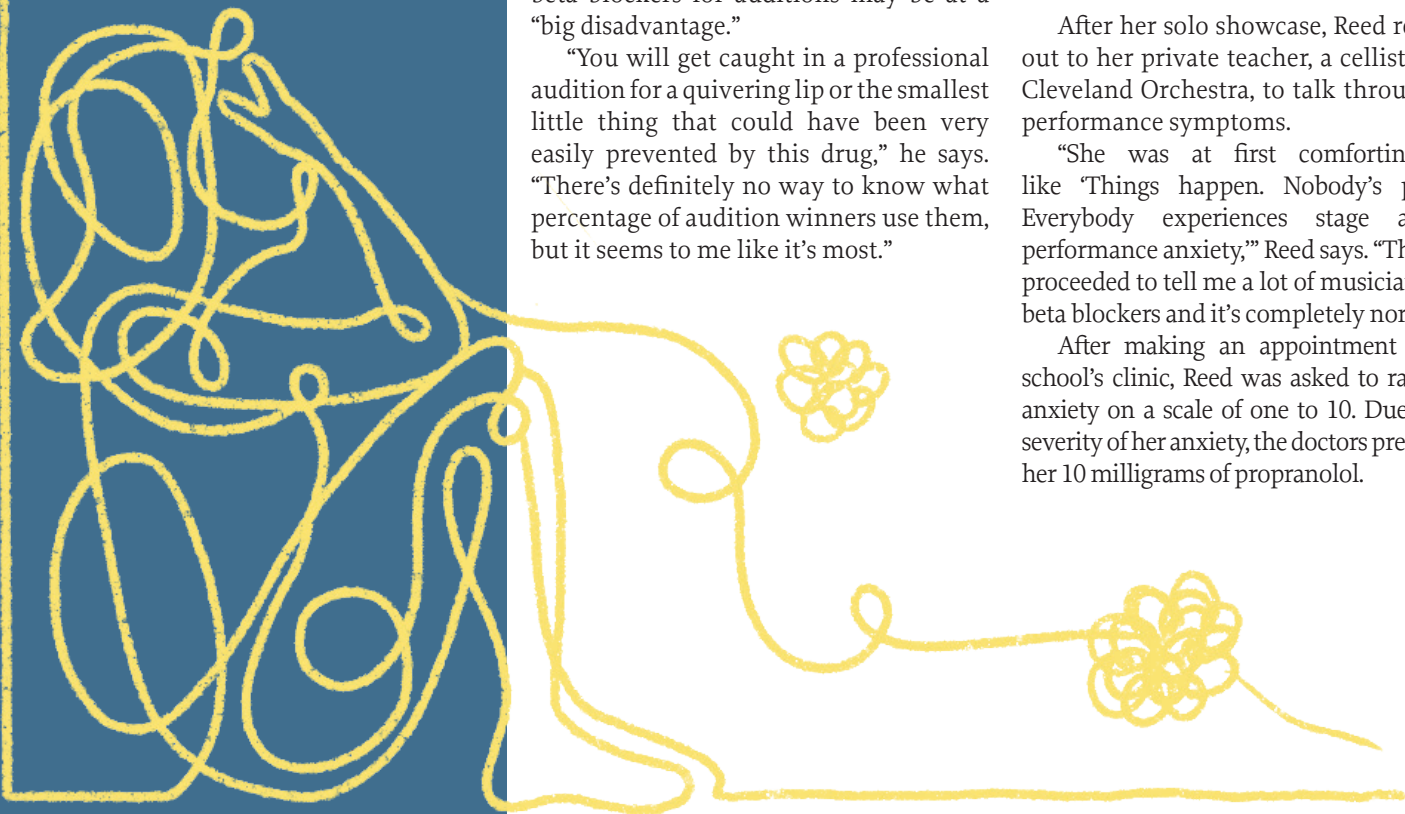
Reed, a cello major, says the experience was humbling and changed her perception of performer mental health.

## Order in disorder

After her solo showcase, Reed reached out to her private teacher, a cellist in the Cleveland Orchestra, to talk through her performance symptoms.

"She was at first comforting me, like 'Things happen. Nobody's perfect. Everybody experiences stage anxiety, performance anxiety,'" Reed says. "Then she proceeded to tell me a lot of musicians take beta blockers and it's completely normal."

After making an appointment at her school's clinic, Reed was asked to rank her anxiety on a scale of one to 10. Due to the severity of her anxiety, the doctors prescribed her 10 milligrams of propranolol.





In fact, Reed, Brown-Hernandez, Martin, Mawrence and Stiles all have the same 10-milligram prescription of propranolol. They all obtained the prescription from a physician or a psychiatrist, albeit with slightly different tests. For instance, Martin's blood pressure was tested to ensure it was not too low and Stiles obtained the prescription after a single conversation with his psychiatrist.

Despite a lack of long-term research on the effects of beta blockers on individuals without heart conditions, they all were assured by their doctor the drug would be harmless as long as they took it in the prescribed dosage. Thus, they all report consciously self-medicating, taking beta blockers infrequently for special occasions, such as an audition or recital to avoid overdose.

Student musicians often learn about beta blockers through the recommendation of peers, advice from teachers or reading through online musician forums.

After learning about professional musicians' usage of beta blockers on an online forum, Martin began taking them and has since recommended them to friends.

"Some people tell me, 'I don't shake when I get nervous, I don't ever need that.' Some people go, 'I didn't know it wasn't normal to shake so much when I get nervous,'" she says. "I've convinced two of my other friends to check them out, and they really like them."

Although it's less common for underclassmen to medicate, Stiles first

encountered beta blockers in high school when watching a YouTube interview with Phil Myers, a New York Philharmonic horn player. In the video, Myers jokingly said students should take drugs if they're struggling with performance.

However, Stiles only realized how widespread the drugs were when other players asked him for propranolol before a school pool audition, a placement audition for school ensembles.

"Other horn players were asking, 'Hey, do you have beta blockers I can borrow?' We were happy to share," he says.

## The taboo

Nausea, jitters, excitement. Communication second-year Celeste Shuman describes her anxiety as the feeling when "you're at the top of a rollercoaster," nervously waiting to let gravity push you over the peak and ground you.



Although Shuman's nerves take root hours before a performance, they don't manifest during the actual show. Instead of stage fright, the theatre major has waiting anxiety, for which she takes an occasional propranolol, and general anxiety, for which she takes a daily Lexapro. These medications ground her in performance and in life.

Shuman says she grew up openly discussing mental health with her parents, who medicate for similar reasons as she does. She wishes others could

recognize the importance of mental healthcare for performers.

"The performing arts is something people are very passionate about, and therefore it can cause people to be very involved and very emotionally invested," she says. "Those are things that can cause people to have a lot of anxiety around performances."

Communication fourth-year Lilah Weisman says she frequently talks to her fellow theatre major friends about mental health and doesn't believe there's a stigma or a taboo within the Northwestern performing arts community around mental health medication.

In fact, Weisman believes most performers struggle with anxiety. According to a 2016 study conducted by the Musicians UK charity, about 70% of musicians surveyed said they have suffered from anxiety or depression.

"I think you're in the minority if you don't deal with [performance anxiety] as a performer," she says. "Basically all my friends are on some sort of medication, [including beta blockers]."

Beta blocker use is also common among athletes and medical professionals for activities that require precision, such as golf and surgery.

But in certain sports communities like archery and shooting, propranolol and other beta blockers are banned as a doping drug for the competitive advantage they provide athletes. Few music institutions have similar regulations for doping among their musicians.

Weiss says peer discussion around beta blockers is open and frequent within music communities. However, some musicians believe the drugs are performance-enhancing, which she disagrees with.

"It's not a performance-enhancing drug you take to be miraculously above your peers," she says. "The only way you're going to be miraculously above your peers is practice."

Within the music community, instrument players have different perceptions of how widespread beta blockers are. Perception may depend on an individual's instrument of choice — Brown-Hernandez says beta blockers are more common for wind instruments than strings, for example.

Brown-Hernandez hopes any stigmas around beta blockers will subside.

"I think [beta blockers] shouldn't be taboo," she says. "You're just trying to give yourself the best chance at performance that you can. If we're all sharing that knowledge and that resource, then it's more fair for everyone."

## Unnatural

Mawrence says he very rarely hears negative opinions about beta blockers in the professional music world, because "everyone I know uses them." However, a recent Facebook post featuring Mark Gould caught his attention, where the former principal trumpet of the Met Opera criticized the Los Angeles Philharmonic orchestra by saying "many players [were] on beta blockers."

Beta blockers' harshest critics seem to be from older generations, Mawrence says.

"It's almost a made-up controversy because you read all the comments and they're almost all positive except for a couple of old geezers saying, 'I never needed them in my day,'" Mawrence says.



Emphasis on “a couple,” Mawrence adds. At Northwestern, his tuba professor openly talked about taking beta blockers, despite being of the “old geezer” generation.

Weiss says she’s also able to discuss medicating with her professors.

“I told them ‘I feel like my performance anxiety is a really huge issue,’” she says. “They immediately were like, ‘Are you taking beta blockers?’”

Conversely, Brown-Hernandez hasn’t discussed her usage of beta blockers with her professor and is apprehensive about how he’d react.

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“I think he would be disappointed or push me toward other avenues,” she says. “Maybe he’d be upset that he wasn’t a part of that conversation and maybe he’d feel like I didn’t really try everything before the beta blockers.”

For music professors, there is also the worry they could lose their job over promoting beta blockers. A Rhodes College flute instructor was fired in 2003 for recommending the drug after university officials charged that she was distributing the medication to adult students herself, obtaining them from a third-party doctor.

Brown-Hernandez says her professor encourages her to try “natural” approaches to managing stress instead, such as meditation and breathing exercises.

Shuman says theatre professors similarly offer mindfulness exercises in classes, which helped her develop a pre-show meditation and affirmation ritual.

Despite developing these “natural” habits to relieve anxiety, Shuman doesn’t see herself stopping her usage of beta blockers or Lexapro in the near future.

However, other musicians like Martin are optimistic they can train themselves to not need propranolol for performances.

Martin says he has been experiencing less and less performance anxiety and hopes to ween off the drug completely.

To train her nerves, Reed is giving herself performance exposure therapy, playing whenever she can.

“I avoid using [beta blockers] during classes where we play for our peers, like studio class or chamber studio,” she says. “That way I can practice controlling my emotions and my nerves in the actual setting.”

Trying to lean into the more “natural” option, Brown-Hernandez recently began following advice from sports performance experts. She’s attempted dancing, listening to high-energy music and smiling at herself in the mirror before performances, all to trick her brain into releasing serotonin to reduce anxiety.

“I’ve tried a lot of that stuff,” she says. “But ultimately, I still ended up on beta blockers.”

Stiles also engages in alternative practices to get him into an audition headspace. He likes to “sing” the music in his head, take a deep “Darth Vader” breath and assign colors to excerpts he will play.

But he doesn’t anticipate his usage of beta blockers will stop, either.

“I understand why people are skeptical about it, but at the end of the day, I really want to win a job more than anything. Getting a job playing in an orchestra is the dream,” he says. “So I’m just going to do anything I can to achieve that.” **N**

