

For more than 20 years I enjoyed a career as a professional musician in New York City, playing trombone and euphonium in many orchestras, including, among others, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and on two occasions, the New York Philharmonic. I also played in more than 20 Broadway shows and with numerous ballet and dance companies. I got my first hearing aids in 1991 when my hearing loss was relatively mild, with thresholds around 30dB. At that time, I only wore my hearing aids in private because of the not-unreasonable fear that I would lose work if people knew I had a hearing loss, although my loss was not yet affecting my ability to perform.

By 1997, with my hearing loss progressing, it had become more important to me to hear people speaking than to continue a career which had provided a great deal of satisfaction for decades. I made the difficult decision to retire from my performing career and to reveal my hearing loss. Although my skills on my instruments remained intact, I was no longer confident in my ability to play in an ensemble. I didn't know if I was in tune with the other musicians and had trouble understanding the conductor when he spoke to the orchestra. Playing trombone in an orchestra can be stressful when everything is working, but when my hearing was failing, it exacerbated the stress, and my nerves told me it was time to quit.

I did not want to compromise the quality of the ensembles in which I played, nor did I want my career

to be tarnished by poor performances on important concerts in major venues such as Carnegie Hall or the Brooklyn Academy of Music. I did play a few low-pressure jobs in the following few years—park concerts and children's concerts—and played with some frequency until 2006. After 2008, I almost never picked up an instrument. Inspired by Betty Hauck's presentation at the 2019 HLAA Convention in Rochester, I tried to practice a few times, but the results were not good, and I didn't continue. When you have done something at a high level for a long time, it is not fun to do it badly.

My hearing continued to deteriorate, with my thresholds increasing by about 1.5 dB per year. Because that annual change is imperceptible, I had grown accustomed to the gradual increase in hearing loss. But over a period of 30 years, the change was huge. When two audiologists told me that I had reached the limits of the benefits that hearing aids could provide, I decided to get a cochlear implant (CI) in one ear but postponed the actual surgery until March 2021 when I was fully vaccinated against COVID-19. I am happy to report that testing shows that my sentence comprehension has enormously improved with the CI, a finding that matches the improvement in communication my family has noticed.

This past July, an email arrived announcing a week-long adult band camp at the Interlochen Center for the Arts in Michigan. In high school, I spent four wonderful summers in Interlochen, at what was then called the National Music Camp. Those summers gave me the

Music Camp with a Hearing Aid and a Cochlear Implant

BY JON TAYLOR

experience to become a professional musician without attending a conservatory, or even taking a music course. For decades I have wanted to visit the camp, but never got around to it. The email about band camp motivated me to practice euphonium a little. I was also curious about how playing would sound through my recent cochlear implant.

The first day I tried to play was a disaster. I could barely make a note come out. It was a little better the next day and improved for a couple of days. However, my lip started to hurt and swell. Putting ice on my lip after practicing helped, but I probably would have given up if I didn't have camp as motivation. Gradually, I got into good enough shape to play in an amateur band and found that my endurance was sufficient to make it through four hours of daily rehearsal at camp.

So, on August 9, after about 13 years of rarely picking up an instrument, followed by three weeks of practicing, I boarded a plane to Traverse City, the airport closest to Interlochen, to attend the camp. The seat next to me was occupied by my euphonium, an instrument which is essentially a tenor tuba. As a seat mate, a euphonium is ideal. It didn't talk much, didn't have bad breath and didn't climb over me to go to the bathroom.

Although it is occasionally called for in symphony orchestras, the euphonium is primarily a band instrument. Outside of the military bands, it is impossible to earn a living playing the euphonium exclusively. As a result, I mostly played trombone throughout my professional career, though some of my best engagements, such as a concert with the New York Philharmonic and a recording with the Empire Brass Quintet, were on euphonium. I started on the euphonium when I was eight years old because my arms were too short to play trombone. At age 10, I took up the trombone which became my primary instrument, but euphonium remains my first love because of its rich, dark sound. If you are going to play in a concert band, as I did at camp, the euphonium parts are better than the trombone parts. And if you can't hear pitches and intonation well, valves are better than a slide. The other reason I started practicing euphonium rather than trombone is that it was on a lower shelf in the closet.

The music program my audiologist installed on my new CI warmed up the sound, but didn't improve

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my ability to hear pitch, which was already poor before I got my implant. With respect to pitch perception, the 22 electrodes in the CI cannot equal the approximately 12,000 outer hair cells in the cochlea, each tuned to individual frequencies. The truth is that I have no idea if I was playing in tune, but my neighbors in the band didn't complain. I did have a difficult time hearing the conductor who was possibly 30-35 feet away in a large auditorium. As a result, when he would say, for example, start at letter B, I had no idea what he had said and tried to

figure out, not always successfully, where they were when they started to play. I was not hiding my hearing loss. When I applied for the band, I informed them about my hearing loss. I always wore my devices, and sometimes turned to one of the players next to me to ask what the conductor had said. In retrospect, I should have advocated for myself by asking him to speak more loudly, but part of me was still reticent about calling attention to my hearing difficulties. Maybe next year.

I was pleased to discover that at this point in my life, my competitive juices were not flowing. At camp, I did not meet anyone else who had had a professional career as a musician, and I didn't care where I sat in the section or who played the solos. I had nothing to prove. Although I certainly wanted to play well, the stakes were lower than when I played professionally, and I was no longer striving for perfection.

I was curious about who the other campers would be. It turned out the median age was probably mid-60s, with a few younger people age 20 to 40. At 71, I was by no means the oldest, with several in their 80s. Almost 40% of the 70 band members live in Michigan, with the remainder spread over 17 other states. It was an interesting group of people, with very little in common except for their love of playing. The first person I met was a percussionist from South Carolina who had been a camper in 1947. In his youth, he had been an Air Force pilot who flew over Vietnam in the 1960s. Several other band members had also attended the camp decades earlier, including a still-terrific trumpet player who went to law school and has retired after being a judge in Michigan, and a trombonist, about 80 years old, who does research on lupus at USC. The other euphonium players were a retired post office worker who had played in a Navy



Me and the Pit Spitter (I am the one on the left.)

Below: My euphonium



band; a carpenter who works in residential construction, who also has taught high school physics, calculus and statistics; and a high school band director with a master's degree from Michigan State University.

All in all, I had a great time at camp. Because I had a career as a musician, I have been accused of being creative. The truth is that I was never creative but was good at my craft. And part of what I enjoyed about playing was the visceral sensation of producing beautiful sounds. Even with impaired hearing, it felt good to be doing that again, and to be part of an ensemble.

To cap off the terrific week, after the concert I went to a Northwoods League semi-pro baseball game,

in part because I was intrigued by the name of the local semipro team, the Traverse City Pit Spitters, who defeated the Kokomo Jack Rabbits 9-2. As someone who spent considerable time playing in Broadway and ballet pits in NYC, surrounded by brass players' spit, the name meant something different to me than to the residents of Traverse City, which calls itself the Cherry Capital of the world.

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During his career, Jon Taylor performed with the Brooklyn Philharmonic, NY Philharmonic, Orpheus Chamber Ensemble, Empire Brass Quintet and many Broadway shows and dance companies.

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