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Why I . . . play the violin

South London GP Nicola Weaver tells **Helen Jones** why she plays in an orchestra

Helen Jones

Nicola Weaver has always had music in her life. As a teenager, she even briefly flirted with the idea of a music career but thought that medicine would prove a better option. “In another life, I might have gone that way,” she says. “But at the time I didn’t see a role model in music that I could identify with.”

Today, as Macmillan GP clinical cancer lead for Southwark and south-east London GP champion for social prescribing, she reflects on her musical journey, which began at a Catholic primary school in Hull. “I played the recorder from the minute I started school thanks to my enlightened headmistress, Sister Mary Austin. She made sure everyone got the chance to play something. I started learning the violin at about the age of eight and have never really stopped,” she says.

After leaving school, Weaver went on to play the violin in various orchestras while studying at Cambridge and working as a GP in Newcastle. She also spent around 10 years learning the saxophone “as a midlife excursion.”

She now enjoys playing the violin regularly for an orchestra mostly made up of doctors—the London Doctors’ Orchestra and Choir (LDOC). It rehearses once a month on a Sunday afternoon to try to fit in with doctors’ busy lives but is open to anyone.

“LDOC is a relaxed, friendly group of players and singers of all ages, from medical students to consultants, GPs, and other healthcare professionals. It works as either a chamber or symphony orchestra, depending on the repertoire we pick, plus a chorus. We are committed to playing music but understand the limitations that the day job can present.”

Lockdown made playing together impossible, but when the rules relaxed LDOC came together again. “We rehearsed with a small ensemble, masked, in gardens and in socially distanced large areas—with great attention paid to the rules—and were able to perform Mozart’s *Requiem* in June 2021. It would take more than a pandemic to stop us,” she says.

As well as the social aspect of being in an orchestra, Weaver says that it has a positive impact on her sense of wellbeing. “Playing an instrument is an absorbing, challenging, and frustrating pleasure, which can only be done with complete concentration at whatever level you play—so there’s no space left in your head for the worries of work. I will never be as good as I’d like to be and I think that’s the case for my player friends—so we happily have a lifelong hobby to pursue.”

Weaver has played with a couple of other doctor based orchestras in London but also with almost every other kind of musical group over the years,

including string quartets, a jazz big band, a pop covers band, and folk fiddle.

“My long term aim is to play decent jazz violin and I’m currently a member of the weekly Jazz Violin Practise Club,” she says, while admitting the time she spends practising is “never long enough.” If she could play one classical piece really well, she says, “It would undoubtedly be the Bach Chaconne, the final movement of the Partita No. 2 in D Minor, but that’s a retirement plan because it’s hugely difficult. Otherwise, my current project is to try and play Charlie Parker’s *Donna Lee* which is also very hard.”

How to get started

- If you have played an instrument in the past, but haven’t done so for a long time, get it out and start playing. “And, if possible, buy a decent mute so you don’t annoy the neighbours,” says Weaver
- Play anything—but do it regularly. Scales and arpeggios are a good idea too
- Join a weekly class of some kind. “Lockdown has its limitations on group playing, but it has also had a useful side effect for nervous re-starters, in that regular workshops have mostly gone online. You can join virtually from your living room and it doesn’t matter how good or bad you are, because on mute no one else can hear,” she says
- “When we can all meet again, search the internet for an orchestra near you,” Weaver says (<http://amateurorchestras.org.uk>)