The Healing Power of Music & Medicine

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By Michael Jacobson

Doctor, musician, motorbike rider . . . Carrie Wang is an emergency medical registrar and member of the Australian Doctors Orchestra. When she's not saving lives with medicine, she's healing souls with music, and when it's time to relax and unwind, she jumps on her cruiser to travel the open road as an outlet, a release and to enjoy. Michael Jacobson reports.

After discussing the merits of Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev's Five Melodies for Violin, followed by the exhilaration of riding the wide roads of southeast Queensland on a motorcycle cruiser, the conversation turns to the novels of Stephen King and, wait for it, pus.

Unlikely as this combination may appear, all logically connect via Carrie Wang, a 33-year-old, Taiwanese-born, lovely, lively and accomplished woman.

As a doctor, Carrie is an emergency medical registrar at Brisbane's Mater Adults Hospital. As a musician, she is a violinist for the Australian Doctors Orchestra, which performs at Bond University on the Gold Coast tomorrow to musically conclude the annual conference of the Australian Lung Foundation.

Carrie's credentials are impressive. Equally so are the day and setting. The sun is beaming from a cloudless, classically blue sky and, from the lookout atop Mt Coot-tha, Brisbane and its environs are stunningly revealed.

As Japanese tourists excitedly disembark from buses, rush for the best vantage point and then riddle the crisp morning air with the sound of chatter and clicking cameras, Carrie calmly stirs her flat white coffee and begins, just as calmly, to talk.

Not about Prokofiev or motorbikes or Stephen King. Those subjects are to come. The first thing she talks about is not talking at all.

Carrie Wang was just nine years old in 1984 when her chemical engineer father, Charles, and teacher mother, Julie, took their family from crowded, polluted Taipei to begin a new life and lifestyle in Queensland.

For more than a year after their arrival, Carrie barely spoke. At Ferny Hills State School, she communicated through music.

``I didn't have a word of English," she remembers.
``It wasn't as if I was ashamed of opening my mouth. The fact was there was so little point. I couldn't understand what people were saying and they couldn't understand me."
``However, none of that mattered when it came to the playground. If you're playing chases or hide and seek, words aren't a necessity.

``And when you're playing violin, as I did with the school orchestra, the notes are their own international language.''

At nine, Carrie already was well-versed in the language of music. Even so, she approached her craft with pragmatism rather than passion.

``In Taiwan, Mum taught in a Catholic school and music was an important part of the curriculum. She valued music highly and was a keen singer.

``My elder sister Christine and I started lessons early. I was six and we learned two instruments. My primary instrument was violin, followed by piano. Christine, who is now a professional cellist, studied cello and piano.

``For me, the violin was an instrument of chance. Someone happened to leave a one-eighth size violin lying around the classroom. Mum brought it home and left it on the couch.

``I suppose I picked it up as a curiosity. To me it was just a strange combination of timber and wire, but before I knew it I was taking lessons and practising an hour a day every day.

``The truth is I didn't enjoy it. It was just expected of me, although occasionally I played tricks to get out of lessons, like deliberately detuning the instruments. That didn't work very often.

``At home I'd practise as Mum cooked. She'd place a tea towel on the floor behind her and that's where I'd stand for the next hour, playing away, not enjoying the sound of the violin, not enjoying the chore of practising, just standing there playing this squeaky box."

Despite her disaffection, Carrie's aptitude was obvious, and once her teachers at Ferny Hills recognised the superiority of her musicianship, she was soon singled out for solo performances. Along the way, word by word and sentence by sentence, she learned and improved her English.

``I had assistance from the teacher's aides, personal tuition for a year and a bit. Still, I didn't dare speak until well into Grade 5. I wanted to speak proper, grammatically correct English."

Such adjustment was hardly a one-way street. Carrie explains how her fellow students, new friends and neighbours also needed to adjust to the newly arrived Taiwanese family led by a former chemical engineer and a former teacher now running the local fish and chip shop.

Which, at last, brings the conversation to mega-selling American author Stephen King.

``Carrie's not my real name, Christine isn't my sister's real name, Julie isn't my mother's real name and Charles isn't my father's real name," she says.
'My real name is Yun-Ya, but Mum and Dad reckoned our Taiwanese names might be problematic, so they picked English names for the whole family."

"Christine and I reckon we were named after Stephen King novels."

If so, Carrie's brother broke the sequence by taking the non-King name of Andrew. He's lucky . . . it might have been Cujo.

Encouraged by her cousin, professional violinist Chen Yang, Carrie joined the Queensland Youth Orchestra in 1985. Chen conducted the QYO III orchestra and his cousin quickly moved through the orchestra's various levels.

"Growing up, I was proficient at music without enjoying it. I just lived with it, lived classical music, playing with the head and not the heart," she says. "That began to change with the QYO. As I reauditioned each year and made my way through to the main orchestra, I found the music itself was meaning more to me. It took coming to Queensland to change music from a chore to something I could cherish. That's when I began to appreciate what I could do and what music could give me."

In 1990, music gave 14-year-old Carrie the opportunity to travel internationally as the QYO embarked on a Pacific Rim tour visiting San Francisco, San Diego, Disneyland, Canada, Japan, Shanghai and Hong Kong.

Though a young musician's dream, there were political ramifications.

With the tour occurring just a year after the Tiananmen Square protests and massacre in Beijing, and with ongoing political tensions between China and Taiwan, Carrie's nationality posed enough of a dilemma for QYO officials to reconsider allowing her on the tour.

"I still had a Taiwanese passport and there were some fears that, because we were to perform in China, I might be detained there indefinitely," says Carrie. "Fortunately, everything worked out."

Then upon her return, everything changed again as Carrie Wang's focus, for so long trained on music, suddenly switched to medicine.

Carrie describes it as 'your typical Asian family thing'. To have a doctor in the family is something coveted, something elevating, and Carrie was told she had the ideal personality for a doctor.

The observation is accurate in the best possible way, because while unflappable, practical, bright and diligent, Carrie is far from aloof or arrogant. Indeed, her presence is calming. Furthermore, she's not remotely queasy.

"Pus, phlegm, blood, broken bones, torn tissue, I can deal with all that," she says. "I wouldn't last long in medicine if I couldn't."
Graduating Year 12 with an OP2, Carrie pondered dentistry, mused upon engineering and `enjoyed life a bit'.

Music, now more of a diversion than her destiny, took a backward step in her life, which was inevitable given the commitment she would need to secure her medical career. Enrolling at the University of Queensland in 1994, she began a Bachelor of Science degree and, as she puts it, `got into medicine'.

``It was an undergraduate degree comprising three years of theory followed by three years of practical work," she says.

``It was around that time I began to rediscover music and thought about completing my Licentiate examination. I figured it was a way of earning a certificate to hang on the wall to prove all the years of practising hadn't been a waste of time and effort. I remember the exam so well. I performed Bach's Violin Partita, Bloch's Nigun, Bruch's Violin concerto in G minor and Prokofiev's Five Melodies.

``The Licentiate exam is the big one, all about showing one's performance skills and it took me six months to prepare.

``Everywhere I went my violin travelled with me. I took it into anatomy dissection classes, into this class and that class, practising whenever I could.

``Then once I passed the exam (with Honours) I packed the violin away again, this time for the best part of six years, only retrieving it to play at the occasional wedding or if my sister's group needed a fiddler for the night."

A prerequisite of Carrie's medical degree was to serve an internship in a non-metropolitan area and in 2000 she left Brisbane for Toowoomba.

Yet despite the rigours of her fledgling medical career, her music would not be denied. Before long, Carrie had joined three community orchestras.

Transferred to Bundaberg, Carrie again sought out orchestras and other ensembles.

``I just gravitated towards musos," she says.

Ironically, many of those she found were doctors.

First impressions might judge the Australian Doctors Orchestra an incongruous ensemble, a bit like, for example, an Australian Farmers Ballet or an Australian Accountants Circus. Carrie Wang proves music and medicine are not the strangest bedfellows.
The ADO was founded by Hobart plastic surgeon and violinist Miki Pohl. Apparently intrigued by what he deemed a disproportionate number of doctors playing in various ensembles, he formed the notion of an orchestra comprised entirely of doctors.

The concept became a reality in 1993 when the ADO debuted in Melbourne with GP William Kimber performing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor.

Fifteen years later, the ADO features undergraduates and graduates from all states and territories representing general practice and all medical specialties. Carrie joined in 2005.

``Plenty of doctors are musos. It keeps the fingers moving and the mind alert,'' she says. ``Maybe there's something about medicine and music being areas in which one needs a real drive to excel.

By the way, when we get together we tend to talk medicine rather than music.

``In the end, the ADO has helped me to love playing again. I mean, I really love it, probably because there's so much music to choose from.

``I can go from a seductive tango to a lush romance to whatever. I've done the occasional soiree concert for friends and big concerts with the full orchestra.

``Being with this orchestra, even though we only play every now and then, has opened up my musical appreciation.

``For instance, when I was growing up there was no pop music in our household. It never occurred to me that pop music was even listenable. These days I probably have more pop CDs in my collection than classical CDs and, as a classically trained musician, it's wonderfully liberating to have that choice.''

Tomorrow's ADO concert at Bond University will aid the Australian Lung Foundation, Australia's pre-eminent facilitator supporting medical and scientific research into lung disease, education and patient-carer support services.

More than six million Australians suffer some form of respiratory illness. In fact, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease - which includes chronic bronchitis and emphysema - is Australia's fourth biggest killer, affecting up to one in six people over the age of 45. Incredibly, three out of four people with COPD don't realise they have it.

Raising awareness is a major aspect of the ALF's agenda and ADO concerts raise money towards that cause, the upshot a profound example of the healing power of music. All being well, Carrie Wang will graduate as an emergency physician next year.

``Emergency medicine, to me at least, is the most exciting field of all,'' she says.
``Of course, you don't wish for people to get hurt, but people do get hurt, and when they are brought to you, and you are the one whose skills and comfort are required to help them, it is a situation of great responsibility and can be very rewarding. You feel you are doing good.

``And in emergency, you never know what's going to happen.

``Every day is a surprise."

Of course, surprises are given as well as received, as Carrie's father Charles can confirm. As soon as Carrie graduated from UQ she bought a motorcycle, a cruiser, the purchase in defiance of her father's orders.

He was hosing the garden when she arrived home with her new toy and immediately recognised he'd been issued a fait accompli.

``When we were little, back in Taiwan, Dad rode a Vespa and we could get the entire family of five on it," recalls Carrie.

``That was normal for over there. I can remember how we had to arrange ourselves, to get the balance just right, before we took off down the road to the shops or to visit someone.

``Dad really didn't want me to buy a motorbike, but in the end I gave him no choice. You should have seen his face when it turned out the helmeted person on the cruiser turning into his driveway was his daughter.

``The bike is my outlet. To be out on the open road is such a joy, a real release. Mind you, I'm very sensible. I've seen the results of too many accidents, so I'm no hoon."

The sun is now high in the sky and the day continues to offer one of nature's virtuoso performances.

But as more buses disgorge more tourists and the cafe fills with the din of customers and clattering crockery, the atmosphere atop Mt Coot-tha morphs from intimate to intrusive . . . with one exception.

Just below the lookout, her violin under her chin and her bow poised across the strings, Carrie Wang patiently poses for photographs and exudes total calm. In Stephen King's Carrie, the title character possesses dangerous powers unleashed when she loses control. King himself says the book maintains an ability to hurt and horrify.

Whether or not Carrie Wang's English name was inspired by the King novel, her powers - as a musician, a doctor and a person - will be wielded far differently to those of her namesake.

For in all her roles, Carrie Wang only makes people feel better.
'It wasn't as if I was ashamed of opening my mouth. The fact was there was so little point. I couldn't understand what people were saying and they couldn't understand me'

Caption: Medicine and music . . . Carrie at the Mater Adults Hospital and, inset, practising the violin as a youngster

Carrie bought a motorbike, much to her father's horror. Left, making her mark on the world

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