HEALING ARTS

*Materia Medica***A Conductor Confronts Cacophony***Jonathan Chalett, MD*

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At age 94, in July of 2009, conductor David Randolph (who recently celebrated the 49th anniversary of his conducting debut at Carnegie Hall) experienced his first hospitalization and surgery, an aortic valve replacement, at NYU Medical Center. He sent frequent e-mails to relatives, friends and members of the St. Cecilia Chorus and Orchestra, which he has conducted twice a year in Carnegie Hall for the last 40 years.

The following is an excerpt from one of his e-mails.

This entire hospital experience has given me a completely new perspective on the concept of sound and noises. I could not have imagined that such a variety of bells, whistles, alarms, hoots, and poundings could have existed. First, the bells—which continue with incessant repetition: three bells, three beats of silence; three bells, three beats of silence; lulling you into a false sense not of security, but of resignation, whereupon the three bells change to four!—or are answered by only two!

Then there are the two bells simultaneously, one of which is ever so slightly faster than the other. As a result, the Doppler effect sets in! It grabs your mind as if in a vise, waiting for them to come together and then separate ever so slowly. It's like waiting at a railroad crossing, where the tempo of the station's warning bells conflicts with the tempo of the bells of the oncoming train!

But the crowning glory is the two-bell pattern of a falling major third (which, as you chorus members know, are the first two notes of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"), but they start in what sounds like a unison, except that one set of notes is perhaps a quarter tone higher than the other!—and both at the same time! And realize that these tortures of the mind don't happen just one by one, as I've described them above. Sometimes they all happen simultaneously! It makes for what I can call only a "veritable festival of aural pain"!