

The Me2/Orchestra: Using Music as Part of the Recovery Journey

Featuring Panelists:

- Caroline Whiddon, Executive Director Me2/Orchestra
 - Ronald Braunstein, Music Director, Me2/Orchestra
 - Carole Furr, Founding Member, Me2/Orchestra
 - Margie Friedman, Director & Producer, Orchestrating Change
 - Barbara Multer-Wellin, Director & Producer, Orchestrating Change
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Daniel Gillison:

Teri, thank you very much. I really appreciate the instruction and giving the logistical background. Welcome, everyone, on behalf of the NAMI board, our board president, Shirley Holloway, the NAMI staff and then all of our state organizations and our affiliates, where the rubber hits the road and they're doing the work in communities across the country. Welcome. Welcome to this very important conversation and this Ask the Expert about using music as a part of the recovery journey, very important, and very tangible to recovery. So with that said, we really appreciate you participating on today. If it's afternoon where you are, fantastic, and if it's late morning, good morning to you. We're going to go ahead and get started. I'm going to pass this off to our chief medical officer, **Ken Duckworth**, now. Ken?

Ken Duckworth:

Thanks, Dan. Hello, everybody. Lived experience is expertise. This is the beauty of this conversation today. The Me2 Orchestra is one of a kind in the United States in terms of creating an environment for people with lived experience, and I am honored and delighted that they are leading this experience today. We're going to see a few clips from a documentary which just won an award. Let me briefly introduce today's speakers. **Ronald Braunstein** is a music director and the cofounder of the Me2 Orchestra. He trained at Julliard, Salzburg, and has conducted numerous symphonies around the world.

Caroline Whiddon is the cofounder of the Me2 Orchestra and has done a number of events in the service of our shared mission. Carole Furr is a Harvard graduate and french horn player. She also majored in physics, so that's actually three things that I can't do and I acknowledge that. She has a nice history with NAMI Vermont as a board member there and does music and works as an accountant in Vermont. Margie Friedman and Barbara Multer-Wellin are the Emmy Award winning producers who put together a documentary about this remarkable community.

So with that, I'd just like to say thank you all for joining us. I want you to send in your questions. This is a great opportunity to talk to people who are breaking new ground in reducing stigma and shame.

Ronald Braunstein:

I think I was about 10 years old when I first decided that conducting was for me. I went with my father to hear the Pittsburgh Symphony play Beethoven 9th, and I just said, "I've got to do that."

Caroline Whiddon:

Ronald was on this trajectory toward being one of the world's greatest maestros.

Ronald Braunstein:

It was hard to accept that I had been diagnosed as being bipolar. I was judged and discriminated against, so I decided to create my own orchestra.

Caroline Whiddon:

I never knew that an orchestra could be such a vehicle for change.

Ronald Braunstein:

Two cellos.

Caroline Whiddon:

Two, two, one, so five cellos, and then I'm missing a chair again. My chairs keep disappearing. We're going to have five violas too.

Ronald Braunstein:

I decided to start Me2 Orchestra because I wanted to make music with people who are like me and also people that support people like me, where stigma doesn't exist.

Caroline Whiddon:

When Ronald came to me with this idea, I said, "It doesn't matter that there have been plenty of conductors throughout history who have probably had the same diagnosis. You are now and forever going to be labeled as the bipolar conductor. Is that what you want?"

Ronald Braunstein:

I've never felt better about having made this fact public, truly. Very short.

Caroline Whiddon:

Me2 Orchestra is the world's only classical music organization that has been created specifically for people who are living with mental illnesses, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, addiction, and the people who support them.

Ronald Braunstein:

Very good. Can we go back to C, letter C? So we know what fortissimo is.

Caroline Whiddon:

We really want to break down all the preconceived notions that people have about what it means to be living with a mental illness.

Ronald Braunstein:

Piano. This is very important. I'm sorry. This is really important. There are lots of subito pianos. They're all over the place. I think we'll get that sorted out. It's okay.

My conducting education began when I went to Julliard and I graduate in the conducting department. Then the next year I won first prize gold medal in the Herbert Von Karajan Conducting Competition with the Berlin Philharmonic.

Ronald Braunstein:

The Von Karajan prize is the most prestigious and competitive conducting competition in the world, and I was the first American to get it. The years following the competition were amazing. I was conducting major orchestras. I conducted the Berlin Philharmonic. I conducted the San Francisco Symphony. Everything I did turned to gold.

Violins [inaudible 00:15:37]. Make that change. But I felt my emotional life was definitely starting to crumble. When I would go to an orchestra to rehearse, there was one time when I practiced one note again and again and again for 45 minutes. At that point, the manager said, "You can't continue." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Because you're ill." I said, "No, I'm not ill." He said, "Well, all we know is you can't continue." They broke my contract, and they got a replacement. They paid me some, I think, \$2,000 to just sort of just weep myself to sleep.

When I was a young boy, I knew something was not quite right, that I would get very, very excited, and then I would become very, very sad kind of rapidly. I asked my father to take me to a doctor. The doctor said I had bad nerves. I was first diagnosed with bipolar disorder when I was 30 years old. I told my manager, expecting that he might have some empathy or perception of someone that could be helped. He just dropped me. Everyone in the music business abandoned me.

Ken Duckworth:

Ronald.

Ronald Braunstein:

Yes?

Ken Duckworth:

Great clip, by the way.

Ronald Braunstein:

[crosstalk 00:17:34]

Ken Duckworth:

Yeah, that's a great clip, and I love that picture of you as a little bit, a fantastically handsome lad.

Ronald Braunstein:

What about now?

Ken Duckworth:

Obviously. It goes without saying. So what do you like about being the conductor of Me2? What's it like on a day-to-day basis? What do you derive pleasure from in the experience?

Ronald Braunstein:

Teaching and learning. I love teaching. I can teach them to listen to each other musically and also as people. So for an orchestra to function really well, people have to listen to each other, and they have to move together, and they have to feel the music together. They really have to work together as a single breathing organism. I find the Me2 Orchestra is so fluid and flexible. It also lets me be an excellent conductor and also vulnerable. So I can be their friend.

Ken Duckworth:

That's a beautiful answer. All right, Jordan. I want to encourage you to send your questions in, because you get a chance to talk to remarkable people in this conversation. Caroline, you're the cofounder. Roughly half the orchestra consists of people living with mental health conditions, and half have no diagnosis. When you were conceptualizing the orchestra, why did you want to make it open to everyone?

Caroline Whiddon:

That was really important to us right from the beginning. It came through in the discussion about whether or not we really wanted to be your standard support group, which is made up of just people living with a diagnosis, or whether we wanted to be a model for inclusivity. We immediately steered in that direction. Ronald and I had been working together at a different organization before he had the idea to work with people like him. One of the things we heard, regrettably, in that space, was that people suspected that Ronald had a mental illnesses, and they didn't know how to work with that. It was clear they didn't want to work with that. That was shocking not only because we have the ADA to actually keep things like that from happening in the workplace, but it was always that their perception of what it meant to have a bipolar disorder diagnosis was completely shaped by, I don't know, the extreme stories they'd heard in the media or some sort of misinformation they'd received. We thought, we just want Me2 to really reflect our ideal society, where people with and without a diagnosis are working together beautifully.

Ken Duckworth:

[inaudible 00:20:59] all right, Jordan, let's go to the next clip.

Ronald Braunstein:

One, two.

Carole Furr:

When I heard that they were starting an orchestra for people with mental illness, I was like, "Yeah, I'm there." I have major depression. I have borderline personality disorder, and I have attention deficit disorder. I think one of the metaphors is just picture somebody whose nerves are raw or somebody who has a case of sunburn, only it's their soul that has that sunburn. Everything you touch is going to hurt. I went to college at Harvard. I graduated with a degree in physics, and I haven't had a career that I've wanted to hold on to. I finally had to realize that was because of my mental illness. Come along to 30, 35, 40, all the time I'm thinking, boy, I'm not going to go back to a class reunion and I have nothing to show for my years. I really had a hard time not thinking that I was inferior, but I beat myself up over it for years.

Ken Duckworth:

So, Carole, what you're alluding to there is kind of the self-shame or self-stigma you were experiencing. I wanted to just ask if you could develop that idea and also how Me2 has been a force in that experience.

Carole Furr:

Thank you. I think it's surprising that we don't talk about self-stigma more, because I think we all experience it. What I think is the essence of stigma is judging. I mean, to me, stigma has two parts: There's a label, and there's a judgment associated with that label. I was very self-judging. I mean, as a person who went to Harvard and was at the top of my high school class, I thought that I was going to accomplish great things in my life. As I got older, I couldn't understand why I wasn't, because I hadn't really accepted that the mental illness was a permanent thing. I blamed myself for my failure to advance in the working world. I thought that the depression was something that, if I worked hard enough, I could overcome it, and that it wouldn't affect my life, my career path. So eventually I had to accept that it was part of me and that that wasn't my fault, that that didn't make me to blame. Just being around other people who have these diagnoses is a lot of what's made that possible for me to come to that level of acceptance.

Ken Duckworth:

In the Me2 Orchestra?

Carole Furr:

Yes.

Ken Duckworth:

That's fabulous.

Carole Furr:

I actually have visited NAMI support groups. I actually even facilitate NAMI support groups now, but initially I was kind of wary of those. Whereas when the orchestra came along, I wanted to join it because I was a musician anyway. I spent a lot of time in orchestras and bands, and so I knew I would have something in common with everyone, whether or not I could relate to them on the other level. Then it turned out to make a big difference.

Ken Duckworth:

Thank you, Carole. That's a great answer. I agree. It's a conversation we should have more often. Let's go to the next slide, Jordan. All right, so, Carole, it's a follow-up question. You didn't used to tell people you lived with a mental health condition or mental illness, especially employers. How did being part of this orchestra change that?

Carole Furr:

Well, it was gradual. I will say that even before I joined Me2, I would sometimes share it socially. But I didn't share it at work with anyone. I was hiding it, and I was really afraid of what people would say if they found out. I kind of remember the first time at a job after Me2 had started that I decided I wanted to tell someone. I took her to lunch, and after a while I said, "I have depression," and she said, "Yeah, I could kind of tell that."

Carole Furr:

I was like, well, that wasn't so hard. People do relate, and it's not a monstrous thing. So that kind of opened my eyes. I mean, seeing people weekly at the orchestra and talking about it just gradually made it easier, and I found ways to drop it in the conversation, and especially when it was possible to be humorous about it. I think it's best if we can laugh at ourselves, and everything is easier if it goes with humor. So I just started to drop those things.

I actually found a couple of jobs where lived experience was considered an asset, so that was pretty amazing. At the job I have now, I shared from the very beginning what was up with me, and I think it probably helped my boss know how to work with me and recognize when I was having problems. He's just been very adaptable, and I've been at that job for five years now.

Ken Duckworth:

It's a calculated risk though, right? Because not every boss is going to be like that. So you had to read it. So we're not giving advice-

Carole Furr:

Yeah, it is.

Ken Duckworth:

... that people should [crosstalk 00:27:45]

Carole Furr:

It is, but [crosstalk 00:27:46]

Ken Duckworth:

You have to read the play, right?

Carole Furr:

Yes. But after a while, I realized that, if I disclosed something and it led to negative consequences, then that was not the place I should be. So it was just [crosstalk 00:28:04]

Ken Duckworth:

That's helpful. If it's not a culture that is all in, then you can find another place to work. Well, there it is. All right, let's go to the next slide. Great answers, Carole. Let's go to the next slide. So this is to the documentary creators. What was important to you about making this documentary?

Margie Friedman:

I'll go first, I guess. I'm Margie. Well, first of all, we've always wanted to do something that would facilitate some kind of social change and discussion, but clearly we all know someone who's living with a mental illness, whether it's a friend, a family member or a colleague, so I think we felt strongly that this was a film that a lot of people could relate to, and certainly this story was an incredible story. I mean, once we saw what they were doing and spoke to them and to the musicians, we were just so impressed and knew that this was a film we just really wanted to make.

Barbara Multer-Wellin:

I have to add that I've lived with depression since I was a child, and I don't know if I'm on camera. I'm Barbara. I never felt like I was anything other than part of Me2, so it was a very personal film for me in a lot of ways. Like Margie said, it's very important to get this message out. We've referred to this as one of the last taboos. Even though mental illness is such a huge topic, particularly now after all we've gone through as a society in the last couple of years, it's still really hard to discuss it. There's mental illness in my family, and everybody always says, shh, shh, shh, don't talk about it. So this was something that had a lot of meaning to me on many levels.

Ken Duckworth:

Thank you. All right, let's go to the next question. What impressed both of you most about the musicians in this orchestra?

Margie Friedman:

Well, probably just about everything, but just a few things. One is their incredible courage in sharing their stories. We filmed with them for two years, and they were just so generous in opening up their lives to us and really expressing what they were experiencing. But the other thing that really impressed us, I think, or at least me is, when they had setbacks, which they did, and certainly even in the course of our filming, they got back up again. They didn't let their diagnosis get in the way of their life, and it didn't let them define them as a person. The other remarkable thing is that they could always go back to the orchestra, and they did. That was incredible for them to know that they had this group that they could always go back to who would ask no questions when they returned.

Barbara Multer-Wellin:

That gave them, I think, the courage and the ability to really take themselves out of the corner that they've been put in my society. As soon as you get a diagnosis, many times you're labeled. You're stigmatized like we've been talking about, and you're supposed to go home and not bother anybody. That's a terrible way to have to live your life. So in this case with the orchestra, they were out there. They were doing performances in public. They felt that they had a real role, and not just in their community, but to fight stigmatization and really say out loud. I remember when we first met one of the other characters in our film, Sandy, and the first thing she said to us was, "Mentally ill people have boyfriends, and they have jobs, and they have hobbies, and they have things they like to do. We're really like everybody else." We thought, yeah, that's what everybody needs to hear, because they are everybody else. They're us.

Ken Duckworth:

Thank you. Next question. Caroline, let's talk about what you've done in terms of the culture there. Are there practices that you've done to make it an open community applicable to other groups?

Caroline Whiddon:

Yeah. Well, one of the most important things we've done ... And this is so simple it almost seems silly, but we put a sign up on the door, whether it's both at our rehearsals and at our performances, that says, "You are entering a stigma free zone." The musicians have told us how much that impacts their experience. They walk through the door.

Caroline Whiddon:

They see this reminder that we're stigma free. So it's empowering, but it's also kind of a reminder that we want to make sure in this space that everybody feels safe. So just the power of those words is something that ... I think it's bigger than even we realized when we [crosstalk 00:33:08]

Ken Duckworth:

Literally a sign post?

Caroline Whiddon:

Literally, literally.

Ken Duckworth:

This is what we're about.

Caroline Whiddon:

When you think about it, we don't have stigma free zones, really, anywhere in our society. I mean, [inaudible 00:33:20] you walk into your doctor's office, do you see a declaration that this is a stigma free zone? You just don't see that. So I think that sign and that desire to pursue a safe space could exist [crosstalk 00:33:35]. It could be at the football practice. I almost said football rehearsal. That tells you something about how much I know about football.

Ken Duckworth:

Well, that's your orientation. It's rehearsal. It's rehearsal. [crosstalk 00:33:50]

Caroline Whiddon:

Right, right. I think it could apply in any number of areas. There just has to be that commitment and that intentionality around it.

Ken Duckworth:

That's great. That's really well said. Next question. Now the questions are starting to come in. So soon I'm going to be shifting to questions from the audience, so keep them coming. Carole, how has being part of an orchestra where acceptance and understanding are a priority made a difference for you? You were already doing this work in your own life. Then you joined the Me2 Orchestra. How has it impacted your experience?

Carole Furr:

Well, one of the things is that I have a tendency to isolate myself, especially when I'm experiencing depression. In my other orchestras, there were actually times when I would go to orchestra practice, but then not go in because I so much didn't want to be around other people. But I don't do that at Me2 Orchestra. At Me2 Orchestra I always go in, because even if I don't feel like going, I know that I will feel better after I do because I'm among my tribe, and there's acceptance and love. I can talk even about the struggles I'm having, something I never would have done at other orchestras.

Ken Duckworth:

The full you.

Carole Furr:

Yeah. One other thing is kind of an interesting thing about how the no judgment has spread beyond the topic of mental health. What I mean by that is musicians can be really judgmental of each other, and in a lot of orchestras, somebody will sneer or say something nasty when you hit a wrong note. That doesn't happen at Me2, absolutely does not happen. We have people who've just begun their instruments, and we have people who have been playing for a lifetime. Everyone gets along, and everyone understands that we need leeway.

Ken Duckworth:

So as Ronald said, it's a group of people that has to speak together, but shaming and snarkiness are just not part of the culture. It's fantastic. I wish I had any musical talent of any kind. Next question. Caroline, let's talk about some of the practical dimensions. You've accumulated a community of people who live with a vulnerability. Have you had experience with people who presented with symptoms, and how have you thought about that in terms of the community culture?

Caroline Whiddon:

Well, I'll say that it's very, very rarely been the type of thing that actually has been disruptive at all in a rehearsal, and I think that's something that, unfortunately, is surprising to a lot of people. They don't understand that, if you have bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, that these are actually episodic diseases and that you actually can achieve wellness. So that's one of the things that we're all learning from each other in the room is that the diagnosis doesn't mean that you're perpetually in a bad space. So more often than not, our rehearsals look like community orchestra rehearsals. They don't really look any differently. But when we do have somebody who's struggling or having a bad day and they come into a rehearsal, the most powerful thing we do is to listen.

Ronald and I spoke about this in the very beginning. We thought, are we equipped to manage a room full of people that have diagnoses? I have depression and anxiety. He's got bipolar disorder. What does that empower us to do? How much can we help people. So we started immediately making sure people understand that we're not doctors. We're not therapists. We've just been in a lot of therapy. So we use the skills we have to listen and to provide support. Every once in a while, sure, it'll mean that Ronald's conducting a rehearsal, and I'm down the hall with someone who needs to cry, who needs to have just a moment down the hall to collect and regroup. That's okay. You just do it.

Ken Duckworth:

It's a beautiful community. Let's take the next question. Ronald, one of the questions that already came in was about your experience in Julliard and in the super high-powered world of super high-end orchestra. I'm paraphrasing the question, but it very much relates to this question. What's it like to run this orchestra vis-à-vis the Vienna Philharmonic? I mean, it's a different environment, right? So what's your experience there?

Ronald Braunstein:

Well, the main thing is, when you're conducting a great orchestra, they have achieved as close to technical perfection as you can. You're dealing with them as a single entity. But in Me2 we treat each individual person as an individual. That's one thing. There aren't the same barriers between musicians in a professional orchestra as in ours. They get to know each other. During the pandemic, we couldn't rehearse, but we had weekly Zoom meetings with all of the orchestras together every week, so we got to know each other. I know every corner of every person's life [crosstalk 00:39:58]

Ken Duckworth:

Their dogs, the whole thing, right?

Ronald Braunstein:

Their dogs [crosstalk 00:40:05]

Caroline Whiddon:

And in some cases their chickens and their bunnies.

Ken Duckworth:

Yes, that's right. All right, that's a great answer, Ronald. Next question-

Ronald Braunstein:

The other one is that-

Ken Duckworth:

Oh, go ahead.

Ronald Braunstein:

Oh, sorry.

Ken Duckworth:

No, no, go ahead, finish.

Ronald Braunstein:

As far as conducting goes, basically, I conduct my orchestra the same way as I would any professional orchestra. I use all the means at my disposal. I use my hands. I sing for them. I cry for them. I tell them stories about the conductor. I rehearse them again and again. I get them to play their best, and to love their music even more every day.

Ken Duckworth:

So Berlin or Burlington, they get the full you.

Ronald Braunstein:

Yes, it's the same deal.

Ken Duckworth:

It's the same deal. Next question. All right, Carole, I'm going to adjust this question a little. Do you think stigma is improving? What are you observing from your vantage point? You've obviously thought about this a lot.

Carole Furr:

Yes, I think it is improving. It's a lot easier to talk about these things now than it used to be, but it's actually pretty hard for me to have a high-level view of that. It's more my own experience.

Ken Duckworth:

But in your own life [crosstalk 00:41:45]

Carole Furr:

I may answer the original question about how [crosstalk 00:41:47]

Ken Duckworth:

Why don't you go with that question? Yeah.

Carole Furr:

So I actually think the best way we can start erasing it is by telling people, and obviously we don't all have the luxury to do that, and there's a lot of reasons why we fear it. But the more we tell people, the more people can come to understand that we're not different.

Ken Duckworth:

So the hundreds of people watching this may benefit from this perspective. All right, great. Let's take the next question. Caroline, did you know how big this was going to be, how much it was going to change people's lives?

Caroline Whiddon:

Sure, Ken. We just looked into our little crystal ball.

Ken Duckworth:

You figured it all out.

Caroline Whiddon:

This is the best idea ever.

Ken Duckworth:

Best idea ever, yeah. It's going to be a winner.

Caroline Whiddon:

No clue, no clue. I mean, really, I think if we're being completely honest, as we should be-

Ken Duckworth:

Bring it on. Today's the day for honesty.

Caroline Whiddon:

Listen, Ronald and I were both kind of ... We'd been beaten down at this point 10 years ago when we met and we'd gone through this very gnarly experience in a professional space. We were trying to regroup and figure out how to go on with our lives. Ronald said, "I'm not going to go back to the professional world that I knew. I'm not going to put myself in that position to be stigmatized and, honestly, discriminated against again." So the only way for him to really move forward with his conducting career, which was the most important thing to me ... I mean, I'd seen the magic that he could do on the podium. I just wanted him to get back on the podium and start making music again. So in many ways it was about survival, and how do we move forward from this very negative place? We thought, sure, it'll be a great thing for other people if they'll even come forward. It was people like Carole who came out of the woodwork and said, "Yeah, actually, I want to be a part of this. We'll see how comfortable I become with this idea of being in a mental health orchestra and sharing my story," and it just grew from there. We're still surprised. I mean, week after week, with the stories and the feedback that we get from people saying this really is making a difference. We just feel very fortunate.

Ken Duckworth:

That's great. let's take the next question. Caroline, let's talk about the positive nature of this. Do you see this as a recovery vehicle, like a communication about recovery?

Caroline Whiddon:

Yeah. I think to a certain extent we are about recovery. We've about sharing those positive stories. As I think I mentioned earlier, I mean, I think people ... All maybe the average person on the street hears about is this guy who was having his worst possible day, and he ends up in the news, or the show they watched on TV last night, the movie that they saw last week that really showed the worst possible scenario and slaps a diagnosis on it. We don't hear about the guy who graduated from Julliard and conducted all over the world and happened to be doing all that with this mood disorder. I mean, that's incredible.

Ken Duckworth:

Well, now we know about him.

Caroline Whiddon:

Now we know about him, right?

Ken Duckworth:

Now we know him-

Caroline Whiddon:

[crosstalk 00:45:36]

Ken Duckworth:

... and love him. Right, exactly.

Caroline Whiddon:

The more we [crosstalk 00:45:38] stories out, the more [crosstalk 00:45:40]

Ken Duckworth:

That's what you're doing, right.

Caroline Whiddon:

... people's perceptions about what it means to live with a mental illness.

Ken Duckworth:

Great answer. Let's take the next slide. This is for our producers, Margie and Barbara. How do you hope Orchestrating Change will impact audiences?

Barbara Multer-Wellin:

Well, I have to say that it's been our mission, really, from the beginning to get this film seen as widely as possible, because every time we do a screening and we talk to people in the audience, people say, "I really learned a lot. I really never thought about it that way." We see it as carrying on the Me2 mission of making people really challenge what they think, what their preconceptions are about mental illness. Our secret hope of hope is that we can get a screening at every NAMI chapter across the country. We'd really like everybody to see it [crosstalk 00:46:32] start those conversations.

Margie Friedman:

Just to add to what Barbara said, I mean, we hope that the film will do what we're doing right now, which is to have a discussion and to really facilitate conversation about it, because so many people really are afraid to talk about it for the fear of stigma. So we hope that the film, which, by the way, is humorous and will make you laugh ... There are times when you may get a little bit tearful. It'll kind of take you on that gamut. But we really hope that people watching it will get, as Barbara said, the message of Me2.

Ken Duckworth:

Thank you. Next slide. All right, so here's some critical information. Go ahead.

Margie Friedman:

[inaudible 00:47:15] just share it with you that, if you would like a DVD for home use or if you'd like to do a screening and a panel discussion of your own, please do get in touch with us. As you can see, our email is OrchestratingDoc@gmail.com. Or you can visit us on our website. Also, we do have a recording of the full concert that's at the end of the film that's available as well. It's really quite fabulous.

Barbara Multer-Wellin:

I'll add too. If you have any questions for Me2 Orchestra, if you are interested in going to one of their concerts or becoming part of one of their ensembles, here is their info as well, info@Me2music.org.

Ken Duckworth:

Great. All right, I'm going to take some questions from the audience. I'm going to start with, where are these orchestras, and how can I see them? Let's just start with the most basic thing. We saw Burlington, Vermont, but I think there's so much more in Burlington, Vermont.

Caroline Whiddon:

Sure. So we founded the orc in Burlington, Vermont, and there is indeed still a full orchestra there. Then you also saw us in Boston in the film. That is now our home based and our administrative home base. So we have orchestras in Burlington, Vermont; Boston, Massachusetts. We have smaller programs that are growing in Portland, Oregon; Portland, Maine; Manchester, New Hampshire. We've got a group under discussion in LA right now. So what we're trying to do is really empower other people who are interested in making classical music under this social mission to be able to do that. We want to see Me2 wherever people want to make it.

Ronald Braunstein:

The main thing is, when a group wants to start a Me2 affiliate or ensemble or orchestra, the most important thing is for them to have someone who's really passionate, who really wants to take it in their hand to lead the development of the group, to lead it, someone who understands mental health. I guess, what did you say?

Caroline Whiddon:

Well, it'd be nice of a they're a great conductor too.

Ronald Braunstein:

Yeah, maybe that's [crosstalk 00:49:43]

Ken Duckworth:

In your spare time, it would be great if you had a gift for conducting.

Ronald Braunstein:

So I'm very happy to develop our whole conducting team, maybe have some summer masterclasses to keep us all on the same page. But to start with excellent talent with excellent leadership passion.

Ken Duckworth:

Next question, this is for Carole. Do you feel this orchestra replaces support groups? How do you think about it as compared to ... I'm going to change it to as compared to a support group. The question is replacing.

Carole Furr:

It doesn't replace them, and as a matter of fact, this is kind of a funny little historical detail. The first year that Me2 Orchestra existed, I really wanted time to talk with people and share more about my struggles and talk about their struggles too, so I actually started, basically, a supertime get together before the orchestra. I was like, "What should I call it?" Caroline said, "Well, don't label it Me2 because it's not the same as Me2." I said, "Okay, I'll call it Me3," so it was the Me3 support group for a year or two there. We got together and did the support part.

Ken Duckworth:

That's great. That's great. All right, so this is a question for Ronald and Caroline and Carole. What is your favorite performance that you did, and what was special about it? I know you may feel they're all special, but this is the question. Did you have a favorite performance or a moment that you recall that really sticks with you?

Ronald Braunstein:

Yes, I think our first concert was the most amazing because there's a certain, is this going to happen or not? When I give a downbeat, is there going to be any sound that will come out at all? That was the highlight, the highest moment so far. The second highest is our last concert, so I think we're going in the right direction.

Ken Duckworth:

Carole or Caroline, do you want to add to that?

Carole Furr:

Ronald, did we do a Dvorak symphony a long time back?

Ronald Braunstein:

Yeah, Dvorak 8th in [crosstalk 00:52:34]

Carole Furr:

That's what I thought. Now, see, I remember that one because I actually had an emotional connection to that piece of music from back when I was in high school in regional orchestra. Doing it again, I got really involved, and I just love that piece of music. I got the sense of flow that you get when you forget about yourself and you forget where you are. I got that during that concert. I can't say I've had that a lot of times in my adult life.

Caroline Whiddon:

That's great. I'll give a completely different answer from either of them, which is that, for me, a lot of the most memorable moments in concerts actually come when we're interacting with our audience members, because all of our performances include both music, and then we interweave these moments of storytelling where a musician like Carole or one of her colleagues in the orchestra gets up and speaks for two or three minutes, just talking about their life with mental illness and trying to erase some of the stigma through education and sharing. But we perform in some really different venues. I mean, we do recital halls and city halls and that kind of thing, but we also take music into places where people might be self-stigmatizing, such as hospitals, mental health recovery centers, correctional institutes. So we've played some prison concerts where the questions that are asked the responses to the music are so incredibly powerful and meaningful in and of themselves. I think those are the moments where we realize that, as open-minded as we're trying to be going into every situation, we've all got a little bit of stigma that we're carrying around too. We've got preconceived ideas about who we're going to meet in correctional institutes, in walk-in centers for people living on the street. I mean, these are incredibly powerful learning opportunities, these performances [crosstalk 00:54:46]

Ken Duckworth:

Yes.

Caroline Whiddon:

... not just about sharing music with others. It's about exposing ourselves to new communities that might be stigmatizing and growing through that.

Ronald Braunstein:

Yeah. I remember-

Ken Duckworth:

Thank you.

Ronald Braunstein:

... in one of those ... talking about places that are stigmatized and that don't usually have any beauty, when we go into a prison, I also had a stigma against prisoners, that they're just these bad people who did all these bad things. On our board, we had the chairman of-

Ken Duckworth:

Oh, the commissioner.

Ronald Braunstein:

... the commissioner of corrections. He said, "Well, it's just a bunch of people who made a lot of bad decisions." I thought, okay, great, but this is still going to be tough. It was tough there until one person in the back of the room said, "Well, I just want to know, do any of you know Beethoven's last string quartet?" I thought, wow, that means ... He said, "I can play-"

Caroline Whiddon:

Mary Had a Little Lamb.

Ronald Braunstein:

... on seven instruments. So, to me, that only means one thing. He wasn't a conservatory ... He wasn't a performer, but he was a music education ... He had a music education degree, which is a four-year program. Somehow he got mixed up with the wrong crowd, and it showed me how thin the line is between-

Ken Duckworth:

Well, said. That's well said. Margie and Barbara, how can I stream the documentary?

Barbara Multer-Wellin:

Well, it's not actually streaming yet, but we will put it up on our website when we have gotten to that point. However, if you are a member of PBS Passport, you can access it that way.

Ken Duckworth:

That's all on your website, what a PBS Passport is?

Barbara Multer-Wellin:

[crosstalk 00:56:58]

Margie Friedman:

All the information's on our website, and also how to, as we said, obtain a copy of the DVD for home use as well.

Barbara Multer-Wellin:

[crosstalk 00:57:04]

Ken Duckworth:

Go ahead.

Barbara Multer-Wellin:

... if you're a member of PBS, there's an extra thing called PBS Passport that gives you access to all their digital programming, so that's what PBS Passport is.

Ken Duckworth:

This is a question that is a little clinical, so feel free to say it's on your side of the line, pal, not mine. [inaudible 00:57:27] say that. How does music help people with anxiety and mood disorders? We know the community is brilliant, and we know the music is brilliant. How does music help people with these experiences?

Ronald Braunstein:

Are you kidding? Are you kidding?

Ken Duckworth:

They want your answer. It's not my question.

Ronald Braunstein:

Well, okay. Well, I think that when people are ... I can talk for myself and a lot of people I know that, when I'm studying music, when I'm performing music, when I'm thinking about music, like when I'm studying Beethoven, there's just not any room for any other thoughts, especially bad ones. So it gets rid of any anxiety that I have during that period. So does that answer your question?

Ken Duckworth:

Yeah. We're back to flow. Carole talked about flow. You're in the experience, and you're not in the other anxiety or mood state. You're in the experience of the music is what I heard you say.

Carole Furr:

Also, I can give a very clinical answer to this. One of Marsha Linehan's acronym things is please master the things you need every day to keep your mental health, and the master part is mastery. Do something once a day that makes you feel that you've achieved some mastery. That's something you can get from music.

Ken Duckworth:

Great answer.

Ronald Braunstein:

Even mastery of one note.

Carole Furr:

Oh, during the pandemic when I couldn't play french horn with other people, I started playing the ukulele. I've had one for a while, but I finally spent more time on it. Every time I learned a new chord, that was my mastery.

Ken Duckworth:

Fantastic, fantastic. Somebody asked, does anybody in the orchestra have a psychotic illness like schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder? In the documentary it says yes, but I think this is a question for you, just to develop that idea a little more.

Caroline Whiddon:

The answer is yes that we do have people with psychotic episodes that participate in the orchestra. But, again, as I said earlier, for the most part, if someone is coming to an orchestra rehearsal, more than likely, they are currently in such a state that they're able to participate actively. We have had members dissociate during rehearsal, really, truly go to a different space, just disconnect from reality. Again, we stay with them until they get out of the episode or until we can get some help. But, usually that's something ... It's always been something we've been able to manage ourselves.

Carole Furr:

Dylan, who's in the movie, has schizophrenia. He said, in the movie, that this was the first time he'd done anything with normal people since he first showed symptoms, since he was 18 or whatever. He had been only around people with mental illness until that time, and he felt like he wasn't part of the world.

Ronald Braunstein:

He said something that struck me, and it, really, almost made me cry each time I saw the movie, was when he said, "Me2 has given me an identity." Very proudly he said, "Now I can say ... Before I was just kind of roaming around in the woods," or something like that. Then he said, "But Me2 has given me an identity." When he meets someone, he can tell them, "I play bass in the Me2 Orchestra." That is a very important-

Caroline Whiddon:

It's powerful.

Ken Duckworth:

It's beautiful. It's absolutely beautiful. Well, here's a question we get on a lot of these Ask the Experts, and this is, again, into the clinical space. This is a woman who has a 22-year-old daughter who lives with bipolar disorder. Is there any experience that you've had that might help her, the mother, support her daughter in accepting her diagnosis? I can give a non-musical answer after your musical answer. I'm not asking this because I expect you to know. This is a very common problem that we come across at NAMI, and I thought you might have some insight into people who have joined who were ambivalent about their experience or people who joined always in an advanced state of recovery, like they've been in this place for a decade, and now they decided to do this, or [inaudible 01:02:22] people who are tiptoeing in, and this could help with their acceptance because they realize there's this amazing community of people.

Caroline Whiddon:

I like to think that what we're doing does help with our 20 something year olds that come into the program and have very recently perhaps gotten their diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Just by being in a group where they may meet someone else about their age and think, wow, that person is a great oboist. What a musician. They really seem to have it all together. Because we don't require self-disclosure at any point, maybe weeks down the road they find out this person also has the same diagnosis, and maybe they're kind of like, wow, they seem great. Maybe that sense of sharing that community space and seeing the other people who are accepting and doing well with the diagnosis, that maybe that makes a difference. But, again, that's about community and [crosstalk 01:03:27] and not at all clinical. So I'd love to hear your answer.

Ronald Braunstein:

Really [crosstalk 01:03:35]

Ken Duckworth:

So the 20s are hard. You're developing an identity, and then you're taking on something that carries negative social valuation. You're being asked to not only figure out who you are, are you lovable, can you find your way in this world, you have to integrate this very powerful idea. So I have tremendous empathy for people in their 20s. I'm patient. Just from my perspective, I take the long view on this because it's not an ordinary person who, at 21 years old, says, "I've got it. I take my meds. I have a regular schedule. I'll stop drinking, even though all my mates are drinking." It's a process of learning and acceptance. What you're and in the community is incredible. You're creating a whole nother space based on a whole nother gift and talent that enables people to say, "I can be in this club." So that's one of the reasons we wanted to have you because it's so beautiful.

There is a doc who's done a lot of work on this. His name is Xavier Amador. His book is called I Am Not Sick, I Don't Need Help. Dr. Amador, A-M-A-D-O-R ... His essential point is you win this argument on the strength of your relationship, not on the strength of your argument. So you don't hit the person over the head and say, "You have condition A, and you need help." Instead you love the person, connect with them, listen to them, get alongside of them and say, "What is it that you would like, and how can I support you?" So I think it's an advanced strategy.

The other person to take a look at is Bill Miller. Bill Miller invented the field of motivational interviewing, so if you say, "Ken, stop eating ice cream," I will say, "Heck with you, I'm eating ice cream," right? I like ice cream. So Bill Miller's idea of motivation interviewing, developed with addiction, is inside of each of us, it's like there's a committee that holds all of our different opinions.

Ken Duckworth:

When you press on one side, the other half of the committee pops up and says, "No, actually, we're going to have all the ice cream we want. It's none of your business." This idea, again, is you join with people and find ways that they're motivated. So they want to have a good night's sleep. You want that for them. You start with that. That's your common area of agreement.

So both Bill Miller and Xavier Amador have both spent their lifetime trying to work this question. I would just recommend those resources to you if you are contended with this, and be gentle with yourself. This is a very big task to take on in your 20s. I'll just say it's a very hard task. So it's a hard question, but I thought I would ask it because you've been observing communities of people, and you've seen some people gather more acceptance along the way.

Ronald Braunstein:

From a conductor's point, when everything is going along fine and then there's a transition in the tempo, either it has to get suddenly louder or softer or slower or faster, before you can change that tempo, you have to be with the tempo exactly. You have to be totally synchronized with that tempo, which requires you to have your ears so open so that you can perceive exactly what the tempo in the orchestra is and what your perception of it is. Once you get that in synchronicity, then basically any change that you make, any transition will be successful.

Ken Duckworth:

Well said.

Caroline Whiddon:

[crosstalk 01:07:48] for our relationship too. I will say, Ken, everything you just said rings true, and definitely when we're in sync, I can say to him, "It's time to go to bed. It's time to eat dinner." It's time to do all these things that are good for your condition, for this bipolar disorder, and help him in that way. But until you've got that relationship with someone, it can be very hard to [crosstalk 01:08:18]

Ken Duckworth:

And have created a culture in your relationship where you talk about it, right?

Caroline Whiddon:

Exactly.

Ken Duckworth:

This is one of the many challenges people face. Can you accept feedback from loved ones without feeling defensive? This is kind of advanced recovery. It's not easy.

Caroline Whiddon:

It's hard in your 20s, and it ain't easy in your 60s.

Ken Duckworth:

Yep, I'm there. All right, I'm going to give everybody an opportunity to make one final comment, whatever it might be. So, Barbara, I'm going to start with you.

Barbara Multer-Wellin:

I just want to thank you and everyone at NAMI for giving us this opportunity and hope that everybody gets a chance to see the film.

Ken Duckworth:

Great. Margie?

Margie Friedman:

I just want to pick up on what Barbara said. We're so grateful for your doing this, and we certainly hope that this has facilitated discussion and that people, if they do see the film, will sit down and talk with their loved ones and to their friends and really talk about it. We actually do have a free discussion guide also on our website that people are welcome to download.

Ken Duckworth:

Carole?

Carole Furr:

Well, thank you all, you 220 participants, for coming to hear us. I feel pretty special that you came to listen. Watch the documentary. You'll like it.

Ken Duckworth:

Caroline?

Caroline Whiddon:

Just to echo the appreciation for the space to be able to talk about what we do, and we do hope that the film itself especially is inspiring to other people. If you have any questions at all about our Me2 and how we work or where we're headed next, we'd love to hear from you. You can find us at Me2Music.org.

Ken Duckworth:

Great. All right, Ronald, why don't you close this amazing conversation out with anything you'd like to say?

Caroline Whiddon:

Oh, no.

Ken Duckworth:

Here we go.

Ronald Braunstein:

No, no. The only thing I'd like to do is, as everyone is doing, acknowledging ... Let me just change it. Barbara and Margie, thank you so much for helping so many people.

Barbara Multer-Wellin:

Thank you, Ronald. You're doing the same.

Ronald Braunstein:

Just say thank you.

Barbara Multer-Wellin:

I said thank you you're doing the same thing.

Ken Duckworth:

All right, so this is a fun and compelling conversation. It's the first time I ever heard the word Dvorak in any of the 15 years of Ask the Expert. I mean, it was one of a kind fantastic, for many reasons, but also for that reason. I want to hand it back to our chief executive officer, Dan Gillison. Dan?

Daniel Gillison:

Thank you very much. This has been an incredible session. I really appreciate you all so very much. We often say people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care, and what you shared with us today demonstrates how much you care. Having a daughter that played in a university orchestra who now is president of a local community orchestra, I personally understand the power of music and the power of connections and the power of caring. We like to say meet people where they are. I'll just add a little footnote to that, not where society wants them to be. So this is about you guys meeting people where they are. As you said earlier, everyone wants to belong, and Me2 ... There's this quote. "Me2 gave me my identity," so thank you for what you do. We appreciate you, and we'll make sure that the information and the link to the video is available to all of NAMI. We appreciate you more than you could ever know. Music and classical music really does change lives, and it actually helps so many. So thank you for what you do.

For what you have navigated in terms of stigma, we appreciate how you have navigated that stigma, and in spite of what society has said, you've said, no, and created a platform for others. So, Ronald, thank you for that. To Carole, Caroline, Margie and Barbara, thank you as well. Ken, for your excellent facilitation as always, I always say that NBC, CBS and ABC are missing an incredible host, but NAMI, NAMI, has you, and we are so appreciative of having you. Our network is larger than NBC, CBS and ABC, just so you know.

What I want to say is save the dates. These Ask the Experts are for you, our audience, and for your networks. Our next one will be on Thursday the 4th of November at the same time, 4:00 p.m. There we'll feature Dr. Gail Daumit from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. The next one will be with Dr. Christine Crawford. It will be on the 2nd of December, and she is the associate medical director of NAMI. These are for you. This is for your learning and for our growth, so we appreciate you participating in these.

I would be remiss if I did not say a couple of things in terms of the wrap up. We want to make sure that you remember, as you see over my digital shoulder, you are not alone, and it is about all of us together. With that said, let me just make sure that you see the footnote here. NAMI Ask the Expert is an informational webinar series and is not intended to provide medical advice on any specific topic or for any specific individual. The series is made possible through the generous support of people like you. If you're enjoying these programs and this free program, please consider donating. Our work is made possible because of donations. We're a not for profit, so please consider us to donate.

Daniel Gillison:

In closing, remember, you are not alone. The last thing I want to say is, when we talk about not alone, we also have to talk about the productions. How do we bring these to you? We bring these to you because of an incredible staff and a staff that cares as well and does this work seamlessly. So like Ken Duckworth, our incredible host and network host, if you will ... I'm not trying to get you a new job, Ken, please. We need to make sure you know that.

Ken Duckworth:

That's good. If you need to see me after class if I'm in trouble, just let me know Dan.

Daniel Gillison:

So with that said, I just wanted to say that, you know what, we want to thank Teri Brister, Jordan Miller, Jessica [inaudible 01:14:57] and Leah Wentworth. This is possible because ... When we open the curtains and you're seeing the production, it's because of them. So thank you to Teri, Jordan, Jessica and Leah and to Ken Duckworth and to the Me2 Orchestra. Thank you. I hope to hear you somewhere in person at some point in time. I love the woodwinds, the percussion, the strings. It's all just incredible, and I can't wait to-

Carole Furr:

You forgot the brass.

Daniel Gillison:

[crosstalk 01:15:27] you know what, I left that out, Carole, because I wanted you to have the last sound bite. So [crosstalk 01:15:36] we're here for you. Thank you all, and we hope you have a great close to your weekend and a wonderful weekend. Bye now.