

**2015 Chicago Symphony Orchestra Performance  
Pre-Concert Lecture U-M Musicology Professor Steven Whiting:  
Reflections by Participants**

While participants enjoyed the performance of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, having the chance to hear U-M Musicology Professor Steven Whiting before the show was mentioned again and again in a post-event survey to be what made the evening a special experience for the doctors-in-training.

Many participants commented on how the pre-concert lecture gave them “the opportunity to appreciate the performance with more intention and depth.” Participants found that “meeting with a knowledgeable artist who was both passionate about music and gifted at sharing their passion with others, was the highlight of the night.” Whiting, a riveting speaker whose “wit and musical acuity” engaged the participants, made “historical connections between the composers.” When he spoke about Mahler’s and Beethoven’s intentions when writing their symphonies, it “changed the entire experience of the subsequent performance.” Some participants came to the event with a lot of prior musical experience; one such participant shared that despite having listened to Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup> many times, Whiting’s “analysis (which is far too dry a word to describe it) changed the way I listened to the performance.” Others came with a limited musical background, and came away with thoughts like this: “I often wish I had a better understanding of classical music, and his talk gave me enough preparation and excited anticipation to enjoy the concert in a way I never have before.”



While Whiting’s pre-concert lecture was intended mainly to provide a guiding template to Mahler’s 1<sup>st</sup> and Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup>, participants drew connections between Whiting’s comments and their medical professions. Some themes included the “value of perception and listening, the beauty of connection, and the importance of understanding history.”

Several participants found these similarities in professions in imagined stories they found in the music. For instance, Whiting made a comment that one grateful participant “found particularly profound, comparing the mindfulness of fully listening to the music as akin to holding vigil over a sick patient, staying attune to the rise and fall of the music as to the changes in vital signs.” Another participant

reflected that they “imagined the [musical] pieces as telling stories from the hospital [such as] the sadness of illness, and the triumph of treatment.”

Other participants found connections that were had more to do with the culture of each profession. For instance, when Whiting was asked about the distinct sounds of each orchestra, and in answering spoke about the homogenization of the desired sounds across orchestras, a participant shared that they felt practiced medicine was also becoming more homogenous across the world. Another example is a participant who found that Whiting made a “really insightful comment about how practice is really breaking problems up into small parts and then fixing them. He emphasized how you learn this when practicing music, and it's really a lesson that can be applied to all aspects of life, including medicine.”

No less importantly, many participants commented on the “joy of life,” inspiration, and rejuvenation of their passion for their own work that they felt after attending the performance and through hearing Whiting’s passionate remarks before the performance. One person commented, “The experience of unraveling the layers of meaning in great music is replenishing to the soul.

Particularly in the world of medicine and medical school, infused as it with emotional challenges, sources that both ground and elevate us become all the more essential.”

Another participant shared that “buried in lectures, biochemistry, and what seems to be abstract physiology in the pre-clinical years, this was a necessary reminder of why we are all in this together: to allow for more life. Life is exponentially bigger when we allow ourselves to exist within the world beyond the library and classrooms -- and especially a world lit by the beauty of art and music. If we lose sight of what we are fighting for as doctors -- to increase and improve the quality of our precious and fleeting moments on earth -- then we will lose our motivation to move forward.”



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