



MUSIC *for a* While

Guidelines for Musicians

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Overview

The purpose of this handbook is to orient musicians who wish to contribute their artistry to an environment of care through playing in public lobbies at Johns Hopkins Medicine. In it we address key artistic considerations for program design and delivery. If you are interested in playing for the Music for a While program, please read these guidelines before applying. If selected, you will be expected to demonstrate your understanding of the information in this handbook through your artistic practice.

Entering the hospital environment can be stressful. Live music provides a welcoming presence upon entering and when traveling through the hospital. Music can lift spirits while waiting for appointments and enhance the environment of care. The aim of Music for a While is to create public access to music within the Johns Hopkins Medicine environment to elevate mood and reduce anxiety among those who visit, work, and are cared for within the hospital.

Music at Johns Hopkins Medicine

Music for a While is part of an extensive partnership between the Peabody Institute and Johns Hopkins Medicine's Office of Well-Being and Department of Service Excellence. The Peabody Institute and Johns Hopkins Medicine together have developed curated, site-specific programs in high-stress contexts, leveraging the power of music and dance to provide positive distraction, entertainment, and creative engagement to support well-being and recovery.

Through the Music for a While and Sound Rounds programs and in collaboration with the Program in the Arts, Humanities, & Health, the Office of Well-Being, and the Department of Service Excellence, Peabody provides a platform and support for qualified musicians from the Peabody Institute and the broader Baltimore community to bring their skill to Johns Hopkins Medicine. Artists play in many settings across the hospital, from intimate in-room visits and on-unit hallways to lobbies and concert stages on the East Baltimore campus. Musicians reach many different members of the hospital community, including

patients, family members and guests, and hospital staff. The Peabody Institute and the Office of Well-Being also support virtual and onsite music-making activities at the hospital by providing classes, and workshops for patients and care providers.

Arts in Health

The activities in the Music for a While program fall in the discipline of Arts in Health, undertaken by artists whose aims are aesthetic. Feedback from patients, caregivers, and staff at Johns Hopkins Hospital indicates that live music has a positive effect on their mood and reduces their stress. Arts in Health practitioners enhance the clinical environment through art-making, education, and engagement through the arts. While health benefits may result from engagement with Arts in Health programs, the practitioners' aims are aesthetic rather than therapeutic, with a focus on positive distraction, entertainment, and creative engagement.

By way of contrast, music therapists working in hospitals focus primarily on individualized health interventions addressing physical, psychological, and social outcomes. While music therapists may engage with patients in ways that appear similar to those of Arts in Health practitioners, their aims are clinical and therapeutic.

Qualifications of Arts in Health Practitioners

- **Artistic Excellence:** As in any other performance context, it is essential for musicians of all genres in a healthcare setting to demonstrate exemplary technique and musicianship. Artistic excellence lays the groundwork for profound aesthetic experiences and for creating meaningful connections with listeners.
- **Flexibility:** Along with artistic excellence, successful performers in healthcare settings are ready to adapt and respond to their surroundings. This includes having a broad range of repertoire appropriate for many different situations and being receptive to feedback from healthcare workers, caregivers, and patients, as well as being aware of the emotional and physical state of those present.
- **Knowledge of Healthcare Culture:** Hospitals and other healthcare settings include a complex network of people, roles, and emotions. As artists stepping into this environment, it is important to have a basic understanding of the culture and day-to-day inner workings of healthcare settings. Musicians should have prior experience in healthcare settings and knowledge of healthcare culture. This could include playing in a healthcare setting, non-musical volunteering with patients, or personal experience visiting or staying in a hospital.¹
- **Empathy:** Empathy is the ability to be present with others and to imagine yourself 'in their shoes' so that you can gain an appreciation of what they may be feeling and experiencing. Music has a unique power, when introduced in a responsive manner, to build and reinforce experiences of connection and empathy in the hospital environment.

¹ Interested musicians can guest on a MFAW musician's shift, and ensembles may be invited to play for special events/occasions.

Listeners in the Hospital Environment

Playing in a public lobby as part of the Music for a While program differs in fundamental ways from playing in more traditional performance contexts. In the hospital, musicians are not “center stage” or on stage at all. They are not the focal point of what is happening but become part of the environment of care. It is helpful to think about how the space and the people within it both circumscribe and inspire musical creativity.

Public spaces in healthcare settings are full of distractions, bustling with movement as well as private conversation, alarms, device noises, and booming announcements. None of these distractions are encountered on the concert stage many performers typically inhabit, and it often takes some time for artists to become acclimated to making music in this type of environment.

Musicians may experience playing in public spaces or virtually as being relegated to playing “background music,” which can carry negative connotations for artists accustomed to being onstage. This viewpoint does not take into account the power that live music may have within a context where people can encounter it unexpectedly or in the midst of other activities. Rather than being in the background, music can assert the presence of humanity and dignity within a complex, stressful environment.

There are no audience members here but instead people going about their work, visiting loved ones, or waiting for medical care. These people may include patients, family members, visitors, care providers and other hospital staff—who may or may not be interested in what is being offered. Musicians should not expect acknowledgement or applause. It may seem like there is no one listening at all. This may not be accurate. In the healthcare environment, people are often preoccupied with other concerns and may be taking in the music and/or taking care of themselves in ways that are not evident.

[“Empathy: The Human Connection to Patient Care”](#) is a helpful video from the Cleveland Clinic exploring empathy in healthcare settings. The

ability to meet people where they are is a fundamental tool for musicians in healthcare.

Leaving one's comfort zone and engaging in a new practice of connecting with others through music can lead to feelings of discomfort. The hospital environment can be challenging for those not accustomed to it. Training modules on orientation to healthcare culture help musicians begin to normalize the experience of being in a hospital and equip them to operate skillfully and appropriately. In addition, these musical guidelines provide a road map for musicians beginning a practice in healthcare.

Musical Considerations and Programming Guidelines

Due to the constantly changing dynamics in healthcare settings, performers need to adjust to the situations around them, approaching programming and playing responsively and flexibly. This includes carefully researching choice of repertoire, considering length and structure of the program, adjusting based on noise levels in the space, and being sensitive to the responses of listeners.

Scale and Timbre

It is important to recognize that public spaces at Johns Hopkins Medicine vary in terms of noise levels as well as proximity to workstations or clinical treatment areas. For this reason, it is important to find the right scale of music for the specific location. Acoustic rather than amplified music is expected in most circumstances. Soloists and smaller ensembles of 2-4 players are generally more appropriate than larger groups. Piano, guitar, winds, harp, and strings are commonly preferred over brass and operatic singing. However, in certain contexts, the bigger scale is exactly right: for example, a brass quintet or large vocal ensemble during the holiday season. During special moments, music in public spaces can be more attention-grabbing, but for most situations, music is most effective when it helps create a restorative environment.

Format

Although there can be engagement with listeners in some settings, typically public spaces in the hospital are not conducive to programming that requires audience participation. For various reasons, those within the healthcare environment may simply need some personal space. When playing in person, it is not necessary to bow, introduce yourself, or announce your pieces unless listeners approach you and ask.

At times people may make musical requests or want to interact. It may also be appropriate for the musician to reach out to listeners if the situation seems to invite it. People may want to connect with the

musician for many reasons, music-related and non-musical. Always be open to interactions that occur naturally or are initiated by listeners and engage as seems appropriate. These interactions can often be very meaningful and are one of many reasons music is beneficial in healthcare settings. In the virtual environment, you may receive medical comments or questions to which you are not equipped to respond; please refer listeners to their healthcare providers or escort them to a hospital staff person nearby should this occur.

Duration

Appropriate program and repertoire length can vary greatly depending on the time of day, traffic flow, and other activities within the space. The most important thing to consider when determining the length of the program and repertoire choices is flexibility. Circumstances may necessitate shortening pieces, eliminating repeats, or drawing quickly to a close. It is helpful to have repertoire of different lengths, including a number of short pieces. It is also appropriate to play sections rather than whole works.

When playing in the hospital, you may want to consider incorporating intervals of silence in between pieces and continually assess the acoustics and dynamics of the space. Experiment with various lengths and styles of musical selections to observe how artistic choices influence the environment; pause and readjust based on your observations.

Musicians may find that the practice of playing short improvisatory or warm-up passages before launching into something more substantial can be useful in this context, providing the opportunity to assess the space, acoustics, and “mood” of the surroundings.

Volume

Acoustics in healthcare settings are strategically designed to minimize noise: for this reason, performers can expect to find dry acoustics in most cases. Musicians should be aware that sound may not travel as easily as it does in a concert hall. Depending on the instrumentation or repertoire, performers may find they have to focus more attention on balance and projection than usual. Some lobbies, however, are built with very high ceilings, overlooking balconies, and other features that can create an ideal acoustical environment.

Unlike traditional concert settings, it is important that those listening can communicate easily at all times in the space. If the music is so loud that listeners are forced to raise their voices in order to be heard clearly, it may impact the safety of patients and interfere with staff's ability to accomplish necessary tasks. Taking a sound level reading with an app like NIOSH's Sound Level Meter can be helpful in assessing ambient noise levels to determine how best to program and where to play within the space.

By continuing to assess what is happening around them, musicians can meet the space and people within it where they are, neither overplaying nor underplaying. At times quiet music is most appropriate, and in other moments strength is exactly what the situation requires. Pausing to allow competing noises to cease (e.g. loudspeaker announcements or delivery carts) is often advisable.

Genres

There are many different genres and styles of music that are effective in healthcare settings. It is helpful to offer repertoire that listeners may recognize, such as pop songs from different eras and genres, jazz tunes, selections from musical theater, well-known classical melodies, or folk songs. Spiritual music should be incorporated with care, as it is important to respect the religious or non-religious traditions of all in the environment and to be musically responsive to the variety of cultures served in the hospital. Offering a variety of genres will increase

the likelihood of listeners hearing familiar music within a stressful context.

Research on the use of recorded and live music suggests that offering choice of repertoire and access to personally preferred selections enhances music's beneficial effects. For these reasons, it is essential that musicians playing in the hospital to explore repertoire that will appeal across ages, styles, and cultures, and to respond to requests as best as they are able. If it is not possible to play what has been requested, it is appropriate to respond by offering something of a similar style, or to ask for additional requests to find some common ground.

While accessibility should be at the forefront of making repertoire selections, it is important that musicians are personally committed to all musical selections they offer – it is never appropriate to “play down” to listeners. Best practice in music in healthcare is grounded in artistic excellence and authenticity.

Choosing and Adapting Music

Musicians in healthcare have context-specific considerations when selecting repertoire and choosing how to play it. They must take into consideration the emotional and lyrical content of the music, as well as background information, to support healing and minimize the possibility of negative response. There are no “prescriptions” for music in healthcare, and no musical selection works in all circumstances. No two people respond to musical material in the same way, and changes in life circumstances can alter an individual's response to a piece of music.

When choosing and preparing repertoire, here are some suggestions based on best practices in the field of Arts in Health:

- **Mood:** In most situations, unless requested, avoid music that evokes sadness and instead select music that calms/relaxes

and energizes/uplifts. Because the primary purpose of Music for a While is to reduce anxiety, it is best to avoid music that is tonally or rhythmically aggressive. Staying mainly in major keys or neutral sorts of sonorities is generally a safe bet. A compromise can be made for music in minor keys with a brisker tempo.

- **Lyrical content** must be taken into consideration. The meaning of certain song lyrics might carry negative associations for listeners and should be avoided. For example, “Yesterday” by The Beatles is a well-known song, but its lyrics and sentiment could take people to a place of sadness; the lyrics focus on longing for the past in the midst of present troubles.
- **Pace:** Consider the tempo and number of notes of the music. A piece shouldn’t be played so fast that it causes listeners to feel rushed or anxious, nor so slow that it lacks any energy. One way to test is to think about what kinds of imagery you associate with a particular piece. For example, Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Flight of the Bumblebee” might be too agitating and stressful for this context. “The Swan” by Saint-Saëns has a moderately slow pace with ascending scale passages that illustrate upward flight and might be a more appropriate choice for uplifting others.
- **Variety:** Keep in mind the need for varying genres and styles in order to connect effectively with others’ preferences. In a lobby, people often move through quickly and won’t have the time to hear complete pieces or sets.
- **Historical context:** Seek to know and understand how the music has been programmed and received in the past, as well as information about its historical context. Because of individual culture and experience, a listener might have a very different association with a piece of music than you do.
- **Flexibility:** Artistic liberties can be taken when adapting repertoire so that one can make the piece less intense. One can change tempo, dynamic range, tone color, etc. as well as cut or repeat sections to make a piece suitable in this

context. Ostinatos or rapid passagework can be omitted to highlight the contour of a melody. Feel free to have fun with it and be creative!

- **Presence:** It's not just about playing the music with a certain tempo, dynamic range, tone color, etc. but how you use those elements of performance to convey relaxation and rejuvenation to your listener. This happens as much with your body alignment, gestures, facial expressions, breathing, and overall ease as with the sounds of the music you make.

Please note that whatever plan you may have made in advance may need to be discarded and redirected in response to circumstances in the environment. Being ready with well-rehearsed, appropriate repertoire is essential, but you will assess and likely adapt your repertoire during your sessions.

Creating Connection

A guiding principle for musicians when considering repertoire for healthcare settings is to choose music that both resonates with one's own artistry and fosters connection with listeners. A few points to consider:

- Select music with which you have a deep emotional connection. When the musician is vulnerable enough to let the music speak through them and to share parts of themselves, this openness facilitates connection with patients, families, staff, and caregivers.
- However, seek music that is aesthetically pleasing to those listening *as well as* yourself. This may mean that the atonal or avant garde repertoire that appeals to you is not the best fit for your listeners. Seek to find common ground—pieces you are authentically passionate about that fit the context.

- When you learn more about your listeners, you can find music that allows them to reminisce and connect with parts of themselves by simply playing the music they love and identify with. For example, if a person in their sixties asks you to play James Taylor, you might in doing so connect them with their youth, a past romance that they have fond memories of, etc. Explore how you can make connections with listeners' past experiences and cultures.

Programming

Creating a program or set list for a hospital context requires the musician to interrogate programming conventions utilized in other performance venues. Musicians in healthcare become conscious of these programming “defaults,” push back against them, and try new approaches such as interspersing genres, breaking down larger works or stylistic groupings, building medleys from diverse short pieces or sections of longer pieces, reprising works already played, and even beginning with long tones or improvisation. It is important to take particular care to plan how to begin and end a session, as the introduction and cessation of music will transform people's experience of the space.

An essential element in any program is the silence between pieces and phrases. In the hospital context, time for breath and release are especially important. It is essential that the musician becomes comfortable with leaving space for listeners to breathe. This practice begins in the musician's own breathing body.

Below are additional ideas for consideration when designing and delivering a program:

- Take a planned set list and mix up the order
- Choose a new starting piece to enter into the space with different energy

- Swap out closing piece to conclude in a new way
- Create mini-sets/medleys to string styles and pieces together, creating pauses in between sets
- Frame the piece differently during rehearsing to invite a new way to hear it – share this new discovery with listeners
- Repeat a piece in the session to deepen awareness and listening
- Incorporate one or two new pieces in each session, and swap others out
- Try different tempos, different pacing, or looping sections that seem particularly appropriate
- Be prepared to shorten a piece by eliminating repeats, sections, or closing at a cadence
- Scrap the set list altogether and play what comes in response to the space and moment
- Begin with improvisation, long tones, or preluding – or insert in between pieces

If you are new to playing in a healthcare environment, you will likely navigate situations you have not encountered before. By reading these guidelines carefully and understanding the limitations on performing in this context, you will be more properly equipped to contribute music's healing presence to the environment of care. By drawing on your technique, musicianship and repertoire knowledge, and through preparing appropriate selections, taking the time to assess the space before and during playing, remaining flexible and responsive, and receiving feedback from mentors, hospital staff and listeners, you will build the skillset of an Arts in Health practitioner.

Required Training for Program Delivery

After being accepted into the Music for a While program, musicians need to complete Peabody training and all hospital orientation and training required of Johns Hopkins Medicine volunteers before being able to begin playing. Orientation includes an online application, confidentiality form, background check, and six online training modules. Peabody training includes topics such as selecting repertoire, intentional programming, and virtual audience engagement. Hospital training modules cover critical hospital policies regarding patient privacy, infection control and handwashing protocols, fire and safety information, and standards of behavior. When training is completed, you will observe the work of an experienced Music for a While musician and will be provided with feedback as you start. Thereafter, you will be accompanied on your shifts and receive additional training as needed.

Interested in Applying to Play for Music for a While at Johns Hopkins Medicine?

If you are an experienced performer interested in volunteering for Music for a While at Johns Hopkins Medicine, please fill out a [digital application](#). If you have questions about the process or the program, please contact Lara Bruckmann, Arts in Health Program Manager, lbruckm1@jhu.edu.

