

Conductor started Boston ensemble for musicians with mental illness: ‘I wanted to form an orchestra of people like me’

By David Weininger Globe Correspondent, October 9, 2019



The ME2/Orchestra performs at South Station in a scene from the film “Orchestrating Change.”

Ronald Braunstein’s conducting career started with a bang when he won the Herbert von Karajan International Conducting Competition in 1979. A clearly talented and well-trained musician, he soon began working with orchestras in Europe and the US. It seemed like the upbeat to a prestigious career.

Yet even early on, Braunstein noticed that his relationship to an orchestra depended substantially on his mood. One year, he said, “I’d feel invincible,” conducting with authority and brilliance, but on returning the next year “I would miss rehearsals, I’d be too depressed and I’d cancel.” Braunstein, who is now 64, was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 1985, but he didn’t take it all that seriously. He pressed on, riding a yo-yo of brilliance and incapacitating despair.

Unbeknownst to him, the stigma of mental illness was trailing his career. Orchestras “would kind of lose confidence in me,” he said in a recent phone interview. “Always a lot of talk about how I was mentally ill, which they had heard from the last place.” He told his European manager about his diagnosis, expecting sympathy. The manager promptly dropped him.

Matters came to a head at a certain engagement where, Braunstein said, “I hit a wall” and was fired. “At that point I realized I had better do something, because I didn’t think I was going to be able to pull myself together again.”

Braunstein decided, in his 50s, to start treatment. But he also decided to get out of what he called “the rat race” of conducting to form an orchestra of people living with mental illness. Together, they could make music without the stigma he experienced. Or, as he put it during the interview, “I wanted to form an orchestra of people like me so that I would be safe.”

Thus was the birth of the Me2/Orchestra, billing itself as the first orchestra specifically for people with mental illness and those who support them. Its membership is open to anyone who can play an orchestral instrument. There are no auditions, no questions as to whether an applicant has been diagnosed with a mental health condition. Many of its performances take place in psychiatric hospitals, shelters, and prisons.

The orchestra’s beginnings were humble — seven people showed up to the first rehearsal in Burlington, Vt., in 2011. Yet it has grown — almost entirely by word of mouth, Braunstein said proudly — to an extent that the Boston-based orchestra numbers some 60 people. Affiliated ensembles also exist in Manchester, N.H., and Portland, Ore. “That’s what a need there is for people who live with mental illness and play instruments,” Braunstein said.

Braunstein and the orchestra are the subjects of “Orchestrating Change,” a documentary by Margie Friedman and Barbara Multer-Wellin. The film, which will have five screenings in the Boston area beginning Oct. 12, paints the portrait of an ensemble that functions as much as surrogate family as an orchestra. Several Me2/Orchestra musicians tell stories, some harrowing, about how mental illness upended their lives. There are scenes where orchestra members fail to show up for rehearsal because they’re “in a crisis,” as one puts it. The ensemble’s importance transcends questions about whether particular performance standards are met.

“It’s been out of this world,” said Sandra B., a flutist who joined the Boston orchestra when it started in 2014. She said that she’d first become aware of

her mental illness during an episode of severe depression at 16. At various times she's been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a type of anxiety disorder, trauma, and ADHD, but she said that today her symptoms are in "a remission-like" state and don't much impact her everyday life.

"It's a really open space, where people are accepted no matter what they're going through," Sandra said of the experience of playing with Me2. "If someone's having a bad day, it's understood that they're having a rough time and that's really accepted. Nobody's judged for having a diagnosis or being different than other people. It helps a lot of people forget what's going on and gives them a space where they know they're accepted and we all know we're here to play music."

Being filmed talking about her illness was intense, Sandra said, especially since it meant "coming out" about her condition. "Until this came out I was still very much in the closet about this." In addition to being personally freeing, "I also think knowing that the stories out there could help somebody was a big deal for me. You never know who you might help."

Braunstein said that the experience of watching the movie was difficult because it showed people in all phases of their illness, including backslides. During one rehearsal scene, an announcement is made that an orchestra musician has been detained by the police and held in a correctional facility. "It's very hard to watch the circle of people having their triumphs and then falling back into the same dump that they were in. Most of them are struggling. They go into success and out."

But, he added, "there's always a place for them when they come back."