

# Quality Qorner

## Quality as Fine Art

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When I was trying to decide whether I should major in music or medicine in college, I realized that I could always have a career in medicine and play music for fun—but not the other way around. So it was that my high school band and orchestra experience led me to playing tympani for my community symphony orchestra during the many years I was a blood bank manager at a community hospital.

I loved our Wednesday evening rehearsals and bimonthly concerts. Our conductor, the principal French horn for the highly-esteemed Chicago Symphony Orchestra, pushed us hard and we played well. Rehearsals and concerts provided a “brain break” from the stress and structure of the blood bank—I could get lost in the melodies, chords, and rhythms of another world. The music was challenging, I had orchestra friends who were not medical people, and we did not talk about anyone’s work in our post-rehearsal gatherings at the local pub. It was like having two separate lives—each life renewed me for the other.

Alas, my current schedule prevents me from joining a community symphony; it’s been several years since I’ve been able to play. Occasional evenings as a listener at Colorado Symphony Orchestra performances will have to suffice until I can regularly commit to rehearsals and concerts. However, when I’m home or in the car, the radio constantly fills the background with classical music.

Recently, I had the opportunity to teach in a program with Irina Lutinger, a longtime ASCP workshop faculty and committee member, who is the senior administrative director for the clinical laboratories at NYU Hospitals Center, New York City. I noticed in Irina’s biography that she had been a concert pianist in her native Ukraine before immigrating to the United States, earning her degree, and pursuing a career in laboratory medicine. Irina still disciplines herself to practice most days of every week and plays in trios and quartets for holidays and gatherings of friends.

Discovering our common passion for music, I asked Irina if she saw any connections between playing in a chamber orchestra and leading the laboratory. Here’s what Irina said:

“I use my love of music as a way to help me manage the laboratory. Music provides a formula for me to listen and create a kaleidoscope of colorful solutions. This helps me see reality in a more perceptive light. When you identify the underlying harmony in every day, it changes you and helps you to flex better to the stress of the medical environment. In music, you see, hear, and feel the collection of different musicians playing their respective parts on various instruments. In the laboratory, the work process is the main thematic motif, and then there are the major and minor variations that we work through as part of everyday life in the laboratory.

“Sometimes, I see the fear of failure in laboratory staff members who struggle with something new—a new computer

system or new analyzer—which blocks their ability to learn and become competent. I tell these employees that to get to Carnegie Hall, one has to practice, practice, and practice! Building skills in the laboratory is like learning to play the notes of a new concerto or a new instrument; one plays first a few notes at a time and practices to gain skill and confidence. Likewise, one learns a new computer system or analyzer one function at a time and practices during training to gain knowledge and competence. When I explain in this way, they can relate to a time earlier in their lives when they may have been learning to play a musical instrument themselves or learning a new sport, and then they become less fearful.”

In my days as the coordinator of our laboratory’s quality assurance program, I often wondered what a “perfect” day in the laboratory would be like. What would it look like if everything in the laboratory went as it was supposed to—without fail or falter—for an entire day? All tests and examinations performed with accurate results, speedily delivered to all locations where they were needed. No instances of unacceptable samples, no expired or back ordered reagents or materials, no complaints, no staff or scheduling problems, no instrument or computer downtime. Just everything humming along—in perfect harmony.

I asked Irina if she could envision such a perfect day in the laboratory and which piece of music would best represent such a wonderful event. Without hesitation she replied, “Beethoven’s 9th Symphony. It has all the variables and complexity of a day in the life of the laboratory and it is so beautiful.”

I completely agree! At a recent performance of Beethoven’s famous “Ode to Joy,” his Symphony #9, the instruments combined with the human voices presented a powerful harmonic sound that resonated in me and still continues to inspire.

Irina and I both believe that a perfect day in the laboratory is possible. All it takes is practice, practice, and more practice on the laboratory’s basic, underlying thematic motifs—the quality system essentials.

### *This Month’s Quality Quote:*

“What makes someone a professional? Consistency in performance—whatever your skill.”

—*M. Dale Clevenger*  
Principal French Horn  
Chicago Symphony Orchestra



*Lucia M. Berte*  
MA,MT(ASCP)SBB,DLM;  
CQA(ASQ)CMQ

Lucia M. Berte is President,  
*Laboratories Made Better! PC.*

Send your comments and questions to  
lmberte@LaboratoriesMadeBetter.com