

Video Transcript: In Memoriam

Penny Brill, Viola, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra:

One of the first things we did when we started getting involved with Children's Hospital is we started playing at a Memorial Service. The Memorial Service was created as a result of the staff, administration, people who were family members of children who died, religious services, anybody who was involved in the care of those patients getting together and talking about what do these people need in order to get through this unimaginable experience of losing their child.

So one of the things we did was we worked with the music therapist in thinking about okay at the beginning of the service people are just coming in, you're trying to get them settled, make them feel welcome, so what kind of music would be appropriate for that? Then at a certain point there's a meditation, and so what do you want to have happen during that? Well we concluded that at that time we want people to give themselves permission musically to cry—to just get totally overwhelmed by their emotions. In some ways it's a structured time, so it's safe to let go then.

Then at some point during the service the families get up and they go to the front of the auditorium and light a candle in honor of their child and their child's face is projected onto the screen. That's a very difficult moment for the families so we decided to play "Ashokan Farewell" during that time because musically it kind of pushes people away from their emotions enough so they can function and hold it together to get up to the front of the auditorium and light the candle and get back. And then later on in the service and toward the end we wanted to have music that would give a sense of hope and that things will be all right. So we played "Cavalleria Rusticana" and we played "Saturday Night Waltz."

What we found is that people coming in were in all different kinds of emotional states. I think of a family where the children might be running around a little bit or obviously upset, and they might be consoling each other, they don't quite understand why the family members are a little more teary than usual. And what we find very quickly as we're playing the music is the children settle down, the parents calm down, which also helps with what happens to the children, and by the time we reach the end of the program, we get a sense of the whole families and the whole audience holding on to the music in almost a desperate, hungry way. They're taking it in because they really need the message that it's sending them. And a lot of them, even though they could leave the auditorium, stay and listen to every last note we play because there is a message of hope by the end (and reassurance) and they obviously really need it.

So for me and for the other people playing in the quartet, there's a sense of we're giving something that people really need at that time. And so it's a powerful experience for them but it's also a powerful experience for us. And so there are many times where I've had someone come up to me afterward and [I] say, 'Please ask me [to play] anytime again. This is one of the most important things I do all year, if not the most important thing I do all year.' And I think it strengthens us as players, and it strengthens the people we're playing for, and it makes us feel more connected. So we're all better off for doing things like this.