

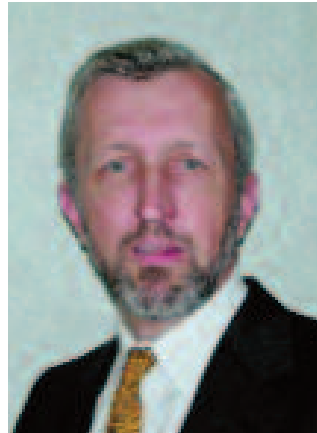
Instrument-Borne Bacteria...

Is It Really A Threat?

Is participating in a school band a rewarding, character-building exercise or a high-risk activity that should be approached with caution? We always subscribed to the former point of view, but a newly formed company, MaestroMD, is touting the latter. For those who haven't already heard, MaestroMD offers an instrument sterilization service. The physician who founded the company asserts that wind instruments are breeding grounds for disease, including tuberculosis and meningitis, and that his sterilization process, at \$50 to \$80 a horn, is an important safeguard for children.

Playing to parental safety concerns, MaestroMD has gotten tremendous publicity across the nation. A story on the company that aired in prime time on Chicago's ABC affiliate opened with the statement, "This time of year many kids are joining band to learn to play an instrument, but it turns out the instrument they choose could make them sick." In a television story that ran in Columbia, South Carolina, the MaestroMD founder told the reporter, "We've seen staph growth and strep growth; we've actually been able to prove that bacteria that will cause diseases like meningitis and tuberculosis will grow inside these moist dark environments [wind instruments]." And this appeared in a column in the Nashua, New Hampshire, *Telegraph*: "Hey, school-band students and parents, wanna really freak out? Check out the health warnings about your musical instruments at MaestroMD.com. Backed up by laboratory research, the Massachusetts-based sterilization company convincingly claims that your school-rented trumpet, saxophone or tuba might be Club Med for deadly bacteria." These are hardly the kinds of messages that will encourage mom and dad to sign junior up for the band. More to the point though, how serious is the threat of bacteria in instruments?

Ever since the early '20s, the columns of *The Music Trades* have been filled with stories addressing every aspect of school music programs. Yet we can't remember ever carrying a story that linked playing an instrument with the spread of disease. We also can't remember reading about the health risks of musical instruments in the various educator publications. While band directors have been highly vocal in complaining about budget



matters, block scheduling, and the deleterious influence of jazz 'n' rock and roll, they have apparently been silent on the threat of instrument-borne diseases. Over the past eight decades, over 100 million kids have placed a horn to their lips to participate in a school music program. If bacteria were really such threat, you'd think we

would have heard more about it by now.

We don't question that if you trained a microscope on a well-used mouthpiece, you'd find more squirming microbes than you'd care to know about. But we also suspect you could find similarly large concentrations of bacteria on basketballs in the gym, utensils in the cafeteria, water fountains, and just about anything else that gets handled during the course of the school day. The question for MaestroMD is not whether horns carry bacteria, but whether kids who play in the band get sick more frequently than their non-musical classmates who come into contact with bacteria by swapping cellphones or drinking from a shared cup. Absent some conclusive study to the contrary, we suspect the answer is no. Which leads to the conclusion that this sterilization process is a solution to a problem that we're not sure exists. There are a lot of real things for parents to worry about, so it doesn't seem fair to try and scare them about something that isn't much of a threat at all.

Part of our role at *The Music Trades* is to act as an industry cheerleader, encouraging new entrants and ideas as much as possible. But MaestroMD is one idea we can't muster much enthusiasm for.

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