

Musical healing

A physician-turned-orchestra
conductor prescribes song

by SAMUEL WONG

IN A DARK CORNER OF A VETERANS' HOSPITAL LIES A MAN exiled from this world. He barely moves, eats little, does not speak, recognizes no one. His face, a stubbly mess, shows neither pleasure nor displeasure—just a constant indifference ever since a stroke devastated him ten years ago. An artery in his left brain had ruptured, spilling a river of blood in his head, drowning out reason and memories, clogging his once brilliant mind. His family left him long ago.

Now this man lies on a miserable cot, vacant and opaque. He looks a decade older than his 67 years. His face is gnarled and unshaven, his streaks of white hair are in disarray, his mouth is twisted and drooling. His eyes stare at the fluorescent light above, an artificial brightness that never varies.

Face to face with him, I start singing an old Anglican hymn, "Come down O love divine." His face stirs with recognition, his eyes begin searching, his breath quickens, his right hand twitches. I sing another verse, and another. I now see his face wince, question, beg, protest. His breathing has become irregular, his face human. His mouth tenses in an effort to speak; warm tears soak his eyes.