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Henry T. Bahnson, Hopkins, and harmonica

To the Editor:

Like many of Henry T. Bahnson's surgical peers at Johns Hopkins who were cited in the in memoriam article by Griffith,¹ I was privileged to be a close cardiology colleague of Hank at Hopkins. My association with Hank was primarily through my work in the cardiac catheterization laboratory at Hopkins. At that time, the cardiac catheterization laboratory was under the department of surgery because the laboratory was considered as a preoperative diagnostic facility before

Acoustical and physical dynamics of the diatonic harmonica

Henry T. Bahnson and James F. Antaki

Department of Surgery, University of Pittsburgh, School of Medicine, 3550 Terrace Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15261

Quinter C. Beery

Department of Otolaryngology, University of Pittsburgh, School of Medicine, 3550 Terrace Street, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15261

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The harmonica is arguably the most widely played instrument in the world, yet there is a surprising paucity of published studies of its acoustics or physical dynamics. The typical diatonic harmonica and the physical forces involved in its natural function are described, and simple observations of the harp's functions are reported. The speaking of the reeds, naturally, when producing a bend, and when speaking as an overblow or overdraw is discussed and investigated by simple stopping of the reeds, by videostroboscopic analysis, and by recording vibration of the reeds with displacement gauges. The reeds of the ten hole harmonica can be made to vibrate at varying frequencies depending on the size and shape of the player's vocal tract. Three different modes of speaking from each hole and its pair of reeds are revealed and studied: first, naturally in a closing mode, either blown or drawn; second, as a bend, either blown or drawn, with pitch in the interval between the two notes in the hole; and third, as an overblow or overdraw in an opening mode with a pitch outside the interval between the two natural notes of the hole. This dynamic interaction allows the player to speak with the instrument perhaps as with no other. © 1998 Acoustical Society of America. [S0001-4966(98)02404-7]

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INTRODUCTION

The name, *Harmonica*, has been used to designate many instruments over the years, some being reed instruments related to the instrument under discussion, and others seemingly unrelated, such as the glass harmonica attributed to Benjamin Franklin, which consisted of a set of glasses of varying size, tuned by varying the amount of water within.

activated by positive pressure in the comb (i.e., blowing), is fastened to the top side of the comb with the reeds inside. A second plate of reeds, the *draw reeds*, which are activated by negative pressure, is fastened to the bottom side of the comb with the reeds outside. The reed slots on the blow- and draw-reed plates are arranged to coincide with each other on opposite sides of the chambers of the comb. Thin metal covers

Figure 1. Top portion of the first page of the article on the harmonica by Bahnson, Antaki, and Beery³ published 3 years before his death. My initials are T.O., commonly used by my colleagues at Hopkins. (From Bahnson HT, Antaki JF, Beery QC. Acoustical and physical dynamics of the diatonic harmonica. *J Acoust Soc Am.* 1998;103:2134-44. Published with the permission of the *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, American Institute of Physics.)

patients, young and old, were operated on for their congenital and acquired heart diseases by Blalock and associates. I was a fellow in the respiratory laboratory of the late Dr Richard L. Riley, who arranged with Blalock to let me work 1 day a week in the cardiac catheterization laboratory because Riley knew of my interest in cardiac catheterization. I still remember the few times that I needed some advice from Hank during cardiac catheterization of babies. I asked the nurse to page H.T.B. for me. She immediately tried to correct me by saying, "Do you mean H.B.T.?" H.B.T. stood for Helen B. Taussig, of the Blalock-Taussig operation, and H.T.B. stood for Henry T. Bahnson. Because the patient was a baby, it was natural for the nurse to think I wanted to speak to Helen B. Taussig rather than to Henry T. Bahnson.

Because Griffith's article began and ended with a reference to Bahnson's har-

monica, I wish to amplify a bit on Hank's association with this musical instrument. As Griffith¹ mentioned, *The Wall Street Journal* in 1999 published an article titled "Of artificial hearts and artificial harps in a Pittsburgh laboratory," with the subtitle "Cardiac surgeon and bioengineer study a harmonica virtuoso from inside his mouth."² The reporter mentioned Hank's application of his artificial heart experience to that of artificial harps, more commonly known as the harmonica. Because many of your readers might not be familiar with publication number 250 in Hank's bibliography mentioned in Griffith's article, I wish to mention that the article by Hank was published in the *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* (Figure 1).³ I suggest that everyone read the entire article to understand the history, physics, and physiology of the harmonica. As Hank said at the end of his article, "This helps keep the harmonica interesting, and indeed has

To T.O.
Hank found
memories of our
days together
at Hopkins
Henry T. Bahnson

helped to sustain its enduring prominence throughout the world.”³

Tsung O. Cheng, MD
Department of Medicine
George Washington University Medical Center
2150 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20037

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