Viola alumna and medical school student Megan Griffin adapted this article for the *Journal* from an essay she wrote for her internal medicine rotation.

The first week of medical school I had an introduction to standardized patient interviews. I met a patient-actor with a headache; another who needed smoking counseling. These encounters were there to establish a baseline for interview skills—but what background did I have? I completed prerequisites
to cover the knowledge needed to learn the core foundations of medicine, but none that specifically prepared me for the skill of interviewing. My classmates and I possess conversation skills and are passionate about helping others, and in some ways that is enough to begin. But as I look back on my path to medical school I realize that I was well prepared for this skill even though conservatories do not offer Interviewing 101.

Chamber music is an essential part of studying music, with the thrill of the incredible works combined with the intense bond formed between players. Chamber musicians develop important skills, from resolving disagreements about musical choices to nonverbal communication techniques. In writings about chamber music, psychologists have noted that music school students are not explicitly taught interpersonal and communicative techniques, although the rules are implicit. Like patient interviews, teaching nuances of chamber music is difficult; hence the hours spent rehearsing to gain valuable experience. Chamber music also fascinates me—the inner thoughts of each musician combine with the outward focus on the group. When you put the parts together, everyone’s inner thoughts are shared. The lines need to weave seamlessly together, with agreement on the moments for each member to play out and a consensus on the meaning; members listen and respond to each other’s musical ideas. Arnold Steinhardt noted at a remarkable performance that “all the quartet’s voices seemed equal, each one shining forth when necessary and then receding into the texture.” I remember playing Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 6, in which the viola lines are the same but the second violist plays a beat behind the first. My colleague made rehearsals interesting by adding notes or playing something with a different emphasis, challenging me to respond a beat later with the same changes. I had to focus on his ever-changing line and keep a level of focus on my own demanding part. Studying chamber music can benefit the patient interview—you learn to separate your prepared inner thoughts from what you hear from the other player, yet swiftly respond to what you hear with empathy and compassion.

Imagine you are about to see a patient whose complaint is chest pain. Without more information, you think of the possible diagnoses by system: cardiac, pulmonary, abdominal, musculoskeletal. For each system you go deeper, thinking about what questions to ask. These are your inner thoughts, the “chamber music part” you’ve prepared on your own by attending medical school, studying the organ systems, and learning about disease. Like music, the preparation becomes easier and more natural with time. Once prepared, I step on stage and play my first line: “What brings you in today?” My chamber music partner (the patient) responds, and as much as I’ve prepared and think I know how they
might reply, chamber music teaches that it could be completely different than what you expected. Knowledge and technique help you prepare your inner thoughts, like how musicians need years of practicing etudes and scales, but you can’t use that diagnostic knowledge if you aren’t truly listening to your partner’s thoughts and responding attentively. When watching a performance you see remarkable musicians playing their part flawlessly while conveying meaning with each note. And you can see when someone is also a remarkable chamber musician, doing all of that in addition to putting the partnership of the group first with intense outward focus. We speak about this partnership in medicine—finding common goals with the patient, knowing when to let the patient guide the interview, and ultimately remembering that our skills and knowledge serve a larger purpose. In my ideal world, future physicians would grow up playing an instrument and studying chamber music. In reality, I am grateful that my experience has shaped me in a way that allows me to use everything I learned while studying music to become a better doctor.

Megan Griffin (BM ’10, MM ’11, viola) played in the New World Symphony and what is now Ensemble Connect for a few years before pursuing another longtime dream by fulfilling her pre-med requirements and enrolling in medical school at NYU. In November, she spoke with the first-years at their Colloquium.