

The Uncharted Horizon

There's a moment in every physician's life when the pager stops beeping, the white coat hangs unworn, and the stethoscope no longer presses cold against a patient's skin. For decades, my identity was inseparable from my profession. I was Dr. Heston, the healer who could interpret the language of health and illness, of joy and depression. My skills were honed to precision. Even in moments designated as "time off," I remained tethered to that identity—reading about patients, attending medical conferences disguised as vacations, always connected to improving my clinical ability. Medicine was my calling. Then, it all ended. The moment had arrived. I retired.

With retirement comes a particular vulnerability: stepping back from being excellent at your job to being relatively mediocre at the new tasks. My days were filled with routine chores that demanded none of the expertise I had spent a lifetime cultivating. This unsettling transition required long moments of reflection—a pause, a breather in life's journey. It was as if my sailboat had gotten untethered, set adrift without the foundation that had anchored me for so long. Where had my bearings gone?

The Uncharted Horizon, the first song I wrote after retirement, reflects this initial uncertainty. Surprisingly, it also provided me with a profound rebirth. The song starts with a quiet melody, then rests on a C#m7 chord in measure 4. It's a deliberate slowing that invites a pause, a deep breath. Then, as the music tentatively resumes, the restful melody continues but soon pauses again, this time much deeper, on a key change with the chord Cmaj7 in measure 20.

These pauses were healing to me. The rest, the deep breaths, the reflection provided the beginning of a recalibration. But then, something unexpected happened. It wasn't by my design but came from somewhere outside of me. Somehow, this same chord effortlessly became the foundation for a new theme (measure 55). Then, boldly, at the end, it became the bedrock of an energizing, strong rejuvenation.

My life in medicine has been like a wonderful chaotic symphony—Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, if you will—yet so much more. From the harmonies of a Gabrielli quintet to the raw energy of rock and roll; from the peace of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata to the questions raised in John Cage's 4'33"; from smooth jazz to the pure joy I felt as a father attending my child's school concert; from the complete wonderment from holding a newborn, to providing comfort to a dying patient taking their last breath; from the profound friendships with colleagues forged on medicine's front lines, to working as a team to try to give our patient one more day to live. Yet, somehow, I always felt centered. Medicine gave me a strong purpose. I knew I was doing my best at something profoundly meaningful.

Then the music stopped; I was off the clock. The echoes from the final cannon blast in Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture had faded. I felt I had lost that sturdy rudder of meaning that had guided me through decades of practicing medicine. But I was wrong. What initially appeared as an ending revealed its true nature: a pause, then a renewal. My C#m7 moment was complete when I heard a strong call from an uncharted horizon. And I'm answering the call.

Thomas F Heston MD, March 2025

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Larghetto ♩ = 55-65

Musical notation for measures 1-3. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The piece begins with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The first measure has an E major 7th chord (*E maj7*) and a melody starting on G4. The second measure has an F# chord and a melody starting on A4. The third measure has a G# minor 7th chord (*G#m7*) and a melody starting on B4. The bass line consists of sustained chords: E major 7th in measure 1, F# major in measure 2, and G# minor 7th in measure 3.

Sustain pedal ad libitum

Musical notation for measures 4-6. Measure 4 starts with a C# minor 7th chord (*C#m7*) and a melody starting on C5. The tempo marking changes to *molto rall.* and the dynamic is *tentatively*. Measure 5 has an E major 7th chord (*E maj7*) and a melody starting on D5. The tempo marking changes to *a tempo*. Measure 6 has an F# chord and a melody starting on E5. The bass line consists of sustained chords: C# minor 7th in measure 4, E major 7th in measure 5, and F# major in measure 6.

Musical notation for measures 7-9. Measure 7 starts with a G# minor 7th chord (*G#m7*) and a melody starting on F5. Measure 8 has a C# minor 9th chord (*C#m9*) and a melody starting on G5. Measure 9 has an E major 9th chord (*E maj9*) and a melody starting on A5. The bass line consists of sustained chords: G# minor 7th in measure 7, C# minor 9th in measure 8, and E major 9th in measure 9.

Musical notation for measures 10-12. Measure 10 starts with an F#7 chord and a melody starting on B5. Measure 11 has a G# minor chord (*G#m*) and a melody starting on C6. Measure 12 has a C# minor 9th chord (*C#m9*) and a melody starting on D6. The bass line consists of sustained chords: F#7 in measure 10, G# minor in measure 11, and C# minor 9th in measure 12.

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13 E maj7 F#add9 G#m7

16 C#m9 Eadd9 A

19 G C maj9 D maj7

molto rall.

tentatively

22 E maj7 C maj9 Dadd9

a tempo

25 E E maj7

rit.

a tempo

28 F# G#m7 C#m9

31 Emaj7 F# G#m7

34 C#m9 Emaj7 F#7

37 G# C#m7 Emaj7

40 F#add9 G#m7 C#m9

43 Eadd9 A G

Musical notation for measures 43-45. Measure 43 starts with an Eadd9 chord in the bass and a melodic line in the treble. Measure 44 has an A chord in the bass. Measure 45 has a G chord in the bass. The treble line continues with a melodic sequence across all three measures.

46 Cmaj9 Dmaj7 Emaj7

Musical notation for measures 46-48. Measure 46 has a Cmaj9 chord in the bass. Measure 47 has a Dmaj7 chord in the bass. Measure 48 has an Emaj7 chord in the bass. The treble line has a melodic line with some grace notes.

49 Cmaj7 D6

Musical notation for measures 49-51. Measure 49 has a Cmaj7 chord in the bass. Measure 50 has a D6 chord in the bass. Measure 51 has a D6 chord in the bass. The treble line has a melodic line with some grace notes.

52 E

Musical notation for measures 52-54. Measure 52 has an E chord in the bass. Measure 53 has an E chord in the bass. Measure 54 has an E chord in the bass. The treble line has a melodic line with some grace notes.

55 C#m7 G#m7 F#

Musical notation for measures 55-57. Measure 55 has a C#m7 chord in the bass. Measure 56 has a G#m7 chord in the bass. Measure 57 has an F# chord in the bass. The treble line has a melodic line with some grace notes.

58 C#m9 G#m7

61 F# E F#

mf

65 G#m7 C#m7 D#m(b6) E

f *mp*

68 C#m7 D#m(b6)

71 E C#m7

74 D#m(b6) E

77 C#m7 D#m(b6) E C#m7 D#m(b6)

80 E

