

Musicians: Alleviate Your Pain

Informational Session

9/2006

by JoAnna Cochenet, Music Education

This handout is intended to be a reminder to be aware of your body's functions through your music career. The information is available online and also in common-knowledge books, and it is not my intent to force information upon you to utilise. It is here for you to do with as you please; this is *your* music career. I have prepared this as a general handout which will be easier to look at as we go through the steps. My interest in sharing this session initiated from my own pains and research on *how-to*'s and most importantly, *where* to start with them. If any pain is too great, be sure to consult a doctor/physician before continuing. I have decided to share what I know, and you might find these may or may not work for you. Hopefully you'll give them a try! Enjoy!

I. General Preventative Steps

- A. Plenty of Water
- B. Nutrition
- C. Rest
- D. Quality practicing, not quantity
- E. Moderate exercise

II. When to think about using your body (all the time!)

- A. Getting in and out of bed/Sleeping
- B. Sitting/Standing/Bending over
- C. Turning a doorknob
- D. Practicing
- E. Always more!

III. Common Injuries for Musicians (most caused by overuse of joints, tendons, muscles, etc)

- A. Nodes-(vocal callouses/swelling)
- B. Tendonitis-(inflammation of tendons in arms, shoulders, etc)
- C. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome-(pinched nerve causing tingling, numbness etc)
- D. Bursitis-(inflammation between tendon and bone)
- E. Sore muscles/Fatigue
- F. Tennis Elbow-(inflammation of elbow rotary joint)
- G. Rotator Cuff-(inflammation of shoulder rotary joint)

*diagnosed syndromes are usually not curable, but some of the stretches and exercises here can help to prevent or at least alleviate some of the pain/symptoms

General rules on stretching:

- ~If the body parts being stretched become painful - then STOP! This is your body's warning signal that the soft tissues are injured.
- ~Stretches should last about 15 to 20 seconds each. Each one should be a slow gradual movement with the stretch occurring as you breathe out.
- ~NEVER bounce back and forth when you stretch. You can injure yourself.

Some Simple Body Work-outs In an Open Space

- ~For instrumentalists (with average sized instrument cases): Pick up your case with two hands using an appropriate **Bend Down (not over)-Pick Up-Stand Up** posture. Hold the case out in front of you at shoulder level and walk around a bit, feeling the certain muscles being used in your back that are not normally. These muscles are to help align your back/body!
- ~All musicians: We all play instruments/sing in a *forward* stance. It is possible that we develop knots in our chest and strained back muscles from overstretching. Reverse this with slow repetitions of wall push-ups (or on the floor) with your arms at different levels! You can also stand in a doorway, one hand on each side, gently leaning forward to stretch those muscles out for several seconds. Do not bounce, that will only create injury.
- ~All musicians: We use our shoulders, back, chest, and spine every day! Simple arm circles (extend the arms and create small to larger circles with entire arm) can help strengthen those parts of your body.
- ~All musicians: One's center of gravity is important to musical *presence* (and good posture). Stand still and rock your body forward, back, left, right, just gently and subtly, finding how your muscles, have to work and adapt, and ultimately finding your personal center.
- ~All musicians: Conditioning your body to use muscles and work in a certain way is beneficial no matter what. Use soup cans or 5lb weights and do some arm curls and extensions.
- ~All musicians: We all go through endless hours of rehearsing (usually sitting down-even for vocalists). We also are not usually sitting in comfortable chairs. Bring a pillow of your own or some padding for your buttocks and back. It will help you to comfortably sit forward but not slouch if used properly.

You can improve your seating by using a firm, wedge-shaped cushion that is about 2+1/4 inches thicker in the back than in the front. Or, or you can put spacers (books or boards) under the back legs of your chair to tilt it to the desired angle. Your chair is the optimal height if it allows you to sit with your knees several inches below your hips.

You can achieve the best support by having both feet several inches in front of your knees. Test this by leaning forward and backward as you vary the placement your feet.

BATHE!

<http://www.japanshakuhachi.com/handcareformusic.html>

To rapidly address pain, tension and inflammation, hot and cold baths are a marvel. Find two waste bin size receptacles, deep enough to hold both your hands and forearms. Fill one with very hot water (you be the judge of 'hot') and the other with cold water and ice cubes. Plunge your arms into the cold bath for as long as you can (probably less than 30 seconds) and then go to the hot bath until you feel the warming effect. Repeat this for 3 cycles, ending with the hot bath. Do this up to 3 times a day including just before bedtime...it can be very healing. For cronic sufferers this can be carried out daily until you cease to feel the direct benefits. Coupled with the hand exercises it's very powerful.

Alexander Technique

<http://www.bodymap.org/articles/artbodymapalextech.html>

<http://www.alexandertechnique.com/musicians.htm>

Through the Alexander Technique, we can learn how to eliminate excess effort that gets in the way of free movement. It is a process of unlearning habitual ways of using ourselves and allowing more natural movement to emerge. The technique was developed by F. M. Alexander, a talented actor who frequently lost his voice in performance. Alexander recognized a predictable pattern of tension throughout his body, which, among other things resulted in the loss of his voice. By learning to free his neck and allow his head to float back to balance again on top of the spine, his body lengthened, becoming free of the tension, liberating his natural postural responses and allowing him to perform at the peak of his abilities.

Here's another way to think about this. If someone were to make a very loud sound near you such as a cymbal crash, you and anyone else in close proximity would instantly do three things: (1) tighten the neck muscles, (2) fix the eyes, and (3) clutch the breath. This is a result of our natural protective mechanism called the flight/fight/ freeze response or the startle pattern. Unfortunately, we don't often fully release out of this pattern of shortening and narrowing of our stature. This means that our freest movement is not available for playing our instruments.

In an Alexander Technique lesson one learns to develop a more reliable kinesthetic sense, to cooperate with the mechanical advantage of the skeletal system, and to think more constructively. As we learn the process we are free to make better choices about how to use ourselves in relation to our instruments. Lessons are often done in the context of an activity, such as playing an instrument.

Stretches

<http://www.japanshakuhachi.com/handcareformusic.html>

1. SHOULDER STRETCH (30 seconds) Plant your feet firmly on the ground, slightly apart. Reach above your head with palms together, breathing deeply. Feel the stretch throughout your body, pull upwards as much as you can. Rest and repeat.



2. SHOULDER STRETCH (20 seconds) Reach behind with both hands as shown. Go into this stretch slowly. Swap hands and repeat. If you can't do this one, go as far as you can into the stretch. After days or weeks, you will increase your reach.



3. SHOULDER STRETCH (30 seconds) Sit cross-legged and place your palms on the ground just behind you, fingers together pointing forwards, hands a shoulder-width apart. Gently arch your back, arms straight, allowing your chest to push out and up while your shoulders, arms and wrists feel the stretch. This is super-nice for blood flow!

4. SELF MASSAGE (one minute) Allow your arm to relax, palm upwards on a firm surface. Using a tennis ball and your other hand, gently massage the tendons through the forearm and wrist in a circular motion along the length of the arm. Keep everything relaxed, especially both your hands and shoulders. If necessary, turn the forearm over and massage the top of the arm too. Anywhere you have pain, the ball can gently massage. The exercise is repeated with the ball on the table and the arm/wrist moving gently, without applied pressure, over the ball.

5. FOLDING FINGERS (8 seconds each)

Lay your forearms on the table in front of you, palms together pointing upwards. Take a pair of fingers and cross them. Hold for a few seconds, cross them the other way and hold for a few seconds. Repeat with each pair of fingers. All other fingers not being crossed should remain straight, pointing upwards and together. If this is too hard with forearms flat on the surface, you can bring your hands off the table slightly, elbows remaining, to relieve the posture. Shoulders are relaxed. Over time your mobility should improve to where you can leave your forearms on the table.



6. FOLDING PAIRS OF FINGERS

Repeat the above exercise but this time take any two pairs of fingers and cross them first one way then the other. Pairs can be adjacent or separated. Try all possible permutations, gently, shoulders relaxed. All other fingers remain straight and together.

7. FINGER SLIDES

With palms together and forearms on the table, Take each pair of fingers and cant the pair, first one way, then the other, keeping the fingers together so that one finger slides against its opposite. Do this with each finger pair. This directly addresses the individual tendons in each wrist.

8. FINGER STRETCH (8 seconds each)

Take your tennis ball again and whilst standing, place your hand flat on the table with your arm roughly vertical. (This angle can be relaxed if the exercise is too difficult). Place the ball under each finger in turn and feel the stretch for a few seconds. A smaller ball can be used if necessary.

9. WRIST FLEXION

Stand and place one hand flat on the table pointing away from your body. Take your other hand and place it on top, applying a little downwards holding pressure. Try to pull the bottom hand from under the top hand whilst simultaneously rotating the wrist of the bottom hand, first one way then the other (like turning a doorknob).



10. STRENGTHENING EXERCISE

A very effective and gentle weights program for strengthening the hands and arms/tendons is as follows:

1. Use a light weight, in one hand at a time (4lbs or less depending on the severity of the trauma).
2. Resting the forearm on a knee or low table, palm up holding the weight, physically assist the hand (with the other) to curl the weight up without moving the arm or wrist, i.e. the wrist is the fulcrum.
3. Remove the assisting hand and allow the hand to curl downwards, slowly, again not moving the forearm or wrist.
4. Start with three sets of 4 curls with each hand. Do this every other day (or longer intervals, you decide). Remember to assist the weight upwards and freely curl downwards.
5. After two or three weeks add one extra curl to each hand, and maintain this for some weeks, and so on up to 3 sets of 12. (This may take months!).

6. Once successfully completing 3 sets of 12 at a given weight and maintaining these sets for up to a month, add a pound to the weight and start all over again at 3 sets of 4 curls, increasing over time.

7. As strength/healing takes place the weights can be increased. If it proves to be too much, go backwards in the program for a while.

Shoulders, Chest and Elbow Stretch

This stretch opens up the chest and shoulder area. An added benefit is the extension of the elbow joint that helps in the realignment process. *Only stretch as far as it is comfortable.

Standing, clasp, and interlace fingers together behind the back, palms toward back. Straighten the arms and elbows and stretch the arms up toward the sky and away from the back. Perform this slowly and hold the stretch for a ten second count. Relax and breathe slowly and deeply. Repeat this stretch as often as needed, especially if you find yourself slumping or rolling your shoulders forward. If you play guitar, keyboard, fiddle, bass fiddle, or any instrument that rounds your shoulders, you need to do this stretch.

Upper Back Stretch

Standing or seated. Clasp hands together in front of you. Inhale. Then exhale as you extend arms out in front of you at chest level. Exhale as you stretch forward, sinking the chest inward and rounding the shoulders forward (Imagine the chest caving in). Hold stretch for a ten second count. Breathe slowly and deeply. Inhale, releasing the hands and drawing the shoulders back and down. Repeat two-five times. This feels so good when the upper back is tired. **After performing this stretch, repeat stretch #1.

Range of motion (ROM) exercises and stretches for the hands

<http://www.sportstouch.com/ArticleMusicianNightmare.htm>

Begin the day with these warm-up ROM exercises. They can be performed anytime and anywhere.

1. Hand Circles: Clockwise and counterclockwise circles. five times each direction.
2. Fist Clinches: Open and close your fists rapidly five times.
3. Wrist Bends: Stretch the wrists forward and backward. Hold for a four second count in each direction. Use the opposite hand to help perform the exercise.
4. Finger Bends: Stretch fingers forward and backward., one at a time. Hold for a one-two second count. Use the opposite hand to help perform the exercise.
5. Finger Rotations: Rotate the fingers clockwise and counterclockwise. Use the opposite hand to help perform the exercise.
6. Finger Pulls: Pull gently on the fingers, grasping the finger joint closest to the hand.
7. Hand Shakes: Shake hands gently.
8. Finger Spread: Spread your fingers wide apart and stretch fingers outward.
9. Finger Pinch: Pinch the ends of the fingers, firmly for one second count.. Stimulates the energy in six meridians in the Chinese Acupuncture system. (Lung, Heart, Large Intestine, Small Intestine, Triple Heater & Pericardium.)
- 10 Palm Rub: Rub the palm s together rapidly for a friction rub. Then massage the hands and fingers. A good way to increase circulation. This feels great!

Instrumental Practice/Performance Tips

<http://www.japanshakuhachi.com/handcareformusic.html>

- Don't grip your instrument. Allow your fingers to lightly hold the instrument at all times, particularly when you are working on difficult passages.
- Take regular breaks while practicing. Relax and stretch for at least 15 minutes per hour, or 5 minutes between songs. This is key to healthy hands.
- Be aware of your body and posture while you play. It is your instrument. How all the parts of you stack up under gravity profoundly affects your breathing and tension.
- During recovery avoid long pieces. Avoid new pieces. Play familiar pieces, and try to play them better than ever before.
- You don't have to stop playing but you do have to change your playing.
- Do all these exercises in a very relaxed manner: relax your entire body through each movement. In particular, don't hold tension in your shoulders or upper arms. Breathe deeply and exhale well throughout your program.

Vocal Practice/Performance Preparation Tips

<http://www.musickit.com/resources/vocal.html>

- Good Posture/Proper Breathing/Vocal Warm-ups
- Drink plenty of liquids to moisten and lubricate your vocal folds
- Keep tea and coffee to a minimum. Caffeine dries out the vocal folds and makes them sound scratchy (Alcohol responds in a similar manner)
- Take a relaxed (calm), deep breath before singing and speaking
- Do not do all the talking in rehearsal
- Warm down your vocal folds after speaking for a length of time with warm water, yawn, and breath deeply
- Steam your voice through a cold or throat infection with a heated moist, warm towel over your head, several times a day for about 10 minutes each time
- Do not strain your voice, use breath support
- Do not push your voice from the throat, the navel should move toward your backbone

Helpful Online Resources

<http://eeshop.unl.edu/music.html>

www.musicianshealth.com

<http://www.sportstouch.com/ArticleMusicianNightmare.htm>

<http://www.japanshakupachi.com/handcareformusic.html>

<http://www.alexandertechnique.com/musicians.htm>

<http://www.musickit.com/resources/vocal.html>

Books on Health Topics/Good Reads

Conquering Carpal Tunnel Syndrome : And Other Repetitive Strain Injuries
by Sharon J. Butler

Medical Problems of the Instrumentalist Musician
by Raoul Tubiana (Editor), Peter C. Amadio (Editor)

Playing (less) Hurt: An Injury Prevention Guide For Musicians
by Janet Horvath

The Orchestra Conductor's Secret to Health & Long Life: Conducting and Other Easy Things to Do to Feel Better, Keep Fit, Lose Weight, Increase Energy, and Live Longer
by Dale L. Anderson

Managing Your Head and Body So You Can Become a Good Musician: The Psychology of Musical Competence--A Student-Musician's Field Guide for Performance and Freedom from Performance Anxiety
by Richard H. Cox

Vocal Health and Pedagogy: Science and Assessment
by Robert Thayer Sataloff (Editor)

Solutions for Singers: Tools for Performers and Teachers
by Richard Miller

Exploring Twentieth-Century Vocal Music: A Practical Guide to Innovations in Performance and Repertoire
by Sharon Mabry

Making Music Magazine
Magazine City Publishers