

Fine

Musicians are increasingly turning to alternative and preventive methods to stay healthy, recover from an injury, and to maintain lifelong wellness.

Tuning

by Madeline Rogers

“No pain, no gain” is a mantra that aspiring athletes learn at an early age. So, too, do many budding musicians. Sore shoulders, tight necks, aching backs, and painful wrists have long been accepted as the price of entering the top ranks of the profession, but that attitude may be changing. A growing number of musicians are learning that playing through pain is not the best prescription for a long career, and that prevention is the best medicine. Increasingly, their quest for comfort, once conventional medical treatments have been exhausted, leads them to alternative methods.

Paula Skolnick-Childress, a cellist with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, suffered a career-threatening injury at age 45. With surgery, rehabilitation, and a sympathetic orchestra management, Childress, now 69, was able to resume her career, but she had to change her ways. “I had to learn not to play with pain,” she says. Her disability, diagnosed as thoracic outlet syndrome, kept her out of the orchestra for two years. “Surgery fixed the nerve impingement; the problem was getting back to playing,” she reports. “I tried swimming, yoga, acupuncture, nothing was working.” She finally found Maryland-based Kelly Russell, whose practice is a blend of massage, Feldenkrais, and other methods. Childress has been seeing him for fifteen years. “I work with him every week,” she says, “because I learned that if I wait until I’m in pain it’s too late.”

Treating an injury after the fact is all well and good, but many would prefer to see more prevention as part of ongoing wellness programs, among them Ed Gazouleas, who retired in 2014 as a violist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and now teaches full-time at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. Each year, he offers a prevention workshop to all incoming string players at the New World Symphony, built around techniques he learned on his twenty-year journey back to health following an injury. New World Symphony is an orchestral

training academy, and the goal of the prevention workshop is to prepare young players for the demands of a full-time orchestral career, which these days requires a level of physical output that Gazouleas says is unprecedented: “There is a craving for super-saturated sensation. Decibel levels are getting higher, and conductors are asking for more intensity, which



Carnegie Hall

Musicians in Carnegie Hall’s National Youth Orchestra of the USA during a music and movement workshop offered in July 2014, led by Liz Lerman and James Ross.

Cellist and recent Juilliard graduate Patrick McGuire with Juilliard faculty member Lori Schiff, who teaches a popular course in Alexander Technique at the school.



Yoga instructor Danielle Kipnis leads musicians of the New World Symphony in a session at the New World Center.



involves vibrating more. These are things I talk to students about: having to adjust your body, your system, to these kinds of demands.”

According to Jane Horvath’s seminal book *Playing (Less) Hurt*, now in its fourth edition (Hal Leonard Books, 2010), musicians experience a high rate of occupational injuries. Horvath quotes a 1986 survey of more than 2,000 professional players conducted by the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians. It found that 76 percent of respondents experienced an injury serious enough to require time off from work. Gazouleas suggests that these figures may even be on the rise. Among the typical injuries for string musicians are repetitive strain to the back, shoulders, and neck. Wind players are at risk for laryngoceles, caused by excess pressure to the larynx, and retinal hemorrhages, also the result of too much air pressure. Percussionists have a high rate of tendinitis and carpal tunnel syndrome.

What’s definitely changing, though, are attitudes toward injury, self-care, and prevention. “There used to be a stigma about musicians getting injured; if you were injured, you were weak. That’s just not the case anymore,” says Rebecca Blum, orchestra personnel manager of the San Francisco Symphony. Her colleague Julie Haight-Curran agrees. Over more than 20 years as orchestra personnel manager for the Minnesota Orchestra, from 1979 to 2013, Haight-Curran says she witnessed “an increase in awareness of self-care and prevention, whether it be running, swimming, stretching before a concert, or cooling down

after a concert,” in addition to an embrace of “lots of yoga as well as Alexander and Feldenkrais.”

Those methods are the three most popular, but nowadays a dizzying array of methods has been developed to bring greater awareness and ease to musicians. A short alphabetical list of techniques and practices includes acupuncture, Alexander Technique, Body Mapping, chiropractic, cognitive anatomy, Feldenkrais Method, massage, meditation, Pilates, Rolfing, Taubman, Trager, and yoga. (See sidebar for definitions of the three most popular programs.)



Paula Skolnick-Childress, a cellist in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, has practiced Feldenkrais, yoga, and other modalities to continue playing after a serious injury.

Institutional Commitment

These methods and others have found fertile ground at orchestras, conservatories, schools of music, and summer festivals and camps. The New World Symphony, founded 26 years ago, arguably has the richest program. Musicians spend, on average, three years in this elite pre-professional orchestra based in Miami Beach. A 35-week season, with two to three performances a week, introduces fellows, as they are called, to the life of professional musicians. “Being a full-time musician is almost as intense as being an athlete,” says Senior Vice President and Dean Ayden Adler. “As educators, our responsibility is to teach them how to take care of themselves.” Throughout the year, fellows are exposed to regular workshops in the Alexander Technique with Juilliard School faculty member Lori Schiff; the Feldenkrais Method with Uri and Hagit Vardi (“a power couple from Wisconsin who come at it from both the artistic and medical side,” according to Adler); performance psychology with Dr. Noa Kageyama, another Juilliard

faculty member and a disciple of sports psychologist Don Greene; and a weekly yoga class. NWS also provides private sessions with these and other practitioners, either on site or via Skype, plus access to doctors and physical therapists, all provided either free of charge or at steeply reduced rates.

Other training orchestras and ensembles are also integrating health and wellness. The National Youth Orchestra of the United States, a two-year-old program of Carnegie Hall’s Weill Music Institute, brings 120 elite young instrumentalists to New York for a two-week residency, followed by a multi-stop tour. In the first year, students got to spend a day exploring the Feldenkrais Method with trainer and practitioner Aliza Stewart and yoga instructor Nicole Newman, founder of Yoga for the Arts. Sarah Johnson, director of the Weill Music Institute, reports there’s great interest in these workshops: “In general, this seems to be more a part of the conversation among young musicians; it’s in a different place than it

was a decade ago in terms of their understanding of the importance of taking care of their bodies and playing in a healthy way.”

The New York Youth Symphony, a tuition-free program for students ages 12 to 22, began offering workshops on Alexander Technique, yoga, and performance anxiety in 2013, according to Executive Director Shauna Quill. “A lot of kids take private lessons and have never considered how they’re sitting, how they’re playing, and how they’re practicing,” she says. “They need to learn not just how to play, but how to play so they don’t get injured. We’re hopefully setting up our kids for a pain-free life.”

The Academy, a collaboration among Carnegie Hall, the Juilliard School, and the Weill Music Institute, offers two-year fellowships to young post-graduate profes-

sional musicians, with the goal of training them for leadership positions on stage and in the community. Part of the program has been a one-day workshop for first-year fellows, which exposes them to the Alexander Technique, yoga, and Feldenkrais. According to Education Manager Deanna Kennett, plans are in the works to extend that into the second year.

New World Symphony’s Ayden Adler sums up the importance of reaching musicians on the threshold of their careers: “We want to give our graduates the tools to take with them into the professional world.”

Tools for Wellness

An informal and admittedly unscientific survey suggests musicians will need those tools. Those employed full time have access to medical care, but insurance frequently does not cover alternative therapies. That doesn’t stop musicians from exploring on their own. At the Cleveland Orchestra, for instance, a small band of musicians has bonded over Feldenkrais. They take regular classes with Samantha Basford at her studio, Cleveland Movement, and when in Miami during the orchestra’s annual residency, they seek out practitioner Dale Russell. Like many such arrangements, this is a family affair: Basford is married to Principal Percussionist Marc Damoulakis.

At the San Francisco Symphony, Feldenkrais classes, subsidized by the orchestra, are offered weekly in the musicians’ lounge. The program was founded in 1994 by practitioner Mary Spire at the invitation of the orchestra. “The year I started the program, several musicians were out on disability,” she recalls. “I had been teaching Feldenkrais at Tanglewood for six years, and I ran into a symphony board member who had heard about it. He said that insurance rates were going up because of injuries, and he asked if Feldenkrais could help.” The program was so successful, says Spire,

that all the injured musicians returned to work, and continue playing to this day. The current teacher, Stacey Pelinka, has a small but loyal following. Among the faithful is bassist Brian Marcus, who entered the program in 1995. Unwilling to have surgery

Nowadays a dizzying array of methods has been developed to bring greater awareness and ease to musicians. A short list includes acupuncture, Alexander Technique, chiropractic, cognitive anatomy, Feldenkrais Method, massage...

Preventive Alternatives: The Big Three

When a musician is hurt or simply wants to play with more ease, she will try a variety of approaches. The three most popular alternative methods—the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, and yoga—all aim to integrate the mind and body through development of greater awareness of movement and breath. Here's a closer look.

ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

Origins: Developed by F. M. Alexander (1869–1965), an Australian-born actor. Hampered by vocal problems, he began to investigate how use of his body might be contributing to his difficulties and developed a new approach. Alexander Technique is typically taught one-on-one, but is also offered in workshops and to groups.

Champions: Guitarists Julian Bream and Sharon Isbin, conductor Colin Davis, Paul McCartney

A practitioner speaks:

“Alexander teaches people how to recognize when they're doing something harmful, to become more sensitive to their habitual posture and movement and how to change it. You don't just lie there and get fixed. You take responsibility for yourself.” — Robert Rickover, an Alexander teacher for more than 30 years who specializes in working with musicians

A musician's tale: “I started piano in third grade and French horn in fifth grade. In high school, I played piano for hours a day and was going to the gym without understanding how to use myself well, so I ended up with chronic back pain at age eighteen. When I got to Juilliard, I saw a poster for Lori Schiff's Alexander Technique class and signed up. After a year, my back pain had lessened

considerably. When you're doing any activity, you want to minimize unnecessary muscular effort; Alexander teaches you that. As a brass player, it's quite practical. If you're tight in your neck, then you're tight in your chest and that means you can't fill your lungs. When you're practicing Alexander, you're focusing on sensations in your body. That has a calming effect.” —Alexander Kienle, French horn, Dallas Symphony Orchestra

FELDENKRAIS METHOD

Origins: Developed by Moshe Feldenkrais (1904–1984), a Russian-born physicist, judo expert, and mechanical engineer. Crippled by a knee injury, he was told he had only a 50 percent chance for recovery. Dissatisfied, he created and refined a method based on principles of physics and biomechanics, training a generation of practitioners. Exercises are performed in a class setting or in private sessions.

Champions: Pianist Richard Goode, guitarist Narciso Yepes, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, violinist Yehudi Menuhin

A practitioner speaks: “A musician's difficulties are directly related to the way they use themselves—that is, in a fixed or asymmetrical position, often with excessive work by the flexor muscles, which inhibits freedom of the arms. Musicians find it hard to take care of themselves unless their ability to play is inhibited by discomfort or injury. However, in my experience, musicians are exceptionally quick to learn new ways.” — David Zernach Bersin, who studied with Dr. Feldenkrais and is a founder of the Feldenkrais Institute, New York

A musician's tale: “When I was in New World Symphony,

in 2001, I developed some tension, fatigue in my arms. I really had to work to find power, and in doing so I was getting less power. I went to every great sports-medicine doctor in South Florida, physical therapists, acupuncturists, chiropractors. A few things worked, but they were not close to a solution. Then I found Feldenkrais and I learned that I would have had the same issues whether I played the drums or picked up tennis or wrote poetry—the problem was the way I was holding tension in my body. I also use Feldenkrais in my teaching. I have many students who play the snare drum, using just their wrists, while their shoulders, chest, and rib cage are locked. If you want to master your instrument and make better music, you need to deal with the physicality of it. It's as artistically important as practicing your instrument.” — Marc Damoulakis, Principal Percussionist, The Cleveland Orchestra; percussion faculty member, DePaul University School of Music and Cleveland Institute of Music

YOGA

Origins: Born in India, yoga has evolved over thousands of years, developing many branches and schools. Yoga can be physically vigorous or restful and meditative, depending on which “brand” of yoga one practices. It is taught in groups or one-on-one.

Champions: Conductors Seiji Ozawa and Leonard Bernstein, violinist Yehudi Menuhin, Paul McCartney

A practitioner speaks:

“Every artist realizes the dynamic mind-body-instrument connection. Even a slight imbalance dramatically impacts performance and, possibly, long-term health. Yoga is

a breathing practice that physiologically calms, focuses, and strengthens mind and body. Yoga can help reduce performance anxiety and prevent or rehabilitate repetitive-stress injuries. Unfortunately, too many musicians rely on beta blockers and other choices. A daily ten- to fifteen-minute yoga practice is a healthy alternative.” —Nicole Newman, founder of Yoga for the Arts; flutist and yoga educator who works with individual musicians, conservatories, and orchestras

Lori Schiff teaches the Alexander Technique to Julie Pilant, assistant principal horn of the Metropolitan Opera, at the New World Symphony's home.

New World Symphony



A musician's tale: “I haven't had any terrible injuries, but I have been close to people who have, and that scared me. So when I had any kind of pain or tension issues, I thought, ‘I'm not going to wait.’ During my undergrad years at the Hart School of Music, I started doing Feldenkrais. That solved my lower back problems, but at a certain point I needed some strengthening. Yoga is really great for that. It balances strengthening, flexibility, and awareness. I also had some performance-anxiety issues, and using breath to calm the nervous system and control your fight-or-flight response is so helpful.” —Emily Kalish, a freelance violinist, member of the Binghamton Philharmonic, and on the faculty of the Concordia Conservatory of Music and Art and the Music Conservatory of Westchester, New York



Stu Roemer

Violist Ed Gazouleas, a recently retired violist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and current faculty member at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, offers a prevention workshop to string players at the New World Symphony. He's shown here with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

for a neck injury, he signed up for Feldenkrais; like his colleagues, he was soon back to work, and has also become a certified Feldenkrais practitioner.

At the Minnesota Orchestra ten years ago, musicians got together and, with a private donor, raised enough money to pay Kathy McClure, chiropractor and masseuse, to accompany them on tour. In the second year, the orchestra administration paid half her way. Although no longer subsidized,

McClure continued traveling with the orchestra at her own expense, offering treatment on a fee-for-service basis and seeing as many as 50 musicians on any given tour, plus the truckers and stage crew.

Although prevention and self-care are up to the individual musician, orchestras now provide a more supportive environment for those who do sustain injuries. Starting in the mid-1980s, the Minnesota Orchestra developed a program called "work hardening." It has gained wide acceptance, according to former personnel manager Julie Haight-Curran. Under work hardening, a musician who has been out with an injury goes through a structured protocol that eases him back to work. Musicians are allowed to sit on stage in the back of their section, playing as much as they are comfortable doing, with their doctor's blessing. As they get stronger, they can play more and eventually return to full-time playing.

Paula Skolnick-Childress, the Baltimore

Symphony cellist, went through a process like that during her recovery. Although it was more than 20 years ago, she still remembers it: "The orchestra and my colleagues were wonderful. I was amazed at how understanding the orchestra was."

To Lori Schiff, whose Alexander Technique course at Juilliard is always full, prevention makes sense both for individual musicians and for management. "You need your people to be healthy," she says. "You don't want to be paying big insurance bills for them to run around from doctor to doctor. And

if they have to lay off for a while, then you have to hire subs. In that regard, the orchestra is no different from corporate America. A healthy worker is a valuable one." **S**

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Julie Haight-Curran, orchestra personnel manager for the Minnesota Orchestra from 1979 to 2013, has witnessed "an increase in awareness of self-care and prevention."

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