

Rewiring ourselves to play without fear

22 OCTOBER 2020

In the third of a four-part series, Gwendolyn Masin, concert violinist, author and educator, explains how we can harness breath, meditation and yoga practice to help us play without fear



Gwendolyn Masin

Yoga

The similarities between yoga and playing an instrument don't begin and end with the rolling out of the mat as with the unpacking of an instrument. Although we could compare the physical and cognitive benefits of the daily practice of scales and études to the daily practice of asanas, both go far further than that. Too often, I find musicians are taught how to use their hands and heads, but the rest of the body is rarely discussed. I believe this to be a grave mistake because it creates separation. We become fragmented, aware of our fingers, but not of where those fingers derive their instruction from; we are aware of the complexity of playing a piece of music, but forget that all the practice in the world is worthless when we neglect the emotionality involved in the music.

Yoga is the study of the mind-body connection. It cultivates the power of presence, teaches those who practice it to bring the mind to a place of clarity. The more we practise breathing—one breath at a time—observe one thought, move through one asana after another, the more the similarities between the study of music and yoga become apparent.

Freedom in Movement

Deliberate practice, muscle memory, repatterning, introspection, interoception, patience, acceptance—these are just some of the things that yoga and playing an instrument have in common. Yoga helps us experience ways of moving that cultivate awareness of our physical and mental habits. In yoga, we consciously work with the body to promote awareness that helps us free ourselves from pain and avoid repetitive strain injuries. My observation is that if we practise movement that stretches our understanding of what our bodies are capable of, we will build physical *and* mental strength and liberate ourselves from discomfort. When I teach, my vision is to work with musicians to maximise this potential for transcendence. (It should be noted that I don't teach yoga, but I have reassessed my approach to playing violin, in part, because of it.)

This knowledge that I have gained, alongside the constant engagement and occasional confrontations I have with my body and how it feels—and it feels different every day!—have been hugely informative for my violin technique. I have new perspectives on everything from sound production and better functionality of my shoulders to a greater agility of the left hand and ability to see and experience what it means to move in a well-supported body. Interestingly, unlike what I've learned from dance or sports, my yoga practice allows me to recognise the physical habits that emotional experiences had left behind. For example, I used to hold the muscles in my shoulders up and had been doing so since childhood. In becoming aware of this historical tension, I can now embody my history in a new way.

I meet the world differently since practicing yoga. I feel changed. By destigmatising anxiety or the presence of fear in relation to performance, vulnerability is no longer a sign of weakness, but instead, an acknowledgement of the challenges of being a performer. I meet these head-on with a sense of calm certitude, and it fuels my love of performing on stage.

Breath

Breath is crucial to our existence. It is at the very centre of our lives and one of the reasons why I named my series of holistic masterclasses 'The Exhale'. Yet, we generally only notice our breath when we start to run out of it. The psychophysiological impact of breathing is significant. Breathing is part of the autonomic nervous system which is made of the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) and the parasympathetic nervous system (rest and digest). When we lie flat, breath coming from the stomach stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, and this activity gives a sense of relaxation which, in turn, gives flow to creativity. Standing increases blood pressure, which means activity from the sympathetic nervous system. We are more creatively unleashed and mentally at ease when we breathe from the stomach, as we do when we lie down—which might be why some psychologists advise their patients to lie down during consultations. Learning how breath helps our performance is integral to improving our understanding of phrasing and direction in music, and it helps our bodies do the work that's involved in playing. Although we can, of course, dip into the effects of breath on performance during a violin lesson, learning pranayam breathing, for example, is very valuable when it comes to focusing our attention on the activity of breathing without the added challenge of playing our instrument.

Movement Intelligence

Yoga asanas have therapeutic benefits for the homeostasis of the body. They stimulate blood flow, aid elimination, develop strength, have a positive impact on stress hormones, can reduce inflammation, or chronic wrist pain. Where other somatic practices might focus on just one area of the body for a period of time, yoga aims to connect the body as a whole. When we act, all our muscles are orchestrated to act out the intention we want, whether reaching for an apple or lifting a heavy weight off the floor. In a practice, it's advisable to put the body through some thoughtful and intelligent movements that require its full cooperation. When practising these movements regularly, muscles will work together to create the intentions that we have. The skill of a good teacher is to notice whether the mapping of a person's body is at an optimum. Our job, whether as a violin teacher or a yoga practitioner is to help optimise the map of the body so that movement is richer and more complete.

There are many points where other somatic schools of thought, such as Alexander Technique or Feldenkrais Method, meet with yoga. Their focus on the capacity to let go of and release tension—tension being unnecessary muscular effort—is very similar to what is practised in many forms of yoga too. The ability to stop and slow down, to

listen to what your body is saying and start to uncover the unconscious tensions that are being held in your body appears to override the teaching of many other approaches to movement therapy.

Due to gravity, the only structure that can transmit our bodyweight to the floor is our bones. Some yoga practitioners refer to this as 'grounding'. If we don't call on this understanding we start holding ourselves up with effort, which can lead to unnecessary tension in our muscles. The more tension a person carries, the less freely the body moves. Yoga holds an extensive collection of movements for the body to learn how to find support and release unnecessary effort and tension, to move intelligently.

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Yoga offers a heightened sense of awareness and learning how to use effort—such as while playing—without tension. There are traditions of yoga that call on the inclusion of only one asana at a time, and only after one asana has been understood in a thorough way, another is added. Although this might appear prescriptive, the outcome of such a discipline leads to the body familiarising itself with a movement to the point where the stretch reflex can be called upon easily, and an intelligent use of movement can be experienced.

Meditation

One of the purposes of yoga is to prepare the body and mind for meditation. One cannot meditate if the body is in distress, thereby distracting the mind from a sense of calm focus. This is (and has been seen across civilisations as) the most desirable of states. To me, concentrated practice of music and meditation are closely related. It is far easier for the mind to focus and be absorbed when the body is free of unnecessary tension. To achieve this feeling and this clarity, a daily practice of physical movement is as important as instrumental practice, particularly as we get older. Moreover, the experiences we gain from yoga, Qigong, Tai-Chi, and so on, can feed our understanding of movement when playing our instruments.

Let us imagine that there is a connection between our physical practice and the psychological concept of flow. Flow is a highly focused mental state, one of complete absorption in an activity or task. I like to compare this state to one of meditation. Meditation is the practice of training our attention to one particular thought, object or activity. In order for us to find a position in which we can meditate, we need to find physical comfort so that our mind is not distracted by our body. To this end, yoga asanas support the practice of meditation, limbering and warming up the body in preparation for finding a comfortable posture in which to meditate. I notice that musicians who practise meditation are able to focus on playing for greater lengths of time. Students of mine who find that their mind wanders while they practise not only suffer from a lack of understanding of what they should practise (or how much, for that matter), but also have an 'untamed' attention span. I compare their focus—that is to say, their mind—to the behaviour of a child. We may sit the child on a chair, but if we don't pay attention, the child will jump from the chair and wander off. The practice of meditation allows us to enjoy a loving discipline towards our minds' behaviour.

Interconnectedness and Integration

Having an understanding of postural alignment and the breath, coupled with a regular movement practice can induce a feeling of lightness and spaciousness in the body. This feeling also helps us to be in constant dialogue with our environment and how we connect to it. We become less fragmented and more whole. When we feel uncomfortable or anxious, neurologically, we fragment. Think, for example, of a knee or a shoulder that hurts. Our attention goes to the place of pain. We begin to think of ourselves in parts. We feel somehow disembodied. Yoga helps to integrate these fragments so that we feel complete. The same goes for the feeling we have with an instrument when we play an instrument. A feeling of spaciousness allows us to experience our limbs differently. They feel lighter and more capable of natural movement. This has a direct impact on our sound and our ability to play for greater lengths of time without fatigue.

Let us consider the view of the body by traditional medicine. Of course it considers the human body as the sum of its parts, but how often is a musician with a pain in their finger treated only for a pain in their finger with no apparent relief? Without looking further than said finger, most commonly we won't find the source of the problem. Pain in a finger can be caused by rheumatism or arthritis. But, if you go to a rheumatologist, they may not find that either condition is causing the pain. However, that pain in the finger may be caused by less obvious things such as a misconception of how to move; a tightening of muscles in the upper arm or neck; water retention; hormonal change—things are more interesting and less obvious than they seem. They are usually interconnected and not fragmented.

Allow me another example. Those who have suffered vertigo know the amazing instrument that our inner ear, the cochlea, is for both hearing and balance. The cochlea coordinates with balance receptors in our joints and muscles to create proprioception, which is how the body knows where all of its limbs are in relation to one another, without us having to look. The inner ear also tracks the zero gravity state of the earth's core so that as the earth spins, we don't fall over. Up-and-down movements, such as in sun salutations, stimulate the cochlea and our sense of balance.

If we consider ourselves within the context of gravity we will see just how interconnected we are. We are all sharing a vast number of experiences, from birth to death, albeit in slightly different nuances, as we go through life. We are a collective, a mass of wholeness, unequivocally connected, and we are capable of instigating change.

Playing Without Fear

The world, on and off stage, does not care whether we are comfortable or happy. It is up to us to create those conditions ourselves. When we are distressed or perceive danger our brain's circuitry changes and our access to higher brain functions are turned off. One of the main reasons that I feel musicians need to move their bodies and consider their breath while moving is to understand subtle challenges to the body and interpret them, not as pain or distress, but as discomfort. Part of yoga's intention is to finely granulate the sensory experiences of life, to refine our appreciation of how sensations land on us. Fine-tuning into what those sensations represent for us and how we respond to them helps us navigate the world more skillfully—not just physically, but also emotionally and psychologically. Our higher brain functions are there to be used, but we need to train ourselves to tap into them, we need to practise a state of calm that lets us experience a heightened involvement with ourselves and our environment. We cannot use our higher brain functions if we live in fear—on and off stage.

Gwendolyn Masin is a concert violinist, artistic director, PhD scholar, author, and educator. She has been Professor of Violin Studies at the Haute École de Musique de Genève, Switzerland, since 2013. She is founder of The Exhale, a series of holistic music masterclasses and workshops that foster musical freedom, inspiration as well as musicality as a whole, based on an harmonic balance of concentration and performance, along with physical and mental well-being. It is designed for professional musicians, students who wish to pursue a professional career, players in search of professional development, and amateur musicians. During a hugely challenging time for the arts and culture worldwide, she has brought The Exhale online in order to continue its mission. Gwendolyn authored her own award-winning method for teaching beginners. It is called Michaela's Music House and is available in English and German. Gwendolyn is artistic director since 2006 of the annual GAIA Music Festival in Switzerland which focuses on chamber music, and co-founder and curator of the International Master Course by Dublin's National Concert Hall that takes place during the summer.

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