

Journey to change – towards a better understanding of ourselves

30 JUNE 2020

In the first of a four-part series, Gwendolyn Masin, concert violinist, author and educator, explains the importance of movement therapy for musicians



Gwendolyn Masin

'First we learn our instruments.'

When musicians read that sentence, many of us will think of our violin, cello— whichever instrument we play. But, what if we thought, instinctively, of our mind and body as our primary instrument? What if body and mind work was not an afterthought, but a point of departure on the long road we walk through music?

Some common injuries that string players suffer from include neck and

shoulder-region tension or pain, should-joint pain or inflammation, jaw issues (TMJ), lower back pain, wrist pain, hip-joint pain, knee pain, ankle pain or foot bunions. Many of us fall into that first yoga or Alexander Technique class because of injury. We might have spent some time in physiotherapy before that class and realised that manual therapy alone would not resolve how our bodies habitually move or teach our brain how it can continuously integrate new movement. Others coming to class are intent on finding alternative options to surgery. After all, as surgeons will agree, putting a wound in a wound is not ideal. But, what if any or all of these conditions could be relieved, or indeed prevented, with movement therapy?

Understanding how our body moves according to its anatomical design is of utmost importance to ensuring our physical health. This understanding also has a profound impact on the conversion to artistic freedom. For example, some musicians carry the misconception that the bowhold involves a straight thumb, but this goes against the natural shape of its joints. Ideally, movement awareness, in tandem with our music practice, can not only prevent injury, but inform the very essence of our playing, from how we form a phrase to how we project our sound. The integrity of a movement translates into the integrity of sound.

Most of us learn how to move our fingers, hands, and arms. We train our inner ear, pore over scores, commit them to memory, and gain stage experience. We sit together and play chamber and orchestral music; we concern ourselves with performance practice; we agonise over the perfect bowing or debate stretching versus shifting left-hand positions for hours on end.

The trouble is: we practise too much, moving our fingers without clear visualisation of which part of the body is responsible for the activity. We repeat phrases without taking a moment to reflect on why passage work isn't improving. Worse than just wasting our time, we constantly repeat the same physical mistakes, creating layer upon layer of inefficient movement. At best, we improve our skills more slowly than our talent would suggest. At worst, we suffer injury, discomfort or physical anxiety, which leads to fatigue and loss of self-belief.

It is our business' best-kept secret that an overwhelming majority of us suffer from some kind of pain or injury. There appears to be a stigma in the world of classical music surrounding the subject of pain. The stigma seems to be connected to the idea that if you have pain it is because you were not trained well, or you are not good enough. The limitations we experience physically lead, in turn, to the carrying of emotional baggage. If we could learn how to move better, we could let go of that baggage and find ourselves uplifted both physically and emotionally.

In my opinion, two issues lie at the heart of the problem. The first is a disconnect between the relationship allying movement and sound production. Unlike, for example, dancers who see their bodies as a source of movement, musicians tend to overlook the fact that physical movement is at the very root of what they do to produce sound. This physicality has components that necessitate training such as flexibility, stability, mobility, strength, and speed. These are attributes associated with athletes—which I see us to be—but many musicians don't see themselves in this way. The second issue is a rigidity of mindset. If you come from a school of thought that barks instruction at you, places you under immense pressure to be best in class, impresses that you are only as good or as relevant as your last concert, then it won't come as a surprise that it is not the body that is stiff when we try to teach it new tricks, but the mind.

I have seen some of the world's leading violinists burdened by a condition known as trigger finger. Instead of resting and exploring ways to heal, they have gone under the knife or continued playing, redoing the fingerings to entire concerti to avoid use of the inflamed finger. Rather than judge these musicians, place yourself in the mindset that not continuing to play will be more fatal for a career than pressing pause and taking time to recover. Is our desire for instant gratification standing in the way of our true potential?

In maths, if any part of the number in a sum is wrong, the answer will most probably be wrong. The same can be said of movement patterns.

It can take years for us to recognise that we are in a state of pain or discomfort, to be able to locate the source and get help in learning to overcome it. This may be in part because we are not informed on the subjects of proprioception or kinesthesia, which is what enables us to be aware of our bodies in space when we move. When we are wholly occupied learning a complex new skill, such as playing a string instrument, we may forget that we are in a body and therefore do not listen to it.

Let's start at the beginning. We intuitively know how to breathe and move when we are born. We have the instinctive reflex of swallowing, for example, which is important for our survival. A baby is able to locate the source of their mother's milk by turning their head towards the nipple, or using crawling reflexes within hours of being born to move up the mother's torso to the breast. Babies also have twitch-like reflexes: the Moro reflex, for example, comprises flexion and extension twitches. Refining these reflexes into movement happens through a natural selection process for movement. We try to grab an object at around four months of age. If we don't succeed, we downregulate that movement. When we do succeed we upregulate, our nervous-system makes selections for that particular efficient and effective motor discharge which allows us to move in that certain way.

Some believe that we are programmed to know how to walk, that this knowledge is in our DNA. However, there is no walking pattern ready to discharge in our DNA. The reason we learn to walk is because the most efficient way to move with the bipedal posture is to walk and run, which is why babies do not continue to crawl. Some body and movement practitioners suggest that in our first years of school we are told to sit up straight in our chairs. We change our habitual way of moving and begin patterning bad habits—the most common of which are slouching, a tilted chin, hunched shoulders and incorrect placement of our ischial tuberosity, also known as sit bones.

On the other hand, breath experts suggest that our intrinsic knowledge of being ideally oxygenated stops the moment that we learn to stand up and play with things. Our excitement to play distracts us, and rather than being aware of our abdominal muscles for use of breath, we use them for the purpose of holding ourselves up. We learn limitations when it comes to other types of movement as well (Note: We move when we breathe. Breathing makes our diaphragm and ribs move). We imitate how our guardians, the people around us, move—someone with a tendency to walk on the inside of their heels is more likely to do so if their mother walks in a similar fashion.

When musicians learn a skill, such as playing a downbow stroke, we take the information in with our eyes and ears, followed by taking in information that we glean from actually trying to produce a downbow. The body's receptors collect information, assess it, and report it to the brain. So, when the teacher demonstrates a downbow, the student will try to replicate the same downbow that the teacher performed. The teacher will comment on the movement the student has made, "pull parallel to the bridge" or "open your arm at the elbow". These auditory cues then downregulate the path that the student uses to execute a downbow. Should the teacher compliment the movement, they are reinforcing the positivity of the movement and the student will upregulate that particular path. This process is never ending, and as we become more skilled we select more specific ways to do things, continuously upregulating or down regulating our activity. In the school curriculum of yore in certain countries, children were taught aspects of the origin of movement before embarking on physical exercise. Today children are oftentimes not privy to this information. This can lead to the incorrect use of our spine, our pelvis and other parts of the body. By the time we come to our instruments, we are taught skills to play, but there is a wealth of information we need to address that is profoundly necessary for a musician to take ownership of these skills.

Allow me an allegory. One hundred random people turn up to a fitness class. The challenge of the day is to do lunges, repeatedly. When you hear this, you might get the impression that everyone already knows the prerequisites required to properly execute lunges. However, the problem of this challenge is that perhaps only a handful of people in the class know how to do a lunge true to the design of the body. The motivation of the instructor's challenge is not based on perfect form, but the number of times the movement can be done. Most people don't have dorsiflexion or spinal coordination, more simply stated, the capacity or coordination to do this relatively standard movement in physical exercise. In the world of classical music the reality is not much different: people are taught their instruments regardless of having an understanding of how their body moves.

We are not assessing people on what their bodies are already capable of and then programming within that; we are under the assumption that they know how to move. We then practise our instruments with no consideration to our body's range of motion or coordination limits.

In maths, if any part of the number in a sum is wrong, the answer will most probably be wrong. The same can be said of movement patterns. Our joints enable the movements we need to execute playing. A joint can be defined as the space between two bones that allows for relative motion between the two. The health of a joint determines how clearly information is being passed to the brain. If, for example, a shoulder joint is healthy and all the receptors in the joint are functional, the shoulder joint is going to give the brain a very clear message of what went on during the movement. If someone's shoulder is in pain, or they have a previous history of injury, the shoulder can't move very well; and the information that the shoulder provides the central nervous system with when it moves will not be accurate. This is because there is scar tissue pulling things in different directions, which makes the body feel like it's in a certain position though it is actually not. This information gets fed back to the brain and results in a person learning sloppy ways to move, ways that are unnatural or not innate to their body's musculoskeletal structure. If the bones at a joint do not move independently, you do not have a 'joint'.

The only way to maintain health in a human articulation is with movement. When you are told to move more, it's good advice, but incomplete advice. What you should be told is move more in every joint on a frequent basis. This is how the health of a joint is maintained. If you have healthy joints you have clear paths of information to the brain. In turn, patterns derived from moving with this clarity are going to be more efficient and safer patterns. They will ultimately lead to more longevity and higher performance.

In a next article, Gwendolyn will explore postural awareness and its effect on performance.

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 fosters 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. When it became clear to Gwendolyn Masin that it would not be possible to host her retreat for musicians as a physical event in Switzerland over the Easter break, in a matter of a few weeks, she had turned it into an online event, offering participants a series of courses with leading artists and practitioners, covering a wide range of subjects from Baroque violin to Bircher muesli.

<https://gwendolynmasin.com/>

<https://www.the-exhale.com/>