

Body awareness can enhance musician's artistic skills

Almost everyone experiences some muscular discomfort, and for many it is a nagging, chronic fact of life. Most people try to maintain the normal conduct of their lives by pushing their discomforts into the back of their awareness. Musicians, however, can't afford to ignore muscular tension.

Due to the extraordinary demands of music making, physical difficulties abound among musicians. Their complaints include tendonitis in the arms or hands, chronic neck and lower back trouble and other problems that vary with the instrument played. But for musicians, muscular discomfort is an artistic as well as a health issue, since even minor discomforts have an adverse effect on their musicianship.

To better understand the muscular and skeletal problems faced by musicians it is helpful to consider the process of learning to play a musical instrument. This partially resembles the learning of any physical skill. Through trial and error, the nervous system establishes a pattern of discrete movements while eliminating unwanted, superfluous efforts.

The Thinking Body

by Mark Reese, Ph.D.



Musical learning, however, is especially complex since it involves our hearing and judgment, as well as the coordination of our muscular and skeletal systems. Using an amazing range of brain and body function, musicians find their ways to achieve their desired tone, rhythm, dynamics and interpretation.

In addition, musical skills require especially fine employment of the delicate muscles of the hands, lips and tongue. Unfortunately, musi-

cians often unwittingly neglect their larger muscle groups while focusing on "fine motor control." However, the larger muscles around the pelvis and spine are essential for good posture and to provide the primary power for the delicate and efficient use of the smaller muscles. When the body's power center is neglected, the result is unnecessary muscular effort and strain.

Better body usage can prevent or at least ameliorate most of these problems, as well as enhance musicians' artistic skills. Although "ideal" body usage is not easily taught or described, musicians who embody these aspects in their playing exhibit what is commonly called "good form," and are able to perform with minimal muscular effort and energy expenditure, without bodily wear and tear. Furthermore, good body usage can improve aesthetic qualities by increasing musicians' sensitivity and awareness of both themselves and their music.

Muscular effort acts like "background noise" which decreases sensitivity. Consider that while we can hear a pin drop in a quiet room, we might miss the sound of a falling chair in a noisy restaurant. This phenomenon also holds true for our muscular sense, so that when muscular effort is reduced, musicians' physical and musical awareness is increased.

Most musicians are keenly sensitive to their bodies and usually open to methods that can improve their body usage and skill. For this reason, many musicians have turned to the body awareness methods of Feldenkrais or Alexander. Moshe Feldenkrais's pupils included Yehudi Menuhin, Igor Markevich, Leonard Bernstein, Daniel Barenboim and many other world-famous musicians.

Feldenkrais lessons teach efficient breathing, sitting, standing and walking; foster increased flexibility and coordination of the neck, shoulders, spine, pelvis and legs; and refine use of the eyes, lips, tongue, jaw, voice, hands and feet. In addition, Feldenkrais lessons help integrate the more subtle dimensions of rhythm, balance, mental practice, spatial orientation and body



Musician Kay Gardner.

image.

The importance of reducing muscular effort has been emphasized by many great musicians. In the biographical movie "In My Life," the great Arthur Rubenstein is seen practicing at his piano. He turns to the camera and says, "The difference between myself and other pianists is the lack of effort in my wrists."

This column was written in collaboration with David Zemach-Bersin.