

Holistic Strategies Can Help Maintain Excellence in the Performing Arts

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The performing arts place a high bar of stress that most of us take for granted. Of course, the majority of musicians would immediately categorize themselves as “type A” personalities – perfectionistic, driven. How many of you have, at one time or another, had a muscle strain or inflammation and kept practicing and performing because of an upcoming audition or performance?

Or, even more frustrating, you’ve had a symptom show up suddenly that impairs your ability to perform? How many have sought the “quick fix” of an injection or medication? We musicians are very clever. We find ways to compensate for what’s not working. We “muscle it.” What we don’t see is the wear and tear that is happening to both the mind and the body, until the injuries and stresses rear their heads and bring us to a halt. So, the good news and the bad news is that there is no quick fix, but there are wellness strategies that can help you maintain your edge.

The statistic of a 75% rate of injury among students and professionals is still a reality. So, how do we change this? We must break the culture of silence and take ownership of our own health and wellbeing. Optimal health for a performer is a lifestyle for both mind and body.

At the Cleveland Clinic Center for Integrative and Lifestyle Medicine, we offer specialized services for care of the performing artist. Stephen Warner, a violinist in his 37th year with The Cleveland Orchestra, knows firsthand the value of the program. A few years ago, he received a diagnosis of Benign Essential Tremor from the Neurology Department at Cleveland Clinic. I’ll let him explain, in his own words, what happened next:

“I went through typical drug protocols, most of which had unpleasant side effects including drowsiness, sleepiness, difficulty concentrating, confusion. As much as the violin and music mean to me, I could not continue to live like this. I began talking to as

many people as possible and was fortunate to get information from colleagues about both the Integrated Medical Campus of the Cleveland Clinic and Dr. Kathleen Riley, a biofeedback specialist. I found the atmosphere at the Integrated Medicine Campus extremely conducive to overall wellness. My symptoms were addressed globally by a health care team providing diet and nutrition, holistic psychotherapy, chiropractic, massage, and biofeedback for musicians. In addition, I practice yoga and meditation.

Most important to my Integrated Medicine experience was the biofeedback work I did with Dr. Riley, who, first trained as a musician herself, understood so well what it takes to do what I do, and is extremely knowledgeable about which muscles are needed in performance. I spent at least six intensive months under her care and gratefully find myself today still using the tools that she gave me to manage my condition and remain at the level necessary to the membership of a world-class orchestra. I am so happy that Dr. Riley has joined the Integrative Medicine Team at the Cleveland Clinic. This totality of diverse caregivers makes this campus, in my opinion, a world leader in helping to heal musicians and teach them how to manage their wellbeing.”

Biofeedback is a treatment technique in which people are trained to improve their health by using signals from their own bodies through physiological monitoring and training. This process enables awareness of various physiological functions for the purpose of learning to progressively establish subtle changes in control of specific body systems. Biofeedback monitoring of muscle activity with simultaneous video feedback of body alignment is a powerful tool that can enable musicians to see “inside” themselves and learn to make effective changes. Biofeedback monitoring of heart rate variability can help people learn techniques for stress reduction.

The Cleveland Clinic Center for Integrative and Lifestyle Medicine offers a range of programs that can help performing artists to keep performing at the top of their game. These programs include holistic psychotherapy, acupuncture, chiropractic, yoga, reiki, massage, nutrition, Chinese Herbal Medicine, Functional Medicine and Lifestyle Medicine. We all work together as a team to effect lasting change in our patients in a holistic way

To learn more about Integrative Medicine for musicians call 216-448-4325 x4.

A classically trained pianist, Kathleen Riley, Ph.D. is the director of Biofeedback for Musicians at the Wellness Institute of the Cleveland Clinic. She is also on faculty at the Cleveland Institute of Music where she teaches courses in Optimal Performance Health.