

Fine-tuning musicians' bodies

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CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

When Toronto Symphony Orchestra violinist Wendy Rose woke up one morning with a frozen shoulder, she was close to panic. She could barely move her left arm – the arm she uses to hold her violin.

"I didn't know if I was going to be able to play," she says. And if you can't play, there won't be any pay.

"This is not something most musicians want to talk about openly," says Rose. "It can affect your whole career. I don't think there is a single orchestra musician who hasn't had an injury at one time or another."

Rose took action right away, going to see a chiropractor, an acupuncturist and, then, a specialist in sports injuries. But no one came up with a satisfactory long-term solution to her injury until she went to see Toronto physiotherapist Ginette Hamel, who specializes in musicians and dancers.

"None of the other people I had gone to see bothered to find out how I had become injured," Rose recalls. Hamel did.

Although a violinist and a quarterback don't rely on the same level of physical exertion, both depend on having highly developed muscle control to do their jobs.

Making music is an athletic activity, says Hamel. "It's normal for injuries to happen. In fact, the chances are greater, because it's very small muscles that get worked most of the time."

And while a soccer star might make a show of limping off the field after a tumble, an orchestral cello player



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Wendy Rose, assistant principal second violin with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, says most musicians don't want to talk openly about injuries.

is more likely to hide the fact that their bowing wrist is painfully swollen from over-practising.

"The stigma comes because people are afraid of what others are going to think. There's always been the feeling that, if I'm injured, I'm not good enough, or I must not be playing well," the therapist says.

Hamel began her professional life as a sports physiotherapist before going to work full-time for the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. For the past seven years, she has built a thriving practice in Toronto, working out of the Artists Health Centre at Toronto Western Hospital.

Members of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra and the National Ballet go to people like Hamel to fix their aching joints or sore muscles.

Often, finding a solution comes down to proper preparation before practice. It's a familiar case of prevention being stronger than trying to cure an ingrained problem. "For me it's a matter of saying things like, 'an athlete stretches, so maybe you should stretch,'" Hamel says.

Based on the variety of musicians' injuries she has seen, Hamel has created two exercise DVDs (available at stabilitywithmobility.com) that musicians or dancers can follow to keep their bodies healthy and flexible.

With most clients, Hamel will capture them playing on video, then take a long, hard look before designing a course of physiotherapy. She has even noticed problems while watching the TSO from her seat in Roy Thomson Hall.

The therapist is one of a growing number of professional who recognize the importance of stretching and posture as the best way of preventing repetitive strain and other injuries among musicians.

And that awareness is starting to trickle down to school level. Recently, students at the advanced Glenn Gould School at the Royal Conservatory of Music had their first "performance awareness" class, designed to make them aware of how to care for their body while practising and performing.

"We take this very seriously," says Angela Elster, vice-president, academic, at the conservatory. "We try to make sure that the students are aware of what their body is telling them," she says.

Wendy Rose says her main violin teacher, Laurand Fenyves, told her early about things she could do to prevent injury. "But when you're young, you're invincible," she says. "You don't really think about it until you feel some pain."

"Pain is the way your body tells you that something's wrong," says Hamel of the needed awareness. "If you ignore the pain all the time and say 'I just have to work through it,' it's the same thing as having a smoke detector and having the batteries out."

Megan Benjafield, who is teaching string-playing to more than 100 students at the Etobicoke School of the Arts this year, says that conversations about maintaining a healthy body are integral to what she does, too. But she admits that most of her students have private teachers, so she has to be careful to "not step on the toes of their instructors."

Hamel hopes that more musical children will grow up recognizing the signals their bodies are sending.

"If you take on good habits right away, in your formative years, there's a better chance that you'll remain free of injuries," Hamel explains. "It can be comfortable – or at least not as painful as you think it needs to be."