

RISKY BUSINESS!

Situations that put the musician at risk

When you are performing, practising or learning, you put your body under a considerable amount of strain. If you don't know how to deal with this, you run the danger of causing undue damage to yourself, both physically and mentally.

Here are ten common traps that musicians fall into, plus some suggestions as to how you can address these. It is intended mostly for instrumentalists, but much of what follows applies to singers too. It's a risky business for you if ...

1. You take more care of your instrument than your own body

Your body deserves and needs at least the same level of care that you give to your instrument. You should bear in mind that playing a musical instrument or singing requires a physical effort that must be compensated for.

The basic tools you can use to tackle this are: exercise routines that are appropriate for your physique and instrument; organising and monitoring your work rhythm; planning any major changes (for example, increasing the length of your practice sessions progressively by a maximum of 30 minutes every three days); caring for your physical and psychological health; and respecting postural and ergonomic matters. Students should understand that ultimately their bodies are more important than examinations, which can be deferred if necessary.

2. You don't compensate for an asymmetrical playing position

This is particularly important for violinists, cellists, flautists and so on. You should work both sides of your body equally, carry out compensatory physical activity and make certain that your posture or ways of holding your instrument are not contributing to or generating greater imbalances.

Such imbalances can adversely affect your muscles, tendons, joints and spinal column, making you less efficient in your work, causing aches and pains and muscle fatigue, and increasing the possibilities of malfunction and the potential for more serious injury in the future. You might consider getting your instrument adapted especially. Working on posture, for example by learning the Alexander Technique, Pilates or yoga, can help to balance you out.

Make sure you compensate for asymmetry by moving the muscles you use to play your instruments in an OPPOSING direction to the playing position. Refer to the BAPAM warm-up exercise factsheet 'don't cramp your style!'

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Acknowledgments:

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(material taken from *The*

Musician's Body: a maintenance manual for peak performance by

Jaume Rosset i Llobet and

George Odam.

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3. You use an inappropriate technique

Defective technique (or using an old technique that doesn't take into account the fact that your body has changed) is often one of the main vulnerable points of the musician, and can be a source of other health-related issues too.

Analyse your natural physical advantages and also your limitations, and discuss these candidly with your teacher. With the help of your teacher, you should choose the technique and repertoire most suitable for your technical, physical and psychological abilities.

Always warm up prior to playing. Avoid putting too much pressure on your instrument; use your energy to play with – and not fight against – your instrument! Work on relaxation so as to achieve the very best economy of effort and movement.

4. You don't try to fit your instrument to suit your body

The process for designing musical instruments has rarely taken into account the need for a better fit with the musician's body. If you really feel that the way your instrument fits your body is too uncomfortable, consider asking your instrument maker to modify your instrument or look for accessories that might help with this. Do not wait until you get an injury before starting to experiment in this area.

A very good test is to take your instrument and stand in front of a mirror with your eyes closed. After playing, remember your exact position and put your instrument to one side, or get someone to take your instrument off you, and observe your posture in the mirror. Notice the difference between this 'frozen' posture and your usual posture.

5. You fail to consider your overall state of health

You should not work when you are injured, over-tired, ill, sleepy, have not drunk enough fluids, or following heavy meals and fizzy drinks which make abdominal breathing difficult.

Use your common sense when you are not feeling on top form. If possible, miss a rehearsal – if you are suffering from an infection, for example. This will spare you problems and you will avoid exposing your colleagues to your germs. You should try to seek the advice of a Performing Arts Medicine specialist to ensure that any treatment you undergo is the most appropriate.

6. You don't deal with poor environmental conditions

Often the musician is not conscious of the effect of the environment on his performance. It is too easy to take no account of aspects such as the temperature, humidity or acoustics. For example, if you are too cold your fingers might not be able to make the subtle movements you need. If the air conditioning is on too high it can dry out mucous membranes, which is very problematic for singers and wind players. If you are performing in the open air and can't hear yourself very well, you might be inclined to play or sing more loudly. A flickering light can give you a headache ...

If you think anything can be done about any of these environmental factors, don't be afraid to ask – for the air-conditioning to be turned down; for a window to be closed or opened, or for background noise to be tackled. Remember, you're not the only one suffering and you're making things more comfortable for others too.

7. You carry and hold your instrument inefficiently

An instrument, whether because of its size (for example, the double bass or the drum kit), or its shape (for example, the lute) or because of a lack of awareness on the part the musician, is not always carried or held correctly.

Invest in the best case you can afford, with wheels for double basses and cellos. You must think about distributing the weight as symmetrically as possible. Use wide straps, avoid wherever possible loading the delicate muscles of the hands, preferably use the more powerful back muscles and, if it is not possible to carry the load in an evenly distributed fashion, switch sides or the hand carrying the case frequently.

8. You don't watch out in your other daily activities

It is true that it is difficult to conclude that a pain in your thumb is because you have been writing text messages on your mobile phone for 20 minutes, if you have spent 5 hours rehearsing with double beaters on the vibraphone. However, here are a few things to watch out for:

- How do you use your mobile phone?
- How is your computer positioned at home?
- What type of pillow do you use?
- How tightly do you hold the handset when speaking on the phone?
- How many hours do you spend writing at exam time?
- How do you make the bed or do the vacuuming?
- How do you pick up and hold your child?
- How do you use your voice when teaching, lecturing or speaking in public?

9. You don't consider the psychological aspects of performing

Although perfectionism, perseverance, sensitivity and introspection may be valuable qualities in a musician, if these are taken to the extreme they may represent a risk to your health.

The subject of performance anxiety or stage fright is attracting the interest of many researchers and some ways of tackling this are currently in development. If stage fright is a problem for you and you feel you can discuss it with your teacher, do so (but bear in mind that often the teacher is not the ideal person to discuss this with).

What is clear is that physical and psychological aspects are very closely related and that addressing some of the physical aspects will have a positive impact on the psychological side. Do warm-up exercises, eat well, have an absorbing hobby outside of music, and generally look after yourself. If you still feel you have a problem that won't go away, then contact BAPAM or your GP to discuss what options for treatment are available to you.

10. You don't take socioeconomic factors into account

Make sure you are in contact with your union e.g. the Musicians' Union, Incorporated Society of Musicians or Equity, and keep them in the know as to your working conditions.

Satisfactory economic and social support will make things much easier for you when you most need it. This might mean, for example, a guarantee of retaining employment if you are injured, economic assistance during periods when you are signed off from work, recognition of the professional illnesses of the musician, understanding and efficiency by the medical profession, etc. It is vital that all young musicians take these things seriously. Ideally, you should be prepared to give time to, and work together with colleagues, to achieve better working conditions for all musicians.

Summary

If you fear that your family doctor does not understand Performing Arts Medicine, then seek specialist advice from BAPAM.

In any case, failing to seek a solution to an injury or problem which lasts more than a week is always a risk, since the longer the problem is left to develop, the more likely it is that treatment will take an equally long time.

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