

The **A B C** s of Gen X, Y(P), Z

A Column for Young Professionals

By Courtney Crappell, NCTM
Guest Columnist Barbara Lister-Sink

Playing-Related Injuries

The Dark Side Of Our Profession And How You Can Help

Technique remains one of the most significant pedagogical concerns for piano teachers. Even though we have more published reference guides and teaching resources than ever, young teachers often struggle to set up healthy and efficient technique for their students. When I began my graduate studies and was practicing for longer periods than ever before, I remember Barbara Lister-Sink's video, *Freeing the Caged Bird*, was inspirational to me. The premise that I could play without pain and discover a greater focus on artistry, free from the distraction of technique, inspired me to rethink the way I practiced and performed. Her personal story and call-to-arms below encourages us to consider our approach to technique and how we guide a new generation of students in piano study.

—Courtney Crappell, NCTM

"It happened literally overnight without warning and no one really knew

*Barbara Lister-Sink, internationally acknowledged leader in injury-preventive piano technique, directs the certificate program in injury-preventive keyboard technique at Salem College. Her DVD *Freeing the Caged Bird* received the 2002 MTNA-Frances Clark Keyboard Pedagogy award.*



what to do with me. I spent the next five years trying everything that was suggested—orthopedists, chiropractors, massage therapy, hot and cold packs, muscle relaxants, pain medication, yoga... Nothing worked. It was (and still is) the worst time in my life."

"I used to think that playing related injuries only happened to other people. When topics such as carpal tunnel syndrome came up...I affected an attitude of indifference with a hint of sympathy and waited for this topic that I was so sure was irrelevant to me to pass. When it did happen to me, it was surreal. Now with this pervasive attitude staring back at me from colleagues and teachers, I realize that no one can understand until it happens to them."

"For almost eight years it was an ongoing battle between limitations, shame and sometimes pain until it finally completely broke down."

The Problem

For more than 25 years, I have retrained hundreds of pianists and organists. More than half of them have suffered from playing-related neuromusculoskeletal disorders. The quotes above are from dozens of tragic "piano stories" I collect each year from my students. Many of them have experienced not only physical, professional and financial disasters from loss of scholarships, auditions and jobs. They have also suffered the emotional and psychological results of losing their ability to do what they love most—making music on the piano. Accurate diagnoses are often difficult to obtain and range from tendinitis,

thoracic outlet syndrome, carpal and cubital tunnel syndromes, to the most troublesome—focal dystonia. But there are also psychological byproducts of injury: clinical depression, decreased motivation, interpersonal problems, accusations of hypochondria, feelings of worthlessness and—the worst—loss of purpose in life.

These disorders afflict, according to researchers, between 26 and 93¹ percent of pianists. I believe this is an appalling percentage, one we would never tolerate in air travel, food industry, pharmaceuticals or the operating room. But in spite of the efforts of researchers in performing arts medicine, and the plethora of outstanding books, workshops, symposia and so on, this percentage remains stubbornly high.

The good news, as pointed out by Brenda Wristen² and Gail Berenson³ in the recent *American Music Teacher* Musician Wellness Series, is that MTNA, the Performing Arts Medicine Association (PAMA) and the National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy (NCKP) are beginning to develop and share resources for students and teachers, including collaboration with international organizations. And in 2012, the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) required all member institutions to be responsible for providing information on injury-prevention and on maintaining vocal, hearing and musculoskeletal health.

This is a historic move in the right direction. But as Wristen cautioned, we cannot leave health and injury-prevention to accrediting organizations

and universities. Independent music teachers need to promote health from the very beginning of study. So where can you find accurate information about injury-preventive technique? And how do you teach it?

My Own Awakening

This mission of mine had its origins in my own playing-related injury at 16 while working on Beethoven's *Third Concerto*. I had developed right arm extensor tendinitis. My arm burned when I moved my fingers and I had to stop cold. Multiple shots of cortisone enabled me to perform the concerto, but I was plagued throughout college with pain. Neither teachers nor doctors had answers. I read numerous historical treatises but could not translate them into practical application.

After graduation, by pure luck my path intersected with an American teacher in Amsterdam. Edith Lateiner-Grosz believed that cultivating *continual awareness* was the key to both injury prevention and compelling music making. Awareness meant: awareness of one's physical, emotional and mental state; of how the instrument feels; and above all, of the *sound*.

My Journey

That was my starting point. In the 1980s, I set forth on a decade-long journey to discover what many of the great pianists had in common with each other, and with great athletes, figure skaters and dancers who moved with such natural ease and suppleness. My musical models were Rubinstein, Cliburn, Arrau, my teacher Guido Agosti, and my own father who played ragtime with great ease and a relaxed, upright posture. I realized they all demonstrated efficient, smooth coordination of the whole body, either on the golf course, on the ice or at the piano. I also learned that great athletes learn complex motor skills in a step-by-step, sequenced manner, just as Lateiner had

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taught me—from the simplest to the most complex coordination, mastering each step along the way.

I have tried never to stop learning everything I can about how the body, directed by the brain, works best with the piano. My students and I read technical history and current research. We investigate how sports pedagogues develop biomechanical models and basic form, as well as strategies for teaching complex motor skills. For 30 years, I have interwoven principles of the Alexander Technique into my teaching and playing. I gradually developed a biomechanical model for playing the piano and a process for teaching it. In 1995, frustrated with the ongoing high levels of playing-related injury, I produced the DVD *Freeing the Caged Bird—Developing Well-Coordinated, Injury-Preventive Piano Technique* in which my own particular method was demonstrated. Continued dissatisfaction led to developing an entire curriculum that formed the basis for the Certificate Program in Injury-Preventive Keyboard Technique at Salem College.

Finally, in 2011, I felt the need for more rigorous study in these fields and enrolled in a doctoral program at Teachers College, Columbia University to study music education, adult learning theory, transformative learning, movement science and neuroscience. I wanted to take my knowledge to a much higher level and subject my own technical model and method to intense scrutiny.

What Our Profession Needs

What I have concluded at 67 is that both the piano and the performing arts medicine fields urgently need consensus on two essential elements: 1) Core biomechanical principles on which to build a technical model of good coordination and injury-prevention and 2) Effect strategies for teaching these principles. These essential elements must over time become

widely understood, accepted and applied. It does not mean that we will all play the same way. But we all can understand these principles and base our teaching of injury-preventive technique on them.

Establishing Core Principles Of Good Biomechanics

Why are pianists—small muscle athletes as well as artists—not taught the same biomechanical core principles that other athletes are taught?

This would require defining optimal use of the neuromusculoskeletal system through skeletal alignment and efficient muscle throughout the entire body. Why are we not held to the same biomechanical standards as athletes?

Just because pianists' "athletic" activity results in art should not exempt us from knowing and teaching core principles of good body use. Art and good technical form are not mutually exclusive, as the playing of Rubinstein, Arrau, Richter, Hess, Prokofiev, Gershwin, the Lhevinnes, Agosti and Cliburn so eloquently demonstrated. Good technique—how we use our whole body at the piano—can help us maximize our artistry.

In 2008, I headed an interdisciplinary panel presentation "Enlightened Piano Technique—A Definitive Model for the 21st Century."⁴ Panel members were leaders in sports pedagogy, the history of piano technique, cognitive embodiment, performing arts medicine and the use of technology in teaching. Core principles of good body use were agreed upon. It was an attempt at incorporating knowledge and research from relevant disciplines to help us create effective models and teaching strategies.

Establishing Effective Strategies For Teaching These Core Principles

Piano teachers spend a great deal of money, time and effort on finding

the right methods for teaching theory, reading, repertory, style and musicianship. What we do not have collectively are sound methods for teaching the foundational technical skills.

The fields of sports pedagogy, dance pedagogy and neuropedagogy are replete with research on sound strategies for building motor skills, step-by-step, starting with the simplest and progressing to the most complex coordinations.

What Can You Do To Help Your Students?

My experience with hundreds of students has given me a deep faith in the ability of the younger generations to solve these problems. You are committed, adventurous, and not easily fooled. You search for, as my teacher Guido Agosti called it, "the real thing." Under your leadership, I believe our field will make significant progress in creating technical models and strategies. But until that happens, you will, to a considerable degree, be undertaking your own journey. Here are some things that can help:

- Learn about your own technical history, your body at the piano, and risk factors for injury. Read Reginald Gerig's magnificent and encyclopedic book on our own history—*Famous Pianists & Their Technique*⁵—so that you both learn of the great technical pedagogues and avoid historically counterproductive pathways; Thomas Mark's *What Every Pianist Needs to Know About the Body*⁶ for sound anatomical information in a pianist-friendly form; and Emil Pascarelli's *Complete Guide to Repetitive Strain Injury*⁷ for information on obtaining accurate diagnoses, types of injuries and tests and strategies for recovery.
- Enroll in somatic education courses—such as the Alexander Technique or Feldenkrais Method—to experience optimal

dynamic alignment and to awaken your own kinesthetic awareness. Cultivating these self-sensing tools is a wonderful beginning to correcting skeletal misalignment and misuse or overuse of muscles. Your students will unconsciously mirror your improved use. Then hold a Saturday Piano Camp with a certified Alexander Technique teacher to jumpstart your students' awareness of their own body use. Being proactive about building good habits is far better than unlearning faulty body use habits later on.

- Encourage your professional organizations to hold symposia and workshops in which performing arts medicine leaders and teachers known for healthful technique join forces and share ideas. Remember, even though many researchers continue to bemoan the complexities of piano technique, experienced piano teachers—consistently successful in teaching well-coordinated technique—have much to offer.
- Knowledge is power. Equip yourselves with as much informed knowledge of good body use as

you can. No one is exempt from the possibility of playing-related injury. But adhering to sound principles of good use can lessen the risks. It will also empower you and your students to better understand why injury occurs and what you can do about it.

I will leave you on a positive, heart-warming and even exhilarating note: The legendary pianist Frank Glazer was a pupil of Artur Schnabel. While he learned much about musical values, he also believed that musicality was best served by an efficient, well-coordinated technique. So in his youth, he set out to understand both piano and body mechanics through studies in anatomy, the Alexander Technique and piano technicianship. He now truly believes that knowledge from each of these areas has enabled him to play without injury throughout his remarkable career. On February 27, 2015, we will present Frank Glazer in concert—8 days after his 100th birthday.

Notes

1. P. Bragge, A Bialocerkowski, and J. McMeeken, "A Systematic Review of

Prevalence and Risk Factors Associated with Playing-Related Musculoskeletal Disorders in Pianists," *Occupational Medicine* 56 (2006): 28–38.

2. B. Wristen, "Playing Healthy Staying Healthy—What Every Musician Needs to Know," *American Music Teacher* August/September (2014): 14–16.

3. G. Berenson, "Professional Associations Lead the Way," *American Music Teacher* August/September (2014): 17–19.

4. H. Brende, J. Chong, R. Gerig, B. Lister-Sink (Chair), K. Riley, T. Schuermann, *Enlightened Keyboard Technique: A Definitive Model for the 21st Century*, Handout at panel discussion held at the Music Teachers National Association 2008 Annual Conference, Denver, CO.

5. R. Gerig, *Famous Pianists and Their Technique*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (2007).

6. T. Mark, *What Every Pianist Needs to Know About the Piano*. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc. (2003).

7. E. Pascarelli, *Dr. Pascarelli's Complete Guide to Repetitive Strain Injury: What You Need to Know About RSI & Carpal Tunnel Syndrome*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. (2004).

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