

Stress points

Being carried off the soccer field on a stretcher has something heroic about it, but the physical and psychological injuries of the music professionals are often kept quiet, for fear of stigma. There are signs that attitudes are changing, but music has a long way to go to catch up with sport, says Jane Oakland

Stress is in! we either have too much of it in our lives or too little. Bookshops are crammed with self-help literature on stress management. Economically, stress-related illnesses are predicted to be one of the greatest factors affecting efficiency and productivity in the future. With that in mind, many businesses are investing in research and personnel to deal with these issues. Sport technology is rapidly developing psychological techniques aimed at reducing

stress and injury in sport, yet the music industry appears slow to recognise the benefits that these techniques could offer musicians. Athletes and musicians are alike in the need to aspire to optimum performance within highly stressful situations. But while it appears that there is considerable help available for athletes, musicians are often left to cope on their own. Questions need to be asked about the reasons for this and what can be done to help musicians of the future cope with the increasing pressures of musical life.

Obviously not all stress is bad. An amount of what might be called “healthy stress” is essential for maximum concentration, creativity and spontaneity. However if the amount of stress is more than can be utilised productively, it will work against these positive effects. It can result in a lowering of concentration, impaired performance, debilitating performance anxiety and in some cases physical injury. Balancing stress levels is a constant source of concern for musicians and there will always be times when it becomes a problem. Very often the initial cause of stress are non-playing related, such as working conditions, relationship problems, or even worse, having to keep one’s physical appearance in shape. The indications are that non musical stress will only increase, given the pressures faced by today’s musicians. If left unchecked, it is inevitable that at some time it will affect musical performance and physical well-being. Unfortunately there has been very little research undertaken which examines exactly how musicians can cope with professional and private stress. This is hardly surprising, given the reluctance of musicians to talk about these issues.

Articles in the national press and several magazines are beginning to draw awareness to the ever increasing physical problems experienced by musicians, yet comparatively little is spoken about the psychological issues that often precede or indeed follow injury. Mental stress or tiredness is often the cause of weak posture, which can lead to inefficient playing techniques and physical discomfort. It is usually only when physical symptoms occur that a musician would seek help, initially from a GP. What follows can be an endless trail of referrals and consultations with various practitioners in search of a possible cure. A psychologist is usually considered only as a last resort. Even when a medical diagnosis is made, dealing with non-playing time or building the self-confidence to resume playing, can initiate just as much stress as the injury itself.

By contrast, the world of sport is many years ahead of the music industry in raising awareness of the connection between mental and physical well-being. Many English universities are now offering basic degree courses in sport psychology. A few years ago the Football Association launched a “Psychology for Football” strategy to increase awareness of psychology in professional clubs and youth academies. In America sports psychologists are required to be licensed before they can legally practice. In order to obtain a licence, the practitioner is not only required to be proficient in the techniques used in sport psychology but also have some training in counselling and clinical psychology. This recognises the need to deal with private stress in order to manage professional stress.

The effectiveness in sport psychology is also beginning to be evaluated. Researchers have found a consistent positive association between life stress and sports injuries and it has been seen that modifying the stress also reduces injury rates. The views the sports men and women themselves have also been considered.

In a project by Anderson, Miles, Robinson and Mahoney (*Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 2004*) several high profile British athletes were asked for their views and experiences of sport psychology. Although some did feel that psychology was only for athletes with problems, most athletes who had experienced psychological intervention came away with a positive view and would make use of it again. It was highly thought of if the psychologist himself had been professional sports-person and could “talk the language” without attempting to transcend the boundaries into that of a coach. It was also found that the athletes felt more at ease with a psychologist who displayed empathy and with whom they were able to talk to generally about their private lives. In other words a good sports psychologist is someone who not only possesses the knowledge and skills to maximise performance under stress but could also be thought of as a personal counsellor. Substitute the word athlete for musician and coach for teacher and there should be no reason why psychological intervention could not be applied to music, with equally positive results. However there still appears (in Europe at least) a certain amount of reticence in embracing this discipline. I think there are a number of reasons for this.

First, although as is so often the case, comparisons are made between music and sport psychology, there are essential differences. Peak performance in music cannot be measured by a perfect score. Forming goals based on an outcome of winning or losing is detrimental to artists, for whom creativity and aestheticism are highly rated qualities. Evaluation of psychological intervention is therefore subjective and not always easy to rate scientifically.

Secondly, there is little awareness of what psychology can offer particular within the student population. A colleague of mine working as a psychologist in a conservatoire in Holland remarked that the biggest handicap in helping students was obtaining the necessary referrals from their teachers. When he was able to work with individual students, he estimated that in 90% of cases both teacher and student recognised improved playing and performing abilities. In contrast to this, most sport academics will include modules on psychology as standard course material.

However, perhaps the most important problem in recognising and dealing with stress-related problems and injury is the inability of musicians to talk openly about them. The image of an injured sports-person carries somewhat heroic qualities, particularly when considering recent football events. I don't think there was a person in the country who was not intimately aware of David Beckham's metatarsal problems prior to a world cup competition. He returned, no doubt with the best medical and psychological help available, to a hero's welcome. A similar scenario was witnessed this year with the unfolding of the Wayne Rooney drama. Musicians will often try to cover up injury problems for as long as possible, in the knowledge that it will be very easy to find a replacement.



It is a shame that only when artists are very well established do they feel able to talk honestly about the effects of stress. Renee Flemming's account of "stage fright" in her recent book (*The Inner Voice*) summarises all the points I have made so far. At the peak of her career, a painful divorce resulted in excess stress and a paralysing attack of stage fright. She wrote "in such a situation the positive effect of an excellent therapist cannot be underestimated".

She herself went on to see a psychiatrist and later when she was advised to make certain career transitions, went to see a sports psychologist. This begs the question as to why a top musician should have to see a top sports psychologist in order to enhance her musical career. "He left me with some fascinating ways of approaching this issue, though I have never been able to think of them without imagining myself standing on the 50 yard line shouting them to a man in a coach's uniform".

Is it not time for more musicians to be trained in the use of psychological techniques so that similar benefits can be felt without having to imagine playing in a Wimbledon final ?.

As early as the 1980's recognition of the physical stresses experienced by musicians was beginning to be addressed, due in part to the efforts of The British Association for Performing Arts Medicine (www.bapam.org.uk) and the Incorporated Society for Stress and Tension in Performance (www.isstip.org) Offices are now open in Manchester and Glasgow as well as London. The Association of British Orchestras (www.abo.org.uk) and Musicians Benevolent Fund (www.mbf.org.uk) are making pioneering efforts to raise the awareness of stress and health problems in our orchestras. Specialist counselling and psychology is provided by Performance and Media, a practise founded by Andy Evans in London. All the psychologists who run this practise have had first-hand experience of the performing arts and offer help for the performing anxiety, motivation and career development. Unfortunately it is so often the case that musicians wait too long before seeking help, either through lack of knowledge or apprehension. Perhaps echoing the Football Association's initiative, a "Psychology for Music" awareness action should be launched.

Recent conferences at the Guildhall School of Music and the Royal Northern College of Music invited keynote speakers who spoke about the need for more holistic approaches in the training of young musicians - in particular, the need to incorporate not only the physical but mental techniques necessary for well being and longevity. Presentations during the conferences reflected these thoughts but distinct lack of student attendance meant that the ideas generated would have little chance of stimulating the thinking of tomorrow's musicians. But courses are beginning to appear which offer more insight into music psychology and its relevance in the training of young musicians.

A post-graduate course initiated by Sheffield University "Psychology for Musicians", is producing several very capable graduates, many of whom are developing ways to put this knowledge to practical use in their own teaching or performing careers. More recently, a course has been started for Thames Valley University, "Performance and Media Health". Designed by Andy Evans, the course aims to provide students with a broad knowledge of the physical and psychological factors that contribute towards well-being in artistic performers. However what is really needed for a course to be designed, similar to the training of a sports psychologist in America, which could recognise the the profession of "applied music psychologists". Students could be trained not only in the psychological aspects of performance, injury prevention, memory training, practice, etc. but also receive some counselling and clinical psychology training. This could then initiate some sort of registration system and quality control. Meanwhile, it is certainly encouraging to see that several institutions are beginning to talk about these issues and reflect on the training and skills needed by future musicians. Ultimately however, it could be that everything comes down to economy. Controlling worker stress is beneficial for the Western economy. Winning in sport is not only financially beneficial for the competitors but, more importantly, the sponsors. It is very difficult to view music (at least classical) as a viable business prospect. Nevertheless, finding ways for musicians to give their best and still maintain their health should be a priority. At the very least, efforts should be made to heighten awareness of stress and lower the stigma that musicians attach to it. Psychology cannot offer a magic cure and may not work for everyone, but should certainly not be dismissed.

11th November 2006



Classical
Music
Magazine