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Tutti for health and wellbeing – Performing health psychology

Report

Background. When coming across “music” and “health”, one succumbs almost instantaneously to either the thought of music training being beneficial to the development of the human brain or the thought of music being therapeutic in the context of palliative care and for its vitaminizing effects on the quality of life. While both pathways have some empirical support and are indeed worth investigating, one rarely thinks of the musician suffering for her art, ignoring pain while surrendering to the emotional dynamics of her art, prone to injury reminding her that her body requests the revaluing of its biology and laws in order to allow her to explore the ethereal meaning of the music, and perhaps lacking the necessary support to cope with her staring audience and demanding audition panel. Yet, both researchers and practitioners are increasingly vocal on a recurrent conclusion: musicians’ health is an under-explored area in both research and practical implementation. Given our obsession towards positive and ‘good’ emotions and our tendency to overlook the upside of our dark side (Kashdan & Biswas-Dienes, 2014), I am not inviting the reader to merely swap her attention from ‘good’ (i.e. music as therapeutic) to ‘bad’ (i.e. suffering musicians), nor am I attempting to victimize the art maker. I am only reorienting the stage light so that it reveals a player that has thus far taken, undeservingly, a back seat – the topic of musicians’ health and wellbeing: a topic which reveals a more complex landscape of music making, beyond any reductionist dichotomy and simplistic labelling.

British orchestras are world leaders and the UK is the second largest source of world repertoire and the third largest music market. London is one of the main centres for world theatre and classical music, selling £67m worth of tickets to overseas tourists between 2011 and 2012. However, workplace benefits for musicians such as holiday pay, pensions and other employment-related rights are scarce. According to a 2012 report of a study conducted by Musicians’ Union of approximately 2,000 musicians, 56% earned less than £20k, 60% reported working for free in the last 12 months, only 10% of musicians were full-time salaried employees, half had no regular employment and only 35% said they were paying into a pension scheme. With respect to health, according to the ICOSM survey conducted among more than 2,000 respondents and the largest to date, 76% of orchestral players reported at least one medical condition that affected their performances, while 36% reported a total of four such severe enough issues. Problems of the lower back, neck, shoulder and upper back were the most prevalent. A more recent study found that over an 18-month period, 84% of Australian orchestral musicians had an injury that interfered with their performance while musculoskeletal pain is common among musicians from British symphony orchestras. Risk factors within the orchestral realm could be environmental (difficulty of repertoire, the number, duration and intensity of rehearsals, temperature, lighting and seating) and/or psychosocial (high workloads, tight deadlines, working relationships and muscle tension due to psychosocial pressure). Playing an instrument has been suggested to be second only to computer use in terms of risk factors for musculoskeletal disorders. In addition, according to the same ICOSM survey, 25% suffered from stage fright and 16% mentioned a severe form thereof. A complex relationship has been suggested between musculoskeletal pain, performance anxiety and depression which could partly be explained by a somatizing tendency, but this interaction remains unclear. Scarce evidence looking at the experience of pain points out that musicians might ignore its potential damage in their striving for

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perfection. Although performing artists have been compared to athletes (both groups play through pain, face extreme competition, face significant risk of career-threatening injury and experience little ‘off-season’), musicians remain an under-researched group, with many unaddressed needs, and unprotected by a clear set of health-related guidelines with respect to both practice and performing. Considering some performance injuries are preventable, performing arts medicine specialists and musicians have been encouraged to make inter-disciplinary efforts to facilitate the development of relevant health promotion programmes and interventions.

The idea of proposing a series of workshops introducing health psychology among orchestral players in London has come easily to me, as I had recently completed my Master’s in Health Psychology and had been a musician myself for 20 years. The Public Engagement Grant offered by the DHP has given me not only the material support to put my ideas into practice, but has also encouraged me to take such an endeavour seriously. Their declared support enriched my feeling of ownership with a pleasantly mobilizing lining and intensified the sense of meaning I attached to my actions in this direction. In addition, the application process would not have been possible without an encouraging collaboration with Dr Benjamin Gardner, health psychologist at King’s College London, with expertise in behaviour change and habit formation.

Aims and content of workshops. The project consisted of a series of five workshops with a total of approximately 60 musicians from top London orchestras, including London Philharmonic Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the English Chamber Orchestra which took place between October 2015 and February 2016. Sessions were run by the grant holder (Raluca Matei), with content agreed with the senior grant holder (Dr Benjamin Gardner). It aimed to introduce the participants to health psychology via a focus on preventative health applied to their needs. The sessions presented research evidence on the prevalence of musculoskeletal issues and music performance anxiety among musicians, the importance of health behaviour (e.g. physical activity and sitting reduction), as well as a description of an array of behaviour change techniques, especially relating and conducive to habit formation. A parallel was drawn between how musicians might already be using such techniques when playing their instruments and planning their practice time (i.e. goal setting, planning, using prompts, habit formation), even if unaware of its happening, and how the techniques being transferable, could then be applied to the realm of health and prevention. A significant portion of the workshops was dedicated to performance anxiety (a popular topic among musicians) and the effects of reframing it (as excitement) on performance. A dialogue was always initiated with participants on the strategies they were already using when tackling performance anxiety, as well as a more general conversation on the issues they were facing. Attendees were also given the ‘*Health psychology in applied settings – A guide for the public*’ leaflet released by the BPS.

Challenges in arranging workshops. Obtaining agreement from orchestra managers to run the workshops was challenging, because musicians from top orchestras have very little time due to rehearsing and touring. Although a few declined my offer right from the beginning, many managers seemed to be persuaded by my arguments based on empirical research around the relevance of health psychology to musicians, and my willingness to adapt the length and structure of the workshop to fit the

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musicians. To maximise participation, all workshops took place between morning and evening rehearsals, lasting no more than 30 minutes, to allow for lunch breaks.

Feedback from participants. Participants completed feedback forms at the end of each session. Findings indicated that most were eager to take part in a conversation about their health, but did not feel that 30 minutes was long enough, and many asked for further, longer sessions on the topic. Large groups seemed less willing to disclose information about their health and expressed an interest for having similar sessions in more intimate settings, with fewer participants. Musicians asked questions about pain management particularly for situations in which they would feel pain in the middle of a symphony and not being able to stop playing. They also asked about anxiety-related symptoms such as tremor and were interested in coping mechanisms. Some voiced concerns about stress arising from the demands of being a musician in an orchestra. Several seemed interested in learning how they could develop healthy habits, and were curious about nutrition-related information. The most popular topic was performance anxiety and there was a generally high interest in anxiety management techniques.

Final reflections and future steps. In spite of their limited duration, the workshops appeared valued by musicians, who wanted to be listened to rather than lectured to. Prior to the workshops, none of these ensembles had had much information on preventative health for musicians. Longer sessions run in smaller groups might have provided attendees further space to express their health concerns and foster greater interest in their own wellbeing. Nonetheless, the support of the BPS Public Engagement Grant has been key in initiating these discussions and provoking greater interest in health, and health psychology, among orchestral musicians.

The findings described thus far will further add to the discussion on potentially innovative and interdisciplinary research approaches to musicians' health. Such a discussion is already planned for May 2016, as part of the Research Seminar Grant 2015 offered by the DHP to this very same topic and organized with the support of Prof. Jane Ginsborg (Royal Northern College of Music) and Prof. Aaron Williamon (Royal College of Music). *Musicians' health and well-being: an interdisciplinary approach* will be a one-day event with short presentations from a range of related fields, followed by group discussions and a round table discussion. The session will be held at the Royal College of Music in London, on Thursday, 12 May 2016. Topics covered will include musculoskeletal issues among musicians, performance anxiety and stress management among both musicians and sportspeople, the effectiveness of interventions conducted so far in both areas, health promotion, behaviour change and implementation research. A good part of the day will be spent presenting the most recent findings and proposed research ideas as part of the *Musical Impact* project (<http://www.musicalimpact.org/>), an AHRC-funded research project involving all nine UK conservatoires (2013-2017) and currently the largest initiative of its kind worldwide which seeks to enhance the health and well-being of musicians in Britain. The principal investigators and music psychologists working on this project will join health psychologists, sports psychologists, physiotherapists, PhD students and key people representing relevant organizations such as Help Musicians UK, Association of British Orchestras (ABO), British Association for Performing Arts Medicine (BAPAM) and Musicians' Union (MU), and journals such as *Psychology of Music* in an attempt to achieve an array of aims:

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- To discuss what is currently known about musicians' health and what health psychology and sports psychology can offer them
- To facilitate discussion/integration, between researchers from different disciplines that are key to the understanding of the health challenges faced by musicians
- To highlight the important research gaps that exist in this area and entuse potential future researchers
- To explore possible opportunities for an interdisciplinary integration of health psychology, sports psychology and music psychology

Speakers include

- Music psychology: Prof. Jane Ginsborg (Royal Northern College of Music)
- Performance science: Prof. Aaron Williamon (Royal College of Music), Dr. Liliana Araujo (Royal College of Music)
- Health psychology: Prof. Jill Francis (City University London), Dr. Caroline Wood (UCL Centre for Behaviour Change)
- Sports psychology: Dr. John Perry (University of Hull/The British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences)
- Physiotherapy: Sarah Upjohn (Purcell School/University of Cambridge)
- Music education: Naomi Norton (Royal Northern College of Music)

Benefits for participants include:

- Free access to an event bringing together experts in their fields
- The chance to be innovative within their own field and initiate new professional pathways
- The chance to contribute to the development of an emerging field and to be part of a highly interdisciplinary approach to musicians' health
- The opportunity to meet students, researchers and practitioners from their field of interest, as well as from related fields
- The opportunity to have their ideas discussed within an exploratory round table conversation

Eventually, the public policy component will also be included in this interdisciplinary conversation in the form of a one-day expert-led event which has received funding from the North West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership (NWCDDTP). It will take place at the Royal Northern College of Music, in Manchester, on 13 June 2016.

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