

Playing & Teaching

How the Taubman Approach can help string players prevent RSIs

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Pioneer of the Taubman Approach, pianist and pedagogue Edna Golandsky adapted the method with violinist Sophie Till and shares how returning to natural physical alignment can help string players avoid injury



Edna Golandsky © Christian Steiner

With the world steadily returning to pre-COVID activities, live performances are once more lighting up the stage. Eager to return to our routine, the question becomes: how can musicians re-enter their previous playing lives without risking injury?

Statistics show more than 80% of music professionals suffer from playing-related problems. These oftentimes can be debilitating and even career-ending. This is where the Taubman Approach can help. Developed by legendary piano pedagogue Dorothy Taubman, the Taubman Approach gives musicians transformative tools to prevent fatigue, tension and pain as well as improving their ability to attain musical expressivity at the highest level.

While this approach was originally developed for pianists, I have also worked with instrumentalists of all kinds. I have long known that the root causes of fatigue, tension, and pain are the same with all instruments concerning the use of the fingers and hands. The Taubman Approach addresses these problems with string players to help prevent RSIs. In the past twelve years, I have had the opportunity to work with violinist Sophie Till in great depth on these issues. Here are some important principles:

The Left Hand – Finger isolation, Curling & Stretching:

When playing the violin or other stringed instruments, there is a great deal of finger isolation, curling, and stretching of the fingers. When the fingers lift by themselves, they pull on muscles on the top of the forearm, causing tension and pain. When they drop by themselves to play the string, they have to press hard on the string to go down, causing tension on the bottom part of the hand and forearm.

When they curl, they pull on the long flexor, which goes from the fingertip to the elbow, causing extreme tension in the fingers, hand, and forearm. Stretching the fingers away from each other is another cause of tension, and also it hinders the ability of the fingers to play freely down.

The principle of alignment and coordination governs all of our movements, regardless of the activity. To avoid unnecessary curling and stretching of the fingers, we need to use specific forearm movements to accompany the fingers as they move in all directions. Then, we can maintain our natural alignment, moving our fingers, hand, and forearm as one unit. This can have a crucial impact in eliminating or preventing tension and pain.

The Wrist - Twisting & Dropping:

Twisting the hand left or right from the wrist is a source of pain for many instrumentalists. Dropping or relaxing the wrist is the main reason for carpal tunnel syndrome. To prevent tension from twisting, the hand and the forearm have to move laterally as a unit. The wrist has to be at the height where the hand and forearm connect and move together.

The Bow Arm - Upper Arm & Thumb:

Lastly, I wanted to include a few primary insights for using the bow arm in a way that will ease tension and pain. Traditionally, I've noticed that many stringed instrumentalists hold the upper arm up too high, which causes fatigue and tension in the upper arm, shoulder, and neck. The solution to this problem is to use the forearm to initiate motion as the bow travels across the strings and let the upper arm adjust accordingly.

When holding the bow, violinists often stretch the four fingers and pull the thumb all the way to the third finger, a most uncomfortable position. The four fingers should not be stretched or clenched. The thumb should be between the index finger and the middle finger. With the support of the forearm, the basic alignment of the fingers, hand, and forearm enables the hand to hold the bow with ease as it moves over the strings.

The brilliance of this approach is that it is not necessary to learn a whole new way of playing, but rather one simply has to return to a natural alignment. One of the greatest joys of the Taubman Approach is that in Dorothy Taubman's search to ease pain and prevent RSIs, she opened up a whole new world of possibility for musicians. They now play with more ease and greater expression than they could have imagined. In the years I've dedicated to this work, I've witnessed miraculous results in instrumentalists of all disciplines from making these changes.