

Angela McCuiston

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SPEAKERS

Hattie Butterworth, Rebecca Toal, Angela McCuiston

Hattie Butterworth 00:02

Welcome to the Musicians' Injury Awareness Week with Things Musicians Don't Talk About.

Rebecca Toal 00:07

Chronic playing injuries are a part of our lives as musicians, either through our own experience or that of our friends and colleagues. Playing-related pain is even more common with up to 90% of musicians reporting pain in relation to their instrument at some point in their lives.

Hattie Butterworth 00:23

After asking openly on our Instagram, whether someone would like to speak about their injury experience, the response was overwhelming. It became clear to us that this is an issue about which musicians feel misunderstood. We are determined to explore this further.

Rebecca Toal 00:38

Musicians' Injury Awareness Week was created by us at Things Musicians Don't Talk About for the week of the 15th to the 21st of November, in the hope that we can share the stories of musicians, teachers and physicians. Through podcasts, social media content and resources and live events in partnership with the UK conservatoires. We are ensuring that anyone struggling with injury can have access to peer support and the correct medical advice.

Hattie Butterworth 01:03

We urge you to take part in any way you can use the hashtag MIAW2021 and tag us @tmdtapodcast if you want to share your own journey with an injury.

Rebecca Toal 01:15

It honestly means the world that you're here and you're listening, and we can't wait to share some inspirational stories with you.

Angela McCuiston 01:27

So my name is Angela McCuiston and I own a business called Music Strong and what I do is I offer specialised fitness training for musicians. I specialise in what I like to call rehab and prehab, so helping musicians overcome and prevent playing-related injury. What I do is, if you think of what a personal trainer does, I am a personal trainer, but I tailor my workouts with my clients and your programming to your instrument, to how your body moves, to your schedule and to what you need as a musician because musicians are not like other professions and we are not athletes of the small muscles, we are athletes period. You use your whole body to play your instrument. And if something doesn't work, something else is going to compensate so you can continue doing that. But eventually things can fail down the chain and I want to prevent that so you have the longest playing career you possibly can. I've been a musician for a very long time. When I was in high school, flute was life. It was literally everything. I was in I was that band nerd that was that never left the band room. I was practising, I missed the bus because I was practising after school - that did not go too well with my parents...I did every honour band you can find I went to Interlochen Arts Camp. I came back as a counsellor just because I liked it so much. I got my bachelor's in flute performance from Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville, Tennessee, and I got my master's in flute performance from Florida State University. I won a position in Sinfonia Gulf Coast, which is a symphony in Destin, Florida, where I'm Assistant Principal and Piccolo. I graduated in 2007 with my master's, but in 2003, my senior year of my undergraduate degree, I joined the Army Band, I joined the National Guard. And three years ago almost, I transferred to the reserve. So I'm coming up on 19 years in the military, in the military band. So I am still very much an active musician and I actually teach adjunct at Trevecca University here in Nashville, Tennessee, I'm the adjunct flute professor. I have always loved fitness, it kind of runs in my family. I've had several members in the military and you know, fitness was always important. My uncle was also like a massage therapist, and a pro-biker, a pro-cyclist, and he was a coach and all these things so it's just kind of in our family, but I didn't really have a direction for it. And when I graduated with my master's, I had already kind of been on a fitness path where I wanted to see what my body could do, and I was already going to the gym like five, six days a week ... it was a little out of control at that point. But when I graduated with my master's degree, I thought, "well, now what? I just have a piece of ... I've got two pieces of paper that say I can play good and real good. Well, now what? Like, I don't have a job." The orchestra I play is not a full time orchestra. Um, I was living in Panama City, Florida, and it's a very touristy town. It's not really big on lessons and such so I tried to do ... I'd been teaching lessons since eighth grade, never had a problem. Move to PC couldn't make a studio last and I thought, "you know, there's got to be something else. I'm a natural teacher. I'm good at it. I like it. I love teaching people and I love helping people." And I was newly married at the time and I didn't have any friends in this new place and no job and nothing to do and I thought, "maybe I'll take a break from music for five minutes and let's go explore this fitness thing. Let's just see what this is like," and I thought, "I wonder if personal training is kind of like teaching lessons but for the body." And it was. I started getting into it and I always loved anatomy and kinesiology and things just fell into place. So I settled on the National Academy of Sports Medicine and then as I'm going through their curriculum, they talk a lot about muscle imbalances and making sure you don't just pr... programme, quote, random exercises, there's a real science behind why you programme how you do for the client. So this light bulb went off in my head. And I thought, "this is what musicians are missing!" because we hear ... we hear musicians yoga, like every five minutes, musicians' yoga, yoga for musicians. There's nothing wrong with yoga, but it's everywhere and that's one side of the coin. Where's the strength training? You can only be so flexible and if you don't have enough stability in your body or enough strength in your body or enough

endurance, you're not... Flexibility is not going to cover all sides of that coin. My first playing-related injury was when I was at Interlochen Arts Camp as a 16, 17 year old, and I got tendinitis right here and it was so bad. Holding a pencil - this was agony. I could not hold anything, it hurt so bad. Doctor told me I should stop playing. Like, "I'm 17. This is not an option. I have auditions coming up." He goes: "yeah, well, I'm gonna send you to physical therapy. And you should quit playing for a while", I was like, "alright, I'll rest." But you know, honestly, it's just the sheer volume. I went from maybe two hours of playing a day to eight hours a day for eight weeks. The body just ... they did not prepare me physically for that at all. So as soon as I came back and went back to quote, normal, it sorted itself out and physical therapy helped. Problem solved. Second injury was when I was in graduate school, and I was in the gym, and I didn't know what good form was. And I was bench pressing, I was dumbbell bench pressing, because I thought that's what you did on Mondays. I mean, I just did whatever the magazine said. And I didn't know what good form was, I didn't know I had to brace my spine, and you know, protect my scapula and all this stuff. I tore a muscle in my back right behind my shoulder blade, I had a pretty severe strain and I couldn't move. And I went to the doctor on campus, and he said, "you you need to quit playing". I said, "um, I'm in school for flute performance. Not an option". He goes, "You know, like no option. I'll give you a prescription for some painkillers ... muscle relaxers and massage." So ... but okay, fine. So then I get out of college, and I'm pursuing personal training and, and taking auditions. And then there was another audition that came up for the President's own Marine Band. It was for piccolo, and piccolo is my favourite thing. But I didn't know any of the orchestral rep. I had graduated with no knowledge of orchestral literature, and I went, "Oh I got to learn...hey, cool, now I have a goal. I gotta do this in a few weeks." So I went from zero hours a day to like four hours a day. And I got to the point where I had some muscles in my back, that would just anytime I tried to breathe, breathing was hard. It was painful. I'd go... I went to see a doctor again. And I was told, guess what? "Oh, you should just quit playing." I said "well, you should quit being a doctor, give me a better... dude, this is not an option". He goes "I can give you some cream." Like, really?! This is what we have?! And he said "Well, here's the problem." I literally told him he should quit being a doctor, I was so mad. So ... and he said, "Well, what's happening is you have a muscle imbalance. And you know, you're playing piccolo." Piccolo, it doesn't matter the size or the weight of the instrument, it has to do with the posture you're in. And when you're intense, you tend to come toward and hunched and, you know, we're just focused, right? We're not paying attention the rest of your body. He said, "Well, you have a muscle imbalance between the front of your body and the back. Your left arm is being pulled forward so the muscles in the back have gotten so weak, that's why they're just pulled and they're about to tear. And the problem is, it's in the front of your chest, you've got a knot about the size of a golf ball, or whatever it was," and he goes "it's right over your heart. So ordinarily, I would give you a cortisone shot right in the middle of that muscle or right in the middle of that trigger point. But the problem is, it's right over your heart, and that would probably kill you. So that's not what you want, right?" I said, "No. So Plan B is?" "You should quit playing." "Plan C is?!" He goes "well, we got this cream." I was like "Alright, you're fired. I'll take a cream" and I thought "okay, enough is enough. I am tired of doctors giving musicians this lame, lazy answer of you should just quit." "Yeah, why don't you just be a dentist?" I mean, that's not how this works, right? So I thought, "there's got to be another way. There's got to be some other answers." So he talked about the muscle compensations. And I was studying for my personal training certification. And they're talking about muscle compensations and the imbalances created by your life, and your postures, and my brain went "and your instruments" and the light bulb went off and I thought, "Oh, gosh, well, screw this! I'll be a resource, if there's no other resources. I'm not gonna start telling

people, like just quit playing, there's got to be something else." So I got my personal training certification in 2009, and I think a couple years later, I studied for and received my corrective exercise specialisation which honestly has to be one of the hardest things I've done since my masters comps, it was just so intense. You have to know every muscle in the body, where it starts, where it ends, what it does, what it inhibits, what it antagonises, what it synergistically helps, what movement it facilitates, or doesn't facilitate, ah it's just so much! But the cool thing is, I literally use it every day. And with musicians, this light bulb went off, and I just start doing research and realised there has been almost no research, at least at that point, almost no research done on musicians and pain, and musicians and strength training. And I wrote a book called *The Musicians Essential Exercises*, and I quote every source I could find at that point. So if you want more resources, go look there. With all the research I started doing I went "oh my gosh, we're just not talking about it. I'm not the only one who got injured." And I can't tell you ... when I got injured in graduate school how I felt that I was blamed. Well that's not okay. So musicians are expected to play an instrument at this super high perfectionist level, 10 out of 10 all day every day until you decide to quit. And the minute you are not perfect, you are blamed. There's something really wrong with that mentality. And having that level of stress and perfectionism just thrust upon you and expected means also, we're not told much about our bodies. You might have some Alexander Technique work, we might have some body mapping work. We might even have some yoga or some barre classes that we do. But I was told to "stay out of the gym, you could hurt yourself." I'm sorry, you can hurt yourself walking down the street. I broke my foot walking into someone's house. You can hurt yourself doing anything you don't know. That's ... it's just an ignorant statement, right? I can wax poetic about this all day long but I finally the, the studies about strength training are coming out and they're showing that there's positive benefits that the pain levels decrease, that the, the incidences of injury decrease, that you have more energy, more stamina on stage, that your posture is better, you don't have neck pain. But we're just told, "if you are injured, you must not be very good." Excuse me? Do we say that to athletes? No. Do we expect them to get injured? Sure! Do we blame them? That's just part of it. Sucks to be you, but it's part of being a, being an athlete, right? But no, musicians are held to this other completely unrealistic standard that you have to be perfect. And the minute you show weakness, or you show humanity of, "hey, this hurts, I don't know what to do about it. Because no one's told me what my options are except quit, I must not be very good?" It has nothing to do with your worth as a musician or your ability level. I literally have two pieces of paper that say I can play good and real good and that's it. They didn't teach me up business whatsoever. So it's taken me longer than I'd like but then having to be self-taught. And I don't have a model to go after either, so anybody that can help me out great. But I just ... the need is there. And I'm figuring out as I go what the different needs are that people have and how I can meet them. And as my business grows, how could my business, as it expands, how can it help people where they are no matter where they are? If you go to physio or physical therapy, that is also strength training, it's the same thing. It's just different levels of it. So you just have to find what works for you, and then once you learn more about your body and what you need, then you're empowering yourself for the rest of your life and you're not beholden to some doctor who has no idea what you do, saying "you should just quit." And we have to stop prescribing rest as rehab. "Just stop playing" is not an answer. It's a cop out. It's a lazy, ignorant answer. That being said, there's a place if you have something that is acute and needs time to rest and heal, okay, fine, but quit as a general rule? No. And then, having doctors and various medical professionals understand what a musician's life is like. How many hours do we spend in rehearsals? Musicians that are not classical? Well, how many, how many hours do you spend on the road? What does your gear weigh? You're the

one loading it in and out of the van and then out of the bus probably. How much does it weigh? What's your form like? How do you pick up that monitor? You know, I mean, are you the sound guy? Are you doing it all yourself? One piece of advice I would give to anybody who's struggling with an injury, do not keep it to yourself. We stop the stigma when we start talking about it and start normalising it. This number of 90% of musicians? That's everybody around you, except the one guy who's like the wonder kid who doesn't have any problems, or he's not telling you that. It's everybody guys! And we have to start normalising the fact that yeah, we feel pain. You don't just play your trumpet or your timpani, or your flute or your cello with your arms and with your lips. You use your entire body, your entire body. Take a body part out and suddenly you will realise how much you use your entire body to play your instrument. So please start talking about it and that sharing resources, because when you start realising that, "oh, you had that, too? Oh, you did, too. Oh, who did you go see?" And then we start talking about who treated us well, who didn't treat us well, who had good results, instead of just trying to keep it on the down low and trying to deal with it ourselves. We don't help anybody when we keep it to ourselves, and then we perpetuate the stigma that we can't talk about it because it means you're an inferior musician. And then that perpetuates lack mindset of "there aren't enough gigs to go around and if I tell anybody, I'm injured, someone will get that gig and then I don't have a job." And it's bull. It's a bunch of baloney that's totally not true. There's so much music to be made and so many other ways and we need every single musician to be able to do it, because there aren't that many of us compared to the world population talking about it so we can get rid of the stigma and we can make more music than ever. And then we can just bury this whole dumb thing about "oh, you're not a real musician unless you teach at the university or you're in an orchestra. Those are the only two legit jobs." Don't get me started on that. All those things are related and if we don't talk about it, we don't make progress.