

MIAW Peter Regan

Sat, Nov 13, 2021 9:31PM • 18:02

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

injury, musicians, practising, music, thumb, college, exercise, hand, dystonia, pain, play, joint, life, people, instagram, concerts, thought, wrists, tendinitis, spasms

SPEAKERS

Peter Regan, Rebecca Toal, Hattie Butterworth

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 it 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 MIAW 2021. 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.

Peter Regan 01:24

So my name is Peter Regan. Little ... little pause there for the double 'R'. I'm a pianist. I'm living in London. I'm 25. I say I recently graduated from the Royal College of Music, but the truth is I've been graduated for a year now. Urm what am I currently doing? Teaching a lot and I'm playing concerts here and there, sometimes it's busy, sometimes it's quiet. This summer with two friends, Carolina Blaskovic and Tara Viscardi, we set up a chamber music festival. So that's kind of what I'm doing with music at the moment and preparing for some competitions and ... I don't know, just trying to enjoy it, I suppose. So the Chamber Music Festival is called Fulham Fest. So we did, we did four concerts over two days. And hopefully next time we do like maybe six concerts? I don't know ... we want to ... ultimately I want to make it like a five day to a week-long thing, but bit by bit. My vision or my idea was that we'd be able to do, I don't know, roughly a week long festival and we'd have obviously all your favourite music, everyone's favourite standard chamber music repertoire, but also new music, electronic music, you know, like, music that's interesting to us that maybe doesn't necessarily fit onto the classical music label, but is very good, you know, I feel like a lot of ... umm ... Music institutions limit themselves by not presenting something just because it's not, you know, traditionally classical or strictly classical. In the end, did that happen? I mean, kind of yes and no. So like, we had some new music, we had some electronic music to actually in fairness, but I suppose we didn't take it as far as I would have liked this year, just because you know, it's hard to organise this type of thing, and get an idea I've had for a really long time. I kept on, I kept on putting it off, because it's like, "oh, well, it's not the right time. It's not gonna be perfect." All these things, blah, blah, blah ... So we just plough ahead, it's like, "look, it's never going to be perfect. Like, it'll never be the right time. It'll, ... it's never going to work out the way it is in your brain. So just try it this year." See what happens. That's what we did. And hopefully next year we get closer to, you know, the fuller picture of that goal of completing everything. It was actually just when lockdowns initially started when, you know, pandemic came to Britain. So I was in the last year of college, and I was really, really, really busy. But also it's my own fault, because I had made myself really, really, really busy. I was just trying to do everything, like I had this obsession, sort of like, "oh, you know, you need to be doing absolutely everything because even if you're in college, like teachers and professors and if you have a communication seminar, or all this type of thing, everyone says "you need to be doing everything, you need to be playing as much as possible, meeting as many people as possible, you should be making connections, getting out and playing all this sort of thing. And I was like, "oh, I want to be a musician and I'm nervous and anxious about having a career. So I have to try and do everything." And it just ended up being way, way too much. And I was practising, morning, noon and night trying to get everything learned. And I just remember one day in like some chamber music rehearsal thinking, "Hmm, my wrist feels a bit funny, feels a bit tired, doesn't feel great in there." It was like, "Okay, well, that's alright, I'll just finish this rehearsal" and I had a lesson later on, it's like, "I'll get through the day, get to my lesson and then I'll take a rest" and then ... so I did the rehearsal, and then I went to my lesson. I was like, "hmm still not feeling great, but I'll just make it through this hour." So I did my lesson, went home. And was like, "Yeah, I'll just take a day off or something like that." And the next morning when I woke up, like, I had such awful pain in both of my wrists, I knew straightaway it was like, "oh, no, just like this isn't just a little twinge, you've done some really bad here." And, uh, turns out I'd like ... it seemed like I had pretty bad tendinitis in in ... I thought, the day before, it was just one hand, but it ends up in both hands. When I was a child, I loved piano and I loved my piano teacher, and she was a great woman who gave me a great love of music, but like she wasn't really a pianist, she just played the church organ down the road. She was giving me pieces that were that required stretches too big for my hand, so I actually had a spell of like, RSI and tendinitis when I was like, 12. So I knew ... I

recognised it was like the same thing. In some ways, I was lucky that, then like next week, we were in lockdown because I wasn't able to play anyway. It took me about what three or four months to get over that spell of injury, like I really wasn't able to play very much at all. I was quite sore for a long time. So once I felt I was ready to play again after this stretch of RSI or tendinitis. I was back into it straightaway, hell for leather, "let's catch up on all the music I didn't learn, let's catch up on everything that had to be put on the side while I was injured." After about two days of like some heavy practising something much more worrying than tendinitis happened. There were a couple of movements that seemed to trigger really coarse, very visible noticeable spasms in my left thumb. There were like some crossing movements in scales or loud chords. Anytime I played them, my thumb would just begin to freak out and move around in spasm a lot and try and close itself in, which was very worrying to me because I thought "oh my god, this is it. I've had the ultimate nightmare. I have dystonia in my thumb." So yeah, this was much worse than what I initially thought about the tendinitis. Then I thought, "Okay, well, now it's time to go to a doctor." I went to a hand therapist. The hand therapist initially was like, "Yeah, I like ... I don't really know what's wrong, because there doesn't really seem to be anything wrong with your hands. And you're able to do all the tests fine. And you're not in pain." Like it wasn't painful. He said "yeah. Like, I don't really know. Like, I can't tell you what this is." It's not very helpful, but okay. Well, I mean, in fairness, this wasn't like he, he wasn't trying to not help me. You know, although he did make a little throwaway remark, which is funny. At one point, he's like, "you know, I'm not really sure, but you could have like a little bit of dystonia." At the time, as well, I said to him, like, "why would you say that to me if you're not sure? Like, that's my nightmare!" He's like, "Oh, well, no, it's probably not. It's like, I'm not sure. It's ... I don't know." And it's like, "No, it's not dystonia." It was like, "Okay, well, please don't say that again if it's not." Yeah, and it just kind of went on for a while, and then I didn't know what to do. I went to another hand therapist. And she's like, "Yeah, well, you're not in pain, so it's not dystonia." I just, and I just didn't know what to do about it for ages. I just had this weird thumb issue. My thumb just was moving around by itself, and it was really getting in the way of my playing. This is when COVID came in. This was the 'thank God for COVID for me', obviously not 'thank God for COVID' because it suited me in my life. So I went home, everything was ... there was nothing to practice for anyway, so I wasn't particularly worried about practising. I was like, "right, I'm going home, you have all this time off, let's sort out your health. Like there's obviously something wrong here. It's like forget the piano, like, this is not the most important thing right now, let's just make sure your hand is able to work for your life." So when I was home, I was just ... I don't know, doing lots of different Google research, which you should never do. And one thing that I thought was, "well, maybe I've got like, trapped nerves or something, or maybe I've got like, I don't know, maybe I've a lot of compression in my back or something and it's triggering some nerve that makes my thumb move." And at the time when I was finishing the Masters then too, so I was doing a lot of sitting at a laptop, sitting all day to put together all the Zoom videos and online extra recital materials, it just went on for hours. And I was having actually a little bit of back pain too from all this sitting. I can't say this is like the cause or ... I'm not a scientist or a medical person. I can't say for certain this is what caused it but I just had this idea. "You know what, it's probably not my hand, it's probably my back. Like I shouldn't be having this back pain at this age." It was all concentrated kind of my upper back and neck, and this is, this is from all the sitting and sitting at the piano. And I thought "Yeah, well that's kind of where all those nerves and connections that go down into your hands are," so it's like "might make sense that your thumb is moving because your upper back is so scrunched up." So once I finished all the online Masters stuff, it was like, "right, let's forget piano let's ... you know, stretch out your back a bit." So I started doing yoga at home, all those Yoga with Adriene

youtube videos. And I definitely noticed on the days like when I did a long yoga session, that I would have a lot fewer spasms than on the days when I didn't, so I was like, "Oh, I must be on to something here, it probably is my back." But the YouTube yoga wasn't really fully fixing my problem. So I was like, "Okay, well, I'm going to keep on just going with that for now". It had been going on for so long that I wasn't in a panic about it anymore. It wasn't a crisis, I'd just kind of come to accept this is something I was going to have to deal with for a while. So every day like, I did a bit of looking around the internet to see what ... if I could figure out anything, but nothing was really coming to me, until one day, um someone popped up in my Instagram. This is where the ... these online social media surveillance algorithms are actually very helpful. And obviously, Instagram knew I was worried about my body and health and wellness and everything. And there was this guy, he came with my Instagram account was called Guy Who Didn't Settle, and he's a mobility coach, and he is somebody who was like, a really high performing athlete for many years, but he suffered with chronic pain. And it was always like, from just basically overwork in his athletic life, but it was ... for him was like, oh, it was never a problem that made him stop, you know, it's just like with musicians, it's like "oh, you have a little bit of a niggle here and there, but like you're grand, so you keep going." And this is what he did for years and years until he got to the point where his injuries were so bad that doctors were telling him like, "you're never gonna play sports again, like, you're going to need surgery, you can't fix this without surgery." And he was like, "there must be another way, like how was I like such a fit, healthy person. How have I just become like, so severely disabled? Oh, you know, like, how does it just happen? You know, I haven't, I haven't been doing anything wrong in my life, with my body or so I was led to believe, you know." So he just, he just began his own kind of research journey on how the body works, and why we feel pain and why people develop chronic injury. And his answer was basically, like, a lot of people develop chronic injuries because they don't move enough, and they don't exercise their major joints, and they don't exercise the full range of motion of their major joints regularly, and that's why people as they get older, get joint problems, it's like, people think they have a bad knee or whatever, and he's like, "No, you don't have bad knee, you just have never exercised the motion of your knee." And if you do it regularly, it will send your brain the message, like, "oh, I moved my knee a lot, therefore it needs like blood and nutrition, so that I can move well", whereas if you're very sedentary, and you never move your major joints, then your brain thinks, "oh, I never move that joint so I don't need to supply it with as much nutrition and energy," and the joint kind of seizes up and becomes weaker, and we experience it as chronic pain or injury. His business is basically helping people with chronic injury, and like ... there's if you look at his Instagram, there's a lot of, you know, customer, or "customer" - what a crass word - there's a lot of I don't know, people you've worked with, who have written about him publicly and said, like, you know, "I've been to doctors, they all said, 'I would never be able to do this activity again, or use this muscle in this way again', and with regular exercise with Mark the guy, the Guy Who Didn't Settle, that's, you know, been shown to be totally untrue, and I can do what the doctors told me I couldn't, basically." So I thought, "right, well, I'll give him a go then, I don't really know if he's gonna fix my thumb, but even if I do a mobility course, won't it be a bit better than doing nothing?" So I did this course with him, where he just coached me through different exercises for all the different major joints in my body, so like I did exercises for my neck, for my shoulders, elbows, wrists, and upper back, lower back, hips, knees, ankles, you just ... you have the exercises for everything and it's like, all you have to do is you practise moving all these joint groups in their full range of motion, every day. And gradually over time, you'll get better. And he says "just trust that it'll happen. Don't worry." He said, like "maybe do like, three one hour sessions a week and every other day if you do like 15 minutes, you'll be fine." So I was like, "Okay, I'll

do it." And yeah, basically, it worked. Like it kind of got rid of my problem. I wouldn't say I got rid of my problem, because you know, it definitely comes back if I'm not on top of it. But I know that if I'm having twitches or my hand feels bad, it's usually because I've just haven't exercised or haven't slept or haven't been eating right in ... the course of the whole ... that whole summer of being like, "What the hell is wrong with my thumb?" just showed me "how can you expect your body to work, if you don't sleep, you don't eat properly and you don't exercise?" And when I eat properly, when I sleep, and when I exercise, I don't have problems with my body. And it was just a simple as that. It was like, "wow, we all know this. It's not news. This is not rocket science." When I was in college and I was so stressed about being a musician, and, you know, having concerts and having a "career" (in inverted commas), I just wasn't taking care of that. And I was so...the stress of it as well also meant that I wasn't really sleeping, like, because I was so like anxious and nervous about college and also the tube went by my bedroom window, so I just like, I didn't sleep for a while, it was like, of course, my body was was deciding I'd had enough because I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't eating properly and I just wasn't exercising, and I was sitting, sitting down all day in the one posture, accumulating all this tension in the same places, and it just ... I dunno, kind of exploded in this injury episode. I definitely put pressure on myself. I don't know why, I just thought it was important to, you know, but also like, it was confirmed by particular authority figures in the music institutions I attended. Not so much in college actually, it probably came more from where I went to do my undergrad, but yeah, like it was from myself, but also confirmed externally, I would say. We always want like a miracle cure or pill or some exciting trick or some cool, interesting news to hear, we want we want to hear something cool about how to do things and how to do well. But the truth is, nothing works like just taking care of the simple stuff, diet, exercise and sleep. Take care of that, and you'll be fine. Like, there's no music if you have no body to play it with, so take care of your body first, and then you're prepared to play. If you're all bunched up in pain and injured, you can't play and you're definitely not happy. Yeah, I suppose I'd say yeah, music is important. I love it. If you're someone coming to college and you love it... great. It should be important. You should love it. It's an enjoyable thing. It's an important part of your life. That's why you're going to college. Be mindful to approach it in a way that it doesn't end up like consuming your life at the expense of your wellbeing. Play music because you enjoy it, and play it to do your best, um ... But if you want to do your best also know that you can only do your best if, if you look after yourself. It was such a panic for me. I felt like "oh my god, my life in music is over and nobody knows what this is and nobody can help." And it just turned out not to be the case.