

MIAW Songeun Choi

Sat, Nov 13, 2021 9:31PM • 19:50

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

practising, audition, felt, injured, practice, injury, exams, thought, musicians, hands, piano, preparing, music, playing, coming, teacher, concerts, competitions, concerto, started

SPEAKERS

Rebecca Toal, Songeun Choi, 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.

Songeun Choi 01:23

Hi, my name's Songeun and I'm a pianist. I've just graduated from the Royal Academy of Music. At the moment, I'm teaching privately, and I've also got my piano trio growing and we have a few concerts coming up. So I started playing when I was about five, because my mum taught piano and I just picked it up from what she was teaching, and then I moved to England, and I wanted to do piano and so I auditioned for the Purcell School, which I was at for about nine years. And then I went on to study my Bachelor's and my Masters at Royal Academy of Music. I was born in Seoul in South Korea, and then I moved to England when I was about five. So basically, I have very small hands. So that's the main kind of reason why I got injured all the time, but it first started when I was about 15 and I was preparing Liszt's La Campanella, and yeah, it has really big stretches. And I just ended up injuring myself one day. To be honest it didn't actually last that long. It was only about a week. It just got better, I guess, because it was the first time I felt strain on my hands. So it just got better without me having to do anything. But then about a year later, I was preparing for a summer course. And it just came back and I ... I wasn't really sure why. I was ... I wasn't actually playing anything too heavy, probably like a Beethoven Sonata and something which wasn't too much on my hands but it came back and I had to drop out. And it went away after a month, I guess. So my hands felt really strange. I mean, I don't remember what it felt like the first time, really because it wasn't too serious. But mostly it was around my palm and my wrist, so it was really hurting to play anything. Like everyday life was fine, but to play anything and to kind of stretch out my hands. So I'm assuming it was something to do with like muscles. My first major injury was about year 12, so that's the first time I've actually had to stop and like, really cancel all my lessons. I was preparing for auditions, and this was for like, the Purcell Room auditions. So it's really big, but I really wanted to perform and I had been preparing. But my teachers said "you really have to stop and I'd rather you not go through this, this audition." And I felt really annoyed because I felt like I really could do this, and if I just get the audition done with and then I can have a rest and the concert's like ages away but he was like "No," and I don't think I've ever had my teacher say no to me before. But I guess it's understandable looking back to it now. And I think I stopped for about three months and about three months after, my hands were slowly coming back, and I practiced for about 10 minutes a day to begin with, because after 10 minutes, I could already feel the strain coming back. Gradually, it went 10, 20, 30 minutes and up to an hour probably. The hardest thing about not doing practice when you're in a music school, because I wasn't ... I was in a boarding house, and first study pianists all have upright pianos in their rooms. Everyone's practising constantly throughout the whole day, and having to listen to everyone practice around you and for you not to do any practice, you don't actually have anything else on to do with your time in a boarding house. Like you're either practising or doing work or you're doing something else, but to socialise ... your friends have to be not practising, if you get what I mean. So if everyone's practising, there's not much for you to do. You can't go out anywhere, you can't go for a walk much. So I think that was the hardest part for me then. And, of course, like I did try, because first, when I injured myself, it was on my right hand. So I tried doing pieces on my left hand, but because I used my left hand less before, trying to take over the whole of my daily life, like kind of routines and practice just with my left hand, I also injured my left hand. So because it's all connected throughout your neck, and your arms and your shoulders and everything. I thought it would be okay but just taking everything onto your left hand just made it worse. And I was okay for a while. I was actually surprised that didn't come back in the first few years of my undergrad at Academy. I think I was just starting to prepare for competitions and trying to record some stuff in my third year, which really wasn't a good year. It was about a week before my End of Year recital. I felt my hands starting to lock up, and I just I just didn't want to tell my teacher because I knew he'd say

"postpone it till the next term." And to postpone it all the way through some holidays and kind of wait till September wasn't really an option for me, because then I had my postgrad audition coming up, and I wanted to think about my final recital after I got this over and done with, so I just went through with it. And the result was terrible. I mean, the mark it itself wasn't great either. But really, I had to stop all the way through summer, and though actually it came ... it was okay, probably September, October because I rested, it then came back just before my postgrad audition. So this time I did go in ask for help, because I couldn't do anything about it. I just couldn't do the audition. So thankfully they postponed the audition till January, February-ish. I thought I had to take the whole year off if I miss this audition. It's ... obviously if you do go ask for help, sometimes it's not as bad as you think it might be. And during that time, I went to see an osteotomyologist who actually deals with pressure point massage, and he told me that I had really tight muscles in my hands. So a few sessions after that, I felt much better, and I went through with my concerto auditions and exams. I think ever since that, I've realised it's all the build up to these deadlines, these exams, probably not so much like concerts, but these exams that keep coming up one after another. Once you're injured at some point, it comes back really easily. You know that, even though, some of your friends might be practising six, eight hours a day, it's just not possible. I just decided, like repeating repertoire on end to a buildup on exams really wasn't a good idea. That was probably where I was getting injured. And I stopped doing that probably only about two years ago and I tried to reduce the practice time to a build up. So I feel probably most ready like the week before and then the week leading up, I try to just think about it in my head. Because if you think about it, nothing's really going to change in that one week. It's just you getting worried. Unless it's really, really last minute, and some things do change, possibly, but you know, most of the time you're ready and there's nothing you can do about it. You just go and play and most of the time, it's okay, the outcome is okay, and better than what you worried about. Now that I've graduated, I don't have to think about building up to exams, and I mean, possibly, I could have auditions and competitions at some point in my life, but with less practice, probably just about three to four hours a day, if I have to kind of work towards something that's coming up. Otherwise, my practice is now ... I think about what I have to do, I go and do it, and then that's it for the day. I don't sit at the piano for hours just because I might have something to do. I go and sit down for an hour and if that's all I've thought about in that day, that's practice done, because I don't want to sit there thinking about nothing. I think because I now live back home since COVID, that does help just because I don't have to book in any practice times. And if I do a bit in the morning, bit in the afternoon, I'm not pressurised to finish everything in one session. Whereas if you're having to book practice rooms on end, I always used to do four hours straight, about 12 to four, because I had things going on in the morning. I'm not really the best at kind of concentrating in the evening, so I thought I had to do all my practice while I could in that daytime, which means you're actually practising four hours non stop without breaks, which isn't the best for your hands. Yeah, so in that kind of sense, it is better. But after I got injured when I was in Purcell, I don't think I've gotten injured because of the length of the practice time. I've kind of learned to shorten the practice time, but really get everything done within that time. I know this might sound really obvious, I mean, a lot of people say it, a lot of teachers say it, but I did have that time when I was injured just before my postgrad auditions, that soon after I had my first concerto exam coming up, which was playing the whole of the Ravel concerto, and that exam takes place around March, beginning of March. And I didn't actually know the piece even through December because of my injury. And I was already ... I was still thinking about the repertoire from my postgrad audition. So I think for about a month I actually memorised the whole thing in my head. I listened to it, I kind of memorised what my hands were doing,

and probably went back to the piano for about five seconds to play what I just memorised. So it wasn't actually sitting down practising and repeating, but it was more kind of like, the understanding of what's going on in the score and the music. Possibly ... it's probably the only time I've really felt my memory in my head was kind of coming first rather than me memorising on my hands. It's not like muscle memory coming first. So I don't know if I'd actually try it again, because I really don't like the process, but it did actually help me memorise it really well, because that second movement thinking back to it now, it's got a lot of things that I would have probably forgotten if it was just muscle memory, because it's really long and the left hand changes a lot. And all that left hand, I kind of memorised it in sequences in my head so I wouldn't forget it. If you're away from the instrument, our natural instinct, it's kind of to go back and practise, you're just like, "I'm not practising. I'm not practising." That's the kind of main thought that's in my head all the time anyway. And I'm sure it happens to a lot of people. So pieces are naturally in your head all the time. So what I try to do is just think about the specific parts that I've practised. So you're practising things you want to improve without playing all the passages before and after that you can already play just to make yourself feel better. I don't want to sit at the piano all day, because it does you absolutely no good. That time where I've kind of changed my thought on practice and the time COVID's happened is very similar, so I'm, I'm not actually that sure if it's changed because of COVID or because of me thinking in a specific way. I like spending time doing other things like baking. I like ... I like baking at home and maybe go for a walk, doing other things, you know ... starting teaching, I've done a lot of that. And, of course, now my practice is mainly based on my chamber repertoire, as well. And I like the fact that I can practice leading up to concerts, rather than exams. So I started having lessons weekly from when I was year four, so that's about eight ... seven or eight? It's the first time I've ever stopped not having weekly lessons in my life. It's sort of freedom, but it means I don't have to worry about "what am I going to prepare for my next lesson?" I'm more focused on "Okay, I've got a concert coming up, I've got this amount of time, and I can prepare in my own time." Really feels different depending on what environment you're in at the time you're injured. I think the hardest for me was being in the boarding school, because you can hear music going on 24/7. Literally 24/7. And probably if you're having to go into college or some sort of music conservatoire every day and you're listening to people perform and practise and whatever every day, that's also really difficult. I'd say never play through your injury, because the time it takes for you to recover just gets longer and longer. And depending on what injury you have, it may get really, really bad. What could have been a month or even three months' break could be a year or even longer. I don't think anyone has to feel that they're behind on anything. Music doesn't end when you graduate. And like people do it when they're 60s, when they're 80s, when they're 90s, the day before they turn 100. If you remember why you started music, it's not about passing exams. It's not about auditions. It's not about competitions. Obviously, it feels like that when you're around so many people that are doing the same kind of thing. And they're all going down the same route. If you decide why, why you're doing music, and what's good enough for you, not what's good enough for someone else, not even your teacher I'd say you need to be in control of what's best for you. If you're feeling pain, stop. It's not you making excuses. You really do need to stop. It may even go away after a few days, so stop, let your teacher know because they don't often say "okay, you know, I don't want to teach you." They're not going to say that. Let people know, because otherwise they may think something else, you know. Or they may have some ideas to help you. You may even get referred to someone else. Knowing that it will be okay over time. Just spending more time with people around you, I guess. And taking that time to do something else, like I like spending time with my friends and my

family, and I feel in the future, that's what I'm going to be looking back on and not the missed auditions or missed competitions not winning. That's not going to be important for me when I'm you know 70, 80.