

Rolfing for Professional Musicians A Conversation with Tessy Brungardt

By Carolyn Pike, Certified Rolfer™, B.M.

Carolyn Pike: What type of musicians have you worked with? Conductors? Vocalists?

Tessy Brungardt: I have worked with all types of musicians – wind, string, horn, percussion, including conductors and vocalists.

CP: What Rolfing® structural integration strategies do you employ with your musician clients?

TB: Musicians usually have complex, multi-layered issues that they bring to Rolfing. Very often they have been playing their instruments from a young age and have “grown around” them. Their bodies reflect the many hours they have spent adapting around the instrument. This creates profound habitual patterns in their structures and their progress depends on our working through those patterns. Like most people, they are almost always working harder than they need to in order to accomplish their particular tasks. In addition, we cannot forget that they experience frequent stress from performance anxiety which tends to cause everything to tighten. They are very specialized in what muscle groups they are using. As some have said, “They are small muscle athletes.” This makes them prone to repetitive stress types of injuries. These are all issues related to making music.

They also have a regular life, one that may include sitting at the computer for hours, walking the dog, and car accidents. All of these things are happening around their musician’s set, but also affecting, maybe limiting, their performance abilities. My work with them is classic in its Rolfing framework – a combination of manipulation and education designed to help them organize better around their line in the field of gravity. That’s my goal.

Their primary goal is usually pain reduction



Tessy Brungardt

or performance enhancement. We work together to improve their relationship with their instrument – to help them find support, to breathe more easily, to release tension. I often watch them perform so I can see them in action, or have them bring their instruments along to an appointment so we can do movement education to ease their patterns. And I carefully inquire about their lives. They usually don’t realize that what they do is cumulative. They may tell me they only practice four hours in a day, not realizing the four other hours they spend on the computer are causing them problems.

CP: Have you noticed that Rolfing has benefited musicians in their bodies, lives, or careers?

TB: Yes, certainly. For many musicians, the art of making music and their instrument, if not the primary relationship of their life, is close to the top. If that isn’t working, the trouble pervades their whole life and can severely affect their career. So when Rolfing

helps their body, as it so often does, it affects their whole life.

CP: Can you comment on musician clients seeking Rolfing for specific problems versus seeking a holistic experience?

TB: Most of the people who seek me out for Rolfing come for relief from some specific problem, and musicians are no exception. They come because they are in pain and feel limitations; they are in structural trouble. What they come to discover as we work is that their problem is part of a holistic situation and that I am asking them to shift what they do in profound ways. These people are accustomed to being experts in what they do and it is sometimes challenging for them to once again find “beginner’s mind.” It can be very hard, but they are generally very motivated. So that makes it fun.

For example, they might show up with a tendinitis in the elbow and want me to make it go away. I can help with manipulation, but they may have to change how they sit, how they practice, how they hold their instrument – everything about how they play and learn new patterns if they really want it to get well. This takes time and dedication and I tell them this as we go along. They have to come to understand that the way they used to do it, the way that led them to success, also led them to the trouble they are having. They can’t go back. They may also need to change how they drive their car, how much e-mail they do, and so forth. Some people find they need to take a break from performance. Some have this forced on them anyway due to the problems they are having and slowly begin to learn new patterns. Others can do it while maintaining their practice and performance schedules. It depends on the problem and the person.

CP: In your experience, do musician clients choose to have any maintenance past the traditional Ten Series?

TB: The phrasing of this question doesn’t really cover how it often works with these people. The short answer is yes, because no matter how well organized they become and how efficiently they learn to play, they still are adapting around the instrument and doing very repetitive activities. So they are always putting strain back into the system and need help relieving that.

The other part of this answer is that, while some people do start out with a Ten Series,

many do not. They need a lot of extra, specific work to get relief so that they can get back to work. Then, it is from that point that we expand to organizing the whole person. I am always following the principles of Rolfing, but the form of the series of the work is quite varied. Patience is a key ingredient to the work; these long-established patterns and the problems they create are slow to change.

CP: Can you recall how one or more of your musician clients reported the benefits of Rolfing?

TB: The most common benefits that musicians report to me are pain relief and a better ability to play their instrument. Sometimes they have lost the ability to play at all and Rolfing helps them to recover this. One interesting thing that is often reported when the work succeeds is that they are not unhappy that they had problems, because it forced them to change how they play and how they relate to the music and to the instrument, and now they are better musicians. Even very highly skilled people report this. They are grateful at the deepest level. These reports move me deeply also.

Of course, to be fair, I have to say that I am unable to help everyone. Some problems are beyond my understanding or skill or the realm of manipulation, and I may not know it until I have worked with the person. I'm always straight with people about this right up front.

CP: When considering musician clients as a group, what does the spectrum of issues look like as these clients show up in your office?

TB: Many instruments are focused on repetitive use and/or unusual twists of the shoulder girdle, so I do a lot of very specific hand and arm work. The strain of long hours of holding up an instrument causes lots of shoulder and neck trouble. For conductors, this is their arms and the baton. Then there are the difficulties that come from sitting for long hours, usually nowhere near the sit bones and on ill-suited chairs. Focusing constantly on the written music in front of them causes fixations forward in the sagittal plane, often leading to neck pain and eyestrain. They have strains and injuries from carrying heavy instruments over long distances. The issues show up as tendonitis in various locations, pain, numbness, and restricted motion. Other common group problems that I see, after my work with [pianist] Leon Fleisher,

are related to dystonia, but may include any number of unusual neurological symptoms.

CP: Can you describe any unique postural or structural tendencies of musicians, whether instrumentalists or vocalists?

TB: Every instrument requires its own adaptations, and this is part of what is so interesting in working with these people. A drummer does excessive pronation and supination. A violinist has to twist the left arm. A clarinet player has to straighten the neck. The pianist has to balance sound between the long and short wires which produce different volumes. Vocalists often benefit from getting a sense of support from their feet. Each performer is unique.

CP: What types of movement cues or activities have you chosen to use with these clients?

TB: Common movement work includes sitting awareness, being aware of what is happening around them so they ease off their sagittal focus and connect to their feet. These are common topics, but the cues may be quite varied as suits the individual. The movement work is absolutely crucial.

Also, I often teach them stretches that they can do everyday to help undo habitual patterns. In fact, last October I participated in a Master Class of four pianists that Mr. Fleisher was teaching at Carnegie Hall. I came in as a guest speaker, spoke about structural issues confronting pianists, and showed them stretches for self-help and maintenance. Then, I worked with each pianist individually, using only movement cues to help them with their playing. It was very satisfying to see how much more ease they found in their playing with only a small amount of coaching. This ease was translated into the sound they produced on the piano. Of course, the other big goal, the one I was primarily there for, was to head off structural trouble before it could become limiting to their careers. It was an exciting day.

On a different topic, but still related to body use, I have musicians limit the time that they practice without a break. Because they are so focused, they often forget to change what they are doing or stop to rest, however briefly, until they are already in trouble. I ask them to set a timer for at least every half hour to remind them to stop and stretch.

CP: Are instrumentalists open to bring their instruments and showing you just how they

need to move to perform?

TB: Yes, I encourage this. I also ask vocalists to sing for me. Sometimes I go to performances to watch the musicians while they are working.

CP: Do you see any similarities between musicians and athletes in how they use or overuse their bodies?

TB: Yes. [Both groups] are often driven, dedicated people and will push themselves relentlessly, leading to all the overuse problems that we are discussing.

CP: May I ask you about possibly your most famous musician client, Leon Fleisher?

TB: Yes.

CP: Are there any privacy boundaries I should know about when asking about him?

TB: Mr. Fleisher often speaks about his Rolfing experience, and I have his permission to speak about it also. He also is very open about his dystonia and how he has worked with it. It is fine for us to speak about these topics.

CP: Was the dystonia local only to Mr. Fleisher's right arm? And if it presented itself in other places, where were they?

TB: Mr. Fleisher had focal dystonia, a type of dystonia which is local to one muscle or group of muscles. For him, it affected his right arm, which is the most common in pianists, whereas a violinist, for example, the problem is usually in the left arm. Horn players will more likely have trouble with the mouth.

CP: How did the dystonia affect Mr. Fleisher's whole structure?

TB: Mr. Fleisher's symptoms were very severe, and for years he couldn't play with his right hand. Instead he played left-hand-only music and conducted, in addition to teaching. As a result of this, he had many of the structural issues that any pianist or conductor might have. He has adapted well around dystonia, and he has maintained a certain balance. So, aside from the local dystonic issues, the whole structural issues are the ones common to any dedicated musician.

CP: Is there anything missing from earlier reports and interviews regarding your work with Mr. Fleisher?

TB: This has been a well-covered story with

many things written, filmed, and taped. As with any story, told and retold, some versions are more accurate than others, depending upon the storyteller. Some of these stories are beautifully done and tell the story well; some are slanted, leaving out important facts, and some are simply inaccurate. These variations sometimes lead to confusion and then questions arise. While I don't have anything new to add as all the information that I can share has already been published, I would like to restate the main points as they relate to our work together, to help clear up any lingering confusion. This is brief and leaves [out] many interesting details, but those can be found elsewhere.

Mr. Fleisher's dytonia first manifested in the 1960s and was so severe it ended his two-handed piano career. In those days, dystonia was not known or talked about. He tried all sorts of remedies, techniques, and medicines, but none of them worked. He moved on in his career, continuing to express his love for music. It says a lot for him that he kept seeking a diagnosis and solutions to his problem, even through all the frustrations. Among the things he tried were Botox injections and Rolfing. The first time he tried each of these things, they didn't work for his problem. The Botox helped relax his hand a little, but not nearly enough to allow him to play the piano with it. The Rolfing certainly helped his structure, but his hand didn't change. He continued on. Then, in 1995, he came to me through his wife. I did many hours of very specific work on his right arm and hand. The changes were incremental, but they allowed him to begin playing more. Then he once again tried Botox injections. This time, most likely because the tissue had some pliability to it, the injections helped him do even more. The combination of Rolfing and Botox works best for him. As his arm improved, I was able to branch out into doing other work with him and he is always working on his movement patterns. We continue to work together.

It is important to remember that dystonia is a brain disorder and there is no cure for it. What he got from our work together was some symptomatic relief, enough to allow him to play. It seemed miraculous and it was truly remarkable, but the miraculous is definitely limited in this case. He can play many things beautifully but not everything he once did. Still, it's wonderful. The work we did, and still do together, is illustrative

of the type of work required by many musicians. They need specific work on their problem, they need movement awareness, and they usually have to change their relationship to their instruments in some way. Both the Rolfing practitioner and the client have to be patient and satisfied with small changes. And maintenance is most helpful.

CP: Thank you.

Tessy Brungardt is an Advanced Rolfing Instructor, a Certified Advanced Rolfer, and a Rolf Movement Practitioner. She practices Rolfing in Baltimore, Maryland. She was interviewed in the 2007 Academy Award-nominated short film "Two Hands: The Leon Fleisher Story" directed by Nathaniel Kahn ("My Architect").

Carolyn Pike studied Violin Performance and Music Education at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas. She maintains her career as teacher and performer along with a Rolfing practice in Louisville, Kentucky.