

# B fit or B flat

It's great to work in a place where there's music drifting down the corridors,' says occupational health nurse Olive Olive, of London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama. The benefits go both ways: she's the country's only occupational health nurse treating music students.

Nearly three out of four orchestral musicians suffer from some form of performance-related illness, according to the British Performing Arts Medicine Trust, which is launching an appeal this month for funds to tackle the problem.

Ms Olive — her husband's surname is Olive — provides health care for Guildhall's 700 students of music, drama and stage management. When the 31-year-old from Tipperary applied for the newly created post last September, she knew it would be an exciting challenge. The drama classes can cause some shocks — 'Sometimes you hear the most blood-curdling screams' — and through friends she was aware of the illnesses that can afflict performing artists.

But within days of starting the job she realised that she was at the forefront of a new area of specialist medicine that looks likely to become an established career path for occupational health nurses.

Occupational aches and strains are familiar to many musicians and actors. Within the past year, there has been growing concern over the high prevalence of performance-related illness, particularly among orchestral musicians. According to the British Performing Arts Medicine Trust — a charity set up to provide free health care to performing artists — over 70% are experiencing some form of performance-related illness.

Their most frequent injuries are in the hands, forearms, neck and shoulders. Conditions such as tendonitis, dystonia and muscle fatigue are common. But psychological illnesses are also prevalent. A recent poll concluded that 20% of orchestral musicians suffer from acute anxiety, depression or sleep disturbance and 27% admitted to in-

discriminately using beta-blockers during performances. The trust believes that ever-rising standards, fierce competition and increased workloads on orchestras have contributed to the high incidence of performance-related illness. And they have criticised music colleges for failing to prepare students for the mental and physical rigours of orchestral careers.

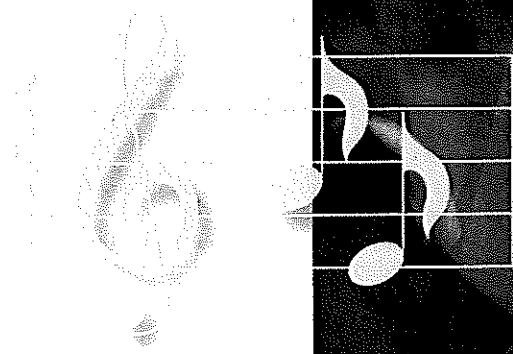
From her tiny treatment clinic, Ms Olive is the students' first point of contact in a health care team that includes a physiotherapist, two counsellors and three Alexander technique teachers as well as t'ai chi and shiatsu practitioners. The service also offers referrals to a musculoskeletal specialist, an ear, nose and throat specialist, a psychiatrist and a psychotherapist. The team was set up last April by Diane Altman, head of welfare at Guildhall. Like most music

Neil Crossley  
meets a nurse  
whose aim is to  
keep music  
flowing painlessly

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colleges, Guildhall utterly refutes the trust's criticisms. But it is the only one in Britain to have established a multidisciplinary health team to tackle the problem.

'The majority of cases I see are performance-related,' says Ms Olive. 'They usually come in with acute pain in the upper limbs. Tendonitis is a common problem, particularly among string players. The problem is that they're





Olive Olive shows a cellist at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama how to avoid neck and shoulder pains

practising vigorously before a performance. This work puts strain on the upper muscles.'

Ms Olive stresses that the bulk of her work is preventive. She gives talks to students on the importance of sensible practising, diet and lifestyle. To rule out any structural disorders, she often refers students to the school's musculoskeletal specialist. She will then monitor referrals with follow-up appointments. But her initial task is to determine the cause of the symptoms. To do this, she must first rule out any contributing factors resulting from a student's lifestyle.

'I really have to quiz them, because they might not remember if they've bumped themselves or slept awkwardly and assume it's due to their violin-playing. We had a case of a piccolo player with severe neck pain. It turned out he'd been cycling to college every day with a heavy rucksack, putting strain round his neck.'

Many cases, she says, are caused by misuse of muscles through bad posture. According to the British Performing Arts Medicine Trust, 60% of musicians' injuries are caused by bad posture. For a musician, the slightest deviation in posture, such as lowering an elbow, can lead to pain. So Ms Olive asks students to bring their instruments to the clinic to study their technique.

For musicians in mid-career, amending their posture often means unlearning the bad habits of a lifetime. Many find it an almost impossible task — which is why all staff at Guildhall keep a careful look-out for errors in students' playing techniques.

But while many symptoms are caused by bad posture, others are directly caused by stress. Both factors exacerbate each other, creating a vicious circle of anxiety and pain. The dilemma for Ms Olive is determining whether the cause is physical, psychological or a combination of the two.

'There are psychological problems being students full-stop,' she says. 'But our students have the added stress of performing and showing themselves in



a good light in front of their tutors, peers and the public. So we really pay attention to the stress element. If I'm concerned, I'll refer them to one of the counsellors.'

For students, meanwhile, the prospect of admitting they have a health problem can be fraught with anxiety. There is always the concern that their 'problem' may be construed as an excuse.

'I didn't dare tell anyone,' says 21-year-old Brigid, a final-year violin student. In January 1996, she began experiencing sharp pains in her left hand during performance.

'There's always that stigma among students that you might be skiving. And I felt a huge responsibility to my string quartet who were getting marks from a competition we were doing. It seemed there was so much at stake. But the more I practised, the worse the pain got.'

Brigid finally told her tutors who readily agreed that she should opt out of performance. Her pain was diagnosed as stress-related, brought on by her anxiety over not being able to practise. Through the school's counsellors she has learnt relaxation techniques to

alleviate her stress. The pain has since receded.

'I now know it is possible for musicians to strive for perfection unharmed. But most people don't know those ways,' she says.

Ms Olive is adamant that staff would rather students temporarily opted out of performance than jeopardise their future careers. 'Our whole aim is to instil good health management so they can help themselves. After all, this is a lifetime's occupation and they need to know what to expect.'

Ms Olive says the school's balance between complementary and orthodox medicine is unique in occupational health. Relaxation is paramount in combating stress, which leads to tension and pain. For this reason, students are encouraged to attend t'ai chi, shiatsu and Alexander technique classes to develop relaxation and meditative techniques.

Ms Altman teaches autogenic training — a series of mental exercises aimed at calming the mind by switching off the body's stress responses. And Ms Olive, a trained reflexologist, believes that a knowledge of complementary therapies is helpful in identifying

how students can benefit from certain treatments.

But the uniqueness of Ms Olive's job is also its biggest drawback. As the only occupational health nurse treating music students in the UK, much of her specialist knowledge is gleaned from the USA and Canada. To help exchange opinions and discuss problems, Ms Olive has made contact with an occupational health nurse at the Royal Opera House in London.

In June, she will begin compiling results of a caseload survey to assess the prevalence of performance-related illness and the effectiveness of Guildhall's health service. She is currently revamping the health questionnaire on course application forms to identify any special needs of incoming students. But it's early days. The long-term benefits will only be felt by the students as they progress in their professional careers.

'It's brilliant, to be honest. The feedback from staff and students is proactive and positive. And the atmosphere is wonderful. When people ask about my job I often joke that it's an added bonus to finally hear "Chopsticks" played properly on the piano.' NT