



Healing the Body, Soothing the Soul

by Donald E. Tepper
Photo by Matthew Borkoski

How physical therapy has helped a violinist spread the joys of music.

One compliment that violinist and song writer Caryn Lin treasures in her years of performing came from a 5 year old. He told her: “I love that creepy weird music you play.” Lin—who cites Bob Dylan and Jackson Browne as major influences—prefers to describe her sound as a blend of eclectic, New Age, classical, and rock. But, from the right audience, “creepy weird” is high praise indeed.

Others have called Lin “an electric violinist for the space age!” She plays her 4, 5, and 6 string electric violins and uses sound effects and looping to create short on-the-spot recordings of her violin, voice, percussion instruments, and other sounds. The result: layers of sound over deceptively simple melodies result in music that others have called “otherworldly.” Lin says she thinks of it as an electric violin as virtual orchestra.

Although listening to music may be soothing to the soul, Lin readily admits that performing it can be bad for the body. “You play a violin in a contorted position. The position of the violin is what it is, so your neck’s kinked. And if your hands or arms are small, you’re twisting even more. It’s not good for your body.”

Lin speaks from painful personal experience. She’s played the violin since age 9, and practices 2 hours a day. However, she didn’t notice any real problems until about 2 years ago. Then, “when I’d put my arm up all the way, my right shoulder hurt,” she recalls. Lin asked her sister Lisa, a physical therapist (PT), for advice. Her sister recommended a formal evaluation. However, at the time Lin didn’t follow up on the suggestion because, she confesses, “my shoulder wasn’t bothering me that much.”

That changed in August of 2007. “I started getting tingling in my right fingers and arm. And there was a problem between my shoulder and neck. That freaked me out. My sister said, ‘Go see Val.’”

Val—Valerie Brill, PT—is a physical therapist at Excel Physical Therapy & Fitness in Villanova, Pennsylvania—the same practice at which Lin’s sister works. Excel is the largest privately owned physical therapy practice in the Delaware Valley, with 9 locations throughout the region. The clinic offers a wide range of services, including work conditioning programs, functional capacity evaluations, and sports performance training.

Brill recalls, “Caryn practices all the time, which is what caused her neck and shoulder pain—a repetitive strain injury. We had to figure out how to eliminate the repetitive strain.”

In Caryn’s case, Brill worked on posture...and patient education. Brill explains: “Caryn actually brought her instrument in so I could see how she held it and how she held her body when playing. With a repetitive injury such as Caryn’s, it’s important to figure out what movement is causing the pain so we can figure out how to eliminate it. In this case, alleviating the pain involved

a lot of stretching and working on posture, plus scapular and shoulder stabilization and upper body strengthening.”

Preventing Injuries

Repetitive stress injuries can appear among all professions and age groups. Brill explains, “Kids are sometimes pushed to play 3 sports a year, which can cause overuse injuries. Part of what we try to do at Excel, especially with younger patients, is to educate them about taking breaks to rest their bodies. Taking a season off or switching up sports each season is okay and will give bodies the break they need to recover.

“Overuse injuries also affect my adult patients. For instance, people will play tennis year-round, doing the same movements over and over again, and often ignoring pain or putting off treatment. So what had been an acute injury becomes a chronic injury, resulting in extended time off from the sport.”

And, of course, repetitive stress affects musicians who may be doing the same movements for years, or even decades. Lin says, “Even though I’ve been playing all these years, I know now to hold my left arm higher. And when my back was really sore, I could feel what movements I was doing with my violin in my back.” That’s the patient education portion of the solution.

Another part of the solution for Lin was stretching and exercises. It’s important that exercises be done the way a physical therapist directs, and at the right frequency. Some patients follow their PT’s directions more

faithfully than others. Brill describes Caryn as “the most compliant patient I’ve ever had. That’s a big reason why she’s been so successful. When I said that exercises should be done every hour, she did them every hour.”

Lin attributes some of that cooperation to her background as a musician: “Playing the violin, I’m constantly repeating things, sometimes 10 times in a row. With physical therapy, it was the same discipline, just applied differently. I’ll practice the violin with a metronome. I have to hold some stretches for 20 seconds. So I’ll set the metronome for a second, and time it that way. Now, that’s integrating music and physical therapy!”

Lin tries to integrate music into others’ lives, too. She frequently performs her program “From Bach to Rock” at schools—thus, the critique from the 5 year old about her “creepy” music. But she laments the scant attention paid to music in schools. “Their classes are cut so short.



Valerie Brill, PT, OCS (left) works with patient Caryn Lin.

The arts classes in most schools are not valued as much by school administrators as math or science classes.” Addressing the importance of students warming up before performing, she asks, “If you only have 40 minutes for a class, will you spend 10 minutes stretching?”

Lin notes that it’s not just children who can benefit from stretching: “Life scrunches us all up. Just look at driving a car.” Brill, picking up on that theme, makes the point that stretching is vital not only for musicians and kids, but also for others. For example, her advice to Baby Boomers: “Have fun with your activities and mix

them up; cross-train. People who only play tennis are likely to have an overuse injury from the repetitive movement. Doing a mix of sports, including yoga or Pilates, will really help you to continue to move as you age. Flexibility is also very important, especially as you get older. Whether or not you come to physical therapy, you need to do stretches.”

Brill also notes that good health and exercise can be intergenerational. She advises other PTs: “Incorporate a young patient’s entire family into their program. Parents can help by taking their kids out for a bike ride or to the park to play bas-

ketball. Make fitness fun.” And, of course, Brill also helps parents develop exercise programs for their children: “We’ve had children come in and work out, and we’ve developed the right type of workout for them. The key is to do some activity that’s getting them moving, whether it’s bike riding or the Wii.”

Building Relationships

More recently, Lin experienced another problem. After sitting at her computer, she stood up and “Something hit me like a light switch. I could barely walk.” She went to see Brill again, who prescribed a series of exercises for her back. Brill says, “She was treated and cured in 3 visits. It came down to her knowing what exercises to do, and doing them.”

Lin adds, “Part of the reason my back has recovered so quickly is because I went right to physical therapy, compared to how long I waited with my arm. The sooner you get to it, the sooner it’ll go away.” Once Lin decided she wanted to see a physical therapist, she was able to do so quickly because Pennsylvania is a direct access state.

And there’s another reason for Lin’s quick recovery: “I was very motivated, and had had a positive experience with my neck. Plus, everyone at

More Tips on Communicating With Patients and Physicians

As Valerie Brill, PT, OCS, notes, busy schedules coupled with rising co-pays and increasing numbers of patients who self-pay can result in fewer clinic appointments. Thus, Excel works with patients who prefer fewer clinic visits to develop home programs to maximize the benefits.

In addition, Excel’s communication techniques are evolving. Advocacy is an important part of Excel’s clinic-patient interaction. Brill explains: “For example, we let patients know that the Medicare cap has changed and encourage them to call their Congressperson to advocate for a raise in the cap. We have created handouts for our Medicare patients to inform them of ways they can take an active role with the government. We tell them to contact their family physician and Congressperson about the cut in benefits and help them with the steps that can be taken to correct the problem. Our job is more than just treatment; it’s also education and empowerment.”

Excel also is enhancing its communication with physicians.

Brill says, “A strong physician-PT relationship is essential. I frequently call physicians and we talk about patient’s progress together. As a result, they’re comfortable with me and refer more patients, and in turn I refer patients back to them. It’s a win-win relationship.”

How does a PT cultivate these relationships? Brill suggests: “Get involved in the community. We’re involved with a lot of soccer, tennis, and other local sports teams, which gives us an opportunity to socially interact with the physicians who treat the players. In addition, we also like to meet with the physicians in person, shadow them, and observe surgery, if they’ll permit it. This way we’re more knowledgeable about their job and they feel more comfortable referring patients to us.”



the clinic is so upbeat and encouraging that you know physical therapy is going to help you.”

Those positive experiences are a key to Excel's success. Brill says, “I'll treat someone for a shoulder problem and they'll have a good experience and then come back for treatment of a knee injury later on. I want to be that patient's physical therapist; the person they think of when they're injured. That's what happened with Caryn and now we have a great relationship. I know she'll call if she's ever injured again.”

Even when the initial injury can't be addressed by a physical therapist, a good

relationship and quality care can pay dividends. Brill recalls: “I had a 16 year old patient who came in with a stress fracture. Unfortunately, I couldn't treat stress fractures, so I referred her to a physician, who treated her. Later, she experienced a back injury. She returned to Excel and this time I was able to treat her. I've treated several members of her family as well and know that they will come back to see me when they're injured. I want patients to view their physical therapist like a family lawyer or doctor.”

That means not just treating injuries, but preventing them. Brill explains, “When a patient comes in, we talk about how to make an injury better and how to prevent it next time. Adults and children want to stay healthy and injury prevention goes a long way in today's environment of limited health care coverage.”

Keeping Health Care Affordable

That raises another issue: patients who are self-pay, and those with high deduct-

ibles. These factors are causing PTs to reexamine the way they provide services, and the expectations of their patients. Brill says, “Caryn was self-pay because she knew that physical therapy was beneficial to her. But even for those with coverage, co-pays are rising and lives are getting busier, resulting in less time for physical therapy. For PTs with busy patients, working around their schedule is essential.” That might mean in-clinic treatment only once a week with more “homework.” This puts more responsibility on the PT to explain the importance of developing a home exercise program and diligently following it. But in the end, the patient saves time by eliminating multiple clinic visits per week as well as money spent on co-pays.

Lin says, “Physical therapy is a challenge. It does take time. But if you don't do it, you won't get better. Everyone just wants to take a pill. Or it's easier to have someone else do it. Sometimes, people don't want to take responsibility for themselves. But often, until they get sick, they don't make a change.”

Lin's message of personal responsibility goes hand-in-hand with the stories she tells at her concerts. There's the one about when, as a third grader, Lin wanted to take violin lessons. But the violin teacher, after testing Lin, announced that she had no musical talent. Or how she was teased in high school because playing a violin “wasn't cool,” and now she plays around the world. Lin says, “My message is: ‘Don't pay attention when people tell you that you can't do something.’” That, she says, applies to music, to health, and to life. **PT**

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