Rolfing® SI and Music

A Productive Symbiosis

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ABSTRACT *The authors, both musicians, one a Rolfer, discuss the significant contributions Rolfing Structural Integration (SI) can make to advance musicians' technical and performance skills. They also consider elements of a musicians' skillset that contribute to a Rolfing practice if the musician is also a Rolfer.*

Introduction

A violinist stands in front of her instructor. The student is talented and industrious. Some of the passages work well and others are still in progress. But whenever the violinist feels stressed, the same pattern arises: whistles and squeaks accompany the tone, her anxiety increases, she loses her feeling of the music, and the performance ineluctably ends with a mistake. During the lesson, the two work to improve the violinist's coordination. But neither playing the passages at a slower speed, nor dismantling the difficult sequences, nor applying any of the usual tricks allows the student to surmount the challenges. The basic problem, that is difficult to pinpoint, still remains. But is it ultimately a question of talent?

After a Ten Series of Rolfing Structural Integration (SI), and an extended phase of experiencing the after-effects of the restructuring, the student realizes that it is not, in fact, a question of talent at all. Instead it is a question of genuine coordinated independence of the left and right hand. For a long period afterwards, she will be able to push the technical limits ever further. She remains resistant to the stress of difficult passages, and can readily call them up. She stays in control of the overall situation and keeps her feet on the ground.

Such success is possible because she has achieved alignment in gravity. Targeted foot work was largely to account for her success. The fact that the violinist's original request for foot work would lead to such deep-seated postural improvement has turned out to be a welcome sort of 'collateral damage' that enabled true independence of the left and right hands and of the head position in the first place. After all, a great deal of what looks as though it happens at once (such as placing the fingers and initiating the bow stroke) is actually executed in a subtly coordinated sequence in order to prevent extraneous noises.

For professional teachers, this is a well-known basic fact. But what is an instructor to do if the student has understood this fact, can execute it when playing slowly, but whose standing position is so ungrounded and basic posture is so

unbalanced that her upper body is already so burdened by balance tasks, that 'running aground' is just a matter of time? So, perhaps the instructor should send the student for Rolfing sessions. But not only do musicians benefit from Rolfing work. We find a reciprocal exchange: Rolfing work itself benefits from practitioners who are active musicians.

The Rolfer: Making Music with One's Hands

What looks so different at first glance is actually subject to astoundingly similar basic principles. The Rolfer's work benefits from the foundations of successful music-making.

Concentration and Focus

Music is sound organized in time. Musicians dedicate a great deal of their work to organizing complex sequences in time, always according to the premise *'the right note, at the wrong time, is a wrong note.'* The focus is uncompromising. *One* distraction – a single faltering of concentration – and *flow* is shattered. The magic of a performance is extinguished. A technical error may occur and, in the worst case, the musician may stop playing altogether. In our times – in which young people apparently are able to concentrate on a written text for just under one minute as the result of today's zapping and clicking communication style – the performance of a twenty-minute work is a huge challenge to a performer's ability to concentrate.

For Rolfers too, this ability to focus is a great benefit. They are able to engage with the client in greater presence, stay on top of things, and maintain the flow of a session over a longer period. They are able to perform their sessions with comparatively more focus and intensity than the practitioner with the usual, more limited, capacity to concentrate.

Listen and Act

Musicians are specialized in taking up a wealth of information (chamber music partners, one's own music on the music stand, the stand partner, orchestra section, conductor, etc.) and being able to integrate it in their own playing in real time. Rolfers who have internalized this ability may engage multiple factors during a Rolfing session. Rolfers are simultaneously with themselves *and* with the different responses of the client. After all, as when an orchestra plays together, success is always a group effort. The individual (orchestra) musician alone is like a cog that has fallen out of a clockwork, or a blossom that has fallen from its bough.

In line with this, the Rolfer's work can hope to achieve a long-lasting effect only if s/he can convince the client to 'play along'. This interaction is also multilayered. It's much more than a mere 'being there' on the part of the client. Fascial structures provide a response and change. The client as a body in space stands differently. At the intellectual level too, communication takes place, perhaps verbally, but perhaps nonverbally. The sessions of a Rolfer who not only applies his/her technique, but is able to enter the spontaneous simultaneity of action and reaction as if s/he were making music, are more engaging, more individualized, and longer-lasting in their effect.

Technique and Application

When a musician practices, the situation is driven by the intention to improve execution through repetition. The principle of rotating attention (Mantel 2001, 24) not only provides the musician with a tool for distinguishing between the 'practice situation' and the 'real-life situation' (concert/session), but also helps break down highly complex sequences into individual parts and improve them.

For instance, a new section of a piece to be learned must be performed rhythmically, with clean intonation and musically appropriate phrasing. If the musician attempts to approximate the 'ideal version' through repetition alone, it will take much longer to work up the piece than if s/he divides up the 'mountain' into more digestible pieces. However, since the sequences cannot be separated randomly – in other words, intonation cannot be practiced independent of sound production – the musician has learned to focus his attention on a single aspect despite the simultaneity of the different aspects. At this instance, all other aspects must be carried out on 'autopilot'. Only the subaspect to be practiced receives full attention. Only once this subaspect has actually been improved is the attention (to the same section of music) directed to the next aspect. In this way, genuine improvement occurs each time the passage is played. In the next practice step, two subaspects are focused on, and not until much later is everything put together. Pupils learning an instrument often know what they have to improve but fail to translate this knowledge into practice due to their attempts to pay attention to all aspects simultaneously. Experienced musicians, by contrast, are able to allow their attention to *rotate*.

While Rolfers do not deal with practice situations in their normal professional routine, they can apply the principle of *rotating attention* in their ongoing work in order to supervise themselves. Some aspects may include switching between anatomical knowledge/haptic listening, self-perception in space, weight instead of force, switching tools (to prevent strain, such as on the finger pads), integrating a new technique, etc. The choice of alternatives varies according to the individual.

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Rolfing Sessions Are Like Successful Music-making

The highest level of a musician's approach to music is not primarily technical, but rather emotional and intuitive. The more advanced the musician's training, the more the technical aspects of playing become just a means to an end, because the ultimate purposes is to perform pure music (Dahlhaus 1978, 102) and jettison 'technicality' altogether. For this reason, good musicians can switch back and

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forth between analytical application of techniques and the flow of a performance situation in accordance with the *principle of rotating attention*. In this case, the musician 'lets go' with the highest level of concentration. What he or she has practiced with technical exercise and repetition becomes subordinate to musical intention and intuition. Only techniques that have reached a certain level of implicitness work. If a musician is unable to execute the step from technique to controlled and intuitive flow, the result is a performance that may be technically flawless but fails to evoke a musical response. The performance lacks meaning, the essence *behind* the notes.

Rolfers, too, who merely assemble well-learned techniques will achieve a different result than those who are able to switch to a controlled and intuitive work mode of working in alignment with the principles of Rolfing SI. A musician trained as a Rolfer combines several advantages: the ability to rotate attention, the ability to switch to controlled and intuitive working in the flow, and the ability to sustain maximum concentration for the duration of a session. This is because the musician has already trained all of these skills. In a concert situation, a musician must be 'on stage' and concentrated over a period of at least forty-five minutes until the intermission takes place. Rolfers can capitalize on such training for their own work, executing the highly focused quality of the attention and the maintenance of this attention throughout the entire session.

Rolfing for Musicians

Rolfers extend a room into space and ground. In the room, gravity has an impact, which forms and structures the body. As inspired by Hubert Godard: *"A body does not exist in relation to itself but always in relation to something or someone."* In the case of musicians, their instrument is present and has a strong impact on them. Musicians move in space when they operate their instrument and can benefit from the principles of Rolfing SI in a variety of ways.

Temporal Organization and Pre-movement

The temporal organization of the motor sequences plays a key role in (professional) music-making (see below). For this reason, it is highly worthwhile to discuss Hubert Godard's 'pre-movement' concept. He describes the sum total of sequences that already commence with the thought of a movement (often outwardly invisible) and play a key role in the quality of the subsequent action (Schwind 2001, 139). Many sequences in pre-movement are hasty preliminary balance and stabilization processes [e.g., in the calf (soleus muscle) prior to elevating the arm] that musicians are completely unaware of and that they consider to be irrelevant. Of course, the power of suggestion and images are used to work on the unconscious element of the processes, but all too often this affects only the body part that is obviously in action [the lips (*embouchure*) of a horn player, the arms of a violinist, the fingers and hand position of a pianist, the 'support'/breathing focused on by wind players, etc.). In contrast, dancers are aware that it is not possible for just one part of their body to dance. Musicians who have learned to work with pre-movement in general have an additional tool at their disposal to develop relaxed, mobile, and flawless actions.

Klaus Liebetrau performing with the Deutsche Kammerakademie Neuss in April 2019. Photo by Susanne Diesner, used with permission.

Balance and Grounding as a Foundation

Of course, musicians can derive enormous benefits from the conventional Rolfing goals. By lengthening the body in gravity, the starting situation for making music is balanced. As in the example with the violin student, in the best-case scenario the individual making music is able to execute motor sequences much more consciously and in a better-coordinated manner because the locomotor system is not already strained by offsetting (balancing) movements.

Charisma and Stage Presence

For a musician, movement in space is similar to that of a dancer. Only if his/her action impacts into the space will it be elegant and *come across*. In other words, only then will an

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artist have what is referred to as *charisma*. In fact, a great many activities/professions can benefit from charisma, including instructors and teachers (no matter what the subject), managers, and salespeople. The only difference is that for performing artists charisma is so obviously linked with professional success. Since Rolfing SI addresses balance in space, good results can be achieved when Rolfing principles are used to work on a performer's charisma.

In observing a conductor in training, for instance, the authors experienced how impressively the impact of the (technically already correct) conducting movements in space were improved by Rolfing interventions such as opening and balancing the upper body, perception exercises for the space *behind* the subject, improvement of the ground orientation through exercises with rods under the toes, etc. While the technical execution of the conducting did not change, the results made it easier for the instrumentalists to 'follow'. Cues were more direct as the conductor personally addressed the instrumentalist or section in question and brought about more pressing responses; he no longer conducted so much 'for himself' (as if he were insulated from the orchestra), but had a presence in the space and impacted the people there. Shortly thereafter, the student won two conducting auditions and attributed this success directly to the Rolfing work described above. This example, like that of the violinist, shows how Rolfing SI and Rolf Movement integration can specifically work on aspects of making music that (especially among musicians) tend to be shifted into the area of 'talent' that cannot be influenced. The authors believe that students in training as instrumental musicians would greatly benefit from structural integration. Collaboration in this area with universities and conservatories would be highly desirable and would help prevent students from arriving at unnecessary impasses.

Stress and Flight Programs/ Performance Training

One of the most exciting advantages that a musician can derive from Rolfing work concerns the natural coupling of the evaluation of sensory perception with the balanced relaxed-upright posture.

It must be borne in mind that a full concert hall, a demanding jury, or even performing for colleagues can constitute acute stress that musicians must *learn* to deal with. In this situation, the performer's inner voice shouts, *"Let me out of here!"*

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In this state, all of the carefully rehearsed sequences run differently (and usually worse) than the musician ever imagined was possible (e.g., "When I practiced, it was fine."). Why is this? Because fight-flight programs triggered by stress 'put a spanner in the works', the playing is more tense and uncoordinated, and the 'startle reflex' appears [the authors' use of this term is as defined by Thomas Hanna (quoted in Smith 2005, 124 ff.)]:

> [Feldenkrais] suggested that negative emotions are associated with a muscular response in the flexors of the body [Thomas Hanna] noted that elements of these responses could become relatively fixed and consolidated into our everyday postural organisation.

Stanley Rosenberg describes this issue in detail; though he does not expressly mention the startle reflex, he refers to the vagus nerve and provides a very good explanation of the same topic (Rosenberg 2017, 191-195). In the context of this old survival program (still alive and well in the modern desk jockey), in the face of danger everything tenses up to prepare for a grappling bout or a quick get-away: the neck, the jaw, eyes and forehead, arms and hands, and the hips. As a result, spatial perception is restricted to the bare minimum because, for example, the interactions between the eye and neck muscles are inextricably linked (Todd 2003, 99.). All unnecessary visual impressions are hidden (i.e., 'tunnel vision'). In the author's own experience, it seems that all unnecessary auditory impressions are also hidden, giving rise to 'tunnel hearing'. When it comes to spontaneous flight, this is of course very expedient – if you continue listening for noises, you may risk being eaten. For a musician, however, this is disastrous. Her intonation is sloppy and the painstakingly practiced coordination is disturbed to the extent that her performance is far below that which is possible.

The authors wish to propose the hypothesis that, in the case of 'tunnel hearing', the

Juliana Soproni performing with Wagners Salonquartet in October 2019 at Marshall Bahrenburg in Hamburg.

musician perceives all produced notes, but fails to process them with sufficient objectivity. He plays out of tune and *he does not hear it* (or he hears it and is unable to do anything about it, instead becoming increasingly stiff in the onset of a vicious circle). Particularly with instruments that generate sound without predetermined pitches, such as stringed instruments, this is a common occurrence. One might see a violinist, for example, who wavers around and has her head rigidly fixed toward the violin despite the fact that her upper body wishes to move strongly as an entire unit. The most common approach of an instrumental instructor is to assume that this inability to stand properly disturbs the movement patterns due to the violinist's struggle to attain balance. And the instructor will, in fact, be able to achieve visible success by working on this in the student. However, we are of the opinion that *before* the out-of-tune violinist can play in a coordinated manner, the flight program must be dismantled so that she can *objectively evaluate the pitch*. Practicing slowly is a good way to employ teaching methodology to eliminate the disruptive program, as long as the student understands the *point* of the slow practicing. This is not as obvious as one might think. The rule is to play *only as fast* as possible *without* triggering the *startle reflex*. The startle reflex may be promoted or preset by poor playing position (in violinists, a protruding, rigid chin; in pianists, raised and tense shoulders and neck) and may already be triggered even through relatively minor stress and anxiety (e.g., in the teaching situation).

Rolfers can use their work to break up old patterns, balance posture, restore spatial perception, and significantly raise the threshold at which the fight-flight program is triggered. In so doing, they can make a highly effective contribution to a musician's basic and advanced training nearly unattainable through pure instrumental pedagogy. Rolfers are familiar with the known interaction between the muscles that move the eyeball and the small muscles in the atlanto-occipital area, and they know that the suboccipital muscles inform the tonic muscles *in the entire rest of the body* when activated (Abrahams 1981 and Caspari 2005).

Dismantling the disruptive patterns requires the following criteria:

1. enabling the suboccipital muscles to work freely and, in so doing, regulating the overall basic tension.
2. maintaining awareness in stress situations to prevent tunnel hearing or vision (basic balance, SI). Hearing plays a key role in this process. Since musicians are 'inherently' accustomed to working with their ears, 'grasping space' with their ears is a resource that a Rolfer can capitalize on in structural work and during work with movement patterns. The work may include resonance chambers in the body itself, in the instrument, or in the room. The physical sequences trained to implement a sound are controlled via the ears, so to speak.
3. detecting issues in instrument-specific 'settings' in the player (e.g., rounded upper body and rigid chin and elevated left shoulder in violinists; sitting without grounding, particularly in wind players and pianists) and optimizing patterns.

Independence of Movements: The Thumb and Grasping

Rolfing SI promotes the independence of the large music-making movements in space, because the basic posture is balanced. However, it can also exploit potential in small sequences.

For many instruments, the hand makes grasping movements. Normally the thumb serves as a powerful antagonist of the other fingers. This grasping movement is a key difference between humans and other living beings. When playing an instrument, however, the thumbs are often used separately from the fingers, which does not constitute a problem in the case of an open hand, as in a pianist, but which becomes complex for a stringed-instrument player. Here, the

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left hand executes a grasping movement in order to hold the instrument. The fingers are placed on the string with force and *still*, the thumb may *not* be involved. It may only remain relaxed and must *not* carry out its normal grasping behavior. If the thumb does it anyway, it will become 'rigid', which makes lateral movements from string to string more difficult and arm vibrato virtually impossible, not to mention shifting.

Wind and brass players also carry part of the weight of the instrument in their hands or even on individual fingers, while the other fingers are supposed to be able to move as freely and quickly as possible. If in this context a highly automatic grasping pattern between fingers and the thumb is active, tension is bound to occur, even culminating in tendonitis, which can obviously extend into the entire body.

Rolfers can have a very positive impact on the independence of grasping and holding functions through targeted (fore-) arm work.

Conclusion

In the estimation of the authors, the most important interface between Rolfing SI and music is the inextricable coupling of spatial perception and physical spatial arrangement with the musical expression. Both of the authors have personally experienced (i.e., as a bassoonist in a concert hall in front of 2,000 people and as the violin-playing 'front woman' of a quartet) the way in which Rolfing SI works with space and the body in gravity to liberate great potential. While Yehudi Menuhin called it "perfect equilibrium" (Menuhin 1986, 12), one can just as easily say, *space is expression.*

Juliana Soproni and Klaus Liebetrau have been a couple since 2001. Juliana is a violinist (modern and baroque) and has played with the Hannover State Opera and the Ensemble Modern Orchestra. She performs regularly with her quartet and has a passion for teaching. Juliana studied violin, music education, and German language and literature, and is particularly fond of exploring teaching methods for the violin. Klaus studied bassoon and has played in the orchestras of the opera houses in Aachen, Münster, Gelsenkirchen/Recklinghausen, and the Hannover State Opera. Since 2003, he has been the principal bassoonist in the Deutsche Kammerakademie Neuss. He became a Certified Rolfer in 2004, a Certified Advanced Rolfer in 2010, and a Rolf Movement Practitioner in 2013. Klaus has worked in his own practice since 2004. Most weeks, he provides Rolfing sessions four days a week and performs an average of one concert a week.

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