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At Tanglewood, music students learn about wellness, too

 

MATTHEW CAVANAUGH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Boston University Tanglewood Institute orchestra rehearses in Lenox.

By Zoë Madonna | GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 18, 2017

LENOX — A group of teenagers sat on hard plastic chairs, scattered around the stage

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berksires campus. Stephen Paparo, an assistant professor of music at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, stood at the front of the stage and issued directions in a gentle voice. He asked everyone to scan the alignment of their bodies as they sat upright, and then to tilt their heads to bring the ear closer to the shoulder and notice what other muscles moved. “Do less, do less,” he urged.

This scene was from the beginning of a class of the [Feldenkrais Method](#), a bodywork therapy practice that teaches people to move with more ease and less tension. At BUTI’s storied summer music intensive program, some students spend up to nine hours a day with their instruments, and days are full of master classes, rehearsals, lessons, and performances. This year, Paparo and other visiting instructors offered a spread of free elective wellness classes, taught by musicians and designed for musicians, intended to help students stay at their best by doing less.

Yoga has long been on offer at BUTI, through a partnership with nearby Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, but this more involved approach to physical and mental wellness launched last summer after director of admissions and artistic planning Grace Kennerly noticed “quite a few” students complaining of performance-related pain.

“It was one of those things where you say to yourself, ‘Man, they’re just kids,’” she said in an interview. “They haven’t had anyone address it, or they don’t have a way to address it here.”

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In addition to the Feldenkrais method and yoga, BUTI also has offered a series of

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designed to move, and using that information to refine the movements that you use," explained instructor ^{Comments} Vanessa Mulvey, a flutist and the president of the body-mapping organization [Andover Educators](#). She teaches the technique part time at New England Conservatory and Longy School of Music at Bard College. "To do that, we look at anatomy . . . then we find joint structures in ourselves to learn how to move more easily and naturally." She reported attendance ranging from 10 to 40 at her BUTI classes.

None of the students I spoke with had ever heard of the Feldenkrais Method or body mapping prior to attending these classes, and all seemed pleased with the results. Soprano Maia Gonzalez was delighted at how much room for air her belly seemed to have after Feldenkrais exercises, and her fellow vocalist Runyu Feng noticed that singing forward was easier. Bassist Lillian Young said the Feldenkrais Method helped her realize she was holding tension in many areas she hadn't noticed before. "It allowed me to relax and open up my sound more . . . like, remembering to breathe," she said. She also said the method helped her manage new pain in her wrist she had been experiencing at BUTI.

"It's really useful as a musician just to get to know your own body and what you can do and where your stresses lie, which helps you not get injured when you have to learn a Shosty [Shostakovich] symphony in two weeks," said Noah Stone, a clarinetist from Westwood. "It was tough but I made it through with no tendinitis, so I'm happy." When asked if he had had tendinitis before, Stone said he hadn't, but he felt that he had come close, "moving [his] fingers so much that the muscles just wear out."

Kennerly is intimately acquainted with the consequences of overwork. She took a two-year break from the viola during the completion of her master's degree at BU to recover from a debilitating repetitive-stress injury. "I was practicing for a solo recital, I was playing for a quartet, I was in opera that season, I was in symphony, I was gigging

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~~she had not been told about any ways to prevent injuries until her injury was so severe~~
that it necessitated a full stop. ^{Comments}

Injury also caused Paparo to change his intended major at Ithaca College from piano to voice, in order to graduate in four years. As with Kennerly's experience, no one had mentioned injury prevention before he was out of commission for "six to nine months," he said, and he tried many treatments and specialists before his piano teacher recommended he try the Feldenkrais Method with Ithaca voice teacher Carol McAmis. "Within about three lessons, I was back to playing the piano without pain," he said. He now teaches a Feldenkrais class for musicians at UMass Amherst, and incorporates the method into warm-ups for the University Chorale, which he directs.

BUTI executive director Hilary Field Respass expressed her thanks to alumni parents Alan and Lois Whitney, the sponsors of this year's wellness series. Their daughter, violinist Sarah Whitney, is now a member of the chamber ensemble Sybarite5. "When I was talking with Sarah about our efforts in building this part of a curriculum, she just reiterated how important and how critical it can be in a young artist's training, because she also dealt with an injury and the stigma of having an injury," said Respass.

A 2012 survey conducted among members of eight Australian professional orchestras found that 84 percent had experienced injuries that interfered with their work. By introducing healthy habits at an early age, Kennerly and Respass hope to decrease the incidence of such injuries both now and in the future. "What [the students] don't necessarily know is that they shouldn't be feeling pain when they're playing," said Kennerly.

If the students' reactions are any indication, these particular habits have a chance of sticking. Gonzalez, Stone, and Young all expressed interest in continuing to utilize the

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BUTI'S conclusion, and Paparo pointed the class to online resources for finding Feldenkrais practitioners near their homes.

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Also included in this year's wellness electives was a screening of the documentary "Composed," which explores professional musicians' experiences with performance anxiety, another common difficulty with attached stigma.

Filmmaker John Beder, a BUTI alumnus, had reached out to the institute personally. "It's a time in your life when you start meeting kids who are also your age and are also doing really impressive things in music," said Beder. "You start to wonder, 'These kids are really good. Am I going to be able to hang in there?'"

Respass emphasized the goal of promoting health through multiple avenues, not just these optional classes. "There's a lot of reinforcement through the summer," she said, pointing out a Q&A session with renowned violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter in which Mutter emphasized the importance of practicing effectively and being physically active separate from playing.

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"She really impressed upon the kids the importance of going outside to hike, or just moving around and looking like a fool, even just for the sake of having a different movement experience," said Kennerly. "One of our violin students was like 'But how do you practice the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto?' and she was like 'No! It's so much more than just putting the fingers down in the right place.'"

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