

Training Musical Athletes How to Stay Healthy



Laura Pedrick for The New York Times

Edna Golandsky working with Scott Cohen on the Taubman Approach at the Golandsky Institute at Princeton University.

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

Published: July 19, 2012

PRINCETON, N.J. — Like a coach teaching a gymnast how to land gracefully, the pianist [Edna Golandsky](#) leaned over the piano during a recent seminar at Princeton University to adjust hand positions and to tweak fingerings, enabling her students to navigate an obstacle course of trills, broken octaves, awkward leaps and rapid-fire passages safely.

“Safely” might seem an unlikely word to apply to piano playing, but musicians are called [“elite athletes of the small muscles”](#) for good reason. The ice packs, splints and anti-inflammatories associated with the sports world are also a daily routine for many classical musicians.

As repetitive-stress injuries worsen, musicians turn to physical therapy, acupuncture, massage, surgery and cortisone injections for relief, but problems often recur. For many, pain becomes the norm, and careers are curtailed. Rachmaninoff, Schumann, Artur Schnabel, Glenn Gould, Gary Graffman and Leon Fleisher are among the prominent sufferers.

While many artists accept discomfort as inevitable, Ms. Golandsky believes that pain and performance are not natural bedfellows. Her seminars, called Practical Solutions in Action, were an integral part of the [Golandsky Institute](#), an annual weeklong event that finished on Saturday evening.

The institute teaches pianists about the [Taubman Approach](#), a method conceived by the pianist Dorothy Taubman that centers on coordinate movements; proper alignment of fingers, forearm and hand; and forearm rotations that reduce the need to twist and stretch in awkward positions.

The goal is not only to avoid strain but also to achieve a more fluid and reliable technique that can facilitate more expressive playing. The Taubman Approach can work well in conjunction with [Alexander Technique](#) and [Feldenkrais Method](#), two movement- and posture-based approaches that can help musicians play with less tension and fatigue.

I became curious to learn more about the Taubman philosophy when I found myself on the well-trodden path of painkillers and ice packs after a few weeks of overzealous tussling with broken octaves.

Each participant at the institute receives four private lessons and is assigned a personal practice assistant. [Therese Milanovic](#), my genial assistant, developed tendinitis while she was a student at the Queensland Conservatorium in Brisbane, Australia, and at one point could hardly use her hands at all.

She was not alone. She recalled that in desperation, a fellow student even considered bloodletting as a remedy. After years of failed treatments, Ms. Milanovic discovered the Taubman technique, resumed performing and said she is now Australia's only certified Taubman instructor.

“It took me awhile to realize that there were answers that worked,” she said, adding that repertory that once seemed unplayable is now manageable.

In an interview Ms. Golandsky said Ms. Taubman has “a scientist’s brain.” She added that “world-famous people would rather go to a doctor; it’s almost a badge of honor now” and that injured musicians don’t think a piano teacher can help.

But there is a reassuring logic to her proposals for navigating difficult passages with greater reliability and less strain. When all else fails, it is best to omit a note to ease a particularly

awkward stretch, Ms. Golandsky said in a seminar, acknowledging that such advice “is heresy in our industry.” But “I think Schubert will forgive us,” she added with a laugh.

The institute attracts classical and jazz professionals and amateurs of all ages and levels, many of whom learn about Ms. Golandsky through YouTube and her extensive series of DVDs. Augustus Woo attended the institute with his son Kevin, a 13-year-old blind pianist, and called the institute a “healing camp.”

Nathan Grabow, also 13, showed precocious talent playing Bach’s French Suite No. 6 in an engaging master class led by the Rev. Sean Duggan, a Bach specialist. Nathan accompanied his younger sisters during a violin pedagogy class taught by the Sophie Till, who has helped adapt the Taubman method for string players, using the same laws of motion and principles of rotation that apply to the keyboard.

Pianists are certainly not alone in their discomfort: other instrumentalists also battle repetitive strain problems, a topic investigated recently by the performing arts magazine [Musical America](#).

But given ever-rising standards of virtuosity and the struggle to eke out a living, many musicians suffer in silence. One pianist, speaking not for attribution, said he had been told by managers not to associate with Ms. Golandsky, noting that there is still a “huge stigma to injury in the music world.”

The institute included a seminar about old-school writer’s cramp and the ergonomic use of computers. [Bobbie Jones](#), a D.J. and recording engineer working at the institute, said he had used some of the rotational movements to alleviate repetitive-strain discomfort from his work as D.J.

One young Israeli participant said, “Even if I looked at the piano, I felt pain,” while casting a rueful glance at the instrument of torture during his private lesson.

But not all pianists at the institute are popping painkillers; some attend simply because they hope to grow artistically. Josu De Solaun, a gifted Spanish pianist with undergraduate and graduate degrees from the Manhattan School of Music, said that he had reached a plateau but that after studying the Taubman technique, he achieved greater control and has been told that his playing has more color and spontaneity.

Taubman advocates have not always been welcomed in the tradition-bound and highly political conservatory world, where professors can feel threatened when their students seek

help elsewhere. The Taubman emphasis on complete retraining in technique made the system seem inflexible and dogmatic to some in the industry.

Some pianists still choose to retrain entirely, practicing rotation movements with slow scales that echoed throughout the practice rooms at Princeton. Others simply refine their techniques, incorporating Taubman principles as needed.

[Ilya Itin](#) — a brilliantly insightful pianist who offered a superb recital of the complete Chopin preludes, Ravel's "Gaspard de la Nuit" and a new work by Yehudi Wyner on Saturday — said that before discovering the Taubman technique in 1999, he experienced keyboard fatigue, which he described as "a form of injury."

He never had to cancel concerts, he continued, but he would have some discomfort and ignore it. "It's normal; everyone experiences that," he said he believed.

Mr. Itin, fascinated by the Taubman approach, studied its principles, and his "confidence level grew immeasurably," as did "a feeling of freedom and a sharpened sense of creativity."

"Knowledge is power," he added. "As Edna says, the goal is to feel there is not a chance you can miss the jump."