



Michael’s Story: Helping Musicians Return to the Stage

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By

Music transcends cultures, touches hearts and makes spirits soar. It's a universal language allowing us to express emotions and connect to others without words. That's what I love about it.

As a classically trained pianist, I also know performing isn't just a livelihood. It's a passion that consumes the body and mind. It can become your identity.

But, like athletes, musicians are prone to injury due to hours of daily practice.

Up to two-thirds of musicians at the collegiate or professional level have experienced pain or musculoskeletal complaints related to the repetitive nature of their quest for perfection.

Just because performers don't make major movements or collide with others, as athletes do, doesn't mean their tasks aren't physically demanding. Muscles used vary from instrument to instrument, just as from sport to sport, and require endurance, flexibility and strength.

Yet when musicians hurt, they typically don't have the same resources available to athletes such as physical therapists who specialize in their types of injuries. Even in a huge performing arts city like Houston, musicians rarely can be rehabbed by someone who understands their art and how it affects their anatomy and psyche.

As a result, performers—professional, collegiate or hobbyist—often play in pain.

I've been there. As a doctor of physical therapy and an orthopedic clinical specialist at [Memorial Hermann Sports Medicine & Rehabilitation Katy](#), I focus on musicians and help fellow performers tune their most important instrument—their body.

“I saw how often performers got injured, how reluctant they were to seek aid and how inadequate their care was. That's the moment I realized I wanted a career blending both my passions.”

Michael Tsang

Where it all began

I started playing piano at about age four and haven't stopped since. By middle school, I knew I didn't want to give up learning science or performing Puccini and Brahms, so when the time came, I applied to universities that offered me both.

I graduated from Case Western Reserve University with a bachelor's degree in biology and a bachelor's and master's in piano performance from Cleveland Institute of Music.

In college, I saw how often performers got injured, how reluctant they were to seek aid and how inadequate their care was. That's the moment I realized I wanted a career blending both my passions.

I wanted to return impaired musicians—including myself—to their instruments without limits.

Treating injury

Thus, I earned a Doctor of Physical Therapy degree at Washington University School of Medicine in Saint Louis, Mo., and did a residency in orthopedic and neuromuscular conditions.

My advanced degree enables me to help performers modify any activity, posture or movement that harms them. I observe my patients playing their instrument and see how they can adapt.

Our shared experiences bond us and create a level of trust and comfort they might not feel with a non-specialist.

Musical instruments are not the most ergonomic or posture-friendly—and awkward positions can irritate and entrap nerves. Peripheral nerve entrapment can cause numbness, tingling, burning or shooting pain. Just as scary is focal dystonia, in which you can lose control of the muscles you use in your hands, jaw or mouth due to the specific tasks of playing a flute, violin or other instrument. When left untreated, a minor ailment can snowball into a career-derailing injury.

Chronic overuse can cause a musculoskeletal condition called tendinopathy, akin to tennis elbow. Without proper rehab, the condition can make pain intolerable, and muscles can lose their function.





Let the healing begin

My knowledge has allowed me to heal myself and others.

It may sound strange to an outsider, but patient sessions often progress from a questionnaire and chat to having the musician play the repertoire with which they’re struggling. That allows me to see their movement limitations and identify precisely where they’re hurting.

The evaluation—and rehab—is individual to the performer. Most likely, we’ll make their movements more efficient, and tailor stretches as well as strengthening and flexibility exercises to their impaired and surrounding muscles. We may need to retrain them to drop habits they developed to compensate for pain. Our final sessions are such a rewarding moment to them—and me. They’re so relieved to discover they can work more easily, yet still make the sounds they’d perfected. There’s no better feeling than when they leave Memorial Hermann and return to the stage. That’s the curtain call I live for.

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After losing her dad at an early age and growing up in hospitals due to chronic health issues, Heather knows something many don’t: Kids think about death and



Lis’ Story

Most of us don’t want to think about death, even in our final days. But as a hospice nurse, Lis thinks about and faces death daily—and learned a lot about life from doing

dying. Now her job is getting them to talk about it.

so.



Sarah's Story

When doctors found a mass in the memory bank of Sarah's brain, she was presented with a fear she'd never thought possible—forgetting those most important to her.



Kel's Story

After a brutal attack left Kel with a traumatic brain injury, he was forced to relearn everyday skills like walking and talking—all while reimagining his life's purpose.

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