

Connecting the First Years of Piano Teaching with Hand Injury Prevention

The thought of hand injuries strikes fear in pianists' lives. It doesn't have to be. Through proper instruction these fears and the number of injuries can be greatly reduced. Creating awareness among college students regarding the dangers that exist in repetitive practice, bad technique, and the pressure of perfection, is the first step towards a healthier career for musicians. Today, *musician's health* awareness has been fostered through various professional forums: conferences, presentations, hands wellness institutes, and a NASM requirement that mandates higher education institutions incorporate wellness topics into their curriculum. While these platforms exist to advocate and educate, far too often the intended audience is older students who have already encountered a problem.

Injuries do not happen overnight, it is an accumulative process, which usually consists of significant warning signs along the way. Most often an injury is a result of repetitive, incorrect use of our arms and bodies, or in other words: bad technique. The roots of bad technique run wide and deep, originating in the first stages of piano learning. The first years of piano studies could be viewed as the most important stages in musician's life in regards to learning proper technique and thus avoiding injuries later in their career. As Joseph Hofmann states in his "Piano Playing" book: "The impressions made during youth seem to be the most lasting." and "The child's power of absorption in music study between the ages of eight and twelve is simply enormous; it is less between twelve and twenty; still less between twenty and thirty, and often lamentably small between thirty and forty" (Hoffman, 70).

As a college professor I witness, "hand injuries" among my freshman class repeatedly, and the root of their problem is all the same, they all had poor or incorrect training in the first years of their playing. All of my entering students have experienced some form of discomfort, fatigue, and pain or/and in rare cases serious arm injuries. Most recently, I accepted a transfer student who has severe injuries in both arms and unfortunately is unable to play any instruments. Hand injuries have become such a common occurrence among pianists, that the pain often invades their entire lives with an incredible force, affecting not only their professional playing but also day-to-day activities.

My presentation will be in two parts. In the first part, I will share a short video of my student's experience as a piano performance major, how and what caused his injury and where he is today because of it. This portion will allow music educators to take a look inside the life of a performance major with a severe hand injury in a college setting. The second part of this presentation will deal with injury prevention from the very first year of piano studies. I will highlight common mistakes that we piano teachers make during the first steps of piano lessons as well as relate this information to the possible injuries in their later studies.