

Guidelines for Healthy Practice and Injury Prevention

Encouraging good health and wellness in our students is valued priority in the College of Charleston Department of Music. Therefore, we present these guidelines to promote a healthy lifestyle.

Voice

Voice students are expected to develop a daily practice routine that includes vocalizing, technical exercises, learning new repertoire, polishing continued repertoire, listening, translating, foreign language diction, and expression/musicality. Vocal performance majors should allot 2 hours per day, and others 1 to 1-1/2 hours per day just for their private vocal studies. Choral and opera/musical theatre classes and practice should be in addition to this.

It is the individual responsibility of each singer to develop and maintain excellent vocal hygiene and health habits. Training the voice requires disciplining the voice, the body, and balancing life activities to keep the voice as healthy as possible. Smoking, alcohol use, and recreational drug use adversely affect the health and well-being of the singer. Consider yourself a “vocal athlete” in training, and remember that “singing is a lifestyle.”

Strings

String students are expected to develop a daily practice routine that includes technical exercises, learning new repertoire, polishing existing repertoire, listening, researching the background of the music, and expression/musicality. Students should allot a minimum of 3-4 hours per day to practice. Ensemble and chamber music class repertoire should be in addition to this.

Playing a stringed instrument requires physical fitness and mental clarity. A balanced diet, sufficient rest, strength and stamina are vital to maintain musicians in top condition for the rigors of a performance career.

Correct posture, stretching and proper warm-up routines are key to injury prevention, as string players are prone to Repetitive Stress Injuries due to the long hours of practice required to master the music and technical details. Good posture not only helps to prevent aches and pains in the back and neck, but will also allow the instrument to be played with less effort. Taking breaks and varying practice patterns will help to avoid overstraining particular sets of muscles.

Piano

Piano students are encouraged to practice in 20 to 30 minutes stretches taking a few minutes break in between. Practice is recommended throughout the day and night, not all at once.

Stretching exercises after and sometimes before practicing is recommended.

Varying the distance from the piano and changing the height of the bench every few days is also important to avoid repetitive motion problems.

A complete technical understanding of piano playing (muscle toning, relaxation, awareness and practice of all available motions) is emphasized from day one at the College.

Guitar

Classical guitar students are required to develop a daily practice schedule that consists of the following disciplines: technical work, visualizing/memory techniques, the study of phrasing and general musicianship, sight reading and the learning of repertoire. Chamber music is highly encouraged and expected of my students. With good practice habits and dedication the student should well be on his or her way to achieving their potential as a performer at the professional level.

Learning how to practice and well being are addressed in applied lessons. Right and left hand alignment including sitting position are studied to avoid tendon and back problems. The regular practice of yoga is encouraged and is highly effective in maintaining a guitarist's health. Most importantly, the student learns to recognize early warning signs and avoid guitar related injury.

Flute

It is important for flute students to have good skills to avoid injuries related to playing, practicing and performing and also to recognize the signs of stress and excessive practice that leads to these injuries. They also must have good equipment on which to play and perform.

Flutists are especially at risk for injury because they must play isometrically with the arms at shoulder level, without support, for long periods of time and must also supporting the weight of the flute. If not done properly and with caution, arm, shoulder, neck and back problems may result. In addition, the repetitive motion of the fingers in executing fast passages of music, exacerbated in the practice studio while in seeking perfection, may cause hand, wrist and arm problems.

Therefore, we emphasize at the College of Charleston proper procedures to avoid injury. Emphasis is placed on proper hand and instrument position, good balance of the flute in the hands, relaxation of the shoulders, and neck to allow the head to "float" with the music, relaxation of the lower jaw and facial muscles in producing the sound and colors of the tone, and good posture when standing or sitting to play.

The flute student is encouraged to take routine breaks after about twenty minutes of playing, to give both the muscles and the neurological system a breather and also to allow the brain to build up a new supply of memory chemical so that the time spent at the instrument is worthwhile and sustainable. In the lesson studio, breaks from playing are also given in the guise of short lectures on some aspect of the phrasing, history or purpose of the music.

Air pressure and air energy is an essential ingredient in the production of sound and expression on the flute, so the student is encouraged to do aerobic exercise to build and maintain healthy lungs and good breathing habits. Students are also encouraged to get a proper amount of sleep to keep physically and mentally alert and to eat a healthy diet to sustain energy.

Lastly, it is important that the flute itself be in fine working order so that the flutist does not need to compromise for faulty mechanisms by overworking the muscles in using undue pressure to make keys close, which can lead over time to significant finger and wrist problems. Therefore, a periodic check of the student's flute is done in order to ascertain that it remains in good working order. If "leaks" are detected, immediate repair is recommended.

Mental injury – performance anxiety – is also dealt with in the practice studio by giving the student confidence through earned praise and encouragement to play before others: (1) in baby steps before taking the stage for a larger audience and (2) in participating in small ensembles. An understanding of the causes of anxiety is discussed in the studio to help the student better prepare for positive experiences on the concert stage.