

Howard Nelson & Pamela Frank: On the Intersection of Healthy Physical Habits and Efficient, Effective Practice That Transfers to the Stage

Description

When NYC's quarantine began in March, and more and more people began working from home, one of the biggest challenges for many, was finding a usable workspace in already-tiny apartments.

Over the last month for instance, my wife has spent more time using her piano as a desk than as a piano (HA! sick burn...) – but then again, I guess this beats using a [hamper in the hallway](#), an [ironing board](#), or (my personal favorite) a [jumbo pack of toilet paper in front of the toilet](#).

And sure, it's kind of funny and novel at first – but these lighthearted photos of makeshift work-from-home setups have given way to more serious articles about [how to deal with \(or prevent\) neck and back pain](#), and how working all day on the couch is [setting us up for all sorts of issues down the road](#).

The difficulty, from what I understand, is that the little things – like the angle of our head when we're texting, or the way we stand while in line at the grocery store – may not be a big deal in isolation, but when you add them all up, especially over time, these seemingly trivial habits can not only lead to worrying levels of pain in our day-to-day lives, but potentially even make us more susceptible to experiencing playing-related injuries (!).

Meet Howard Nelson & Pamela Frank

Howard Nelson has been a physical therapist for over 30 years, and specializes in addressing movement system impairments – that is, identifying and modifying the habitual movement patterns and postures that lead to pain and injury. He worked at NYC's Hospital for Special Surgery for ten years, including five in HSS's sports medicine department, but in recent years, has begun to share his expertise with musicians.

Pamela Frank is a world-renowned violinist and highly sought-after chamber musician and teacher. She is on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music, coaches at Tanglewood, Ravinia, and Verbier, and having recovered from a career-threatening injury herself, has been presenting workshops and teaching with Howard to help musicians not only learn how to avoid injury – but also play and practice more effectively too.

In this episode, we'll explore:

- The story of how Pamela got injured, met Howard, and relearned how to do everything – from playing to walking to brushing her teeth. (4:21)
- What Howard asked her to do in the first session that made her think “What is this? This is not

physical therapy, I need a real physical therapist!” (8:25)

- The reason why you’ll see Pamela often lift her arms up, and rest her hands on her head while sitting or standing. (10:28)
- We tend to think of playing-related injuries as being caused by playing-related posture or bad habits, but Howard and Pamela describe ways in which our daily habits away from the instrument influence our aches and pains in our playing too (and vice versa). (17:03)
- And speaking of laptops at eye level, Pamela also explains why your music stand should be higher up than it probably is – even in chamber music! (20:33)
- How you don’t suddenly become an artist – artistry has to be trained. (22:59)
- What non-judgmental and effective and efficient/thoughtful practice looks like (the next four minutes might be my favorite bit of the interview). (24:31)
- Pamela explains how general, unspecific self-criticism is a “cop-out” (wait...maybe *this* is my favorite bit of the interview?) (29:17)
- Howard explains why trying to avoid risks, and not giving yourself permission to make mistakes reduces fluidity, increases, and paradoxically, leads to more mistakes. (31:51)

Notes

- Howard mentioned using laptop stands to elevate the level of your laptop screen to eye level (16:09). If you’re not familiar with these, here are some examples of what he was describing: [The Best Laptop Stands @wirecutter](#)
- I alluded (28:32) to the 1976 Tharp & Gallimore study of coaching legend John Wooden. Here’s a post about the study and a link to the original paper: [What is More Effective – Praise or Criticism?](#)
- Howard mentioned (31:51) an article written by sport psychologist Alan Fox about the benefits of playing with less tension, and playing more freely: [Relaxation Helps Power and Speed](#)

Additional resources from Howard and Pamela

Here’s a sweet 9-min video about how Howard and Pamela’s paths intersected, and how that led to their work together now: [Fit as a Fiddle @Articulate](#)

They’ve put together a 2-page PDF with simple, practical suggestions on healthy playing: [Playing Healthy: Suggestions for a long career without aches and pains, by Howard Nelson & Pamela Frank](#)

And if you’re curious to learn more about movement systems, here’s an article about Howard’s own personal experience recovering from a shoulder injury that was affecting his tennis game, and how he came to discover physical therapy and the concept of movement systems: [Aligned At Last](#)

How to work with Howard and Pamela

You can learn more about Howard and Pamela’s [workshops and teaching](#) at their website: [fitasafiddle.nyc](#)

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