**The Hidden Benefits of Strength Training**

Seem like everyone is on the fitness train nowadays. The pressure to workout is in your face everywhere you look, (and you better post it on Instagram, too). From Hot Yoga to Barre, to Aerials, Jiu Jitsu and CrossFit, it seems there’s something for everybody.... except performance artists.... where do you fit in? And do you even want to work out?

You’ve been told you need to exercise, and we all know it’s just plain good for us, but let’s be real: for those of us to whom the inside of a gym is as foreign as the face of Mars, where do we even start? And apart from looking good on stage, why should we? I’m happy to tell you that there are a host of other benefits besides making sure your skinny jeans don’t produce a muffin top.

Read on.

**But Who Am I?**

I got my start in the world of performance injury relatively young. I discovered the flute in middle school and by high school it was life. I grew up just south of Nashville in Columbia, and I auditioned for every honor band, camp, etc. there was, making All-State Band and orchestra, playing the Nashville Youth Symphony, attending Governor’s School for the Arts and around my junior year of high school I went to Interlochen Arts Camp. My body was completely unprepared for the sheer volume of playing I was about to do and back then, no one talked about much of anything physical relating to practicing. I developed pain in my left wrist. I wore a wrist brace for most of the camp and slathered myself in Ben-Gay. By the time I got home I couldn’t hold a pencil or an empty cup without pain. Doctor told me it was tendonitis and to “stop playing”. That would be the first of 3 times I would hear that advice.

Fast forward to graduate school. I’m at Florida State, working on my master’s in flute performance. I have always loved strength training and I got into the habit of working out every day. Unfortunately for me, I had no idea of two important things 1) what proper weight lifting form was 2) what exercises were good and bad for me based on my high volume of playing. As fate would have it, I picked, what I now know, is a really dumb exercise, and did a whole day devoted to chest training. My form was incorrect, no spinal stability and to top it off, I had no idea my chest was already so tight from the flute it was creating an imbalance between my chest and back and when I pressed the dumbbells up, that day my body said “enough” and a muscle in my back tore. I had no it was weak and needed to be strengthened. I went to health services, in agonizing pain, he gave me a prescription for muscle relaxers and a massage and said “stop playing”. To a performance major. In graduate school. That’s your answer???

Third and final straw came after grad school when I learned about a piccolo audition for a job I really wanted. Unfortunately, I didn’t know the orchestral repertoire, so again, I went from 0 to 100 and dove in, cramming hours a day in to learn the music. After a couple of weeks of this my body again tried to warn me something was wrong. I could move my right arm and I had spasms in my back. I’ll never forget the doctor’s words. “Ordinarily I’d give you a cortisone shot in the trigger point in your chest that’s causing the back spasms, to help it relax. Unfortunately, it’s right over your heart, and it might kill you, so you should probably just stop playing”.

I had had it. THIS was all the answer there was? I couldn’t imagine any other profession getting that answer. We know it’s only a matter of time before a professional baseball player throws out his shoulder, then there’s a team of people to help rehab and get him strong to send him back out. The answer isn’t “stop playing baseball” so why was that the answer I was getting? I decided that since I couldn’t find any answers, I would BE an answer. I took my love of fitness and teaching and discovered the National Academy of Sports Medicine. I got my Certified Personal Training certificate from them and started training and then my Corrective Exercise Specialization and that’s when it hit me that there was nothing like this out there for musicians, using smart strength training to address muscle imbalances to keep them strong and balanced and give them confidence and the ability to keep playing, prolonging their careers instead of telling them to “stop playing”. I went on to obtain my Senior Fitness Specialization and Cancer Fitness Specialization and this year accepted the position of Chair of the Performance Health Committee for the National Flute Association. So, I founded Music Strong. Currently I’m building a team of professionals to help musicians in all ways, not just physical, because musician’s wellness and fitness is best served as a team approach.

**Why Should I Care?**

Your body is your first instrument, and when it isn’t working properly and when it isn’t working properly, it’s only a matter of time before other things are affected. Have you ever noticed that when you stay all day on the couch, it’s exhausting? Yet, when you do a little exercise, how much more energy you have? It’s counter-intuitive but that’s how our bodies were made. Some other things to think about

* Less body confident = less confidence on stage
* More inflammation = more allergies and illness
* Poor insulin resistance = more fat, trouble sleeping, decreased creativity, increased irritability and stress

All of these things come back to one important thing, MONEY. If you don’t have energy, confidence or have a cold, you can’t give your all, you can’t be your best, and people don’t want to pay for sub-par.

**Quick Run-Down of Non-Physical Benefits**

Financial Benefits

* Preventative maintenance is cheaper than doctor’s bills
* If you get injured or sick you have to take time off from touring, recording, and working and time off is money lost.
* It’s tax deductible
* Not worrying about throwing your back out pushing an amp up 2nd avenue and being able to play a gig!

Spiritual/Mental Benefits

* More balance between personal and professional life
* Making yourself a priority, carving our “me time”
* Confidence is increased, anxiety is decreased
* You’re better able to “be in the moment”
* Increased self-awareness and being more in tune with your body = less chance of injury or overworking
* It’s cathartic = less stress, better sleep = more creativity and positive mood.
* Hitting a physical goal puts things in perspective and gives you confidence to tackle other big things in life
* When your physical health is on track, other things tend to fall in place.

That’s a short list, let me expound on a few of them. All of these come back around to money and image, which we need as artists. Read on to see why.

**Confidence**

By and large this is one of the biggest benefits to exercise. I have trained everyone from high school kids to geriatrics and there is something so incredible when someone picks up a weight they thought was previously impossible. You can see the excitement on their faces and now they want to break whatever other self-imposed barriers there may be. A couple of examples for you:

John is a client of mine I’ve been seeing for almost three years. He is a tenor and sings classically, but is also an author (which means he sits a lot) and when we started had terrible back pain. Like all men, he wants not just to get rid of his pain, but to like what he sees in the mirror at 60 years old. I only see him once a week and he does almost nothing outside of our sessions, so progress in some areas has taken longer, understandably. A few weeks ago, I put some weight on a barbell and he deadlifted from the floor for the first time in his life. He was no longer guarding his back and as he picked it off the floor, his face lit up in a huge smile and he shouted “this is important!” He did several more before turning to me and exclaiming how excited he was that he was able to do that, and how amazed how “right” it felt. He never thought it would be possible and he could feel what it was like to actually lift things appropriately and correctly and not once did his back feel in jeopardy. From there, we’ve gone to much more advanced moves and he’s crushing them all. His confidence is palpable.

Another client of mine was a petite 24-year lady who had never worked out in her life and had no idea what she was capable of but she wanted to be healthy. Two things held her back: she had no idea what to do and the gym totally intimidated her. We walked through all kinds of exercises and before our time together ended I told her “I’m going to have you pick that barbell up with your butt”. She didn’t believe me that would be possible, but like almost all ladies, she wanted a perky booty, so we worked on hip thrusts and other exercises, having fun along the way, you could just see how much more confident she was every time she walked into the gym, now she knew what to do with a dumbbell, how to hold herself, how to move. The day came and I told her “you’re going to lift your body weight with your butt” and she laughed and said let’s go for it! She did it, multiple times and got up and did a happy dance. That young lady now has confidence that spills out into the rest of her life, besides feeling confident in any gym.

Sometimes we put barriers on ourselves with what we think we can and cannot do, even if we have no idea what’s possible. We limit ourselves. The gym can be intimidating. But, there is something so incredibly empowering about picking up something really heavy, and doing it well and that breeds a certain confidence. Knowing you now have control over your body, that translates so well to the stage and bolstering your self-confidence.

**Control**

Do you notice that when you take the time to clean and organize your house, you sometimes get inspired to do the same thing in other areas of your life? Or, when you started following a dedicated routine in some part of your life, you noticed carry over to another? Exercise is no exception. When you start following a workout routine and you really follow through, suddenly other things fall in order. When you take that dedicated time to do a planned workout and you start to see the results, you see your body changing (be it increased strength, better balance, better breathing, increased endurance or....is that an AB MUSCLE??) it hits you that you have this great control over yourself and your body. And yes, you realize you have more control than maybe you thought you did over other areas of your life as well. Exercise is empowering, just watch it change your life outside of the gym!

**Me-Time**

How many of us feel we have to be everything to everyone and do it all right and self-care is a frou-frou word dedicated to people who don’t have jobs and have nothing else to do? We’ve heard that if you don’t take care of yourself, no one else will, but it’s so true, and just like in an airplane you’re told to put your mask on first and then help the child next to you, you have to help yourself before you can help anyone else.

Our schedules are SO jammed every day and even if you’re doing what you love, how much is dedicated to strictly doing what you want that is not job related? I LOVE music, but when I play all day long, from rehearsals to practice to recording to concerts, etc. there’s no balance. I need to step away and enjoy a hobby, which several of mine are physical,and if I’m not lifting, I’m on my bike. I can’t take phone calls on a bike, I can’t answer emails, I can’t work on my website...all I have is the challenge in front of me and that time is strictly for me. I’ve gotten so into it, that I see the value and I carve out several hours a day 3-4 days a week or more to do it. Another one of my clients put it this way, she’s the wife of a high executive with a jet set schedule but also has a couple of kids who’ve moved back home and she’s so busy taking care of everyone else she said “I see the value in this, I put my foot down and these few hours a week I carve out just for me, or else I’ll go crazy. I have to have that time that I devote to myself”.

**Better Mood**

Exercise releases endorphins, the feel-good hormones, and who doesn’t want more of those? A lot of times we turn to other things to heighten our mood, but it’s isn’t pure and doesn’t last. You feel GOOD pushing yourself, doing a little more each time, feeling yourself move and when you leave, you have so much more energy, you don’t need as much coffee.

**Decreased Anxiety**

This one goes along with increased confidence. We can build up so much anxiety about ourselves, doing things perfectly, being enough, when you step into the gym, put yourself in a trainer’s hands, you are allowing yourself to be a beginner again. There are no expectations for you there. Can you feel the relief that comes with those words? No expectations, and you’re allowed to be a beginner and have no idea what to do. I know I just felt my stress levels go down. Putting yourself in the hands of a coach that is right for you can do so much to alleviate stress and performance anxiety. I work in a personal training only gym and I’ve seen everyone from The Property Brothers to music execs to physicians, to educators to moms working out there, but in the gym, no one cares who you are, we’re all allowed to learn together. And, as you get stronger and more confident, your anxiety decreases. Decreased anxiety allows you to be more creative, to relax, your cortisone levels go down and so does your weight. All the good things.

**Increased Creativity**

Why is it the best ideas seem to come to us in the shower? Because when you get into hot water, it can serve as a vasodilator, letting your blood vessels open up and allowing easier blood flow to the brain. With that increased blood flow comes increased oxygen which in turn, helps to give us some of our best ideas. The same things happen when we exercise. The blood vessels dilate to allow more blood flow to the muscles and to the brain which increases our creativity. Make all you need to give you the final line to the chorus of that song you’ve been working on, is a little exercise.

**Better Sleep**

Have you ever moved? You know, had to pack up everything you own and unpack it somewhere else? Do you remember at the end of the day how bone-tired you were? How did you sleep after that? There’s a certain satisfaction to physical exertion and knowing you’ve really pushed yourself. Your body needs to recover and after a workout, the only place it can rebuild and recover is sleep. So, if you find yourself tossing and turning, a good workout might be all you need.

These are just a few of the multitude of benefits you can get from exercise that have absolutely nothing to do with how you look. Sure, we all want to look great and feel good about how we look, and exercise can get you there, but take a look at this list, don’t you want all these things as well?

Give it a try and if you want some guidance, I’m here for you!

Angela McCuiston is a NASM-CPT, CES, SFS, CETI-CES and holds her M.M. in flute performance from The Florida State University. An active musician, she plays assistant principal/piccolo in Sinfonia Gulf Coast of Destin, FL and with the 129th Army Band in Nashville, as well as teaching and freelancing in Nashville, TN. Winner of the 2005 Piccolo Masterclass Competition for the National Flute Association, she has fused her love of fitness and music to form Music Strong, a business that provides health answers to musicians. In 2018 she accepted the position of Chair of the Performance Health Committee for the NFA and is sought out national as a resource in musician’s health and fitness. She currently resides in Cane Ridge, TN where when she is not playing, lifting, teaching or training, you can find her cycling across the countryside.