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Avoiding Injury by Proper Warm-up

BY ANDY HARNSBERGER

If you are anything like the average person, you are constantly faced with time constraints. Because of this, our practice sessions often turn into “note cramming sessions”, where we try to learn as many notes as possible in a short amount of time, or play through our recital pieces up to tempo several times within that short period. Not only is this detrimental to the hands, but it can also be harmful to the overall performance in recital situations.

Warming Up

For many percussionists, warming up is walking into the practice room, picking up the mallets and whizzing through some scales or technical exercises. Remember you are using some very delicate muscles, and these muscles need to be warmed up **BEFORE** you use them. Just as athletes incorporate stretching into their warm-up routine, so should you stretch before you start to play.

I like to begin warming up by doing very gentle stretches with my arms, hands, and fingers. It is necessary to flex and extend the muscles, especially the thumb (*pollicis*), forearm (*brachioradialis*), and fingers (*digitorum*). To get the blood flowing, I run hot water over my hands while continuing to stretch. This will take anywhere from 5 to 10 minutes, depending on your own circulation. For very poor circulation, you might try a “contrast bath” – 5 minutes in cold water, 5 minutes in hot water (repeat).

After you have warmed up your muscles, begin your exercises or easy playing on the instrument. Continue stretching and take short breaks occasionally, at least 10 minutes every hour. By taking regular breaks, you get a chance to recuperate mentally as well as physically. Make it a ritual! Chances are, if you have warmed up properly you can practice longer hours without fatigue, and, if you must leave your practice session for an extended period of time, you are likely to still be warm when you return. Warming up properly and taking care of your hands during practice sessions can prevent serious injuries such as tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome.

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