



Performance Health: Guide for Instrumental and Vocal Teachers

How to support your students' health
and wellbeing.

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Introduction

How to support your students' health and wellbeing – a guide produced by the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine (BAPAM) and the Musicians' Union (MU).

Three-quarters of musicians have health problems that can impact their creative work, ranging from minor inconveniences to career-limiting conditions (Ackermann, Kenny 2014). Many of these conditions could be prevented by healthy practice.

This guide is designed for instrumental and vocal teachers, who will often be the first person a student turns to when they have a problem. It will not make you a clinical expert – you would need professional training to offer clinical advice – but it will give you advice on how to minimise health problems by adopting healthy routines into your own and your students' practice. It will also help you recognise potential problems and know when to refer to clinical experts.

Students range from early years to retired adults. The general principles here can be applied to students of all ages, although we have offered different suggestions for different age groups where appropriate and indicated where exercises can be adapted for younger children.

To make the information in this guide easier to remember, we have developed the P.E.R.F.O.R.M.A.N.C.E. mnemonic:

- P is for Posture
- E is for Environment
- R is for Routine
- F is for Fitness
- O is for Overuse
- R is for Rest and Recovery
- M is for Mental Health
- A is for Anxiety
- N is for Nutrition
- CE is for Clinical Expertise

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P is for Posture

Posture is often the cause of musicians' injuries, aches and pains. As well as relieving these, improving posture can also improve the quality of playing and performing.

For the teacher and student, observing and understanding posture in relation to their instrument will pay off in terms of comfort and the prevention of fatigue and injury, as well as improving sound, technique and musical expression.

Good playing posture keeps the body balanced and provides core stability, which allows finely controlled movements of the arms and fingers to be undertaken freely. It also avoids unnecessary and inappropriate muscle use, reducing the risk of muscle overuse and imbalance. Aim to avoid posture that overworks some muscle groups, resulting in tension, fatigue and pain. Encourage a posture that will be more comfortable and less tiring – a “neutral” posture.

In a neutral posture of the spine, there is symmetry and alignment (or balance) of the head above the pelvis. The spinal curves are lengthened so the back of the skull and the base of the pelvis are far apart.

Posture is habitual. Whatever your posture, it will feel “normal” because it is familiar, even if it is generating tension in some muscle groups. Often, small and simple changes to posture can significantly change the quality of playing and the comfort of the player.

Deviation from optimal posture during playing is inevitable, particularly during performances, but should be kept to a minimum to avoid bad habits developing. Ensuring that the body can move easily and from neutral to playing position, returning to neutral after playing and letting go of tension, is an important lesson that can be taught early and reinforced regularly. It is therefore important to maintain good posture when practising by regularly reassessing playing posture in front of a full-length mirror.

Attention should be given to both standing and sitting posture, as appropriate to the instrument and playing conditions. When standing to play, balance and stability of the lower body is achieved by evenly distributing body weight through both feet. The feet, which face forwards and slightly outwards, should be positioned with a width that is between pelvis shoulder width. The head, shoulders, hips and knees should be positioned so that the spine maintains its alignment when viewed from the front and its natural curvatures when viewed from the side.

When sitting to play, the pelvis and shoulders should be parallel to the floor. The centre of gravity of the instrument should fall within the region of the thighs, and the natural curvatures of the spine (especially that of the lower back) should be maintained by ensuring the hips are at a higher level than the knees, either with the use of a wedge-shaped cushion or a tilted chair.

When reviewing posture, the additional factors of ergonomic attachments to the instrument and playing-related equipment should be taken into consideration. Playing posture is highly influenced by the ergonomic set-up of the instrument, including shoulder and chin rests (violin, viola), the spike (cello) and support straps (guitar, saxophone). Such ergonomic aides must therefore be tailored to the anatomical and technical requirements of the individual player in order to optimise their posture. Playing-related equipment, such as chairs, music stands and microphones, should also be adjusted and positioned to improve the musician's posture. Ask the student whether they feel any strain when they play, then help them identify small changes to equipment that might help.

Playing posture must be adapted to evolve with the growing child, especially during and after the growth spurt, to ensure it remains optimal into adulthood. Adapted instruments can often be used for

smaller people. Don't forget to keep making adjustments as young musicians grow and their bodies change.

Healthy seated posture



Alexander Technique, body mapping, Feldenkrais and yoga can all help musicians better understand their body and improve their posture. All can be researched online and accessed relatively easily.

MU members can access weekly Feldenkrais sessions¹ and a bespoke Yoga for Musicians programme², both online, as part of their membership.

¹ musiciansunion.org.uk/events

² musiciansunion.org.uk/health-safety-wellbeing/musicians-yoga-essentials-course

E is for Environment

The performance environment is not always a space that performers have control over. However, checking the environment in advance is as important as a sound check.

Your student should be encouraged to check where they will be located on stage. You might want to encourage a parent or carer to do this for younger students. They should review:

Access. Can they get to where they need to be? Do they have to carry equipment up and down steps or across uneven surfaces? Secure areas such as lockers for valuable belongings can minimise stressors. Think about how to get home after a performance as well as arriving on time.

Vision. Can they see everything they need to – the conductor, the music, other members of the ensemble, the audience? They should let someone know if, for example, they are stuck behind a pillar, or if there is insufficient lighting and they have to crane their neck to see. Glare and coloured lights can also impact vision. Take care with cables and other trip hazards which can be difficult to see in dark areas during performance.

Layout and set up. Can the position of furniture or equipment be adjusted to optimise posture and performance? Think about the space needed to perform, proximity to others, adjusting heights and angles of chairs and equipment.

Temperature. Can the heating or cooling system be adjusted to a comfortable temperature? Chemicals such as stage fog, make up, or pigments and paints in set design can cause irritation.

Hydration and food. Is there easy access to water? Think about bringing your own healthy snacks and meals rather than depending on convenience foods.

Touring environments bring a range of challenges such as sleep disruption, tropical infections, and a feeling of isolation from family and friends. Think about preparing for this change of environment and taking steps to prevent illness or injury. Designated quiet areas can help to focus or unwind.

Rehearsing in the space includes feeling comfortable physically and mentally as well as playing through the pieces, as well as identifying any obstacles which could be managed. It is not always possible to make changes, so encourage students to learn from different performance environments so they can prepare for any hazards in their spatial environment.



I have been in very stressful situations regarding lack of time to set instruments up before a rehearsal or inadequate warm-up time or working in freezing temperatures. Outdoor performances need special care due to the temperature changes, even in the summer, so it's making sure plenty of warm clothes are at hand, standing your ground as regards to appropriate time to warm up, respecting what you do and making sure other people respect what you do!

Dame Evelyn Glennie

*Taken from "Sustainable Creative Careers: Your Own Best Health – Evelyn Glennie", BAPAM website.*³

³ bapam.org.uk/sustainable-creative-careers-your-own-best-health-evelyn-glennie

R is for Routine

Planning for health is as important as instrumental or singing practice. Encourage your student to structure their time to ensure that health is embedded into their daily and weekly routines.

A balance of activity is helpful for mental and physical health, including routine and necessary activities, but you should also make time for pleasurable, relaxing, restorative activities. Diaries can be a helpful way of encouraging your student to plan their time.

Timeframe	Routine	Necessary	Pleasurable or restorative
Monday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music practice • Feed cats • College/School/Work • Core strength training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete tax return • College assignment deadline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet with friends • Go for a walk

See BAPAM’s “Health Practice Checklist”⁴.

Pre- and post-performance routines are also important, and musicians are advised to warm up their body before picking up their instrument. Warming up will also reduce the chance of injury.

Model this practice in lessons, starting with some warm-ups (see BAPAM’s “Don’t Cramp Your Style” leaflet⁵) and ending with some stretches so that your student forms the habit of warming up before and stretching after they play.

Encourage breaks, especially in long rehearsals followed by a performance. This is not always easy and depends on the circumstances but getting out of playing position even for a few seconds during a rest in the music can reduce the chances of injury.

⁴ bapam.org.uk/health-resources

⁵ bapam.org.uk/health-resources

F is for Fitness

The term “musical athlete” was first coined by Nicholas Quarrier in 1993. He noted that strength, flexibility, endurance and co-ordination – as well as ability – are required by athletes and musicians, and that both work in a competitive environment with high expectations.

Musicians should therefore undertake cardiovascular, strength, endurance and flexibility training to give themselves the best chance of developing the strength and stamina they need and reducing the chance of injury.

The Fit to Perform research project 2020 found differences in fitness measures between instrument groups in their study of music students in higher education. They found that 79% of participants exceeded the minimum recommended weekly amount of physical activity, but this was mostly based on walking activities. Core strength was a weakness for most musicians.

Encourage your students to keep fit, referring to NHS guidelines as appropriate:

- NHS recommendations for 5-18-year-olds – “Physical activity guidelines for children and young people”⁶
- NHS recommendations for 19-74-year-olds – “Physical activity guidelines for adults aged 19 to 64”⁷

Encourage students to have regular eye, dental and hearing tests. Problems in these areas can all cause specific problems for musicians. Parents and carers should be taking children and young people for regular check-ups, and it is worth encouraging this pattern into adulthood.

The BAPAM ‘Hearing Health’ resource has an infographic which highlights various hearing problems and how to prevent them.⁸

Regular dental check-ups will help spot problems that might impact embouchure or singing technique. See a dentist who specialises in working with musicians if a problem arises.

If students suffer from a medical condition, they should consult their GP first before undertaking any exercise. Recommend that they start slow and with low intensity to avoid injury.

⁶ [nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-guidelines/physical-activity-guidelines-children-and-young-people](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-guidelines/physical-activity-guidelines-children-and-young-people)

⁷ [nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-guidelines/physical-activity-guidelines-for-adults-aged-19-to-64](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-guidelines/physical-activity-guidelines-for-adults-aged-19-to-64)

⁸ [bapam.org.uk/health-resources](https://www.bapam.org.uk/health-resources)

O is for Overuse

Instrumental musicians are prone to numerous playing-related musculoskeletal disorders, including inflammation of tendons and other soft tissues (tendonitis, tenosynovitis, epicondylitis, bursitis), nerve compressions (carpal tunnel syndrome, cubital tunnel syndrome) and a less understood condition commonly referred to as overuse syndrome, which leads to pain and loss of function in the affected region but with no obvious diagnosis.

Although the exact mechanism of these musculoskeletal disorders in relation to playing remains unclear, they are widely considered to be associated with the concept of overuse, where normal but excessive, repetitive or unaccustomed use leads to soft tissue damage, either acutely or over time.

Overuse with poor posture is another cause of injuries in musicians and refers to soft-tissue damage from repetitive movements over a period of time, or overloading unprepared muscles and tendons.

Musicians who do not give themselves a long enough lead time for a new repertoire with a different technical demand, or who do not give themselves enough time for rest and recovery, are more vulnerable to overuse injuries. From a teaching perspective, introduce new and possibly demanding work to your students with enough time for them to build up to a performance in order to avoid injury.

Due to the potentially devastating impact of playing-related musculoskeletal disorders on the ability to perform, prevention is of paramount importance. Given the many hours spent practising and rehearsing each day – especially when preparing for public performances, auditions and competitions – the potential for overuse should be mitigated by adopting preventative behaviours, including good practice hygiene, a regular daily routine, appropriate pacing across academic and professional schedules and allowing adequate time for rest and recovery.

Research with over 2,500 orchestral musicians (Steinmetz 2015) showed that more than one in two (55%) were suffering at the time of the research from physical problems that affected their playing. The prevalence increased significantly with advancing age, and string players and harpists had an above-average frequency of experiencing physical problems.

Injuries develop over time and often start with small aches and pains that are ignored. Ask your students if they get any pain which might be caused by playing. Pain when playing may be a warning sign of an underlying problem and should never be ignored. Students should therefore be advised to seek help from a clinical expert as early as possible to avoid their symptoms worsening or becoming chronic and thus more difficult to treat.

For further details on reducing the risk of overuse, please refer to the sections in this guide on Routine and Rest and Recovery.

R is for Rest and Recovery

Musicians face significant physical and mental demands, and time for rest and recovery should always be part of the schedule.

Sleep is vital to general health. With the irregular hours of musicians, it is not always easy to keep to a regular routine. You should encourage your student to establish a regular sleeping pattern where they can. The NHS has advice on good sleep hygiene.⁹

Mental practice away from the instrument is helpful when your student is injured, fatigued or has been unwell and needs to pace their return. The Strad has advice on mental practice.¹⁰

When returning after a period of ill health, musicians should plan plenty of recovery time and breaks between practice. Bear in mind the impact of other activities during breaks. For example, computer work during a break will not rest an upper limb injury. You can help your student by encouraging them to schedule rest and recovery time.



When we sleep, our bodies are busy carrying out small repairs to the everyday “micro-injuries” we sustain from normal life living. In order to complete these repair jobs, we need sufficient, good quality sleep. The body can cope with some disrupted sleep, but if we are chronically sleep deprived, a repair backlog can turn into a noticeable injury.

Taken from “When the Curtain Goes Up Again: Building our Fitness to Perform”, BAPAM website.¹¹

⁹ [nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/coronavirus/how-to-fall-asleep-faster-and-sleep-better/](https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/coronavirus/how-to-fall-asleep-faster-and-sleep-better/)

¹⁰ [thestrads.com/7-ways-to-harness-mental-practice-for-musicians/168.article](https://www.thestrads.com/7-ways-to-harness-mental-practice-for-musicians/168.article)

¹¹ [bapam.org.uk/when-the-curtain-goes-up-again-building-our-fitness-to-perform/](https://www.bapam.org.uk/when-the-curtain-goes-up-again-building-our-fitness-to-perform/)

M is for Mental Health

Good mental health is vital for all of us. We know that many musicians will have a mental health problem during their career, which has only increased since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Practising techniques and exercises that support mental health should be part of the weekly schedule in the same way as fitness training.

Suggested techniques include:

- Breathing
- Mindfulness
- Meditation
- Journaling
- Yoga

Your student should find a technique that works for them. As well as helping with overall mental health, a well-practised technique can be drawn on when symptoms feel worse.

Research (Winnicott 1960) shows that children who have been taught to be “good” from an early age can develop a false external self and this can continue into adulthood with no time to explore their true self and a growing fear of revealing less “favourable” traits. Knowing who we are is directly connected to self-confidence and self-esteem. It enables us to live with purpose and direction and develop good relationships with others. Teaching can give a sense of what a “good” musician is and encourage students to develop their sense of self.

In order to be confident, we need healthy self-esteem, but many performers are harshly self-critical and have a negative dialogue going on their heads. As a teacher, you have a powerful role to play in helping students to reframe their negative thinking more positively. Thought diaries, such as the example below, can be helpful.

Date	One negative thought about myself	More positive and helpful thoughts to balance this out	Reframing my original thought more positively
Example	I never stick to new exercise regimes.	I did run a half marathon last year. Are the exercise regimes over ambitious? How long do I expect to follow new exercise regimes? What level of fitness do I want to achieve?	If the exercise regime is designed for my needs and achievable, I can stick to it. I work best with goal orientated exercise routines. I maintain a reasonable level of fitness for my needs.

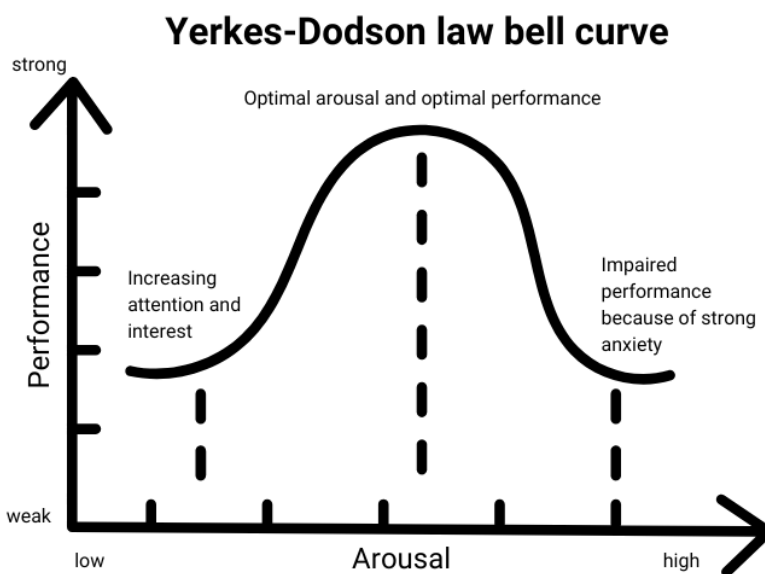
Getting help for mental health problems is very important. If you think your student might be struggling, ask them how they are doing. The BAPAM factsheet 'Mental Health Support in a Crisis' gives advice on what to do in this situation.¹²

¹² bapam.org.uk/health-resources

A is for Anxiety

Performance anxiety is experienced by most musicians at some point in their career. The physical symptoms can be debilitating and, once experienced, the fear that it will happen again can create a pattern.

The Yerkes-Dodson law describes the relationship between stress and performance. It describes how performance increases with physiological or mental arousal, but only up to a certain point. When the level of stress is too high, performance decreases.



The performer needs to be able to draw on techniques that can increase arousal to the optimum point and stop it tipping over into unhelpful levels of stress.

Learning techniques to manage performance anxiety at an early stage can provide musicians with tools to combat it. Some techniques can be used in the moment, while others can provide longer-term background support.

Encourage the performer to use pre-performance routines. Warming up the body by marching on the spot, for example, can help increase arousal if you are feeling lethargic, and breathing exercises can help reduce stress to bring it back to optimal levels. Distraction techniques to help manage stress levels can be helpful when waiting backstage. Bring a book or something that can take the mind away from the task ahead. Distraction might not work for everybody, so it is essential that students experiment with what works best for them prior to performance.

A breathing exercise

Make yourself as comfortable as you can. If possible, loosen any clothes that restrict your breathing. If you are lying down, place your arms a little bit away from your sides, with the palms up. Let your legs be straight or bend your knees so your feet are flat on the floor. If you are sitting, place your arms on the chair arms. If you are sitting or standing, place both feet flat on the ground. Whatever position you are in, place your feet roughly hip width apart.

Let your breath flow as deep down into your belly as is comfortable, without forcing it. Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Breathe gently and regularly.

Some people find it helpful to count steadily from one to five during the in breath. You may not be able to reach five at first. Then, without pausing or holding your breath, let the breath flow out gently, counting from one to five again. Keep doing this exercise for three to five minutes.

Taken from "Breathing Exercises for Stress", NHS website.¹³

Practising relaxation techniques like yoga, for example, can reduce performance anxiety, and there is some evidence that the more performing becomes routine, the more "normal" and less stressful it can be. Using visualisation techniques can also enable students to practise positive experiences of performing.

As a teacher, you can model best practice by arranging performances for students and including these exercises.

MU members can access weekly meditation sessions¹⁴ and a bespoke Yoga for Musicians programme¹⁵, both online, as part of their membership.

¹³ [nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress)

¹⁴ [musiciansunion.org.uk/events](https://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/events)

¹⁵ [musiciansunion.org.uk/health-safety-wellbeing/musicians-yoga-essentials-course](https://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/health-safety-wellbeing/musicians-yoga-essentials-course)

N is for Nutrition

Finding a healthy balance with the food you eat and keeping hydrated is very important for musicians. It is especially difficult because of the lifestyle: long hours, gruelling rehearsal schedules, long periods of hanging around with nothing to do, late nights and, trickiest of all, being on tour.

Encourage your student to develop good eating habits while they are not under pressure and then keep up the routines when the pressure is on.

People of all ages should aim to maintain a healthy, stable weight. The NHS has advice for parents of healthy-weight children as they grow.¹⁶

The BAPAM factsheet 'Dietary Advice for Performance Professionals' tells you more about diet for performers.¹⁷

Simple and healthy meal plans that do not require much cooking and can be eaten in small amounts are ideal for short performance breaks.

¹⁶ [nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/childrens-weight/healthy-weight-children-advice-for-parents](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/childrens-weight/healthy-weight-children-advice-for-parents)

¹⁷ [bapam.org.uk/health-resources](https://www.bapam.org.uk/health-resources)

CE is for Clinical Expertise

If you think your student may be struggling with a health problem, whether this is physical or mental, encourage them to talk to a clinician about it and not to wait until it gets worse. The most important thing is to get a clinical diagnosis so that the most effective treatment can be provided.

Your NHS GP can help. BAPAM also has a Directory of Clinical Practitioners who are experienced in treating performing artists.¹⁸

For singers, we recommend that a diagnostic assessment at a specialist vocal health clinic is undertaken to determine the correct care pathway.¹⁹

BAPAM can provide a free clinical assessment for musicians over the age of 13 and can often help signpost to funders who might be able to help support private treatment for professional musicians if needed.²⁰

¹⁸ [bapam.org.uk/practitioner-directory](https://www.bapam.org.uk/practitioner-directory)

¹⁹ [bapam.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Vocal-Health-Referral-Recommendations-April-2022.pdf](https://www.bapam.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Vocal-Health-Referral-Recommendations-April-2022.pdf)

²⁰ [bapam.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/BAPAM-Factsheet_Financial-and-Practical-Support.pdf](https://www.bapam.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/BAPAM-Factsheet_Financial-and-Practical-Support.pdf)

Summary

Here are the key actions points for teaching healthy practice:

- Warm up and cool down with your student at each lesson
- Introduce new pieces with enough time for your student to build up to the demands without injuring themselves
- Encourage healthy eating and keeping hydrated
- Encourage students to plan regular breaks and time for physical and relaxation exercise as part of their practice as a musician
- Teach mental practice
- Encourage them to seek healthcare support if needed

References and Resources

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BAPAM Factsheets

- [Performance Health: A Guide for Instrumentalists](#)
- [Fit to Sing: Vocal Health](#)
- [Hearing Health Infographic](#)
- [The Healthy Pianist](#)
- [Psychological Self-Care](#)

Available from [BAPAM.org.uk/health-resources](https://www.bapam.org.uk/health-resources)

NHS Information

[nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/)

Musicians' Union membership services for music teachers

The MU has a strong community of teaching musicians with over 10,000 members. We have music education specialist officials and advise music teachers on the specific issues, including pay and contractual issues, career advice, employment and legal advice.



Professional Indemnity Insurance

Essential protection for teaching musicians.



Enhanced DBS Checks

MU members get a discount on Enhanced DBS Checks.



Safeguarding Training

Stay up-to-date with the legislation regarding safeguarding children and pupils.



Member-only Guidance & Advice

In-depth guidance developed with music teachers' needs in mind.



Community & Representation

Opportunities to help shape the MU's aims and initiatives for music teachers.



Joint Memberships

We've partnered with EIS, NEU and UCU to give musicians the opportunity to enjoy numerous benefits.

Credits and contact details

This guide has been jointly produced by the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine (BAPAM) and the Musicians' Union. The P.E.R.F.O.R.M.A.N.C.E. mnemonic was developed for BAPAM by Dr Christina Siomos.

BAPAM delivers expert health and wellbeing services for those working in the performing arts across the UK. BAPAM connects those working and studying in the performing arts with clinical specialists in this field, offering free clinical assessments. It ensures that performance professionals receive the best possible information and training to prevent poor health. It also provides care when things go wrong, to support healthy careers and aid recovery from illness or injury. For more information, visit bapam.org.uk.

The Musicians' Union represents over 32,000 musicians working in all sectors of the music business. As well as negotiating on behalf of its members with all major industry employers, the MU offers a range of services for self-employed professional and student musicians of all ages, including musicians who teach. The benefits of membership include £10m public liability cover, £2,000 equipment insurance, contract advice, professional development, legal assistance and wellbeing services. For more information, visit theMU.org.

This guide has been written with the input of many people, to whom thanks are due: Dr Christina Siomos, Dr Sarah Upjohn, Dr Finola Ryan, Berenice Beverley Zammit, Dan Hayhurst, Chris Walters, Julia Grieshofer, Claire Cordeaux, the Musicians' Union, and to all the BAPAM trainers and clinicians who support performers to sustain a healthy career.



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