



A Conversation With Katy Keller



MS PT, Clinical Director of Physical Therapy & Therapist



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To get a closer look into Juilliard's physical therapy services, I went up to the 22nd floor of the Rose building and sat down with Katy Keller. After showing me the great view and leading me through a quick session on the foam roller, we chatted about her work in performing arts physical therapy and how it relates to vocalists.

Ari Bell - How many years has the Juilliard physical therapy service been around?

Katy Keller - Juilliard has had a physical therapy consultant for over 25 years. Initially the service had very limited hours, attended mostly by the dancers, in a smallish room in the main building. There was a counseling team that pre-dated the other health services and a nurse who fielded the medical issues that arose. Dr. David Weiss, our current consulting orthopedic physician, was also involved from the inception. The Dance Division was particularly instrumental in getting the service established. In the 20 plus years I've been here, the physical therapy service has expanded to 6 days a week during the academic year. We treat students from all the divisions in the gorgeously renovated therapy room on the 22nd floor of the Rose building. Come check out the view! The health service has grown exponentially over the years. In addition to the medical and counseling staff, our therapy service includes an occupational therapist (Aviva Wolff) specializing in the hand and upper extremity, and a chiropractor (Lawrence Demann) who just joined the team this year. I work in close cooperation with Carol Holyoke, a truly exceptional

physical therapist, with 20 years of experience treating performing artists, who also has a background in the arts (she was an art history and dance major).

AB - Do you often work with singers, or more so with dancers, actors and instrumentalists?

KK - We work with students from all the divisions. This is a point of pride! It has taken many years to overcome some of the stigmas associated with injury. Understandably, students can hesitate admitting to a problem because they are anxious it will affect casting or the perception of their talent. On the contrary, however, students often discover that their faculty and administration can be very supportive and helpful regarding injuries. The musicians now make up about 50% of the scheduled appointments, with the dancers about 40% and actors and singers 10%. There are characteristic patterns of tightness and movement impairment associated with each of the disciplines. String players for example, tend to develop asymmetries in the shoulder girdle from long hours of repetitive motion. Specific muscle groups tend to tighten and overpower the counterbalancing muscles. This in turn, feeds into malalignments and inefficient movement patterns.

AB - What's one thing you'd like Vocal Arts students to know about the services you offer?

KK - Many Vocal Arts students come to physical therapy. Typical complaints include neck and shoulder tension, back pain, headaches and jaw issues. Although alleviating pain and recurrence is an important goal, in terms of treatment philosophy, we mainly consider the broader context of the functional requirements of the art form. For vocalists, the ability to stand for prolonged periods of time with an unconstrained throat, rib cage and diaphragm, means that the segments need to line up properly from the base of support. If for example, the backs of the legs are tight and the pelvis is held into a tucked position, then as a consequence the back will round, the shoulders rise up too high, the head juts forward and the overall dynamics are impaired. We address these types of alignment dysfunctions with hands-on manual therapy, in addition to postural and re-patterning exercises. Don't be surprised if you leave physical therapy with one of those large foam rollers you see everyone using! Foam rollers are great to roll out tightness but also to lie down on long-wise to unweight and align the spine, activate the core muscles and free up the limbs.

Interestingly, a number of singers have presented with hypermobility syndrome; in laymen's terms, known as being "double jointed". Regular exercise and conditioning is especially important for these students to maintain the strength needed to support the rigors of vocal training.

AB - When should a student think about making a physical therapy appointment?

KK - There are any number of reasons that a physical therapy appointment might be appropriate. Problems are not always related to the physical demand of vocal arts training. It could be for an injury from an accident such as an ankle sprain, or knee pain from a movement class or neck strain from a heavy costume, etc. We can answer questions about how best to take care of yourself. To make an initial appointment, call the health office at extension 282. Appointments are 20 minutes long. For serious musculoskeletal concerns and injuries an appointment should be scheduled with the orthopedic physician. If you are unsure who to schedule with, ask the front office for guidance when you call. All "in-house" services are free for students.

AB - What is unique about physical therapy for performing artists?

KK - Similar to the professional athlete, an injury for a performing artist is not only a physical constraint but also an assault on identity. When an injury impairs the artist's ability to train and perform at the high level of intensity and prowess they expect of themselves, the experience can be very upsetting. Fortunately, the majority of students recover quickly and in the process they learn a lot about their unique physical make-up and what they can do to stay healthy for the long run. A better understanding of biomechanics and customized exercises learned in the course of treatment often results in beneficial changes in preparation and technique.

AB - How did you get into the field of performing arts physical therapy?

KK - I was raised in Rome in a family of artists. My mother worked in film and my father was a painter. It was only natural that I thought I could become a dancer. At my insistence, my parents enrolled me in Rosella Hightower's dance conservatory. It was a serious boarding school in the south of France. There I discovered that my talent and physical attributes were rather inadequate! But, the anatomy class enthralled me to such a degree, that from the age of 13 I was determined to somehow weave dance and medicine into a profession. Ultimately, I got my masters in physical therapy at Columbia University. I feel so fortunate to have entered performing arts physical therapy 30 years ago when it was a fledgling specialty and I could be part of developing many of the approaches that are now standard in the field. Working at New York City Ballet with one of the pioneers in dance medicine was extraordinary. Miller Institute for Performing Artists and on Broadway were other places I worked with a caliber of exceptional artists that I profoundly appreciate.■



Katy Keller's best advice for singers to keep their bodies well? Get plenty of sleep and find a bedtime routine that helps you wind down from the day!