Healthy Music-Making in Australia

Introducing the national peak body for performing arts healthcare

So often we hear about the health benefits of engaging with music and music-making. The initiative Making Music, Being Well (c.f. Music Forum Vol.16 No.3, 2010, and other MF editions) is just one example of many that foreground or forge the links between music and wellbeing. Time and again, we hear how active music-making can contribute to the health and wellbeing of all age groups, from improving symptoms of asthma in children, to alleviating anxiety in dementia sufferers. Blood pressure drops. Depression lifts. Self-esteem improves. And the list goes on.

There is a flip-side to this coin, though: without care, music-making may also carry health risks. Perhaps the most obvious is the risk of physical injury from playing a musical instrument. “Oh, I could never practice enough to get RSI”, you might joke. But even amateur music-making may give rise to potentially serious health concerns: Consider an ardent choir-goer who wakes up the morning after rehearsals to find her speaking voice painfully hoarse; repeated misuse of her voice in this way eventually leads to more serious vocal health problems. Or think of the amateur ukulele-player suffering from performance anxiety so severe that he decides he must drop out of the local ukulele group; a social network is lost, self-confidence drops, and the cycle of anxiety is exacerbated.

Enter the Australian Society for Performing Arts Healthcare (ASPAH): the national peak body concerning itself with promoting healthy music-making at all levels, from the amateur to the professional. Its members range from performing artists to educators to healthcare practitioners in a variety of guises: doctors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, voice specialists, chiropractors, psychologists, alternative practitioners, and others. Members are brought together by their passion and common belief that the vitality of the arts within a society is dependent on the wellbeing and health of its artists, and that this wellbeing is critically important.

In promoting holistic life span healthcare for performing artists, ASPAH recognises that all performers, young and old, amateur and professional, have unique needs that may not be met by standard models of health care. Based on this consideration, it promotes:

- Accessible high quality holistic health care for all performing artists;
- Education for health workers, teachers, performers and students to improve health and wellbeing;
- Research across relevant disciplines;
- A culture of lifelong preventative health care and safety practices;
- Multidisciplinary discourse among health professionals, educators and performing artists; and
- Increased community awareness of performing arts health care.

One of the central activities of ASPAH is an annual national conference, open to the public, which includes formal presentations and informal workshops by artists, arts educators and healthcare experts about a spectrum of issues relating to performing arts healthcare. Music, dance, theatre, circus arts, and other performing arts are all represented. In 2011 the conference will be held at University of Sydney on 22-23rd October. The ASPAH website will soon display a call for papers and the full program, or you can sign up to receive email alerts by contacting the ASPAH Secretary Paul Duff: secretary@aspaah.org.au.

Membership of ASPAH includes a subscription to Medical Problems of Performing Artists, the leading journal in the field of performing arts healthcare. Members also have the benefit of access to information about ASPAH’s happenings — including the occasional networking events and workshops hosted by the organisation’s regional chapters — and importantly, the knowledge that they are contributing to the creation of a national culture where the health of musicians and artists is recognised and valued.

For more information or to join, visit ASPAH’s website www.aspaah.org.au. You can also keep up to date through Facebook (search for “ASPAH”), or browse the ASPAH Blog for news about general public events, articles and publications on performing arts healthcare (http://aspaah.org.au/news/).

Healthy music-making!

Catherine Grant, PhD candidate at Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, has been a national committee member of the Australian Society for Performing Arts Healthcare since 2007.