

# INTERVIEW WITH OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST STEPHANIE DAVIES.

*By CSO violist Max Raimi, January 21, 2016.*



*Occupational Therapist Stephanie Davies with CSO violist Max Raimi at the Tokyo airport getting ready to board the plane to Shanghai.*

Playing the viola is not exactly what the human body was designed to do. As a result, more than once in my life my body has complained rather loudly, resulting in pain that has made performing music and doing a lot of other things extremely difficult. I share this experience with a great many of my colleagues, and many of us have had success in attacking our problems in the same way. We consult a miraculously gifted occupational therapist named Stephanie Davies. Stephanie did not “cure” me—what she did was even more remarkable. She figured out why I was out of balance, and gave me the tools—strengthening and flexibility exercises, plus new ways of thinking about how I physically go through life—to heal myself. If Stephanie were not practicing, the Chicago Symphony you see on

stage might well have a number of pieces missing from week to week, and a number of other musicians contending with pain.

Happily, she is joining us on the Asian tour as the guest of one of the musicians she has helped. I'm not sure how much of Asia Stephanie is actually able to see, since innumerable old and new clients find themselves in need of her services. I interviewed her for this Travelblog.

Max Raimi: What does an occupational therapist do?

Stephanie Davies: Most people are much more familiar with physical therapy, a traditional rehabilitation method. Occupational therapy tends to focus not just on the structural physical body, but more on the activities that an individual needs to accomplish in life and we value the benefits of success as a part of the rehabilitation. To be a successful human, we explore what is our occupation, not just our job. What are the tasks in our daily life that we need to accomplish, and how do we physically and mentally be successful in doing those? An occupational therapist can do everything on the spectrum from working with children to help them be successful in school, to working with highly skilled professionals such as athletes and musicians. We work in mental health as well, helping people to problem solve and to do tasks in different ways to create success.

MR: What are some things about working with musicians that you have found to be uniquely challenging and perhaps uniquely rewarding?

SD: I think it fits into so many of the categories I just mentioned. Musicians do not just have a job, they have a passion. They have a life style that's very specific and very different from people who may be working a day job at an office. It's very rigorous on their physical body, in different ways for different types of musicians. It also requires a mental clarity and a discipline to connect the physical body to both the psychological needs of performing and the requirements of the group working together.

My specialty, over time, honed in on the specific use of the neck, shoulders and arms as I started working with string musicians and really understanding how specifically trained the neck, shoulders, arms and hands are. Physical asymmetry inevitably develops. These are imbalances in the use of the muscles on the right and left sides of the body, often creating uneven forces on the joints and tissues. These forces can lead to cumulative trauma and injury over time. Yet, this asymmetry is actually important for a musician to develop in order to be skillful with the instrument. But how do you have longevity in your life overall and not cause structural damage when you are using your body so specifically and asymmetrically?

I also think that in working with musicians, there is this incredible opportunity because you tend to be highly disciplined. You all have very skillful ways of accomplishing what you need, so I love the opportunity to bring another skill set and open up an idea of how to best balance your bodies. It's not how to change your playing, or how to have better posture with your playing, but how to bring the balance of your life back, especially physical and structural balance to help with that longevity.

I also find that musicians have an incredible ability to follow my instructions. Not all my clients listen to my directions and take them so seriously. Each specific sensory cue. It's really like being able to taste the flavors in coffee and wine—you hear the differences in what I am saying, and those nuances are a real benefit in being able to teach and work with all of you.

MR: Are there things about working with musicians that create unusual difficulties?

SD: I won't say too much (laughter), but I think that there is a challenge...maybe the challenge is my

own. I am not a musician myself and I do not have the ability to give you or any other musician direct instruction on how you should sit, how you should move, how you should play. With another professional, I may teach the ergonomics of sitting at a desk or standing at a station in a factory. But with musicians, what I can do is guide you better towards what you need to accomplish physically, and maybe relate it to when you are not playing. Not interfering with your training but enhancing your understanding of your bodies while playing and after.

Another challenge of working with musicians—I'm not sure how to say this exactly right, but it does seem as if there is a worry about acknowledging an injury. So maybe people put off getting help. People have a lot of worry around having a problem; I respect that it is a very sensitive scenario but I really want people to recognize that they can get help sooner, so they won't have to suffer from any of the downsides of not being able to play. All the while I respect the need for privacy.

I think a lot of my interest in musicians comes from the fact that you are trained so early on to do what you do. When we hit a limitation in our bodies, as everybody will, whether it is injury or just age, it can be so uniquely threatening to a profession that has such longevity. I am fascinated by the possibility of helping my clients take away the worry and the fear around hitting a limit in our bodies. There is so much possibility that can open up again, and my goal is to bring more and more efficiency, longevity and endurance to the tissue and to our overall structure. We don't only age and become limited.

Therapies, especially holistic therapies, can bring musicians so much ease and longevity. I'm just fascinated with the continuum of stopping the worry and the fear that might arise that something is changing for the negative, and transforming that into success and comfort for years to come.

MR: You've had an interesting bird's-eye view of the orchestra—travelling with us, spending so much time with us, attending rehearsals. Was there anything about it that was very different than what you had expected to see?

SD: Everything (laughter). I actually had very minimal expectations because I had almost no idea what to expect. Of course I have worked with people who have gone on multiple tours and it seems exotic and exciting and all of that. I am amazed at how organized the process is and how such a humungous group functions so well together. Also, there is something fascinating about how individual and how unique everyone is and yet how beautifully it all comes together. I think one of the treats that I've had is traveling with a group where everyone is so interesting to talk to. Every conversation I have had has been really lovely; it is an extremely passionate group of people who have so many interests both within their profession and outside of it.

MR: Are there specific issues with specific instruments that seem to keep appearing?

SD: Absolutely. Wind musicians are newer to me but I've worked with several. There tends to be some interesting things around the organization of their diaphragm musculature and how it affects their shoulders and their neck. They are incredibly well trained in things like breath control where I cannot offer advice, but there is something about when the diaphragm might have a little spasm and its affect on shoulder and neck pain—there are these referral pain patterns, and someone may not know that a problem may be coming from the diaphragm.

Obviously, violinists and violists have a real challenge with neck and shoulder issues, and different nerves that are traveling down the arms. Cellists have a very subtle but different problem in how they organize their spine and their neck in order to accommodate such a large instrument, in a way that is a bit more asymmetrical than it appears, in addition to problems with the hands and arms over time.