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Classical artists have got the notes — now they need the biceps

Barbara Hannigan says sport psychology helped to control her nerves

To make it big in classical music, today's stars are turning to the world of sport to keep mind and body in perfect harmony

The treadmill's pounding, the heart rate's pumping, thumping beats fill the gym as the runner pushes on and the sweat pours . . . on to a score of Mahler's Fifth Symphony. Step aside Jessica Ennis-Hill; conductor Marin Alsop is feeling the burn.

Alsop is typical of a new breed of classical musicians who are embracing sports conditioning — both physical and mental — to maintain their artistic edge. Alsop, who again takes the helm of the Last Night of the Proms this year, ensures there's a gym wherever she stays on tour. "I'm nowhere near a paragon of fitness but working out helps my mental focus," she explains. "It enables me to enter that zone quickly and concentrate for long periods."

Classical clean living marks a quantum leap from some legendary bad habits: conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein was rarely seen without a cigarette and a Scotch. Pianist Vladimir Horowitz used antidepressants to control his nerves; Glenn Gould chose prescription pills and coffee. In the 1980s Russian conductor Yevgeny Svetlanov frequently staggered on to the London Symphony Orchestra's podium after a skinful — his liveliest conducting depended on it.

Sports conditioning also goes beyond the general trend for wellbeing, which has made us all mindful runners and plank-holders. It is intrinsically linked to staying in good musical shape. The conductor Daniel Harding recently told *The Times* how using a coach has refined his technique: "The idea came from sport. Great tennis players are like precision machines, yet they all have coaches watching them every day. I felt my ideas about interpreting music had developed way beyond my physical ability to convey them to the orchestra, and that's what I wanted to work on."

Pianist Steven Osborne has practised mindfulness for about five years and it has, he says, helped him to learn pieces more quickly and practise more effectively. “When you come to something you can’t do your first reaction is to be frustrated and angry and worried that it’s going to sound stupid in the concert. So you try to make it better with all that stress in the background,” says Osborne, who meditates for 30 minutes every morning.

“Mindfulness teaches you to more quickly be aware of those initial reactions and to think: actually I don’t need to invest in that. It gives you space in your mind to calmly analyse the problem.” In some ways mindfulness seems a contradictory philosophy for a musician. How does it fit with the perfectionist concert pianist practising for hours to master a particular phrase or work? Mindfulness is not about controlling the outcome, Osborne explains, but accepting that some things will go awry. “The purpose of the meditating is to become curious and open to what your mind and body present to you without trying to change it . . . making friends with the inner restlessness. And that transfers well to the practice situation.”

For conductor Pablo Heras-Casado, regular running is intertwined with his musicality. A 3km, 15-minute run just before a concert fires him up. “It energises me and makes my awareness, concentration and reflexes work faster. My body feels alive and strong.” Conducting requires stamina, power and expression. “Running is very extrovert and I don’t like silence and introversion before a performance.”

Heras-Casado does run in silence, however. “I don’t listen to music. I like to concentrate on my breathing and the sound of my steps. It’s part of the connection with the self and my surroundings.”

Staying in the “now” is a holy grail for athletes and there is little difference between choking in a big game and stage fright. So no wonder musicians are learning lessons from sport psychology. Soprano Barbara Hannigan, widely praised for her performances of testing contemporary music and her recent conducting, says she turned to sport psychology to control her nerves. “I found they were interfering with my ability to perform how I knew I could perform . . . with my potential under pressure. It wasn’t to do with my voice or my musicality. It had to do with my mental game.”

Fortuitously, Hannigan’s neighbour in Amsterdam is Jackie Reardon, who has coached the Dutch tennis, hockey and archery teams in psychology. With Reardon’s help, Hannigan has learned various techniques “to stay super, super-focused”. She uses breathing, muscle tension, “friendly eyes” — never judging herself during a performance, which would mean coming out of the moment — and eye control.

“Sometimes before I go on stage I will put one thumbnail on top of the other and focus on the edge of the nail to bring the focus very, very small, for 15 seconds,” she says. “It’s like when tennis players look at the racket and put their fingers on the strings; they’re not adjusting the strings of their racket, they’re bringing their focus in.”

Reardon also shows her athletes videos of Hannigan performing Ligeti’s *Mysteries of the Macabre* and Berg’s *Lulu* to illustrate taking risks under pressure. “The idea is that we can never repeat the good thing

— that amazing shot, that amazing high C," Hannigan says. "We can only create the parameters for a peak or optimal performance."

This distinction between peak and optimal has proved crucial to Hannigan in handling the constant expectation related to singing at the world's best venues. "The pressure would be too great if I said I've got to be 150 per cent every time," she says, and carefully plans her peak performances around her energy levels, aiming for perhaps two peaks in a run of six performances. "If I'm performing with the Berlin Philharmonic and it's being recorded for DVD or for their digital concert hall [streamed live online], I know that will be on the internet for ever and that's the one I want to be the best. I'm not even sure the audience could tell the difference."

Scrutiny in the classical world is more acute than ever: YouTube replays as many duff as dreamy notes; bloggers recount each whiff of gossip, HD screenings magnify every artistic strain and wrinkle. It demands a certain resilience. Mezzo soprano Allison Cook originally took up yoga out of vanity. "I'm very often in my underwear on stage and I really physically interpret roles. In order to sing and do that you have to let go of your stomach muscles to get a good breath. If I know I don't have a big belly hanging out that's a great thing."

Cook is known for performing endurance operas: the 70-minute, one-woman *Emilie* by Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho and Luca Francesconi's 80-minute two-hander *Quartett*. Yoga, she says, gives her the necessary stamina and strength. "If I feel my legs are strong, I feel grounded to the stage. Yoga goes with how I hold my body — which is my instrument — so with good yoga, everything's lined up to ultimately function."

As the science around performance psychology and physiology grows, so the practice becomes more accessible. The Royal College of Music in London now has a research Centre for Performance Science, headed by Professor Aaron Williamon. Williamon's team uses a performance simulator to recreate the high-stress concert and audition environments and train students to deal with stage fright: sweaty palms, jitters, and a racing heart. "We know that people who are physically fit are more efficient at dealing with stress," Williamon says. "But most musicians don't bother to get physically fit. We still have a selling job to do."

Stuart Skelton, the Australian tenor who has made Britten's *Peter Grimes* his own, spent the first four months of this year not singing after a chest infection. Now back to full health — he has just announced his first performances as Wagner's Tristan in 2016, which he will sing under Simon Rattle's baton — Skelton wishes he had possessed "some tools to bulletproof the psyche" for those tough times.

"This industry being what it is, these things turn into a much bigger deal on the rumour-mill: 'Skelton's cancelled four months of work. He's clapped out.' The lowest point for me was wondering whether my voice would ever come back." Now Skelton is looking into performance psychology. "You need a set of coping techniques. Athletes do it all the time."

Of course, classical musicians can do their jobs without sports conditioning. But the struggle for results, for the peak, can become exactly that — a struggle rather than a process. Entering the performance arena armed with a support "team" of physical and mental strength helps artists to create the intangible magic adored by audiences.

"Last week I was singing Walton's *Façade* with the Berlin Phil with Simon Rattle in Berlin," Hannigan says. "As Simon said, 'We were in the air'. We had this sense of joy and playfulness, which was so heightened in the performance. We were high on that for days."