

Teaching the Student, Not the Diagnosis: Principles of Pat O'Brien's Technique and Pedagogy

BY DANIEL RINDLER

One year after a successful surgery cured me of severe wrist pain and allowed me to return to playing classical guitar, I found myself in more debilitating wrist and hand pain than ever. It was 1993. I was an NYU music education undergraduate, having dropped out of a conservatory with tendinitis. I had already become enchanted with the lute and its repertoire. This led me, thankfully, to Pat's doorstep.

Onset of Disability

A few years earlier, upon graduating from a performing arts high school, I developed severe pain in both wrists, and also elbows, hands, and fingers. Not only was I unable to play guitar, but I had trouble tying my own shoes. I was diagnosed with tendinitis, but my doctors admitted they were puzzled when I didn't heal after many months of rest, ice, ibuprofen, and physical therapy. Perhaps I would "simply have to quit playing," they suggested. After three years of pain and a long stint of retraining my technique at a performing artists clinic at Roosevelt Hospital, I had an MRI scan and an "occult ganglion cyst" was found in my left wrist. This is a cyst that commonly forms on the wrist just below the back of the hand. It was termed "occult" because it wasn't visible without an MRI, unlike most ganglion cysts that are quite visible to the naked eye. This cyst, they said, was the source of my trouble and the answer to why I hadn't improved. Surgery was offered as the only solution. The surgeon was excellent and removed the cyst from my wrist, and not long after I was back to playing and quite happy about how good I felt.

But it seemed that a "cure" wasn't what I needed. One year after the surgery I was in more pain than ever and completely despondent. I stopped playing for a few months. I had come face to face with the fact that the problem was in the way I used my body to play the guitar, not something a surgeon could simply cut out. Also, the technical retraining I'd done at the performing arts clinic simply hadn't been enough, and I was clearly still playing in a way that was hurting my hands.

With a little time off to rest and soul-search, it occurred to me that I was almost exclusively playing lute, vihuela, and early guitar music transcribed for classical guitar. I decided to make the switch from modern guitar to the lute and called a teacher I found in the classifieds of the *Village Voice*. I found the address he gave me in the flower district of Manhattan, climbed some rickety steps, and found myself face to face with Pat O'Brien, with his long beard and ponytail, in a studio filled with instrument cases and stacks of music and books on early music spilling out on every surface.

Retraining with Patrick

My first lesson with Pat was not unlike a doctor's consultation in some ways. We carefully talked through all my symptoms and interventions taken thus far. I had acute pain in both wrists, my thumbs and lines of pain along the tendons. My elbows were inflamed, my shoulders cracked when shrugged, and I had back and neck pain to boot. (The physical therapists at the performing arts clinic had told me I had the body issues of an old man though I was only 22—not helpful, but memorable.)

My notes from my early lessons with Pat are a mix of musical and therapeutic suggestions:

- Practice right-hand finger movements with and without therapy
- French tablature practice
- Buy capsaicin cream
- Practice Attaignant's *Haulberroys* (#65 in the Daniel Heartz 1964 ed.)
- Slow movements to warm up before playing, and ice after

Lessons with Pat were a little like training with Mr. Miyagi from the movie *The Karate Kid*. I went in with the goal of learning something that seemed fairly straightforward—for Pat to show me how to play without hurting—and found instead that he had much broader plans for what to teach me, and how to invite me to learn. Of course, instead of a movie actor, Pat was the real deal. The lessons were intense. When I injured my hands, I had dropped out of a conservatory, and lost music as a center of my life. Working my way back to playing was filled with emotion for me, and Pat understood that. The lessons were also intensely long! For \$60, Pat would teach a 90-minute lesson which was already a low rate in NYC circa 1993, but if his next student didn't show, my lesson would become three hours long, and many times would last longer than that—sometimes going until his wife Mary called him to come home.

Pat's interests were seemingly infinite and his recall was encyclopedic. In the midst of helping me with my hands and teaching me to play the lute with some level of artistry, I learned a lot about life from him. In a typical session, Pat could cover a large range of distinct topics, such as thumb-under technique, how long to ice my wrists, how to play the accents of a hemiola, how thumb-under could translate into my properly holding my toothbrush, the benefits of using a speedball dip-pen, the popularity of wearing nutmeg grinders on one's belt in medieval Europe, functional anatomy, clawhammer banjo technique (with a fretless Appalachian Mountain-style banjo pulled off the wall for demonstration), discussion of the emotional impact of my hand injury (with tissue box at the ready), and perhaps a little time spent on refining my juggling ability, Mississippi John Hurt's Piedmont blues guitar style, Latin American politics of the '60s, and always the latest gossip from the early music world. I was beyond excited to have found him and learned so many unexpected things. All of that knowledge he shared keeps him in my thoughts. He talked about such a wide range of subjects that ordinary moments in my day bring him to mind such as when I walk by the "butter brick" buildings he taught me the history of in our shared neighborhood of Park Slope, or the rare and delicate Camperdown Elm Tree in Prospect Park.

My path to recovery with Pat was slow, but there were some glimmers of improvement in the first few weeks. Around a month in, I hit a turning point when I told Pat I needed to put the simple pieces he'd given me on hold and just focus on exercises for a while. I needed to focus entirely on the physical task of refining my technique without the added need to actually be musical. Pat agreed, and said he'd been waiting to see if I came to that conclusion for myself. That was the kind of teacher he was. He didn't spoon-feed—he recognized that there were ways his students had to contribute to the learning process. In teaching me, some elements were taught step-by-step, but as in this instance of my putting aside the pieces he gave me, there was ample room for me to shape the path of my learning process with him. This mirrored his own experience—Pat hadn't been taught what he was sharing with me by another teacher—he had sought out the learning himself, out of necessity.

As word spread in the NYC music community that Pat had found his way out of pain and had begun playing again, other musicians began to send him students who were in pain. He never intended to fill this role, but fell into it in this way. Many students who came through the door were suffering with issues that had very little to do with what Pat himself had experienced, but with his knowledge and creativity, he was able to find ways to help many of them. While he always remained first

and foremost a music teacher and not a therapist of any kind, he helped players of many instruments and even some nonmusicians, such as sign language interpreters, out of debilitating hand pain.

As I progressed through several months of playing slow and careful exercises, I was able to begin again to play simple pieces—Attainant was my favorite, while also branching out into English lute repertoire as well. I wasn't an overnight success by any means—it had been four years since the pain had begun and I made slow but measurable progress. I still iced after each practice session and often felt as if I'd pushed my hands too hard. Pat helped me to get back to functioning when no doctor had, but I never felt 100 percent cured. Still, within a few years of working with him I was playing pieces that seemed unattainable a few years earlier and only dealt with minimal discomfort and occasional pain flare-ups. While I still had some pain, I was largely able to manage it, and had begun to play the theorbo in addition to renaissance lute. I had attended the first meetings of the NY Continuo Collective, and a whole new world of music and ensemble playing opened up to me through that experience. After six years of weekly lessons with Pat, I was playing well enough to audition and be accepted to Indiana University for a master's program in Early Music Performance Practice, where I studied lute, theorbo, and baroque guitar. In the intensive setting of a conservatory degree, I found that what I'd learned from Pat helped me to function very well, but I had enough discomfort and occasional pain that I decided, finally, that a career as a professional musician was not the best option. Instead, I began to look for a way to help people in a similar way to how Pat had helped me.

“School isn't a particularly good place to go if you want to learn something.” Pat O'Brien

Pat was an autodidact, an incredibly motivated “self-learner.” While at Indiana University, I came across the work of another autodidact, Moshe Feldenkrais, in the form of Feldenkrais Method classes taught by a practitioner of the method. As I read Feldenkrais' books I found the Feldenkrais approach to experiencing the interconnectedness of the parts of the body, and the body-mind connection, to be perfectly aligned with what I'd learned from Pat. It was so helpful, and so fascinating, that I went on to become a practitioner of the method, and now work with many musicians, usually to help them out of chronic pain but also to help them improve areas of their playing that they feel stuck in.

In the following paragraphs, I will share some of the basic elements of Pat's technique as it was taught to me, and view it through the lens of

a little more than a decade of time as a Feldenkrais practitioner. One of Pat's gifts was to personalize his teaching to each student. He didn't see his work as a technical approach that could be easily codified and told me as much when explaining why he'd never published a book about his methods. My own work with musicians follows this model as well. However, there are some basic ideals of technique that I believe ran through Pat's work with most students. I'm going to detail a few of them here. You can find photos of Pat demonstrating some of these concepts in *The Art of Practicing* by Madeline Brusler.

The jewel in the crown of Pat's technique was the idea of moving from the base of the fingers, as referred to above (the idea that was reinforced by his meeting Andrés Segovia among other older musicians). This movement was one "key" that Pat found helped people find a path out of repetitive strain injuries, as well as focal dystonia, which is not simply a condition of inflammation such as I had, but a neurological condition in which the fingers either contract involuntarily or don't respond or "stick" when certain patterns of movement are made.

Pat liked to say that he had solved the ancient zen koan, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" By bending from the base and middle knuckles of one's hand but not the tip joints, you can actually audibly clap your fingers to your palm. That's not necessarily recommended if you are having hand pain, but it illustrated the point that one could move the fingers forcefully and efficiently by initiating the movement from the base knuckles rather than by, as many people do, initiating the movement from the tip joint. Most people, when they think of bringing the fingers to the palm, begin by bending the tip joint of the fingers and the other joints follow suit. This may seem a trivial difference, but anatomically it engages an entirely different pattern of muscle contractions.

To illustrate, try this experiment. With your left hand, squeeze your right forearm near the elbow where the muscle is the thickest. Hold the muscle firmly in the left hand while you make a fist with the right hand fingers and thumb. The first few times you try it, initiate the movement by bending the tip joints—i.e., the knuckles closest to the fingertips. Do you feel how the muscles of both the top and bottom of your forearm contract and push against your left-hand fingers? This is an unusual muscular mechanism, as both sides are contracting. This co-contracted pattern is almost as if one is pressing both the gas and brakes of one's car at the same time. The two muscle groups work in opposition to each other, and the fingers can make a very forceful movement. It is very strong but gets tiring—Pat talked about it as the "monkey hanging

from a branch” grip. He explained to me that it was a great mechanism when one was hanging from a branch, but was a greatly excessive use of force for playing the lute.

Now, again use your left hand to squeeze your right forearm in the same place. This time, fold your fingers first at the base joints nearest the palm, and then at the middle joints of the fingers. Don't bend the tip joints at all if possible. Now you will feel a marked difference in the way the muscles of the forearm contract. The muscles in the inner side of the arm contract and the muscles of the outside of the arm lengthen and therefore don't bulge into your hand. In this second pattern of coordinating the fingers, while one set of muscles contracts, the other relaxes—what is referred to as an agonist/antagonist relationship. Next, as the fingers uncurl and return to a resting position, the muscle group that contracted to flex them now lengthens. In the first (monkey on a branch) example, there is much more time spent with both sides of the muscles contracted and little time at rest.

Given the thousands of small movements of the fingers needed to play one's instrument, using this second, more efficient coordination of the hand and arm, in which one side is always at rest, was crucial for my ability to avoid or recover from injury. It seemed clear to me at the time that this movement of the fingers was the key to unlocking my tendinitis. It wasn't a cure, but as I refined my movement, the pain became less and less.

This movement is accomplished through a combination of muscular contractions, including one group of tiny, unusual muscles in the hand called the lumbricals (from the Latin for “earthworm”). They are unusual, in part, because they do not attach to bone as most muscles do. They contribute to our sensation of the movement of our fingers. Dr. Kerning Wang writes, “because it is spindle-rich, the lumbrical muscles play an important role in the sensory feedback of the distal interphalangeal, proximal interphalangeal and metacarpalphalangeal joints [all three joints] of the fingers.”¹ Wang goes on to say that the lumbricals are involved in “quick, precision movements of the fingers.”

With the hand that plucks the strings, one can learn to brush the fingers across the string with the tip joint passive. Depending on the mobility of one's joints, the tip may passively bend backward as it contacts the string, as if it were a paintbrush. One can learn to make a fantastic sound this way, strong, but round and warm toned. The downside

¹ Kerning Wang, MD “A Biomechanics and Evolutionary Perspective on the Function of the Lumbrical Muscle,” *Journal of Hand Surgery* (2014).

is that it takes more time and practice to learn not to brush up accidentally against adjacent strings, which is easier to do when the tip joint isn't actively flexed.

Pat had me mimic him to learn the basic movement of bending at the base joint of the finger to pluck the strings. It was quite strange at first since my mental image of how I initiated the movement in the past had been centered around the sensation of the tip joints curling. Now the tip joints were to remain passive and I had to find how to move in an entirely new way. Pat also had me practice the movement of my right-hand fingers with theraputty, a palm-sized glob of rubbery putty to squeeze without curling the tip joints. At the lute, I found it easiest to move this way with my right pinky. It stood to reason, as it was the finger for which my pattern of habitual clutching at the strings was not practiced. Even though I wouldn't be using my pinky to play the strings, for now Pat strongly encouraged me to practice the movement with my pinky and let my other fingers learn from its sensation, a strategy I use with my Feldenkrais clients in different contexts each day.

The other challenge of this right-hand technique was learning not inadvertently to brush the strings adjacent to the course I meant to sound. Pat had me play simple right-hand-only exercises to become accustomed to allowing my tip joint to brush back without touching the next course. I remember many times in lessons looking down at Pat's fingers as he demonstrated a phrase of a piece, and seeing his fingers bending so purely at the base and middle joint only, and realizing I didn't quite have it yet. For the fingers not to hit the next string, it was essential to find the angle of the hand and arm and the height of the wrist that allowed me to play cleanly. As I did, my tone became rounder and fuller and, satisfyingly enough, the sound I produced began to become a guide towards refining my technique in addition to what felt better for my hand.

For the fretting hand, the same basic idea is applied of bending the fingers from the joints nearest the palm, but the tip joints generally aren't allowed to bend back. Here, one holds the hand in a position so that the base joint of the fingers is above the fingerboard, or nearly so. Then the hand is in a position to move from the base joints, and there is increased leverage for pressing down the strings with ease. In my playing, this led to a sense that my fingers were approaching the fretboard from "high above" rather than wrapping tightly around the edge of the fretboard. When I was positioned well, I could see perhaps the top eighth of my palm when looking down at my left hand while playing. I sometimes thought of it as my left-hand fingers standing tall on tiptoes.

More Principles of Patrick's

There were many other elements to Pat's technique that he shared with me over the years I studied with him, though for this article I'll detail just a few. Many of the concepts of his technique fall into the category of creating clear lines of force through the skeleton for maximum efficiency. When force doesn't travel in clear lines through the skeleton, the result is one bone shearing (displacing slightly) in relation to the next one and a loss of efficiency and greater potential for injury. In working with Pat, I learned a lot about avoiding these shearing forces in the fingers, wrists, and arms. Below I give details of how this applies to the wrists.

Even when practiced ideally, the playing position for plucked strings is much more anatomically challenging than for instruments played in a more symmetrical position, such as keyboard instruments. Many players add unnecessary strain and wear to their body (as I did) with their arm positions. My right wrist, especially when playing thumb-out, was habitually side-bent at an angle ("ulnar deviation") to bring the fingers to the strings, thus taking the tendons of the right arm around a curve that constrained their capacity for free movement.

Similarly, my left hand bent forward at the wrist, sometimes at an extreme angle. There are moments, as when spanning a large number of frets, when this is difficult to avoid. However, like many players, I often kept my left wrist bent in this way unnecessarily, not reserving it for rare moments. In this position, as Pat once explained to me, the tendons rub back and forth over the distal head of the radius and ulna (the two bones of the forearm at the wrist), almost like pulling a string back and forth over a rock. The results can be reduced ability in playing, or creation of inflammation (tendinitis) and, as I learned the hard way, can lead to a ganglion cyst in the wrist.

It was extremely challenging to find a less flexed position of the left wrist, especially for certain chord shapes. One key to allow for this position was the hinge bar: a kind of signature move from Pat's technique. For many chords one can maintain a more relaxed position by fretting a few or even the single top course with a partial bar of the first finger. In the case of playing just the 1st course, one frets the string with the middle or base segment of the finger rather than the tip. This allows for a more relaxed wrist position and more freedom for the other fingers. Pat used the technique often.

About a mile downtown from where I worked with Pat, and worlds away musically, young composers such as John Zorn were creating music that was labeled "totalism." Totalism attempted to include

many musical influences and styles, and was wonderfully chaotic. In my early twenties I found it to be exciting, daring, thought-provoking, and occasionally moving. I don't know if Pat was aware of that music at all, but I propose that a case could be made for calling Pat a "totalist" for the way he approached early music and teaching. In the midst of his swirl of information and influences, he had a singular focus: he always came back to developing as a musician himself and to supporting those around him to do the same. He brought forth all his interests and experiences—including his understanding of anatomy and technique—to influence that singular goal.

"Health is the capacity to recover from shock and to realize our unavowed dreams." Moshe Feldenkrais

I initially sought out Pat to help me get out of pain, but as it turned out, he had larger goals for me than I had recognized for myself. Pat both brought me back to expressing myself through music, and in the long run influenced me to find a way of employing my own curiosity about people, my past experiences, and interest in a broad range of subjects to enrich my own teaching. Now I, too, work with musicians and others who are seeking to get out of physical pain or anxiety that is limiting them, and they often stick around after the pain is gone, just as I did with Pat. They begin to realize that the relief from pain they initially sought was just a small part of a larger need to feel comfortable in their own skin, and to feel a certain internal structural integrity that carries them physically and emotionally through good and difficult times in their lives. This was Pat's gift to me and all of his students, and which I hope to carry on in some way to support us from where we were, and then to generously give us something bigger and richer than we knew we were looking for.