

# Patrick O'Brien and His Own Former Disability

BY PATRICK O'BRIEN

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## Editor's Introduction

In the late 1960s Patrick was disabled by tendinitis pain for about two years, to the point where he could not play at all. Probably this primarily affected his right hand. He tended not to speak about it later, regrettably, because the story of how he cured himself would be both remarkable and instructive. He consulted doctors, teachers, anybody who could help, but found little solace.

Apparently at one point he took night classes in anatomy and physiology to learn how the hands function, and what he learned became the basis of all his future pedagogy, not only his cure.

When word got out that he had cured himself, other musicians with hand injuries began to come to him for help, and his big heart could not turn them away though he would have preferred to teach musical interpretation. Over his 40-odd-year teaching career he must have seen hundreds of hand patients, perhaps thousands. He referred some of them to Jack Silver in Toronto, in whom he had confidence because of Jack's own cure and understanding of the issues (see Jack's article on page 141). He was frustrated that he could not help or cure all of them. He told one student that he cured perhaps 25 percent. Katharyn Benessa has written in this volume why he was not always successful despite the essential efficacy of his system. Some people simply did not follow directions, wanting to keep trying their own solutions. Others came briefly and then disappeared with no further contact, so the teacher had no idea how or if they progressed.

Still, there is surely no teacher in the history of music who has helped more musicians recover from hand injury. If so, it is undocumented. Neurology journal articles on the subject are uncertain about the origin of hand injury, and usually conclude that the success rate is low. Well, of course it is low if you are not treating the cause. Neurologists turn to MRI brain studies, but these do not indicate whether the images are the chicken or the egg.

Patrick knew the cause and the underlying anatomical reasons: faulty plucked-string technique. He eventually isolated a few prime causes and focused on those, foremost among them distal flexion (bending the fingertip joint), excessive abduction (spreading the fingers, primarily of the left hand), and to a lesser degree excessive opposition or gripping with the left-hand thumb and little finger, which creates tension, as does abduction. Knowing these factors, and closely observing how the students played, he could create exercises to retrain musicians to avoid the problem motions and ultimately restore their playing ability.

Here are brief explanations by Pat to two of his students, Steve Forsley and Daniel Rindler (see his article on page 49), and an unidentified student.

### **Daniel Rindler – transcribed from a recorded interview with the *JLSA***

When Pat was a young man, he was a working musician, playing gigs constantly to make a living, and he began to have debilitating hand pain that threatened his career. He had studied with a teacher who had helped him progress musically, but who didn't teach any kind of consistent technique. At this difficult time of his life, not finding the answers he needed from teachers, he took matters into his own hands. As he told the story to me, he spent months playing in front of a mirror, trying different small experiments of technique, often while in severe pain, making note of which movements felt better and which felt worse. He studied anatomy and began to understand the inner workings of the hands and arms.

But Pat didn't solve his hand problems completely alone. He began to reach out to others in order to research ideas that might help him. He began to seek out and speak to older musicians who were still playing at a high level of proficiency late in their careers. He spoke to jazz and pop players, classical musicians, and folk musicians who played traditional music at weddings for hours on end. His question for them all was a brilliant one: "What did you find you needed to change in your technique as you got older, in order to keep playing with the proficiency you have now?" He even managed to ask this of Andrés Segovia, who held up his right hand and said, "I had to do a lot more of this," bending his finger as if to pluck a string at the base joint and the middle joint, but not flexing at the tip joint, which remained passive, like a soft paintbrush would when brushed across a canvas. This particular movement of the fingers was one that came up again and again as Pat spoke to various musicians and became a central part of his technique.

**Steve Forsley – transcribed from a recorded conversation with Pat O'Brien**

**PATRICK O'BRIEN:** I have a tendency to manipulate from here and there [pointing], and not to grip this way. That's the way I use my hand, because I went through so much pain, I mean, I'm talking just unbelievable depression. [Laughing as he talks] Even now, my wife won't admit when I ask her point blank in front of other people, she won't admit how bad I was to live with at that time. I must have been unbelievable to put up with.

**STEVE FORSLEY:** What year was this?

**O'BRIEN:** I guess it was in the late '60s, somewhere. I was into this problem really badly for a couple years when I finally found the last trigger that I needed, which had to do with relaxing the tip of the thumb. And making that happen all the time as I plucked and as a posture and so on and so forth it took me only a few months to get the problem gone. And oh, inside of four or five months, after I just thought of that final idea, I was back playing again.

It was ironic because there had been times during those two years that I stopped, did nothing with my hand for like a couple months. Put it in a sock and tried not to move it at all. And it didn't get particularly better, it still hurt. I had to train my way out of it, I couldn't just relax my way out because I had forgotten how. I had just forgotten. And the very way I maneuvered my muscles and talked to them and how I triggered them, you know, I had forgotten how to do it.

**Patrick O'Brien's response to a question from an unidentified student**

**O'BRIEN:** But I wouldn't hook the tip of my finger for nothing. Why? Well, I had this wonderful motivation when I had this tendinitis problem about 25 years ago. The chronic pain lasted a couple of years. It was really painful. I would wake up out of a sound sleep as I moved my hand in my sleep. It hurt so much. One of the tendencies of tendinitis is that when they're inflamed, they adhere when you don't move them. If you're asleep, then fum! The first time when you wake up they hurt like hell. When you get some movement, they hurt less because you break down some of the adhesions that happen during the time of immobility.

What I had was a situation where if I did it wrong, it hurt like hell, and if I did it a little bit better or right, it hurt less. And that really was a strong motivation for me to change my whole way of moving my hands.