Fine tuning

Wellbeing for orchestral musicians has been pushed under the carpet for decades, writes **Coriander Stuttard**. But at Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra things are beginning to change

In the past it has been considered weak or whingey for orchestral musicians to speak out about pain or to request hearing screens. Meanwhile schedules have become all the more demanding. But since 2015, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic has been steadily implementing a Performance and Wellbeing programme, with investment and project support from Help Musicians UK and Jerwood Arts.

The evidence of its success is tangible on a daily basis among the musicians. For Peter Garden, executive director of Performance and Learning, it is about spreading the word so that this kind of work becomes the normality for every organisation and every musician. Mark Pemberton, director of the ABO says, 'We are delighted to see how the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic has picked up the baton and made such a decisive step forward. We are hoping it will inspire other orchestras – certainly the packed attendance at a session they took part in at our conference in Cardiff in January 2018 would suggest so.'

In building the programme, Garden began talking to musicians individually about their life at work. 'It's in our interest to have the best team on stage,' he says. He talks of the physical, psychological and technical endurance needed to deliver the full programme of concerts, recordings and tours. His ethos is to treat musicians like musical athletes. Inspired by the work of Dr Nick Allen, medical director at the Birmingham Royal Ballet, who brought a background of sports science and rugby into his work with dancers, and informed by the research into performance science, Garden began to link musicians to elite athletes and looked for ways to support their lifestyle holistically.

The orchestra began by making sports massages available between rehearsals and concerts, and even taking masseurs on tour, which players say makes an amazing difference after travelling on long-haul flights, cramped trains and coaches. There is access to a dedicated physiotherapist who understands the physicality of the profession. Referral and assessment is immediate and is paid for through the orchestra – a stark contrast to musicians having to 'pay to keep themselves on stage' which was the norm for many years. Violinist Lukas Hank feels it is a special part of working with the orchestra. 'It deals with the acute problem in your shoulder or whatever, but actually it's about a much bigger thing. You don't just turn up, play, then go home. It leaves you feeling incredibly positive and valued when they look after you as a whole and are not just focussed on your performance at concerts,' he says. 'It's more like being part of a sports team. I know the help is there and I don't have to rely on it every week but we are regularly reminded of it.'

As well as the physiotherapists and masseurs, a wider team of practitioners is involved. Sophie Till is a pain-free strings specialist who visits the RLPO annually and works via Skype to deliver workshops and lessons based on the Taubman Golandsky technique, which analyses the mostly invisible motions which take place underneath virtuoso technique. 'Some players bring pain and injuries, others bring aspects of their playing that are bothersome, and others are looking for technical solutions to something they want musically,' she says. 'The professional players are so busy that they tend to come when something has gone awry in their playing, but in the process of sorting out those issues, the preventative side of things comes up. A player might bring a bow arm injury where there is much pain. Solving such injuries usually involves peeling away layers of information while also reworking the playing. Putting things back together is really a four-part process from injury to completely solved; getting the player out of the pain through new information; working in the new technique at a basic level; integrating that technique into the repertoire and finally integrating it into the work place and performance where the stress often adds another dimension that needs solving. In contrast, another player might bring problem passages and we can address the specific issues as they come up in the passage.'