

SARAH*(47), VIOLINIST

(detailed description of a single FI lesson)

Sarah is one of my clients who come for Functional Integration from time to time. A few months ago she called me because of pain in her left thumb while playing the violin. S. is a professional violinist and she works in an orchestra.

At the beginning of the lesson Sarah explains me that she has pain in left thumb especially when trying to flex and adduct it. She tells me that the situation came up while practicing and that she has to be able to play within two days because of her function in the orchestra.

I ask her if there is a special kind of difficulty in the music they are playing in the orchestra. She tells me that it is Wagner what means playing during large periods of time without a moment to pause. I assume that there could be a latent contradiction in her use of the left thumb, which was triggered by the over-demand of the situation and I decide to explore in this direction.

I ask her to imitate her position of holding the violin to show me how she uses her hand while playing. I observe with attention every aspect of her organization, but I can't find anything special.

So I ask Sarah to lie down on my table and I start to place cushions and padding to make her feel comfortable and reduce the work in her system to a minimum.

First of all I perceive that her breath is not easy. I remember what Feldenkrais writes in "Awareness through Movement" about the supralymbic system, which is responsible for the higher functions and very connected to the hand, mouth, throat and breathing apparatus, so I think that facilitating her breathing could be a good way to enter into her system.

Sarah has often breathing problems because of her non specific allergies what causes her to organize her chest strongly towards inhalation. So her ribcage looks continuously a little bit inflated. She has improved her breathing a lot during the last year and she was almost free of allergy but the continuous influence of the air-conditioning in the orchestra has triggered again her reaction and breathing turned to be difficult. So I take some time to organize her legs looking for more freedom in her belly to breathe. Then work with the right arm and hand to eliminate parasite tension and interference on the thoracic cage. Then I lift her head a bit to find a better relationship between her torso and her head what allows her to breathe with less effort after some moments. I know this aspect of her organization because we had worked on before. After about fifteen minutes S. is at ease, breathing much more quietly and listening with attention to what is happening. Up to that moment I didn't touch her left arm or hand.

As I have worked with Sarah for over a year I know the main aspects of her organization and the relationship of her breathing-pattern to her neck and head, it gives me the possibility to help her to organize her head in a way that allows us to focus our attention directly "on the problem" in her left hand, although it is not the usual approach in our work.

So I put my attention on the organization of her left forearm, which lies close to her body: her elbow is orientated inwardly and the palm of the hand towards the ceiling which coincides with the organization in her chest. To me it seems to give her a feeling of more space to breathe in her chest. The muscles that connect the arm to the chest and neck are quiet tense and there is no space under the armpit.

I start by trying to roll gently the forearm on the table and I can feel that rolling the forearm outwards is much easier than inwards. So I begin to facilitate what she does supporting the

movement by pulling from the little finger to get the palm into some flexion. I put my other hand in the metacarpal joint to lengthen a little bit her fingers flexing the metacarpal joint. Through this approach the outward rotation of her arm is getting still easier and her hand is getting into flexion. I introduce the flexion in her hand because she said that the flexion of the thumb was painful, so I try to “saw” in her brain the information that flexion “from the other side” is no problem. This is a principle that is used very often in this work, as Beatriz said it once to describe proximal and distal in a more simple image: “when you can’t move the door, move the house around the door.”

I continue by repeating the same movement with the ring-, middle- and index finger and I can feel her hand becoming softer. She says that the feeling in her hand is changing.

Next I lift her whole left arm a little bit to redistribute the muscular tonus and find a new position for her arm where it is more freely to move in different directions. I roll her forearm as before and there is more movement than before to both sides. Next I bend her elbow and put her forearm standing horizontal. Then I close her hand carefully into a loose fist and I start to do small circles with her wrist fixing the fist gently with my other hand. She takes a deep breath and let go some tension in her chest. There was a kind of tension in her chest that I perceived and what guided me to do these circles with her wrist. The circles were meant to “tune” or awake the middle for her wrist and shoulder joints on a proprioceptive level. As I try to lift her arm again there is much less resistance and there is space below the armpit.

Next I put her elbow a bit away from her torso and I sustain her wrist with my knee so I can roll her forearm quiet easily and regulate with my leg the height and position of her whole arm adapting to her needs. I use this position as a kind of mobile extension of the table. I want to enhance the rotational movement of the forearm to be as easy as possible. Now I begin to explore the movements of the thumb itself. It calls my attention that the thumb is almost in line with the four other fingers. Suddenly I associate the image of her left hand holding the violin in this position, too. I remember the motor development of the hand in the evolution and development and I suspect that there could be a conflict between the more primitive global holding pattern where all five fingers work in one line and the opposition of the thumb to the other four fingers. I remember that Moshé writes that the opposition of the thumb as an important difference in the evolution of our brain, if comparing with monkeys, for example.

After exploring the movement resources in her arm “around her thumb” I put my hand flat and with a little bit of weight on the pad of her left thumb and start to move it a bit inwardly towards her palm. But there is a resistance to go further and I decide to continue from the other side. I start again to pull from her little finger into flexion and she immediately expresses her feeling of relief in the hand. I repeat the same movement with the other three fingers and a little bit of outward rotation in the forearm.

I try again to roll the pad (the first joint) of her thumb into her palm the amount that is easy and I can feel her whole nervous system becoming more attentive. As the next step I move her thumb inwards this way and then I begin to flex the index finger with my other hand towards her thumb. I remember an ATM from Alexander Yanai (“Working with the dominant hand”) and I begin to slide her thumb gently and slowly from the outside to the tip of the index finger and then to the inside. I repeat several times until I can feel it becoming easy. I go on to the middle finger and repeat the same procedure. After that I do the same with the ring finger and a little bit with the little finger. Her whole hand and wrist is getting softer and softer.

Then I begin to flex the thumb a little bit with the tip of the index finger, then the middle and so on. I follow the logic and put the thumb inside the palm and put the other fingers around into a loose fist-configuration and the thumb completely inside. Holding the fist I start to roll again the forearm on my thigh until it becomes easy. After that I do some rolling movements with the forearm outwards and the thumb simultaneously inward (in opposition). Then I let go the hand and stop.

We take several minutes to feel the differences in her sides and hands and let her nervous system process the information. As she comes to sitting she tells me that she feels a big relieve in her hand and thumb.

I ask her if she has to face demanding situations this day and she tells me she can stay at home and take care of herself. She already knows how this kind of process works and she is able to support it by her acting. I think a moment to go further on and getting it into the context of the violin, but I have the impression that it is enough for her and I decide to keep it for another day.

The next day I receive a SMS in my mobile phone from Sarah: "pain is gone".

The next lesson I ask her to bring the violin and we did a very interesting work with the different movements of the thumb in opposition to the other the fingers depending of what they need to do on each string.

It's possible that Sarah had learned to use the thumb adapting her hand to the need of the other fingers when reaching the strings in different positions, in particular the higher ones. This causes a strong outward rotation of the left forearm and "invites" the thumb to align with the other fingers, especially when the little finger reaches out to play. I think that the essential point in the Functional Integration was the differentiation of the thumb with the other fingers and to clear the opposite relationship in combination with the outward rotation of the forearm. Another important point was to become aware of the thumb's movements in her playing technique which means to find the active movements the thumb does, with his three joints, to complement the movements of the other fingers.