

Music, Health, and Science

Amy Thakurdas, Column Editor

A Conversation with Jennifer Montone: Jaw and Back Injuries

by Angela Cordell Bilger

In the October 2005 issue of The Horn Call, Jennifer Montone, then principal horn of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, detailed her ongoing recovery from a jaw injury caused by a car accident. Now principal horn of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Jen talked to me during the summer of 2018 about both her jaw injury and a subsequent back injury, one that required emergency surgery, and detailed what she learned through those recoveries. This article is an abridged and updated version of that conversation. – Angela Cordell Bilger



Jennifer Montone

Angela Bilger: For those who didn't read the 2005 article in *The Horn Call* about your jaw injury, let's start with a recap of that injury and recovery process.

Jennifer Montone: In October of 2004, I was in the passenger seat turning my head and talking to my sister (who was driving) when we were rear ended, and my jaw slid all the way to the right. Everything on the left side got stretched and displaced, and everything on the right side was compressed. I took a couple weeks off, then tried to come back to work, but had sharp, shooting pain in my jaw. With the help of colleagues, I found an oral-facial specialist named Clayton Skaggs. He works often with athletes and now co-runs the Central Institute for Human Performance in St. Louis (they also have a location in Jupiter, Florida). He became my main doctor through my jaw recovery, and had several specialists in-house that he recommended I see – an acupuncturist, a massage therapist, and a cranial-sacral chiropractor. They all recommended that I stop playing for the time being.

Then I heard about a neurologist named Richard Lederman at the Cleveland Clinic. He's the head of the Center for Performing Arts there. I saw him in January of that year and played for him with electrodes all over my face and jaw while hooked up to a biofeedback machine. This is how we figured out exactly what was going on in the musculature, and he helped me formulate a plan for coming back to playing.

AB: What information did you get from the biofeedback machine?

JM: The muscles that seemed affected by the injury were my masseter, temporalis, and lateral and medial pterygoid muscles. The masseter is the lower jaw/chin muscle, and when I had

aching pain playing low or loud or sustained, it was from the masseter. When I played high and stopped or muted, I had sharp, shooting pain from the temporalis muscle, which is your temple muscle and spans from the TMJ up the side of the head. The muscles most affected for me for everyday life were the lateral and medial pterygoid muscles (they create a T in the middle of the cheek), so I did a lot of physical therapy exercises to heal them. It took a long time. I also had a specialized practice routine that he helped me develop.

AB: What did that routine look like?

JM: He suggested I stay off the horn until March and then start playing five minutes a day between middle c and middle g, just soft and easy. It was awful at first. I would play my five minutes a day and then I would cry for about ten minutes after that. After a few weeks, he said I could add one more half step or one minute each day. So, it was an excruciatingly slow intro back into playing, but it was conservative and effective. Eventually, also, I started seeing the opportunity in it and started trying, in that five-minute session, to focus on redeveloping whatever aspects of horn playing I could – a relaxed breath and even blow, or a timed attack (both air-attacked and tongued). Then I'd focus on the smoothness between one note and the next, starting with a couple notes then adding a third. Then I added musical direction, articulation, rhythm, dynamic control, sound quality, musical expression, style, and then eventually worked to rebuild confidence. How I rebuilt ended up truly informing how I now play and teach. The process made me a more conscious and problem-solving player and teacher.

I started slowly easing back into work in mid-May. Even though I relied heavily on the assistant, Larry Strieby, it was important for me to be able to play a little bit with people. Through the summer I continued practicing diligently and expanding, and by the time of the Philadelphia Orchestra audition in October, I could play high but I still couldn't play pedal notes. The first time I played pedal B^b or C was actually at the audition. It still hurt quite a lot. But I felt so grateful to be back to playing, and I don't think I've ever felt so comfortable at an audition! It was truly a gift in that way.



I continued working as slowly and conscientiously as I could, trying to make progress while being mindful not to overdo it. The challenge with a recovery, I think, is that there are mental and emotional components that may be bigger than the technical aspect of it.

AB: This brings me to the question of how to develop trust in your body again. Part of it is a matter of time, but once you are on the edge of being able to do something, or *think* you could, how do you teach your body to know again that you can do it, and not to approach it with a sense of fear?

JM: It's a good question and a huge topic! My subsequent back injury (culminating in 2016) presented an even greater mental challenge for me because of the length of the playing recovery, but in both cases, trusting my body was a big challenge. The fact that the jaw pain started to subside over time helped keep me sane, as did keeping myself busy with other things. I tried to become an overall healthier person, and did a lot of working out, yoga, and meditation during that time. Years later, with the back injury, I circled back to the work I did with meditation. Metta meditations, Jack Kornfield's *A Path with Heart*, the *Tao Te Ching*, and other resources have provided much inspiration, as has your website, Angela!

I also found that it helped to focus on the expressive part of what we do – the giving and loving and sharing of our musical ideas and excitement and passion. Having an injury makes you feel weak and scared and imperfect. And of course, we are all those things while going through an injury or difficulty, but it's amazing how strong the gifts of love and generosity can be as we share them through our playing and teaching, and how they can override fear. My teacher, Julie Landsman, has a "head-to-heart" meditation that is really beautiful. When I play with my expressive, loving, excited, music-loving self instead of my fearful self, I can hear and feel an unbelievable difference. I've noticed with the back injury that when I sit there and I wait to feel or hear the weakness that I'm afraid of, there it is – like clockwork! If, however, I become very passionate about what I'm going for musically, singing something exactly how I want to phrase it, and thinking of who I'm playing for, it is healing for me also. It feeds me and helps me to trust that the art form is bigger, and that the intention of love is bigger than any challenge we face.

AB: That's beautiful, Jen. Let's talk about your back injury and the specifics of what happened.

JM: It turns out that the same car accident was the catalyst for my discs starting to slip drastically, but I think I was likely to develop back problems anyway because of a hereditary flaw. My family has narrow spines which allows the discs to hit nerves easily, and my mother and sister have had back issues too. I had herniated discs on both the L4-L5 and the L5-S1 discs in the lower lumbar on my left side. In college and in my young professional life when I felt pain, I'd go to my doctor who would give me pain killers. Then I'd take it easy for a couple days and I'd be fine. But after the accident the episodes became more extreme and more frequent. Then after I had kids, I think I wasn't particularly mindful of the way I was moving, especially in picking things up, so the injury continued to develop over the years.

The worst episode started in March 2016 when I was in Cleveland with my husband and kids for a week. My youngest son was about two at the time and having a tantrum at the playground. I picked him up and put him in his stroller – bending, lifting, and twisting at the same time (which is, according to my physical therapist, a huge "no-no"). I felt enough pain to know something had happened. I'd had serious back pain the previous December and January, but this was the final straw. My body was screaming at me.

The painkillers my doctor prescribed didn't help, so I began physical therapy. During those next few months, we played *Rite of Spring* and Mahler 2 and went on tour to Asia with Bruckner 4 – heavy playing for how much pain I was in. Also, I brought my kids (aged two and four at the time) on the tour and was pushing the double stroller and helping push the suitcases around. I didn't know enough to be as cautious of my body as I should have been at that point. In retrospect, it would have been much smarter for me to have called out sick from work and to start taking it easy about two months earlier than I did.

I had cortisone shots when I returned from tour, but they didn't help. The next step was an MRI to see if surgery was indicated. The doctor said that, based on the MRI, my L4-L5 and L5-S1 discs were herniated (slipping) and blocking my spine sixty percent, which explained the growing pain. She said if I kept going with physical therapy, I might be able to avoid surgery, but that I might want to start thinking about having it.

When we got home in late July I saw a surgeon in Philadelphia. I was trying to avoid surgery still, but was in excruciating pain. I had numbness down my leg and in my foot at that point, which he said was normal, but he advised me to beware if I developed numbness in my torso or pelvic region. He said that would mean something called *cauda equina* where the spine is one hundred percent blocked by your discs. It can cause paralysis unless you have surgery within twenty-four hours. Apparently, between July and August of 2016, my spine went from sixty percent blocked to completely blocked. So, on August 18, while in Saratoga Springs with the orchestra, I woke up bizarrely numb in my trunk and my family and I rushed back home to Philadelphia. The hospital bypassed all the normal pre-op and rushed me in. My Rothman orthopedic surgeon did a laminectomy (where they grind down your bones) and a discectomy (where they take out the discs that have slipped). It was a scary day, but the surgery was a complete success, I'm relieved to say.

The next few months were a blur of recovery. It took a lot of slow physical therapy to recover from the injury and surgery, and it took a while to figure out which therapeutic aids worked best for me – heat or ice, which positions to lie in to relieve the discomfort, how much physical therapy and strengthening I could do without re-injuring. I've found that problems manifest in personal ways and so do solutions. I think that we just have to be mindful of what is going on with our bodies.

I went to see Dr. Lederman at the Cleveland Clinic again in October of that year, and he explained that the reason to be conservative with my playing recovery is that there is intrathoracic or intrathecal pressure in the form of fluid that builds up in the spine when we play. Playing soft is a little bit better than loud, but only mouthpiece buzzing doesn't have that intrathecal



pressure inside the body. He helped me develop a plan for coming back to playing which involved only breathing exercises and mouthpiece buzzing until Christmas. He said I could try playing gently and gradually in January, but to not expect myself to sound at all strong or normal until April or May. He was spot on. That was when I started to feel a bit like myself again.

For at least another year after that, though, I continued to feel weakness in the muscles of my torso. They were still actively healing and readjusting and weren't able to be used for horn playing very well, it seemed, so the more extreme parts of playing took even longer to come back. *Patience, confidence and trust* are words that became mantras for me. The playing recovery, and especially regaining strength, seemed to take forever. It was a constant battle between attempting to persevere, and being frustrated and depressed. I would find myself feeling abnormally tense while playing – I think just from trying too hard!

As a result, I am now more conscious about keeping myself more physically loose and mobile and open when I play. I do a lot of nose-breathing in rests now to relax myself, and I've added an Arnold Jacobs breathing bag and breath builder to my daily routines. I can tell now if my hips are tight, or if I tense my arms or rib cage while I'm playing, or take a tight or shallow breath, and I intersperse my playing with lots of stretching, yoga, and breathing exercises.

I've been working for the past two years with Ariel Weiss (a wonderful Alexander Technique teacher) and Dinka Vlatković (an incredible physical and mental coach) on regaining my physical mobility and effortlessness, especially while playing standing up, off the leg, and bells up. It's exciting to finally be able to do these things again! The questions of how to breathe, blow, spin the air, and support the sound have been a topics of rediscovery for me as well (these are always good places to put the attention). I'm also subdividing more consistently to keep myself feeling grounded and connected to the orchestra, and it helps me feel more stable and connected in general.

It took a long time, but I feel healthier and stronger and more aware than I ever have been, which is a huge silver lining for me. So even though it's been a long, somewhat excruciating road of recovery, I am thankful for how I play and how I approach things now that I'm on the other side of it.

AB: Do you have things you do now after extensive playing to counter the exertion of horn playing?

JM: I do. Initially, I had to figure out how much exertion my back could take on any given day. There were certain things that clearly hurt my back – playing loud for a long time, picking anything up, twisting, bending, pushing anything, sitting for long periods of time, standing long periods without walking, wearing high heels. Any of those things would make it worse. If I did one of those things, I would usually be okay if I stopped doing whatever was aggravating it, did my physical therapy exercises immediately, applied heat, and rested. Celebrex was also very helpful.

It's a constant readjusting of what you think you can do. You cross the line, jump over the line, and then you step back and try again with more caution. Increasing my understanding of the body has been very helpful, and as my back healed and my core strengthened around my spine, everything improved – slowly but surely.

AB: Is there any advice you might have for someone who has experienced injury or is going through the recovery process?

JM: The most important words for me have been *faith* and *trust* and *patience*. Playing music is such a big part of our lives, so it can be so terrifying and depressing to experience an injury of any kind. I'm thankful there are great resources. There are doctors, physical therapists, specialists for all areas of the body, body workers (Alexander Technique and the Feldenkreis Method, for example), and colleagues who have gone through injuries themselves. There are many performing arts institutes and performing arts doctors in our country, and if you search online, it can help to tie the playing part of the recovery together with the physical recovery.

In both of my injuries, I had to give my body the time it needed to physically heal, and then keep problem-solving to get back to playing well again. It helped to seek out support from others, and the common thread I found was to try to find some sort of inner peace through it all.

It seems like almost every professional musician I know has encountered some major roadblock, such as an injury, in their career. So, I hang onto that. I try to find some humor in it as well, because otherwise it can feel like an insurmountable challenge. You certainly learn a ton through it all! It's a fascinating thing – I wonder if injuries and other setbacks might just be part of our profession because of how physical playing an instrument is, and how unpredictable life is. I wonder, if we can see it as part of the process of being a musician, maybe it would feel less scary when it happens.

AB: It's just a part of what we do...

JM: Yes, I think roadblocks and difficulties of some kind might just be a part of it for most of us. So, we learn from it and keep trucking along, and we support each other and help each other over our various bumps in the road – and that's a big part of healing too. There is so much loving, compassionate advice out there and you can feel very supported by it. We have a beautiful community in that way.

To read the original interview in its entirety, visit www.musicianswell.com. For more about Jennifer Montone, see www.jenmontone.com.

Angela Cordell Bilger lives in Philadelphia where she is second horn of Opera Philadelphia and on the faculty of Temple University. She created Musician's Well, a website dedicated to telling stories of injury and recovery, and writes poetry in her spare time.

