

# LENE BROUGHT YOGA INTO THE CONCERT HALLS

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**Yoga practically gave french horn player Lene Skomedal her life back. Now she travels between stages across Europe teaching other musicians how to strengthen their bodies and handle stress by mastering breathing and movement.**

*Text: Cecilia Nebel, photo: Anna Rosén, translation from Swedish: Frieda Mossop*

It's a regular day at Gothenburg concert hall. Musicians come and go through the entrance way and say happy hellos to the receptionist at the stage door. Most of them disappear into the backstage corridors. But not everyone. Some go upstairs with their instrument cases in one hand and a yoga mat in the other.

Freelance violinist Charlotta Grahn Wetter is one of them:

"As a violinist, you are sure to have tension in your neck and back."

Yoga has found its way out of flashy fitness magazines and become a workout routine for the masses. In later years, concert halls and festivals have discovered the benefits of combining classical music and yoga. In Helsingborg, for instance, the orchestra has attracted a new audience by offering yoga classes accompanied by live music. The Gothenburg symphony has also embraced the idea. Today though, is not about finding new ways to connect with the audience, but about the musicians themselves.

Freelance musician, horn player and yoga instructor Lene Skomedal is in the main foyer overlooking Götaplatsen, ready to meet early bird orchestra musicians and conservatory students. The music is turned low and the floor is filled with different coloured mats. There is some hushed talking, but soon conversation subsides and people take a seat cross-legged on the floor. Some close their eyes and turn their focus inward.

Lene has prepared meticulously. As an orchestral musician she knows what the participants have to wrestle with on a daily basis: aching shoulders, strained backs and stiff necks. Musicians belong, like professional athletes, to a vulnerable occupational group who constantly have to perform at a very high level in order to stay in the business. While pro athletes usually have access to a team of medical professionals to prevent and treat injuries, the awareness of risks on the job is much lower with musicians. Laid on top of this is the pressure to constantly perform at your best: to nail that solo, to be responsive, alert and focused during long rehearsals and demanding concerts. To be able to deliver a top performance at an audition – to channel months of preparation into a few minutes of brilliance which can open the door to – or slam it shut – the possibility of that desirable permanent job. Lene Skomedal is aware of these challenges and wants to help the participants find tools to handle the stress. Part of it is to let go of the pressure to be perfect.

"Let's leave orchestra thinking behind. I'm not a conductor, you don't all have to keep the same tempo. Let today's form and feeling be your guideline. Without thinking about performance, let's just try to land in our own bodies," Lene says to the group.

It's not easy. Some follow the movements easily, others hesitate or lose their balance, but try again.

"Try to move your breathing down into your belly. Is there something you can let go of? That you should not waste energy on? That frustrating conductor or colleague who complains all the time? Just let it go..."

Lene instructs and demonstrates, sometimes she uses musical terms:

"Molto legato ... it should feel like one long movement. Think glissando ... like in Mahler fifth," she says softly.

Bodies stretch out and ball up, after a while everyone seems to have found their own tempo.

"Orchestral musicians are so used to performing. To constantly be thinking 'what can be better?' It is a challenge to not always give your maximum effort. Here we practice thinking that 'what we do is enough'. It is important to listen inward," Lene explains.

She wanders among the participants, adjusts a hand, a foot. Constantly giving options when certain positions are especially challenging or perhaps too difficult. To injure your wrist is detrimental to a violinist, to twist your neck or back can be disastrous for anyone. Lene thinks this is the reason why many people avoid yoga.

"Since I am a musician myself, I am very aware of how important it is to not risk a physical injury. I take extra care and give alternatives, so that the yoga can benefit everyone," she says. Violinist Charlotta Grahn Wetter feels safe following an instructor who knows what positions might be risky. Now, yoga is a routine she does not want to be without.

"Especially the breathing has made a big difference, I've become much better at focusing and keeping my concentration," she says.

Lene Skomedal lays a light hand on someone's back or shoulder, with a gentle reminder of the intention to "let go". Listen inwards – and breathe! The effect is evident. During the class a few people discreetly wipe away a few tears.

"In every class someone starts to cry. I think it's because you finally get to relax. Tension from the many rehearsals and concerts is released."

Just over a year has passed since Lene switched the concert attire for yoga tights and demonstrated the sun salutation in front of her first group of musicians. It happened after a few horn playing colleagues started getting curious about what she was doing out in the hallway before the concert. "Could she maybe teach some sequences to the rest of them?" She could, and this was the start of a journey which is now about customizing yoga routines for musicians.

She has focused on finding exercises that fit different specific situations.

"The most important yoga is really the kind that happens off the mat. The powerful 'sun warrior' is perfect just before a concert, as a position that boosts inner strength and confidence. If you are full of energy and get home late at night after playing a concert, the 'pigeon' position is a nice way to land – it is both a good stretch and helps you calm down. Or just pick an exercise that feels positive before entering the stage. Get the blood flowing and the deep breathing going!"

"Balance exercises are great for finding your focus. I do them all the time in the practice room."

Lene describes herself as 90 percent musician and 10 percent yoga teacher. Her goal is for musicians to do yoga exercises as routinely as they practice their scales, or that tough passage, over and over again.

"I want everyone to have the tools to do what they need; to ground themselves, find their focus, calm down or boost their energy! That you as a musician can feel as good as you possibly can; avoid injuries, be in touch with your breathing, and really be able to enjoy the music while playing it. The body is such an important part of the instrument, I don't think we fully grasp that."

This realization hit Lene Skomedal with full force five years ago. Pregnant with her first child, she was faced with a nightmarish diagnosis – a tumour was also growing inside her uterus. Happiness over the baby was taken over by anguish and concern and a battle for life. A few months later Lene and her husband Terje Skomedal, who is also a musician, were finally able to welcome a healthy baby boy to the world. The joy and relief was indescribable. But for Lene, the long road to recovery had just gotten started. After multiple operations her abdominal muscles were wiped out. A disaster for a brass player!

”Five years ago I couldn’t do anything. And it could have ended there – the playing too.”

That was when she picked up yoga, something she had used before, but in a completely different way. Slowly, she began to rebuild her strength. Every other day she could practice at home for 20 or 40 minutes respectively before her body forced her to stop. But with breathing and yoga movements’ help, she was able to slowly but steadily expand her capacity. Today she feels stronger than ever.

”I didn’t think it was possible to get to where I am today. Passages that I used to need four breaths for, I can now do in one. The difference is huge. Even if my situation was extreme, the knowledge of how to rebuild your muscles after child birth is important for all musicians who have had children,” she says.

”And the effects of yoga go further,” she says with a laugh, ”I am four centimetres taller just from improving my posture, I have a stronger back and a more open front side. I have increased my lung capacity with two litres, I never have problems with injuries any more – I used to always be in pain somewhere. I am also in a better place psychologically and am so much more relaxed, both in preparation and on the job.”

”Yoga is not magic, even though it feels like it!”

## Short yoga school

### Deep squat

**How?** Stand with your feet at the edges of the mat, your toes slightly pointed outward. Sit down deep. An alternative is to use a wall for backside support, maybe roll up a mat/blanket and place it under your heels, have a couple blocks or something else under your bum if it feels too intense and you can’t get all the way down.

**Effect?** I use this before concerts and experience the position as grounding, focusing, and it boosts the testosterone in your body so that you are prepared for challenges.

### The rag doll

**How?** Stand with your feet at a hip-wide distance from each other, bend your knees and hang forward. Take hold of your elbows and stretch out your back, rock a little from side to side, and relax your neck and jaw. Slowly roll back upwards.

**Effect?** This I use after rehearsals or concerts, when my shoulders, back and facial muscles are tired and I want to recover faster. One of the most relaxing positions for the neck, and at the same time it helps with blood circulation to your brain and face.

### Eagle arms

**How?** Cross your arms twice, think about keeping your elbows forward and upward while you simultaneously round your neck and back.

**Effect?** This increases blood flow in the shoulders and I use it before, during and after rehearsals and concerts, to warm up or to restitute faster.

### **Alternate nostril breathing**

**How?** Close your right nostril, breathe in through your left nostril, close them both and hold your breath, breathe out through your right nostril, breathe in through your right nostril, hold your breath, breathe out through your left nostril. Repeat the cycle, preferably for a few minutes.

**Effect?** For me, this is the best breathing exercise for focusing and grounding, while it also gives me energy.

### **Warrior 2**

**How?** This position is slightly more complicated to explain in a short way here, but there are plenty of great instructions online.

**Effect?** When exposing the throat and heart, while "opening" the hips, testosterone in your body is boosted and you are better prepared for challenges. The position is grounding and I use it often before concerts.

## **Lene Skomedal**

**Age** 39

**Profession** Freelance musician

**Passion** To help more musicians to discover the power of yoga.

**More info** [yogalene.com](http://yogalene.com)