Teaching Awareness to Music Students, Through Movement

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Published in The Feldenkrais Journal 17:35-39. Spring 2004

A lifetime of competition and training based on maintaining standards are primary forces that shape the musician’s attitude toward learning. Competition and standards focus on external comparisons and references and are good for fostering discipline. To be sure, discipline distinguishes the artist from the dilettante; however, it does not necessarily lead to creative thinking or self-awareness. Thus, music students can become desensitized to their musical intuition while obsessing over perfection and correctness, even at the expense of their health. It is evident that we, as music teachers, have overlooked or, worse, devalued a fundamental quality in learning music: many of our students lack the self-awareness to fully realize their artistry.

Since 1989, I have taught a class in the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education in the School of Music at Northern Illinois University, open to juniors, seniors, and graduate students. Members of the class have come from across North America and Western Europe, as well as Australia, Brazil, Russia, Bulgaria, Israel, Japan, and Korea. Most of the students have heard about, read about, or taken lessons in the Feldenkrais Method. A few have pain and injuries. Many are concerned about tension. They all want to improve their performance.

The purpose of the class is to teach students how to become aware of themselves and how this awareness may improve their performance. The Feldenkrais Method does not teach how to perform music, nor does it teach how to learn to perform music. One learns how to perform music by studying music. Performance can be far more effective, however, if one is self-aware and mindful of his or her surroundings. There is a direct correlation between self-awareness and the quality of interaction with other musicians and the audience. Feeling the suspended breath of audience members who are sitting in the back row of the balcony, or trusting silence while playing a jazz improvisation, is the difference between a good and an exceptional performance. These subtleties cannot be worked out in the practice room. They are a result of the performer's presence within the moment, his connection with the other musicians and the audience.

For most musicians, efforts to express themselves are partially blocked, diffused, or deflected. Instead of producing a musical sound, efforts to express the music result in physical tension. Consequently, the performer feels expressive, but does not sound expressive. You can see this in the body when he plays with legs that do not bend, weight that does not shift, or fingers that move too much. What is observed in movement usually is reflected in the sound. As a Feldenkrais teacher and musician, I observe both the effectiveness of the movement and the musical intent. Legs that do not bend may relate to rhythm that feels stiff. More flexibility or more awareness does not necessarily create a new tonal image. But increased self-awareness, in relation to the performance environment, may allow the tonal image to be redirected in a more effective way. As one student explained the change in his performance after an Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lesson, “It became available, so I used it.” What I find interesting is not just that something “became available,” but that he chose to use it.
When musicians perform with more awareness, not only do they play better, they play healthier because the effort to express themselves no longer manifests as physical strain. As Feldenkrais teachers, we observe the result of strain time and time again. The body begins to hurt and then breaks down. What begins as something inspired and beautiful becomes exhausting and painful. Imagine the self-doubt of someone who is hurt as a result of his own efforts to express himself. If a musician becomes injured, learning to become more spontaneous in performance is hindered even further because his attention focuses on avoiding the pain and the injury and not on taking musical risks.

The class, “A Workshop in Movement and Performance Awareness,” is about learning to trust taking those risks. It fulfills the pedagogical requirement of the Master of Music in performance and is now considered an essential part of the graduate curriculum in music. The class is primarily designed around the experiences of ATM lessons. These experiences generate topics for discussion and homework without the need to follow a set syllabus. The students discover what is relevant to their unique situation in their own way and in their own time. I tell them that they can go write their own books on how to play or sing.

In some classes, a student will perform an excerpt and, without discussion, we will do an ATM lesson. After the lesson the student will perform the excerpt again, and then comment on what he notices musically, physically, mentally, emotionally, etc. Usually, the change in playing is obvious. Sometimes the performers are unsure of what the specific changes are, and simply feel that their performance is easier or more relaxed. Sometimes, the performer feels as if his performance is weak and ineffective. He may not know what a powerful performance feels like and confuses effortlessness with weakness. It is not uncommon for students to feel that they played better after the lesson because they have “warmed up.” My response is, “When did you warm up? While you were lying on the floor? What is warm-up anyway, and why should we warm up?” This exchange initiates the discussion and homework for the next few classes as they re-examine the purpose of our warm-up routines. They realize that the purpose of warming-up is to become fully present to play or sing and to interact, and that their routines may have become mechanical and ineffective. The discussion provides a nice opportunity to broach how ATM lessons are a process of self-discovery on the road toward being awake. After the performer has commented, the class members share what they noticed. They get excited as they list the changes in his performance, such as greater dynamics, bigger tone, or more confident rhythmic feel, qualities of which the performer may be unaware. Often, there is an element of surprise or ambivalence because the improvements do not follow the primary rule of learning music—practice until perfect. After all, you do not learn to play better by rolling on the floor, or do you?

As the semester progresses, the focus shifts from producing immediate changes in their performance to a deeper, more personal exploration of their performance and of themselves. At some point in the semester, someone in the class broaches the subject of the connection that they feel with the performer. It can be an uncomfortable subject for some musicians because of the lack of language to describe or measure, and therefore it frequently is dismissed as charisma. The class acknowledges that the connectedness also may be related to changes in the group’s awareness. They realize that there is more to the performance than just the
changes in the sound or in how the performer moves. This discussion may engender assignments or journal notes on how ATM lessons affect presence.

Occasionally, students will request that they be excused from class or sit out the lesson because they are performing after class and are afraid that they might feel too weird to play. One student had a convocation performance before some faculty and her peers. As a new graduate student, it was her first solo appearance at music school and she was feeling anxious. This seemed no time to experiment. Without insisting, I encouraged her to do the lesson and that even if she felt different, the performance would probably go well. A couple of days after the performance, I passed her in the hallway and asked how it went. Her eyes widened, “It was amazing! I felt strange, but it went really well!” Later, I asked another student who attended the convocation what he thought of the performances. He replied, “It was ok, nothing great.” Pausing, he added, “But, there was a graduate student who can really play!”

One of the peculiarities of teaching the Method at a university is that college students expect homework assignments. An assignment might include doing two ATM lessons from class and noticing how one lesson affects the movement quality of the other lesson or doing a lesson from the Awareness Through Movement book (Feldenkrais, M., 1972). Writing assignments, in particular, get the students to do ATM lessons on their own and to figure out how to articulate their experiences and discoveries. Writing assignments improve class discussion and students’ ability to communicate with their artistic and professional communities. Students also keep journals, which I read a few times during the semester. The journals help the students understand their process and provide me insights as to what to include or change in my teaching. We never discuss journals in class; they are for individual use. Some use their journal simply to record the lessons; others include daily observations on the effects of the lessons and write questions for themselves. In accordance to university rules, I distinguish the learning experience of the graduate students by requiring them to write a research paper. The students may write on any topic so long as it relates to the Method. I encourage them to choose a topic that they find meaningful. “Why Do We Yawn?” “The Breath,” and “Mental Practice and Visualization for Performers” are a few of the topics.

What the students bring to the class determines the quality of the learning experience. The students are easy to teach because, as performers, they are self-motivated and understand the value of self-directed learning. In addition to their music training and performing, most of the students also have taught music. This allows me to relate learning the Feldenkrais Method to multiple shared languages and experiences. The students understand, for example, that theoretical generalizations found in music pedagogy have limited effectiveness, and therefore, generalizing experiences from an ATM lesson may also limit learning. Many strategies in learning music performance also apply to learning the Feldenkrais Method. Any eighteen-year-old freshman knows that you progress more quickly if you practice at a slower tempo.

Conversely, music training also can develop peculiar learning attitudes. Imagine spending several hours a day, for fifteen years, learning how to adjust your fingers on the violin to within a few thousandths of an inch, in fractions of seconds, to play a passage perfectly in tune and in time—and that anything less is unacceptable. Likewise, musicians may be inclined to practice the details of an ATM movement instead of allowing the movement to reveal itself. Tell a class
full of college-age musicians who are working hard on their technical craft to move less or move slower and half of the room may come to a stop. This may appear to be thoughtful exploration of the lesson, but more often than not, it is excessive attention to a detail of the movement. It is important to relieve musicians of the responsibility to do the movements correctly, and to broaden their attention. I get very serious and tell them, “I am going to ask you to do something no music teacher has ever asked of you before.” I let a breathless silence hang briefly in the air as they ponder their fate. Smiling, I suggest, “Do it poorly, or, please, at least in a mediocre way.” Trying too hard has become a standing joke in the class. There is an underlying dynamic in these classes that balances discipline and play—think clearly, be responsible for yourself, and enjoy the moment.

Music training can also create false concepts and assumptions about what is “natural” action. Music training is stylistically exclusive, and therefore, lacks aesthetic perspective. You do not learn to be a musician, but to be a concert pianist or a jazz saxophonist. With this stylistic orientation, there is often confusion between what is natural or healthy. Many opera singers, for example, believe that jazz singing destroys the voice. All music performance requires movement, and specific musical styles require specific movement. Each musical style has a feel, has a concept, requires specific techniques, and is equally unnatural. Interestingly, mature artists may move in peculiar ways that are an integral part of their musical image and artistry but defy our preconceived templates of efficient action. But one of the challenges for musicians who study the Feldenkrais Method is that they may need to re-examine qualities of their playing that feel reliable and familiar. It is one thing to feel or sound better; it is another thing to change the most meaningful part of your life. After a particular Functional Integration (FI) lesson, a student picked up his instrument and played much better than I had ever heard him play before. He exclaimed, “I don’t know what you did, but this sounds great! This is weird! I don’t play this well!” He ended up rejecting the changes that occurred during the lesson. Even though he liked what he felt and heard, he did not credit himself for the changes in his playing. Changing one’s approach to performing can take years of exploration. Therefore, the notion of re-learning how to play or sing is discussed later in the semester, after the students have had time to develop confidence to re-learn on their own.

At the end of the semester, we meet for the final exam—usually at the local coffeehouse. The university rules simply state that you must meet at the designated exam time “for examination or other instructional purposes.” We sit at the table together. The students present their research papers to everyone. Assumptions and contradictions are challenged, and fresh perspectives are noted. Ideas go back and forth.

After fifteen weeks and thirty classes, the students acknowledge that learning self-awareness is a never-ending inquiry and that the class has served as an invitation to that inquiry. The students fill out a simple questionnaire that asks what they learned. Their responses range from learning how they move to relieve tension to how the quality in their performance has changed. One student wrote that he learned, “to rely less on rules and regulations and more on feeling, response, and sound.” Another wrote, “I learned the benefits of becoming aware of my body. Not only does this help in performance situations, but as an overall mental and physical equalizer.” When reflecting on the semester’s work, I resist the temptation to codify our
experiences for use in future classes and trust that the process of discovery will reveal what is most interesting and appropriate.