

Application of
The Feldenkrais Method
in Learning Music Performance

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A student, Phil, comes to his saxophone lesson distressed about changes in his playing over the weekend. Having steadily improved the tone quality of his classical style over three semesters, he now finds it no better than when he began, and he is convinced that he has lost something in his technique, or concept of tone. As Phil describes it, something "went wrong" during last Saturday's practice session, and his tone hasn't felt right since.

This happened to Phil once before, as a sophomore, while he struggled for six weeks to learn how to alternate between classical and jazz style and between the appropriate changes in mouthpieces, reeds, and ligatures. It was a difficult but perhaps necessary experience filled with self-doubt. Now he is in the final stretch, preparing a senior recital that is less than four weeks away. As he strains to reach for the high notes, I suppress my initial reaction to his unattractive performance and my fear that our two years of work may be unraveling. I let go of the tension in my jaw and mouth as the focus of my attention softens. Perhaps the "problem" is not that he has lost his understanding of how to make an attractive tone but that he has reverted to older and more familiar habits because of anxiety about the upcoming recital.

Contradictions and Assumptions

Phil's situation is common to many saxophonists in college. Like many of these students, Phil was oriented toward jazz. The saxophone is so closely associated with jazz that the two are nearly synonymous; but the instrument has been introduced into classical music only recently. Because of this, the instrument has an uneasy place within the common practice tradition in academia, which is rooted in classical style. Though their experience and artistic aspirations are often in jazz music, saxophone teachers and their students feel pressured to learn performance within a pedagogical framework that evolved from classical music.

However, such assumptions, I have discovered, have a pernicious effect on learning. Students oriented to one style are likely to be confused by methods designed for the other. We fail to realize, for example, that even the most basic elements of the traditional

classical approach, such as creating a repertoire list, do not necessarily apply to jazz-oriented students like Phil, who was admitted into the saxophone class because of his jazz skills and thus cannot be expected to profit by methods that are designed for classical-oriented students. The reverse is also true for classical-oriented students learning to play jazz.

While this predicament has long confronted saxophonists, it is no longer a problem unique to the instrument. With the recognition of the artistic validity of cultural and intercultural styles, technological developments in electronic and computer-synthesized music, and an ever expanding history, music schools find it increasingly difficult to establish priorities. When inundated with such quantity and variety, students often become unable to concentrate on any one thing. Harold Best, dean of the Conservatory of Music at Wheaton College, has aptly described the current state of music education:

... we will be compelled to wedge talk about 21st century music into curricula which have yet to deal convincingly with the 20th century wedge, driven in turn some years ago into curricula which had already been filled to the full with musical practices up to the late 1800s. [Endnote 1]

Although my students represent the top 20 to 25 percent of those who audition for entrance into my class, I have felt at times that I was teaching on a remedial level. Since student performance habits reflect a particular stylistic orientation, much of their learning has had to be, in a sense, re-learning. I could see the potential in each student; I knew from my performing experience as a classical and jazz musician that musical styles are learned. Yet students did not understand or appreciate that they could learn to master more than one style. Jazz-oriented students, in particular, became discouraged and lost their confidence, and with that, their interest. Students had not only to learn style and technique, but to develop a personal understanding of an unfamiliar "classical" image.

This situation compelled me, as a performer and performance teacher, to search for the common denominator in teaming apparently distinct styles of (Western) music. I became more and more convinced that the problem lies in our assumption that music is to be learned by studying only its content. I felt certain that the process of learning to play was equally important. If students could become more aware of their individual processes, I reasoned, they would then be better able to adapt to an inevitably changing arts world.

I first tried to expand my understanding of learning and teaching by consulting music pedagogy books. But I found that these educational materials were concerned primarily with the developing habits of elementary students. What about my students, college students, students that have already developed performance habits?

The narrowness of the application of these pedagogies led me to question those who professed to be addressing in this way the "natural learning process." It seemed to me I needed a perspective on learning that transcended traditional pedagogy. I talked to Ron Price, coordinator of the music education program at NIU about my interest in methods of learning that would embrace both the psychological (intuition and thought) and

physiological (sensation and movement) elements of performance by adults. Ron suggested I investigate The Feldenkrais ® Method.

The Feldenkrais Method was created by Israeli physicist and mechanical and electrical engineer Moshe Feldenkrais, 1904-1994. Having studied at the University of Paris and at the Sorbonne, Dr. Feldenkrais worked for a time as a research associate of Frederic Joliot-Curie at the Radium Laboratory. He later went on to become director of the Army Department of Electronics of the Israeli Defense Force, and of the Weitzman Institute. In addition to his extensive work as a scientist, Feldenkrais was highly proficient in Jiu-Jitsu and was the first European to become a black belt judoku under the teaching of Kano, the Japanese creator of Judo.

While working on the development of antisubmarine sonar detection during the Second World War, Feldenkrais aggravated an old knee injury. Surgery was recommended, but with no more than a 50 percent chance of success. He decided that before he would subject himself to the consequences of a possibly unsuccessful surgery, he would try, with the benefit of his knowledge of several disciplines, to learn to walk again. His findings were published in 1949 in *Body and Mature Behavior: A Study of Anxiety, Sex, Gravitation and Learning*; public interest in this work led him to develop what is now known as The Feldenkrais Method. Later, Feldenkrais described his approach thus:

The way I teach my students to work is to bring them into conditions where they can learn to think. They have to think without words, with images, patterns and connections. That sort of thinking always leads to a new way of action. [Endnote 2]

The Feldenkrais Method has two modes of application, Awareness Through Movement® and Functional Integration.® Awareness Through Movement (ATM) is taught through verbal direction, while Functional Integration is taught nonverbally, through touch.

In 1987, I received support through the NIU Office of Faculty Development to train to become a Guild Certified Feldenkrais Teacher and integrate The Feldenkrais Method into the performing arts.

Phil's Lesson Continued

What is Phil doing that is different from before? I can't see the inside of his mouth and throat or know how he feels, but I can imagine what I would do to produce the tone I am hearing. What can I see? His jaw is moving forward and backward more than usual and his head is jutting forward, his torso appears flexed and stiff, and his pelvis is tucked as if he were hiding a tail between his legs. I let him continue to play as I look for more clues. Each note demands a greater effort to produce. Now I can see that his embouchure is breaking down as he begins to tire. He starts to bite the mouthpiece/reed in order to

produce a tone. The dynamic, how he has unconsciously chosen to organize himself to play, appears as it did two years ago, before we made changes in his neckstrap position and embouchure. At the end of this first segment of the piece he is unwilling to continue, scolding himself under his breath. I watch and wait.

"Man, I don't know what's going on. First of all, these reeds are just awful and the horn is leaking like a sieve!"

I try the instrument. It plays fine. He sighs and shakes his head as he looks to the floor.

"I think I shouldn't have played my jazz set-up so long last Friday night. I couldn't help myself. There was a great session happening at the Coffee House."

What sound is he imagining when he is playing? Is he aware of how he is playing? I am hesitant to point out my observations. I sense that anything I say at this point might be categorized as a problem, which would create an unnecessary barrier. With a recital coming up and only a few lessons and rehearsals remaining, that is the last thing we need. As things stand, his demeanor is defensive and his self-confidence is sagging. I hear it, see it, and feel it.

Applying The Feldenkrais Method

Formerly when I taught music I would focus on certain factors, such as accuracy of technique and stylistic nuances. The student and I would concentrate on correcting mistakes in playing a particular piece and work on specific exercises that emphasized pitch accuracy, dynamics, rhythm, and timbral flexibility. However, it was not enough simply to identify and correct problems in performance, and assign exercises. I needed to discover how the student related to what I was saying. Since understanding performance is primarily nonverbal, I couldn't tell how a student might interpret verbal instructions.

For example, if a student with a jazz orientation is learning classical style from a teacher oriented in classical music, the teacher will apply techniques learned in childhood that the college student would be teaming for the first time. If the jazz-oriented student is moving his or her jaw when articulating the beginning of a tone, the teacher will point out the mistake in this technique, supposing that a technique can be "corrected" by simply bringing one's attention to it. The student, however, may feel that the "correct" technique is impossible to execute because it is not in the realm of his or her experience of articulating a note.

This creates an interesting predicament. The student is expected to learn to execute a sequence of nonverbal acts, but is hindered by acquired habits. The only means of communicating with the student are verbal instruction and example, which together suggest to the student, "you are wrong and you cannot trust the action and sensations that

you normally would associate with this sound." How then is the student going to learn to make the desired sound? The consequence of this kind of teaming is expressed by Samuel Nelson:

The first problem is that most musicians believe they play an instrument that is "out there." They do not understand that it is they who make music and it is their entire self that is the primary instrument. [Endnote 3]

Seeing an action or a skill as an extension of the person exchanges traditional linear, right-or-wrong logic for a non-linear, spontaneous interplay. The quality of this interplay is determined by the teacher's awareness of effortless action and the function of movement. With this awareness, the teacher leads the student to realize how to perform with greater ease and quality, and thus how better to do what the student intends.

Phil's ATM

"Let's try something, Phil. Put the horn down for a moment and lie on the floor. Please, take off your shoes and your glasses. Notice how you lie on the floor. How does your left leg rest on the floor ... your left heel, your left calf, your left thigh and hip? What is the distance between the back of your knee and the floor? How does your left leg touch the floor compared to how your right leg touches on the floor? How do your buttocks rest on the floor? What is the distance between the small of your back and the floor? How far up your back do you begin to feel the floor? How does your right scapula, or shoulder blade, press into the floor compared to your left shoulder blade? Do certain points of your shoulder blades press more into the floor than other points? How about your arm? Are the palms of your hands facing the floor, or are the backs of your hands touching the floor? Are your elbows bent or are they straight? And what about your neck? Does the back of your neck touch the floor? What is the distance between the back of your neck and the floor? Where does the back of your head rest on the floor? Does it rest more to the right or to the left? Does your nose point left or right? Away from your feet or more toward your feet?"

Phil begins to quiet down as his attention wanders to various parts of himself in relation to the floor. I notice that his right side appears shorter than his left. His head is turned slightly to the right also.

"Now, gently and slowly roll your head to the left and to the right. Roll your head only as far as is comfortable. Notice which side your head rolls to more easily. To which side does your head roll further? "

"Slowly roll to lie on your side, and then back to lying on your back."

He chooses to roll onto his right side.

"Are you holding your head when you roll to your side? Let your neck be soft and allow your head to roll on the floor as you roll to your right side. What else are you holding when you roll to your side? Take your time. What about your left leg? Can you find a way to roll to your side without stiffening and pushing with your left leg?"

"Please rest."

"Now bend your knees so that the soles of your feet come into contact with the floor. Find a comfortable place to put your feet, and organize your knees so that the weight is supported by your feet and hips. As you roll to the right, let your knees tilt to the right as well. Is it easier or more difficult to roll with your knees tilting? Are you holding your breath as you roll? Are you ambitious to roll correctly? Try rolling poorly or moderately and maybe you will discover something in how you roll that you didn't notice before. Allow yourself to exhale as you continue to roll."

"Please rest."

"Bend your knees, and this time when you roll to your right side notice what your left shoulder and your left arm do. Is there a way that you can involve your arm with rolling to your side? When you roll, imagine that you are reaching for something to your right with your left hand, something that you want. Look at this imaginary object so that your head and your eyes are also involved with this movement. Now, when you roll to your right, lead with your left hand. Is it easier to roll now? Do you notice that your shoulder is also active in this movement?"

"Please extend your feet and rest on your back and notice how you lie on the floor now. How does your right side compare to your left? Roll your head to the left and to the right. Are there any changes in how you roll your head?"

"Now roll to your left side and notice how you roll and compare how rolling to your left side compares to rolling to your right side."

Phil noticed that it was significantly easier to roll to the right.

"Continue rolling to your left side.."

After finishing the short ATM lesson, Phil stands up and walks around the room. His carriage has changed considerably. His posture appears less flexed, his face is more open, and his movement in general seems easier and more comfortable.

"Notice how you are walking now. Feel your weight on your feet. Notice the feeling in your jaw and face. Now let's go back to the horn and play some. "

His tone is transformed. Each phrase is executed with ease. The high register speaks without the slightest hint of strain. I can tell that Phil is enjoying the experience of playing his instrument. His phrasing is more intimate and spontaneous.

"Wow! How did you do that?"

"I didn't do anything."

"No, seriously, what did you do? I mean, I have been pounding my head against the wall all week trying to figure what was wrong with my playing."

"You were the one that was doing. I simply brought your attention to what you were doing and suggested a few things that perhaps you could add to how you were rolling. Maybe this, maybe that, we discovered them together. It was the result of your action and my suggestions that you became more aware of how you were rolling. As you let go of unnecessary tension, your movement became easier. You are playing the saxophone more easily because you are more aware of how to use yourself, without tension. Saxophone playing, rolling on the ground, walking, whatever, it is you that is doing it. Perhaps you're feeling pressured from your recital and that has made you tense. Who knows? There could be countless reasons. However, a good way to keep in touch with your playing is to keep in touch with yourself."

Learning How Not to Know

Because The Feldenkrais Method teaches through the body, it originates in general human functioning and is not restricted by stylistic idiosyncrasies. Therefore, the method is effective in developing new habits of learning music, acting, dance, and perhaps areas of study outside the performing arts. The explorations that this kind of learning evokes are based not only on a cognitive or intellectual inquiry but on somatic action and interaction. They are the kinds of questions that elude definitive answers. They are circular, intimate questions that cultivate wonder and exploration. It is this "learning to become comfortable with not knowing" that is the heart of creativity, and is, in my opinion, the essence of learning to be an artist.

Endnotes

1 - Harold M. Best, "Performance and Composition II; Music Curricula in the Future," *Proceedings of the Sixty-fourth Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM)*, 1988.

2 - Moshe Feldenkrais, "Self-Fulfillment Through Organic Learning," *Mandala Conference*, 1981.

3 - Samuel H. Nelson, "Playing with the Entire Self: The Feldenkrais Method and Musicians," *Seminars in Neurology* 9, No. 2 (June 1989): 101.