

Healthy Practices: Feldenkrais, Movement, and Music

UW-Madison Cello Professor and Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner Uri Vardi recently sat down with editor Cathy Spann to give readers a window into the Feldenkrais Method®. Vardi began with some background on the method, provided his philosophy of teaching, and referred us to Bernard Scully, a horn player who is benefiting from Feldenkrais techniques.

UW-Madison Cello Professor Uri Vardi puts great emphasis on the choreography of playing, the relationship between movement and sound. In order to further his understanding of this approach, Vardi has specialized in the Feldenkrais Method, for which he received the 1999 UW-Madison Arts Institute Faculty Development Award. Both he and his wife, Hagit Vardi, are now Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioners. In addition to his studio teaching and performing at the university, Uri Vardi teaches a two-credit course entitled Feldenkrais for Musicians.

By way of background, Vardi related that the method's creator, Moshe Feldenkrais, was an Israeli physicist, engineer, active athlete, and martial artist. Created over fifty years ago, the Feldenkrais Method® aims at improving body awareness in order to help people with chronic pain, movement difficulties, and neurological problems, as well as to enhance athletic performance and reduce anxiety. Author of many books, including *Body and Mature Behavior*, *Awareness Through Movement*, and *The Illusive Obvious*, Feldenkrais is famous for saying "If you know what you do, you can do what you want." At the center of the method is the principle of expanding a participant's awareness of how s/he moves.

Vardi continued that Feldenkrais challenged the adult assumption that the way we move in relation to gravity is innate and consequently fixed. Feldenkrais observed that human babies learn to move through a trial and error process that results in specific movement strategies for each individual. Over years, what was a successful solution for moving through space in childhood can become a habitual, idiosyncratic movement for the adult. The Feldenkrais Method takes the individual back to the initial stage to find out what is possible in a movement sequence. In doing so, it expands the awareness of how a person has always moved and provides other ways of accomplishing the physical action.

The method has two modalities. In an Awareness Through Movement® lesson, the teacher guides the student through a sequence of movements centered on a particular theme in human movement. In a Functional Integration® lesson, the teacher's touch guides the student through variations of gentle movements that enhance awareness of individual habits and expose the student to new options.

Vardi's teaching philosophy incorporates the idea of options: "I believe that my principal role as a teacher is to help my students become aware of who they are and to help them grow. It is not to define their faults nor cure them. The driving force in this process is my curiosity in the unique makeup of each of my students. As a cello teacher, I not only challenge my students to understand the intentions of each composer, I also help them to explore their inner world, and to express their unique voice within the context of the composition."



Uri Vardi

“Most of the learning occurs in the process of working towards a musical goal. When I teach a musical composition, I often guide my students to attend to their habitual ways of musical expression. Musical expression encompasses the whole range of human emotions. Although the exploration of expressive nuances does not necessarily lead directly to the ultimate mastery of a composition, it frequently results in the expansion of the student's personality and music-making abilities. This way of learning is organic rather than linear. Instead of setting concrete, simple goals and learning the prescribed tools to attain them, in organic learning, the experimentation with different ideas provides the student with the freedom to choose among a whole array of options for expressing a musical intention.”

“The same principle of encouraging the search for a variety of options applies to the technical mastery of the musical instrument. In order for my students to gain the ability to meet any composition's demands, they must have a vast repertoire of movements that will give them the freedom to use their bodies with maximum efficiency. Most of us accept the ways we move as if they are a part of our genetic makeup, whereas in reality, we learned to move by trial and error, and our nervous system is wired according to our experiences. Unless we are challenged to question this wiring, and to explore new possibilities of movement, we limit our range of expression. I constantly challenge my students to explore new ways of moving while playing, and to correlate them with minute differences in the quality of sound. Through my experience, I have found that when students discover the power of becoming aware of minute differences in their movement, it is not only their sound that changes, but also their coordination, and overall technical proficiency.”

“The most fascinating aspect for me in approaching teaching in this manner, is that my students come to not only discover their personal involvement in the communication of a musical composition, and their ability to efficiently express it on their instrument, but they also very often gain self-confidence and imagination. The benefits of body awareness also help them in the prevention of injury, and in the healing after a disabling injury.”

Wisconsin Cello Society Newsletter Op.5 No.1 Summer, 2004 In the course, Feldenkrais for Musicians, Vardi focuses on awareness, not on the “right” way to move. The course is open to all instrumentalists. Each week, students attend a Feldenkrais “Awareness Through Movement” (ATM) class and a master class that concentrates on options of movement in relation to performance. In addition, the students are assigned a recorded ATM lesson to do at home. In the ATM class, Vardi verbally instructs students on a sequence of movement centered on a specific theme. During the Master Class, a student is encouraged to try new ways of movement related to the production of sound, to phrasing, or to the mastery of other technical aspects of playing. The student's attention is then drawn to the effect of those changes on

his/her musical expression. The purpose is to help the student be aware of his tendencies. Once the student senses the many options that are available, s/he will instinctively use a movement or a body configuration that enhances the musical intent. Although the mastery of the musical instrument and the enhancement of musical expression is the focus of his teaching, Vardi notes that the efficiency and ease of movement that comes with body awareness also helps students prevent playing-related injuries.

Bernard Scully, a horn player who took the class, described his master class experience: “When I was asked to initially play for the class, I was a bit nervous and not totally centered on the music. I gave a fairly decent and competent performance at first, but maybe not so musically gratifying. The process of differentiation that I was asked to do next gave me the awareness I needed. By standing on one foot, playing in a more and more contorted fashion, and walking while playing, it took my mind off the class, my nerves, and everything outside of me at the time. It made me look inward and focus more on basic things like taking a big breath, blowing lots of air into the horn, etc. As these unnatural positions became more and more complex, I had to go further and further inside myself to draw out the music. Finally when I went back into my normal playing position, I was aware of how much more I could give to my performance! I was also more focused, more limber, and more in tune with my music-making.”

About his music-making, Scully writes that “I began to just let myself do things, explore sensations, do a ‘bizarre’ interpretation of a piece, all the while just observing what was going on and relating it to everything else I had learned ... I feel more freedom to simply go through a process to make things the way I want them, rather than adhering to the ‘correct’ methods or forcing things in place. It is a little like the idea of jumping off a cliff at first, but after I’m flying in the air, I feel much more at ease letting myself ‘miss’ notes, produce ‘bad’ sounds, do things differently, all for the sake of becoming more attune to what actually does work.”

Vardi collaborates with his wife, Hagit, who is a musician as well. Hagit Vardi works with diverse populations and is particularly interested in working with musicians. She will join Uri later this summer at Musicorda Music Festival in Amherst, Massachusetts to give Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement classes and Functional Integration lessons.

To learn more about the Feldenkrais Method for musicians, visit www.harmoniousmovement.com.