

Uri Vardi Teaches Students to Get in Tune with Their Bodies

by Richard S. Mumford



Watching a performer on stage can add to the emotional impact of hearing music that's thrilling, mysterious, or exquisite to the ears. But sometimes it means witnessing an array of facial grimaces, awkward body gestures, or other signs of physical strain. If you're the one performing, it's probably no secret that striving for mastery of a score can cause significant pain—with very little clue about how to prevent or alleviate it.

Uri Vardi, professor of cello at the School of Music, wants you to know there is a better way. He's a certified practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method, an approach to body awareness and principles of movement developed by Moshe Feldenkrais more than 50 years ago. Feldenkrais was an Israeli physicist, engineer, athlete, and martial artist who countered the assumption that adults move in certain ways because of an innate need to do so. Based on his observations and research, he propounded a different theory—that human beings are equipped with ways of moving that they have learned by trial and error. By clearing the slate of conditioned habits and beginning anew, he pointed the way to claiming alternate patterns of movement.

For Vardi, using Feldenkrais with music students correlates perfectly with his teaching philosophy, which focuses on helping his students become self-aware and grow. To do this, he aspires not simply to teach the structure of a score, or the technical ways to master it, but to assist the process by which students explore their inner world and express their unique voice within the context of a musical composition. He calls this learning style organic, as opposed to linear.

In 1999, Vardi received the UW-Madison Arts Institute Faculty Development Award to specialize in the Feldenkrais Method, and by 2003 he was certified as a Feldenkrais practitioner by the Feldenkrais Guild of North America and the International Feldenkrais Federation. Each semester since then, he has

offered a two-credit course open to both undergraduates and graduates studying any instrument or voice. The course meets twice weekly over 15 weeks, and generally has 15 students. One day each week is devoted to "Awareness Through Movement," in which Vardi instructs the whole class in becoming aware of precise sensations through independent movements of parts of the body. The nervous system will choose the optimal way it knows to achieve a desired result; but it does so based on information it has stored from previous history. Class members are provided pieces of carpet so they may lie on the floor and discover how muscles may or may not need to work in tandem. Is that furrowed brow really necessary when lifting your arm in a (deliberately) contorted way? Is your back less strained if you concentrate on channeling your weight through your legs?

For the other day, Vardi uses a master class format. He asks one student to perform, then introduces new movements (or subtracts old ones) to isolate and analyze the body's feelings. Students may become aware of discomfort when doing something the old way, and a freedom to choose a much more comfortable approach. The class is encouraged to observe and listen intently to the differences in the musical expression after the performer adjusts his or her motions.

For Vardi, the matter is simple: "We create sound by moving in a certain way." A limited vocabulary of movement limits the possible outcomes. Enlarging this

vocabulary enhances the ability to create a desired sound, and opens up whole new worlds of musical expression, insights, and mastery of the instrument. Often a common ancillary benefit of this increased self-awareness is the prevention of playing-related injuries.

Amy Schendel, a doctoral student in trumpet and Paul Collins Fellow, took Vardi's course in the fall of 2005. She was initially intrigued due to experience with frequent back pain and tension, not only while playing her instrument but during other daily activities. The course encouraged her to approach learning in a radically new way: instead of making judgments from an entirely intellectual perspective, she was freed to let herself "be" in the present moment, paying attention to what her body was telling her. She could ask herself why her back felt tense, and focus on parts of the body that connected with the area experiencing pain. Over the course of the semester and beyond, the method has revealed new options for movements that reduced or eliminated strain. Schendel found that applying these tools to performing had a significant impact: "Developing an increased self-awareness can be beneficial on many levels as a musician. When I allow my mind to be in the moment, I feel that I can make a stronger connection with the listener. My stage presence becomes amplified and I am ready to communicate. Along with this, I have a chance to fully express the music on the page with my whole self, uninhibited."

Many students elect to take Vardi's Feldenkrais course more than once, and Vardi expects to continue offering it for the foreseeable future. The tightening of lips and twisting of hips may not disappear from the recital stage anytime soon, but for his students, at least, a sensitivity to the relationships between movement and sound very likely will serve their muscles and music-making well. ❊