



Integrating the Feldenkrais Method and the Dalcroze Method: Music, Improvisation, and Function

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Dr. Feldenkrais rarely discusses music in depth, at least not in his books. While he clearly had a high appreciation for the arts, it seems that the use of music was one area that he did not choose to explore. This task has been left for those who have followed him. This being said, Feldenkrais was well aware of music as an avenue for improvement. He refers to musicians in his books as examples of types of people with a high degree of refinement of function. While I have never seen any evidence that Feldenkrais himself was a musician, he worked with a few extremely famous performers, Yehudi Menuhin being the most notable example.

Music, like the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education, offers the means for awareness and integration. What it sometimes lacks is a systematic means of attaining a function beyond the stated goal of improving a performance of a piece of music. Like all the arts, and like many other therapies and approaches, it may achieve greater ends through elusive means. Despite the difficulty in nailing down the concrete benefits of music as used for self-improvement, certain educators have made use of it for just this purpose.

AN INTRODUCTION TO DALCROZE AS KINDRED SPIRIT

Among the music educators to grasp this most acutely, Emile Jacques-Dalcroze may be said to have the most in common with Feldenkrais. Dalcroze was a Swiss musician who was dissatisfied with the way Western European conservatories in the early twentieth century were producing educated musicians who could not actually *play*. He departed radically from typical educational practice and developed a method whereby music was felt before it was explained. A study of his history and the path by which he came to create what is known as the Dalcroze Method reveals a person much like Feldenkrais, curious, self-informed, and brave.

Dalcroze practitioners seek not only to make use of that bravery, but to embody it. Training is not passing on information, but immersing students in a process that will transform them, much as they will transform their students. There are debates among the community on how the Dalcroze Method is to be propagated, with one underlying issue being the conflict between knowing a certain amount of information versus becoming a certain kind of teacher. Dalcroze instructors are expected to be able to create music and music games through an improvisatory process, both at and away from the piano, and must be able to monitor the progress of their students so as to make adjustments to the music and the games that will maximize the learning. Perhaps these descriptions sound familiar, and even reassuring, to a Feldenkrais community with the same ideals and difficulties, and only marginally different tools.

One aspect of Dalcroze's work involves the use of movement in time as a primary tool for discovering music concepts. In *Dalcroze Eurhythmics* and *plastique animée*, students improvise movement across the floor to the sounds of pre-composed or improvised music. They strive to reflect, or recreate in themselves, a picture of this music. By doing so they can begin to embody musical concepts like half-notes with their one movement per two pulses, the smooth continuous movement of a legato phrase, and the Simon-says-type music of

imitative canon. Typically, those who promote the benefits of a Dalcroze education cite an increased sensitivity to music, an improved expressiveness, and a higher level of functional musicianship. They may also mention that students experience a general sense of well-being after doing such lessons. The reasons for this are perhaps elusive, even for the teachers, and it is here that the discussion gets very interesting for a Feldenkrais practitioner.

Unlike Feldenkrais, Dalcroze was not scientifically trained and so his terminology is, by necessity, often self-invented. This has caused problems with the propagation of his work, which can be more difficult to approach than other progressive music education methods such as Kodaly and Orff that were developed at the same time. Even more interesting, however, is that many of his disciples who were fluent in his musical ideas seem to have been unable to discuss what appears to be a deeper kind of education that Dalcroze strove for but was unable to articulate in terms that were universally understood.

Dalcroze suggested throughout his life that his Method could serve to improve all aspects of a person's being, to make them healthier. Many of these ideas stopped with him because of the apparent lack of clarity behind his thoughts and claims. For instance, there have been disagreements about what Dalcroze meant by terms such as "a-rhythmic" and "joy," which seem to refer to a deeper kind of learning that is not clearly articulated. In his comprehensive survey of the work of Dalcroze, Michael Giddens discusses this term "joy," used by Dalcroze to describe an effect of his Method that he could not sufficiently account for.

Despite the brevity with which Dalcroze discussed the non-musical benefits of eurhythmics in *Exercices de plastique animée*¹, two important points were revealed. Firstly, he stated that the balance between man's mind and body achieved by eurhythmic exercises was a significant factor towards attaining the non-musical benefits he attributed to his system. Secondly, this balance was said to produce a "calmness" in the entire organism, which gave rise to a unique sensation which Dalcroze called "*la joie*." This "joy" was a phenomenon which only those who participated in eurhythmic classes would fully comprehend, and come to "know" within themselves. It was also a feeling that did not lend itself to verbal description, and because of this Dalcroze pleaded with educators not to dismiss his claims as mere exaggerations. He admitted, "I cannot make you understand the nature of this 'joy' but I do wish to state that it exists in all people who have applied themselves to the study of eurhythmics for the *necessary amount of time*."²

As Feldenkrais practitioners, we may recognize this joy and calmness as familiar effects of "integration" and "awareness," terms that we also have some difficulty explaining to the public.

For this reason, it should come as no surprise to a Feldenkrais practitioner to hear a story of Dalcroze observing that one of his students' shoulders was higher than the other and offering to "fix it for them!" Indeed, some of his musings could be mistaken for Feldenkrais's own: "A harmonization of our nervous system, the stimulation of slack motor centers, control of instinctive behavior and spiritualism of corporal manifestations, should establish a unity in our organism both for preparatory and executory purposes . . . A time will come when our bodies attain—through a complete reconquest of the muscular sense—an independence bringing our acts into direct union with our desires."³ This goes beyond any kind of musical achievement and moves into questions of differentiation, integration, and habit.

On Feldenkrais's side, we are all aware of the history of indifference and skepticism among the scientific and medical community for Feldenkrais's well-thought out ideas. Feldenkrais, while able to describe his Method in scientific terms, seems to have resisted concretizing his work in particular disciplines, perhaps for fear of the inevitable reduction

of reach that might result. While the status of the Feldenkrais Method may be slowly improving, it remains a hard sell for those in the medical profession who like to diagnose and stick to concrete definitions, or those in the arts who may be uncomfortable with overly precise description and aim. A doctor intent on diagnosing a single cause for an ailment may have little patience with the more amorphous idea that seemingly unrelated symptoms could be alleviated through something as fuzzy as a learning process. Meanwhile, creative performers who make a living out of blurring boundaries in theater and music may find any description of the creative act that involves the function of the skeleton and the nervous system clinical, inhuman, or reductionist.

The Dalcroze and Feldenkrais Methods both use concrete steps to achieve more global, less easily definable results. However, the particulars in the approaches of each Method differ, as do many of the expectations of the teachers who implement them. Because the Methods overlap without being redundant, I believe that a union of Dalcroze and Feldenkrais could satisfy both the concrete thinkers and the amorphous ones, while simultaneously strengthening the two Methods. Neither needs the help of the other. Yet both would be enriched by an integrated approach of the two. What follows is a discussion of the ways in which a Dalcroze-inspired music program can interface with observations and processes common to the Feldenkrais Method.

MUSIC AS CONTAINMENT

Containment is a term that, for this discussion, can be defined as a psychological enclosure around an infant by its mother, a context that is provided to a young creature who lacks such a context, and therefore lacks sufficient orientation to develop in a direction. Before a child is able to sense the floor and propel itself, such containment is extremely valuable in forming a bond, establishing identity, and determining next steps for development.

While music is not typically described in terms of containment, it can serve the same purpose for an adult that the mother's arms do for an infant. It provides a kind of sound-enclosure which, if appropriate to listeners, can orient them. J. Scott Goble, in his groundbreaking book, *What's So Important About Music Education*⁴ has done an extensive study showing that musics of varying cultures, used for varying purposes, share a common trait of serving to restore a kind of equilibrium, whether psychological, social, or physiological. When working with middle-schoolers and even some adults, I often provide them with a musical task such as singing, coupled with movement. The students believe, of course, that we are working on a musical task when, in reality, I am asking them to pay attention to their changing sense of self. Because they are improvising their moves in an environment where pleasant music is playing, they recognize that they are safe and in control of their choices. They do not often see that I have constrained the improvising to direct their awareness, as when I ask them to move in a circle any way they like and then ask them to notice which way they have chosen to go. As we change the direction of the circle to the less habitual, they are primed to notice things about themselves without feeling self-conscious or wondering what the point may be to these movements.

Music can serve as an effective containment for clients, providing them with a context that is less disorienting than a typical lesson. While temporarily lost in one sense, that of functionality, the client may maintain a sense of connection and stability by having music introduced to the situation. This approach may provide clients with a more positive experience of the Feldenkrais Method, one that they can quickly gravitate towards.

MUSIC AS SCAFFOLD FOR LEARNING SEQUENCE

Sometimes Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement lessons are hard to take in, both for students and practitioners. The aim of a Feldenkrais lesson, the reason for Moshe's choices, and the given sequence can be opaque despite the phenomenal results the lesson can bring about. Chief among the difficulties is the recognition of the structure of the lesson: its beginning, its process, and its desired result.

To some extent, Feldenkrais may be said to have kept the dramatic arc of his lessons deliberately obscure. It may be that he wanted a student to trust the instructions implicitly because, otherwise, the student might attempt to anticipate the aim of the lesson and mistake the end for the means. By leaping to the end to show themselves or the teacher how good they are at the desired movement, the student misses the very process that leads to improvement.

Nevertheless, this powerful aspect of Feldenkrais's methodology also may be driving certain students away. Not everyone in every culture is comfortable trusting implicitly a series of strange instructions that ostensibly have nothing to do with anything in their experience. Lacking any kind of orientation, the anxiety of a student may prevent them from experiencing the lesson or making it clearer.

Music, at least traditionally constructed music, has the advantage of being more transparent to our ears and minds without being concrete or requiring the use of language. We may not understand how a Mozart sonata is designed, but we very well might feel its process in our bodies, recognize the recurrence of musical themes, hear their transformations, and respond to the dramatic unfolding of its sounds. Because we have a profound connection to musical sound, we can "comprehend" more in it than we need to explain.

One of the ways in which I teach according to Dalcroze principles is to improvise music on the piano for my students to respond to. I manifest a certain level of organization in my playing, and the music contains natural places for breath, tension and release, as well as many levels of organization, including the melody, the harmony, and the larger structure. I can ask the students to incorporate what they hear in their movements. It is as if I am providing a sonic FI lesson, with my hands reaching them through the music. When I combine this approach with language specific to ATM lessons, pointed, focused, and questioning, the result can be a class full of people who are sensing and moving without feeling lost, overwhelmed, or wanting to sleep.

MUSIC AS TASK IN WHICH TO PRACTICE FUNCTION

One of the great advantages of the Feldenkrais Method is that, while its means are specific to the lesson, its aims are very general and can be so global as to be described as "a universal improvement." Again, however, each advantage has its flip side. While a practitioner may see the use of more integrated "twisting" in a client as a means to reduce back pain, improve the carriage of the head, and make walking easier, a client coming out of an ATM class without specific guidance from the practitioner may have no real sense of what to do with these improvements. Thus parasitic habits may quickly reassert themselves, as the new pattern is not integrated into the desired function, and a client may find he or she must learn the same lesson a number of times before it sticks.

Musical activities are concrete to the extent that they serve the purpose of generating music or dance. As with musical structure, however, the concrete nature of musical movements is in the service of a more generalized product, the elusive musical sound. Habits may still creep in as musicians attempt, perhaps neurotically, to replicate the perfect

phrase, but the thought process behind music making lends itself to thinking beyond the habit towards an ideal of sound or phrasing.

Therefore a musician engaged in a Feldenkrais lesson, or a Feldenkrais student engaged in a music lesson, has the opportunity to immediately make use of a new way of twisting towards a valuable end. The feedback of the beautiful sound they begin to make with their instrument, or the phrase they can play wonderfully because they feel it, serves as a tangible marker of the use of improved functionality. Music thus serves to solidify the effects of the lesson very effectively.

What I am able to do by combining the Feldenkrais Method and Dalcroze is offer students an experience that incorporates their entire selves in the process of playing a piece "better." They may move to the music they will perform, move in silence with the music in mind, or move to completely different music that relates somehow to their piece. Ideally, as they think about themselves functionally as well as musically, they gain a clearer picture of *the means by which they have improved*, which goes beyond what they can hear, or even what they sense emotionally. The act of making music serves as a way to put their functionality to use immediately, rather than wait until they stand up to walk, or sit down to type.

DALCROZE AND FELDENKRAIS: A MARRIAGE OF EQUALS

To my knowledge, few if any Dalcroze people are conversant with the Feldenkrais Method, and the same can be said of Feldenkrais practitioners in regards to Dalcroze. Each camp may be aware of the other, and may marvel at the similarities of issues within the communities, but the lengthy certification that creates a barrier to entry into either of these groups makes it highly unlikely that anyone will endeavor to master both. A Dalcroze Certificate, only attainable under the supervision of someone with a License or *Diplome*, and usually necessitating travel to another state, may take up to three years of study. Licensure requires additional years. To my knowledge, only one Feldenkrais practitioner, Eric Barnhill, has managed this feat of combined certification and is engaged in merging the two approaches.

The lack of contact between schools is a great pity, because Dalcroze's methodology provides numerous opportunities for differentiation, integration, and awareness. What they may be lacking is a systematic means of applying these music-specific tools to a more general well-being, which is what Dalcroze apparently was hinting at. In this way, the Feldenkrais Method can both make use of the remarkable Dalcroze lessons as a means to improve its results, while simultaneously providing a powerful framework whereby the desired effects of Dalcroze may be better monitored and propagated.

As an example, Dalcroze teachers frequently ask participants to move across the floor to music. While moving, the participants may be asked to keep one beat with their feet and another, quicker one with their hands. At a later point, the participants may be asked to switch the rhythm of the feet and hands.

This is, of course, differentiation of the hands and feet, with the ultimate aim being integration of the movement into a musical whole. Throughout, the music provides containment and context. Often in these situations, participants are left to their own devices to negotiate the difficulties of such moves, with gradual introduction of the challenges over time serving as the best way to avoid frustration and encourage progress. Can you imagine, however, an ATM lesson that has been constructed to further differentiate the hands and feet, so that the participant is able to recognize the location of the difficulty in navigating both? What if such a lesson could systematically approach the

problem from three different points of view that have been chosen so that the sequence of the learning is clearest? Furthermore, what if the levels of differentiation and subsequent integration were so interesting that participants no longer worried about mastering the skill, only to find at the end of the forty-five minutes that they were remarkably better at it?

Of course, in addition to having discovered a great improvement in their ability to differentiate the hands and feet, participants would discover that they walk more easily, that they breathe more freely, and that their sensations have been heightened. This kind of revelation may occur after a Dalcroze lesson anyway, but with the addition of a Feldenkrais approach, such improvement may be deliberate rather than a pleasant by-product. Moreover, the ease of movement will translate very nicely into freedom at one's instrument.

Dalcroze's Method as it applies to children, and especially children with special needs, points at an even more compelling merger of the two modalities. The Feldenkrais practitioners who succeed with children do best to create a sense of play in their work. The games Dalcroze employs can serve as ideal opportunities for play, such as a game in which a ball is passed around in coordination with a piece of music according to various rules determined, sometimes on the spot, by the instructor. Typically, these games are meant to introduce a concept such as *hearing the steady beat inside a complex musical texture*, and involve increasing levels of difficulty designed to encourage the participants to discover something about music or their response to it that will make the game easier and more enjoyable.

Again, a certain kind of thinking may be used in passing around a ball and matching that passing with a sound in the mouth or a counting sequence. What the children see as a game can be carefully monitored with an eye to the moments of difficulty. It may be appropriate at this point to take a brief aside and choose a different activity that the practitioner knows will contribute to the skill, but is not immediately obvious to the child. Dalcroze teachers work this way, and Feldenkrais teachers know which activities would most efficiently serve to focus the children's attention on improvement of function.

The key to merging the two approaches from the perspective of a Feldenkrais lesson is a greater willingness to improvise within the context of a lesson. In an ordinary ATM lesson, this can be very challenging, as the instructions are carefully sequenced. When music is involved, however, especially along the lines of a Dalcroze lesson, there are more obvious opportunities to improvise, explore, and sense.

While expecting Feldenkrais practitioners to study Dalcroze, or even to study music, may be too much to ask, it would be in everyone's benefit to foster a conversation between the two communities and seek ways to collaborate. Those of us in the middle would certainly benefit from initiating and mediating the conversation, as well as clarifying the strengths of the different approaches. The resulting work of the combined schools might serve to improve our standings within the general community, and would undoubtedly improve the lives of a great number of participants.

NOTES

- 1 Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, *Exercices de plastique animée* (Lausanne, Jobin, 1916).
- 2 Michael Giddens, *Freedom Through Rhythm: The Eurhythmics of Emile Jacques-Dalcroze* (Master's Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1984).
- 3 Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, *Rhythm, Music and Education*, tr., Harold Rubinstein (London, Chatto and Windus, 1921), p. 237.
- 4 J. Scott Goble, *What's So Important About Music Education* (Routledge Research in Education, 2010).

