Curiosity and Intention: Teaching Music from a New Paradigm
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Music is uniquely engaging. Unlike other endeavors, music’s form is reflected in an equivalent form of activity in the nervous system of the performer: “musical flow equals neural flow,” writes scholar William Benzon. Neural activity occurring during the performance of music is so directly connected to the music that the brain waves of two performers playing together move in synchronicity. Music couples nervous systems to the extent that the neural state of an entire orchestra approaches the state of a single typical member of the orchestra. And there are visible physical changes in many different areas of the brain that represent the experience of playing music, according to Oliver Sacks, who writes in Musicophilia, “Anatomists today would be hard put to identify the brain of a visual artist, a writer, or a mathematician—but they could recognize the brain of a professional musician without a moment’s hesitation.”

Music performance unfolds in real time, as a result of real-time movements, thoughts, and intentions. It is a collection of many small details that join together to create a coherent whole. At the level of each note and of the entire piece, thought, movement, emotion, sensation, manipulation, timing, and orientation are operating. Perception and feedback interact at many levels, informing and transforming future activity. Many brain structures and processes participate in perceiving music, sensing pitch, timbre, loudness, resonance, harmony, rhythm, pulse, and emotional charge, to name a few. Add to these perceptual mechanisms, the complex motor skills involved in playing an instrument and the emotional and expressive sources of artistic nuance, and it becomes apparent how complex music making is and how much of the whole musician is engaged in the activity. The Feldenkrais Method of learning deals so directly with the nervous system and the whole self that it’s no wonder musicians have an affinity for the Method. Feldenkrais lessons are especially effective in improving musicians’ performance: The learning process inherent in the Feldenkrais Method helps the musician develop both technical confidence and a unique artistic voice. The specific activity of learning and performing music can serve as a unique laboratory in which to explore the concepts and strategies of the Feldenkrais Method.

There are many similarities between the practice of music and the practice of the Feldenkrais Method: The kinesthetic sense is often highly developed in musicians, and many strategies for practicing and learning music are the same as those used in Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons (slow practice, variation, and shifting focus for example). Yet the differences between Feldenkrais and music performance are profound: Music is very goal-oriented, classical music culture has a strong right/wrong dichotomy, and goals and ideas of right and wrong are defined by external authorites in a way that deprives the student of agency. Traditions and conventions have evolved over centuries, creating the illusion that there is an ultimate truth—the one ideal way to play a piece. In contrast, the Feldenkrais Method offers a focus on process rather than goal, on complexity rather than duality, and on exploration rather than direction. The Feldenkrais teacher creates an environment in which there is space for curiosity and discovery. This is not always easy but it helps students understand and retain their own agency and style. As the artist Robert Irwin says, “What you’re trying to do is develop their sensitivities and not your own. One of the hardest things to do is not to give them clues—‘Here, do it this way, it’s a lot easier’—and instead to keep them on the edge of the question.”
As a professional flutist, I felt immediate improvements in my playing from the study of the Feldenkrais Method. One example stands out clearly: During my Feldenkrais training, I joined a new chamber music ensemble, and my first concert as an official member took place one month after a training segment finished. We had been studying Awareness Through Movement intensively, and I decided to turn the preparation for this concert into a large-scale ATM lesson, focusing on the process rather than the goal, and making the process aesthetically pleasing.

Bringing my attention to how I learned the music, I became curious about the strategies I used—slow practice, variation, abstracting and studying short passages, all similar to strategies encouraged by Awareness Through Movement. With curiosity, my practice became more intentional. The simple act of noticing strategies and naming them gave the power to discriminate and choose what was most effective. Practice sessions grew more efficient and also more aesthetically pleasing—I was conscious of their form, like a musical composition.

I also did Awareness Through Movement lessons before practice, often one of the primary image lessons, and tried to carry the quality of movement and thought from the lesson into the practice session. Before picking up the flute to play, I did a quick exploratory scan. Taking a few seconds to ask some questions, visualize the five lines of spine, arms, and legs, and notice the movement of breathing cultivated a quality of attention and an absorption in the learning process that I had rarely experienced before. By scanning my whole self, my attention widened beyond the magnetic pull of the flute, lips, fingers, the beating metronome, and the difficult notes on the page. Practicing with this spacious, absorbed attention made it possible to learn more quickly and retain more from day to day.

The concert was successful and marked a profound change in my experience of performing. Musicians often fall into viewing everything from a negative perspective—in the past, performances were usually accompanied by a running mental narrative of all the imperfections of the performance, forecasts of the dangers yet to come, and worry about the audience’s opinion. This new approach led instead to greater absorption in the music and the challenge of musical expression: I was communicating something to the audience rather than performing to impress them. With my former focus—perfection—I set myself up for failure. Now the priorities had changed, and mistakes mattered less, so I made fewer of them. Through redirecting my ambitions from the goal of performance to curiosity about process, I rediscovered and clarified my true intentions. I achieved the original goal as well, a successful performance, and thoroughly enjoyed myself in the process. How to teach this kind of experience? I began to play music because of a deep affinity for musical expression—where did I get sidetracked into focusing only on perfection and mistakes?

In the goal-oriented education of a musician, an external authority usually defines the goal. Musicians have many strong external stimuli, animate and inanimate: a long tradition of stylistic conventions; authoritative, occasionally even abusive teachers; the musical instrument; the printed note on the page; the pulse or tempo of the music; the conductor and other collaborative players; and the audience. As a student I learned to trust an external source of information at the expense of trusting my own instincts. Interpretation and performance required external validation: I was trying to achieve an external ideal. No one told me this. The belief grew from the inherent structure of the education and classical music performance practice. I was pulled out of myself, trying to follow a teacher’s interpretation of a piece, a conductor’s gestures, or even just a rhythmic pulse.

As a teacher, how could I bring my students’ experience back to themselves? I began simply by asking, “How did that go?” after they played a passage or a piece. I was surprised by the answer. “It was horrible!”
they chorused. What in particular was horrible? "All of it!" When I asked Zoe, a high school student, for particulars, she went into great detail about all the problems: bad tone, missed notes, no rhythm, breathing in the wrong place. That she would go about this self-deprecation with such gusto struck me as strange until I realized that her answer was completely insincere. She wasn’t listening to herself critically, but trying to please me by second-guessing any criticisms I might have. She was looking for the right answer. Her self-assessment was global: everything was bad. I asked about particular notes—did you miss that one? What about that one? She began to sort out what had been successful and what hadn’t. The next time she played the piece, it sounded better. She listened differently, beginning to discriminate and hear where there were problems and where there were not. With a new kind of attention, she could develop preferences for what she wanted to hear and take more responsibility for learning.

This was a successful strategy to encourage Zoe to listen to her playing, but what about listening in a broader sense? What would encourage her to listen kinesthetically, to widen her attention? Since the flute is such a magnetic attractor of attention, the focus of conscious attention while playing often narrows to the instrument and what touches it—the lips and fingers. A good example of this occurred during a lesson with a 9-year-old beginner. In her attempt to balance the flute and bring it to her mouth, Thea kept letting her right thumb slide off the instrument until it was sticking straight up in the air. We explored ways in which the thumb could support the flute more comfortably, but as soon as she brought the flute back up to her lips and began to play, her thumb slid up into the air again. When asked, "What are you doing with your thumb?" Thea looked at me blankly, looked at her thumb, and started laughing. Her attention was drawn so strongly to her lips that she had completely lost her right thumb.

Another student paid attention only to her fingers while learning a piece with a difficult scale. Meredith could play the scale slowly with confidence and ease, but when she played more quickly her shoulders rose, her fingers squeezed the flute and even the breath she took before beginning was quick and shallow. Her sympathetic system was activating—she didn’t know how to stop hurrying. A freshman in high school, Meredith was very active but without much self-awareness. In this case her attention shrank to her fingers and how fast they needed to move to achieve her goal, and she didn’t notice the changes in her shoulders and breathing. When Meredith observed her breath and the movement of her ribs, paying attention to her right side only, she noticed how her right shoulder rose and fell with the breath and how the ribs separated and the chest lengthened with each inhalation. After a few minutes of this, she sensed that her right shoulder was much lower than the left. She played the scale again and noticed that her right fingers moved more easily.

After paying attention to breathing on both sides, Meredith’s fingers moved more easily, but the scale was still a challenge and I wondered if widening her attention even further would help. I asked her to shift her weight right and left, forward and back while standing, and whether she could play the flute and feel her feet on the floor at the same time. Meredith tried playing the scale quickly while thinking of her feet and had no trouble at all. She played the scale quickly with the same organization as when she played slowly. The next week, of her own volition, she told me she had decided to think of her feet every time she played a difficult passage.

I teach some flute students entire ATMS; with others I fold in themes and movements from lessons I’m currently studying or teaching. I often use changes of orientation to give students an experience of new possibilities: They play standing, sitting, walking, lying down, bent at the hips so the head and shoulders are upside-down, or leaning the top of the head against a wall. They draw distinctions about their experience playing in different positions or after movements from ATMS, and learn to listen, to discriminate, and more generally, to know themselves better.
Most directions are verbal, but sometimes hands-on contact can be very simple and direct. Touching Thea's thumb lightly brought her attention there. Once an adult student was having difficulty playing a high note. She was using a lot of effort in her mouth and neck, trying to represent the idea of “high” by reaching up for the note with her head. I put my hand on top of her head, sensing through to her feet and the note popped out immediately.

Many of these strategies are useful for students who have some experience, but I wanted a new approach to developing skills required to play the flute from the very beginning. Lily was a fairly small 9-year-old last fall. She worked hard to hold the flute, reaching with her arms, squeezing with her fingers, hunching her shoulders, and craning her neck forward. I asked her to reach forward and to the side without holding the flute until she felt her spine moving, and she sensed her arms as longer and connected to her self. She learned the movement of bringing her fingers together easily from the bell-hand Awareness Through Movement lessons—her hands softened and her nervousness about the novelty of playing flute and about getting it right ebbed. Then, as she played she described circles with the end of the flute, which created a great deal of movement in her shoulder girdle and upper chest, allowing her arms to feel various possibilities of organization. Even simply walking while playing increased movement throughout her skeleton. She experienced the possibility of playing the flute with easy movement from the beginning.

Experience is the way musicians learn to play an instrument. A beginning student learns to see a note on a page and finger it without conscious thought. Then they practice common sequences of notes—scales and arpeggios—so that these also can be recognized as units and executed fluidly. In a study of learning through practice, Steven Petersen and colleagues at Washington University used PET scans to measure the brain activity of subjects first while they learned a skill and again after they had learned it. The patterns of cortical and sub-cortical activity were different in each instance even though the skill performed was the same. Petersen proposed the metaphor of a scaffold for the learning process: The brain builds a neural scaffolding as a task is learned, and then the scaffolding is stored in another area of the brain as a schema which can be recalled easily when the task needs to be repeated.6 Moshe Feldenkrais sets up a similar distinction between learning and doing: “Distinguish between learning and doing. When you learn how to do something, you must do less than you are able to do. When you ‘do’ you must be able to do it quickly, powerfully with everything good. When you learn, it is not the same thing. It is not ‘to do.’ Whoever does not distinguish between these two things, never learns.”7

The process of learning, building the scaffold, is visible externally through movement. A newer student may begin to play the wrong note, realize the mistake with a start—a spastic and irreversible movement—and continue playing with added tension. A beginner’s uncertainty about the notes is visible. There are small starts and hesitations in finger movement, the head reaches forward, the elbows lift in the air. When finger movement becomes more reversible, and the student is able to stand more easily and notice where her thumb is, I know that she has learned the passage—the scaffold has been stored, and she is now “doing” rather than learning. By paying attention to this visible learning process, the teacher can break a passage into smaller components, slow the tempo, and guide the process so that there are fewer irreversible movements, and the student learns to play with greater ease.

The above stories do not present a toolkit of pedagogical techniques to be imposed on the student by the teacher, nor are they “fixes” for tension and problems. Rather, the intention is to create an environment in which the student can discover each step forward on her own. There is a general direction forward for each student, but no prescribed sequence of steps. This way of teaching allows the student to learn more quickly and with better retention than following a series of prescribed steps—much as toddlers will learn to walk more easily by finding and losing
their balance on their own rather than being held and led into walking. In a greater sense it allows her, like the toddler, to become acquainted with her self, to trust her instincts and ideas. She will develop a unique kind of confidence—not confidence that she knows exactly what to do in each piece (or each life situation), but confidence that she knows how to learn what to do.

There is much more to music than technical proficiency on an instrument. Music has been intimately intertwined with human development from the early stages of our species. William Benzon theorizes that early humans' imitation of animal cries grew into a collective musical enterprise that gradually acquired rhythm and intention, transforming our developing minds and allowing the possibility of language to arise. Music provides a communal experience, "an actual binding or 'marriage' of nervous systems," which shapes society and draws communities together. Every culture in the world has music and dance. The human nervous system developed in an atmosphere suffused with music.

And from the beginning, music has been a powerful force for expression. Perhaps it evolved from the need for expression: proto-humans expressing excitement following a hunt or dispelling anxiety through shared vocalization and movement. Rituals for major life events always include music. The reason we learn to play an instrument is to have a means of expression, and it's important to teach expression as well as the techniques of playing an instrument.

From the beginning, I ask students what they want to express with the music they play. I ask what mood each piece has, and talk to even the youngest students about phrases and gestures, using conversation or reading as an analogy, and giving them possibilities to choose from rather than one correct manner of playing. Gesture in music is like tone of voice or inflection when speaking. If you hear a sentence read by someone who has difficulty reading, the import of the sentence doesn't come across clearly: the struggling reader is focusing mostly on the mechanics. But if someone reads the same sentence spontaneously and passionately and every part of the person is involved in saying the sentence, the same words provide a new experience.

Theo, a high school graduate about to become a math major at Harvard, was thinking about a particular phrase and had decided on every detail about how he was going to execute it. Many teachers address expression this way: Marcel Tabuteau, an eminent oboe teacher at the Curtis Institute, had his students write a number from 1.1 to 10.9 over every note in a phrase, delineating the relative loudness of each note. This can be a useful feedback mechanism when learning to control the shape and dynamics of a phrase—and practicing in this way had given Theo an arsenal of techniques—but it has nothing to do with sensing a gesture. Gesture "... does not mean only movement, but a movement which can express something. Therefore, it is a movement that embodies a special meaning. It is more than a change in space, or a body action, or a mechanic activity: gesture is an expressive movement which becomes actual through temporal and spatial changes," writes semiotician Fernando Iazetta. These temporal and spatial changes have been studied extensively in the fields of electronic music and human/computer interface: "Gesture increase function by virtue of their expressiveness. That is, a gesture may control multiple parameters at the same time, thus allowing a user to manipulate data in a manner not possible by modifying each parameter individually. For example, a conductor simultaneously controls both tempo and volume of the music gesture. The rhythm of the gesture controls tempo and the size of the gesture controls volume. This allows an efficient communication not possible by adjusting the tempo and volume independently." Phenomenological analyses like these are similar to Tabuteau's numbering strategy. They are also similar to Awareness Through Movement lessons,
which often abstract movements and gestures from life (such as reaching), divorcing them from content or meaning, so as to study them from many angles.

But when making a musical gesture in the real world, such as conducting the shape of a phrase, a musician doesn’t consciously manage all the parameters. He doesn’t say to himself, “Now I’m going to move my arm a distance of eighteen inches in an upward diagonal movement, inhaling as I do so,” or “I am going to indicate a tempo increase of 12% while simultaneously indicating a gradual increase in volume.” He has an expressive intention—an increase in excitement, for instance. If he is uncertain of his intention, the gesture will seem more self-conscious and less sincere. It’s fairly apparent when a conductor spends time practicing in front of a mirror, or when any musician is more taken with the look of a gesture than with the underlying musical meaning.

Theo had analyzed the phrase we were addressing—he had been learning, building scaffolds, becoming acquainted with myriad possibilities, and now it was time to “do.” When I asked Theo what his intention was for the phrase, he couldn’t answer. I asked him to think of the mood of the phrase and the emotional content, then to scan himself as he was standing, thinking of saying something with that emotional affect and how that felt from his feet to the top of his head. I asked him to be a conductor for a moment and draw the shape of this phrase in the air, keeping the whole kinesthetic sensation of the phrase’s emotional affect in his awareness. Then he played it on the flute, and all the separate details he had been executing with intense control organized themselves spontaneously. The internal intention he had generated took care of the details and he didn’t have to think about them. And the phrase sounded much more authentically expressive and mature.

Quick, easy gestures also help musicians let go of excess conscious control. When Lily was in her second year of studying the flute, she learned pieces in a very careful, methodical way. She was trying to feel a steady pulse, and each beat had the same weight—the piece sounded robotic. I asked her to play a little more quickly, the notes began to shape themselves into gestures, and suddenly the piece had a human, expressive quality. Awareness Through Movement lessons often follow a similar strategy: After exploring a movement slowly, the student is asked to move quickly. This frees the movement from conscious deliberation and it becomes more of a continuum, free of tics and excess effort.

Explorations with my students have taught me a great deal. Each student is unique and requires a unique environment for learning. Their various responses are a fertile ground for my own explorations and often lead me to new discoveries about my own playing. Simply observing the learning process in a student makes me more aware of my own process and more able to pay attention to the feeling of learning. Observing even the most beginning students opens up rich new insights. Recently I realized that most beginners, like Lily, when they are first learning to feel a pulse, tend to play all their pieces in one particular tempo. It’s difficult for them to vary this. I started wondering if I also have a habitual tempo and realized that I do—when I choose an easy tempo for slow practice I tend to choose about 72 beats per minute. The elusive obvious: this is the tempo of my heartbeat. The same was true for Lily and other students as well—giving the musical term “pulse” new resonance for them—and a discovery I can make use of in future explorations.

In addition to my own playing and studio teaching, another forum for the exploration is Summerflute, a masterclass with a somatic focus for flutists. In 2004 I was invited by my colleague,
Amy Likar, to join the faculty of this annual workshop, which she had founded in California two years earlier. In addition to her performing career as a flutist, Amy teaches the Alexander Technique and serves as the President of Andover Educators, training and certifying teachers of a functional anatomy course for musicians called Body Mapping.\footnote{13}

The workshop is a weeklong intensive course for flutists and other interested musicians. Participants study Body Mapping, the Alexander Technique, and the Feldenkrais Method in the context of musical performance. The approach is collaborative and the different modalities complement each other well. Amy, and Lea Pearson, an Andover Educator and professional flutist from Ohio, co-teach a morning Body Mapping class, helping students to recognize and clarify their physical self-image through anatomy instruction and experiential exercises. In the afternoon students receive private Functional Integration, Alexander Technique, and flute lessons. I teach an Awareness Through Movement lesson before the dinner break, and there is a master class with Finnish flutist Liisa Ruoho every evening. An international performer and faculty member at the renowned Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, Liisa studied the Alexander Technique extensively during her otherwise very traditional European musical education. She is a wealth of musical and somatic knowledge, and her exploratory approach to developing her own playing and that of her students has many similarities to the Feldenkrais Method.

Many Summerflute students experience dramatic change in a single week, and it’s not because we’re saying something new about flute technique. We’re stepping out of the right/wrong dichotomy altogether and looking at a new way of learning that is process-oriented rather than goal-oriented, curious rather than judgmental, and dynamic rather than static. The various activities at this workshop help divert focus away from goals and the illusion of conscious control in achieving those goals, and toward an awareness of intention. Along with this we educate students about their own form and structure both intellectually and experientially. They develop more awareness, clarify their self-image, and leave with rich fodder for further exploration.

Many arrive at the workshop wanting to learn the correct way to hold the flute, stand, or breathe—the single correct way. Amy often begins with an illuminating exercise. She talks about the functional anatomy of standing, balance, and the way the skeleton supports us and then students find their own balanced way to stand. Once they have found a degree of balance, she tells them to hold it. Everyone laughs. It’s immediately apparent that it’s impossible to be statically free.

Why do we look for one correct way to do things? Why are we so enamored of the static and the simple? Our brains have evolved to categorize and simplify input as a matter of survival. Early musical training, like most early education, taps into this trend. It’s much easier as a teacher and as a beginning student to think of one correct way to do something. Students are taught to play scales, and if the correct note doesn’t follow the previous one, it’s a mistake. And mistakes (like pain) are a strong attractor of attention. My student Lauren recently played a brilliant performance of a Mozart concerto with her youth orchestra, came offstage and said, “I cracked the last note!” At that moment, the single mistake outweighed all the beautiful expression and even the technical perfection of the rest of the piece. Imagine a teacher in a lesson, saying “No, that needs to be different. Play it this way . . . yes, that’s good!” The “no” is something to be avoided at all costs, and the “yes” hardens into a rule, the only right way to play. Learning to play the flute can set up this black and white thinking. Take the example of a half-note G on a musical staff: this symbol means you close the first three keys on the flute and the thumb key, and blow a stream of air over the lip plate for two beats. If you close any other keys, or play for only one beat, you’re wrong.
If you examine the process of playing the note closely, however, more complexity emerges. For instance, you can play the G with subtle differences of timbre based on different organizations of your lips, mouth, and torso; you actually need to play different pitches for the G when it’s the tonic, the third, or the seventh of a chord; and the half-note can be many different lengths depending on where it is in a phrase, the type of emphasis or the tempo of the piece. The G printed on the page is much more like a cluster of possibilities to choose from than a universal truth. What at first seemed black and white becomes simply a constraint, within which infinite possibilities are still available.

While practicing and learning music, a musician can take the time to play with these different possibilities slowly and comfortably, as in Awareness Through Movement. But while performing a piece, no one can consciously manage all the available choices. Consider the myriad nerve impulses, items of sensory input, and tiny muscle movements involved in playing a single half-note G. Then add the rest of the notes, rhythms, and expressive complexities found in a piece of music. This is far too much information for the conscious mind to manage and control. But traditional pedagogical methods lead musicians to believe that such control is possible. And using excess effort gives the musician the comforting illusion that we are exerting more control.

I like to teach the first lesson in Awareness Through Movement, called “What is Good Posture?” at these workshops, because it teaches these concepts by asking the student to embody them. The lesson adds complexity to some simple assumptions, teaches a simple way to learn complexity, and challenges the notion of rules and right/wrong dichotomies. Why do we have a concept of good posture when we never stop moving? Why do we think we should sit up straight when no bones in the skeleton are precisely vertical? Using oscillation in sitting and standing, followed by the movement between sitting and standing, Feldenkrais illustrates the idea of posture as movement, and as the experience of finding equilibrium. Once, after the lesson a music teacher came up to me and described a postural alignment specialist her students had seen who told them, in minute detail, the correct way to stand and hold their instruments. “This lesson does the same thing more quickly, and the students are figuring it out for themselves,” she noted. The lesson leads to a great deal of reorganization without a lot of conscious control. And it’s all internally motivated and discovered—so the student owns the experience, rather than the postural alignment specialist—and it is easily applied in practice or performance.

During Summerflute Amy hands out a tool for self-evaluation. It is a list of many questions, directing the attention of the reader toward arms, legs, freedom of breathing, balance, ease in the neck muscles. Formerly the questions were framed to require yes/no answers, but Amy changed the structure so that the answer to each question is a line representing a continuum. She emphasizes that the goal is not to be always at one end of each continuum—it wouldn’t even be the ideal to aspire to—but to be aware of how we’re always moving.

Movement is a fundamental aspect of music. Music occurs in time. We speak of melodic lines moving up or down, rhythms and beats moving slowly or quickly. Performers move in order to play music. Holding static concepts of performing (like the single perfect way to stand, or a pre-arranged goal of exactly how to play a phrase) will always leave the performer and audience at a disadvantage. In contrast, a dynamic view opens up infinite possibilities and brings the performance to life. My first really enjoyable concert experience, described above, was the first time I was deeply engaged in this movement, rather than trying to execute a static interpretation I had decided on earlier and learned by rote. And even my level of engagement during the concert was a point constantly moving on a continuum.
How do we inspire students to become more engaged and dynamic in their approach to performance? Asking questions, especially questions that focus on intention, can be very effective. Curiosity and exploration are dynamic states of thought. In her evening master class, Liisa often asks students, “What are you trying to say?” She tells a good story about an argument with her husband: he shouted something, and she began to shout back, but ran out of breath—then realized that she didn’t know what she was about to say. The argument ended in laughter. Her contention is that if you know what you want to say with a phrase, you will inhale just the right amount of air. Not only that, but also the lips, fingers, abdomen, and chest will organize themselves around your intention and express it much more effectively than you could if you were micromanaging each movement. The clearer you are about your intention, and the more aware you are of yourself and what you are doing, the more easily this system-wide organization will take place and the more emphatic, clear, and expressive the performance will be.

Questions regarding intention or motivation can involve many different levels of scale, from lifelong motivation, “Why do you want to play music?” to momentary intention, “What tone color do you want for that note?” They can also be used to explore different technical aspects of playing, “How would you like to shape the vibrato in this phrase?” or “How is the movement of your fingers expressing this affect?” as well as expression, “What are you or the composer trying to say in this phrase? In this movement? In this piece? What is the shape of this phrase or gesture?”

Questions spark curiosity. Curiosity sparks engagement. Engagement makes performances more dynamic and alive. Action is tuned to intention, expression is clear, tone quality and technical precision improve, mistakes become a lower priority, and confidence grows. I have witnessed this repeatedly in my own playing, in teaching individual students, and in the master classes at our workshop.

At first, students want to answer the questions with a single answer to be used for every performance. I tell them just to ask the question and play, not to decide on an answer. Music is so nonverbal that it’s difficult to articulate the answer. The music itself is the only answer needed. If the answer were decided ahead of time the performance would sound less sincere, less alive. Music performance is the exploration of questions, unfolding in real time.

In his advanced training, "Table Manners," Yvan Joly teaches a lesson he calls “Waiting for Inspiration.” He uses the experience of waiting for the next inhalation as a kinesthetic metaphor for the experience of waiting for an idea to occur. The space between the question and the answer is conducive to a state of mind similar to the artist’s “vacant stare” discussed by Anton Ehrenzweig in his seminal work of art psychology, The Hidden Order of Art. An artist steps back from his painting with this stare, able to disperse his attention in an undifferentiated manner as in a dream, and in this way discovers what needs to happen next—as particular detail emerges that needs revising. “The primary process is a precision instrument for creative scanning that is far superior to discursive reason and logic.”

In the middle of playing a phrase, a flutist is not going to consciously direct the choice of length, timbre, attack, pitch, decay, vibrato, finger pressure, movement of the abdominal and intercostal muscles to expel air—the list goes on and on. “It can be stated as a general psychological law that any creative search involves holding before the inner eye a multitude of possible choices that totally defeat conscious comprehension.” Rather, by asking a question about color, mood, or phrase shape, the musician opens up this spacious primary-process type of attention; the choice is made by a different area of the nervous system than the conscious and discursive. “An inspired performer like Casals places a vibrato or portamento only in certain places, but
not in others, obeying the command of some rigorous discipline which he is unable to put into words." The many elements and actions of playing organize themselves as a musical answer to a question of intent.

The creative process is a rhythmic movement between two kinds of attention, the undifferentiated primary process and a secondary process of conscious revision and discrimination. This applies to music as well as to art: "... the trained musician allows his attention to oscillate freely between focused and unfocused (empty) states, now focusing precisely on the solid vertical sound of chords, now emptying his attention so that he can comprehend the loose, transparent web of polyphonic voices in their entirety." This rhythmic oscillation can include movement between unfocused and focused attention, and attention can also move rhythmically between various details—the actions of playing, breath, expressive intentions, qualities of movement and thought, color and timbre, the overall structure of the piece, sound, the nuance of a single note—and awareness of the whole self and the whole coherent musical experience. Curiosity about these aspects of playing opens the space for inspiration and intention to flourish, while awareness allows the nervous system to organize to achieve intentions without conscious control. This is "doing," in Feldenkrais’s sense, but it’s very different from the usual sense of striving to achieve. The system organizes itself around intention: the musician can just sit back and let it happen.

Ideas and concepts from the Feldenkrais Method enrich music as they enrich life. Self-awareness and clarity of intention work together: Awareness galvanizes more of the self in realizing intention. Because the Feldenkrais Method is unusually portable to different contexts and scales of magnitude, this is true of performing, of learning a single phrase, of teaching music, and of life. On the first day of the first year of Feldenkrais’s San Francisco training a student asked what the main goal of the Method was, and he answered that it was to clarify intention. This idea is also expressed in his article "On Health": "The healthy person is the one who can live his unavowed dreams fully." As in a musical piece or phrase, life unfolds and dreams shape. As we become more acquainted with ourselves, intentions clarify and our intentions organize us to act. Dynamic movement and thought, clear expressive intent, curiosity, and engagement make music a living art. In the practice of performing in this dynamic way, as in the practice of living in this way, cross-motivations disappear, tensions reduce, emotions are expressed rather than suppressed. Art does not imitate life, nor life imitate art: The two are one.

NOTES
2. Ibid., 23-46.
13. www.bodymap.org
15. Ibid., 35.
16. Ibid., 30.
17. Ibid., 27.