

SENSEABILITY

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of the *Feldenkrais Method*®
of somatic education
written by *Guild Certified
Feldenkrais
Practitioners*™

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Playing Music "The *Feldenkrais*® Way"

An Interview with Aliza Stewart, GCFP

-by Lavinia Plonka, GCFP

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A professional pianist, Aliza Stewart began to study the *Feldenkrais Method*® 23 years ago. Since then she has been "instrumental" in helping hundreds of musicians improve their playing. Besides working with individuals on their music skills, Aliza has taught at the Peabody Conservatory, and currently is the *Feldenkrais* teacher in residence at the Mannes College of Music, The Yellow Barn Music School and Festival and, with David Zemach-Bersin, in the Marlboro Music School and Festival. Aliza also works extensively with non-musicians and is currently a candidate to become a *Feldenkrais* trainer. *SenseAbility* sat down with Aliza recently to speak about her work in the world of music.

Sense: What brought you to the *Feldenkrais Method*?

AS: I was performing at the time, and I was always looking for better, easier ways to produce the sounds I wanted and to be able to play all the pieces I liked. I was taking lessons from a wonderful musician who was teaching at the time at the Curtis Institute of Music. She observed the way I was sitting and moving at the piano and suggested that I study *Feldenkrais*.

The story has a funny twist to it. My father was almost the same age as Moshe and grew up in the same town in Belarus as he. They were both active in the Zionist movement and knew each other well. Moshe left the town when he was very young, and my father stayed, for family reasons. After the Holocaust, my father came to Israel, where he got together with all the survivors of that town, including Moshe's mother and brother, and formed a group that met very frequently at the *Feldenkrais* household. I used to go

with my father, as a little child, to these meetings and I remember very well that Moshe was considered the crazy guy, the "meshugener" in Yiddish, who left a promising career as a scientist to do this strange thing only a few people understood.



Aliza assists a pianist using the *Feldenkrais Method*.

I was very surprised when I was directed towards the *Feldenkrais Method*, but I trusted my teacher and followed her advice. I had a *Functional Integration*® lesson with one of his assistants and was not very impressed. I was quite kinesthetically challenged and had difficulty feeling any changes. But then I went to a 4-day workshop with Moshe and with every movement he was teaching and every sentence about the human experience he was uttering, I knew I came home.

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Sense: How do you think the *Feldenkrais Method* improves a musician's playing?

AS: Playing an instrument is a complex process that begins with a musical composition that has to be turned into a series of movements. The movements involve weight, speed and direction, and they all have a relationship to gravity. When these movements are inefficient and not well organized, the result is excessive strain and unnecessary wear-and-tear on the muscles and, of course, unsatisfactory musical results. Magnified by long hours of practice, this wear-and-tear produces many of the playing-related injuries that are so common among performers.

The *Feldenkrais Method* is an elegant and effective way to improve the quality of these movements. It does it first by improving general, everyday movements and moves to specifics that have to do with playing. This elegant quality of movement improves performance and eliminates pain. The more flowing the movements, the more possibilities of the player has, the more fluid the sound and the better the musical imagination is. The musical performance becomes more alive and exciting. I know from my experience and from the results I get with other musicians that this freedom and richness of movement can prevent or heal injuries that are related to playing.

Sense: Can you give us an example of someone whose playing improved as a result of *Feldenkrais* lessons?

AS: Hannah*, a violist, came to me with pain around both elbows, in her neck, in her left shoulder and her back. She had had this pain for close to three years and had gone through extensive physical therapy. The pain was diagnosed as playing-related, so for two years, the work of the therapist was to analyze her stance and fix her in the right position to play. The pain in the elbows was reduced, but the pain in the neck and shoulders increased. She was not able to play more than half an hour at a time without experiencing pain. When she went back to her teacher and her physical therapist, they told her that she now had perfect posture for playing and that there was nothing more they could do for her.

Hannah has a Masters degree from Indiana University, one of the best music schools in the country, and she was enrolled in an Artist Diplomas program at the Peabody Institute. She studied with absolutely the best viola teachers in the country, and prepared herself for a career in one of the major symphony orchestras.

I asked her how she was practicing and she went into a long description of how she analyzed every little move of the chin, the hands, the bow and the fingers. She would change shoulder rests and chin rests every day and had tried all the different models available in the market. All felt good for the first 15 minutes and then stopped working for her. She looked for detailed instructions about how to make each

sound. Her teacher, being worried about the injury, got pulled into this kind of compulsive thinking and they both left the rest of Hannah, the artist and the person, out of the picture. Her playing had become a series of carefully shaped, isolated moves that produced angular, meaningless music. Observing her, I felt that my role was to let her understand and feel a dynamic posture that would enable her to move freely with the instrument under her chin.

Hannah told me that she used to play almost standing on her toes. After she was injured, in her work with her physical therapist, the main goal was to put her back on her heels. There was no thought given to why she stood on her toes when she played, which had more to do with trying to control the sound than with posture. Music is constantly propelling forward in time. Hannah did not know how to produce this sense of movement in the sound because of her habitual way of producing sound, so she propelled herself forward to express the excitement she could not express in sound. Now she was told to stand back on her feet, which she did faithfully, almost to the point of falling backwards if nudged, but still trying to propel the music forward! The conflict caused her painful tension.

We started working with organizing simple positions and movements - sitting, standing and walking. What I mean by organizing is giving the student a sense of balance, power and ease in changing positions. That allows the musician to feel strong and powerful and at the same time shift weight and move freely if the sound calls for it.

I taught her to take sitting into standing and into walking, first without the viola and then with it. We worked on how to do this shifting so easily, that the sound would not change as she did these movements. She started getting the idea of what dynamic posture means.

Then we worked with playing while coming to stand on a hard, round bolster, without losing balance. It is very difficult to do, and the sound suffers when the balance is compromised. But when she came back to feel the safe floor under her, the sound was enormous and resonant!!! I taught her how to shift her weight while playing without getting stuck, and her pain disappeared.

She could now play for two hours a day with no pain, but I still felt that there is a heaviness to her holding and playing the viola that I could address through combining flexibility of body and flexibility of phrase. In the past, a musical career was only possible for the outstanding talents, for the Mozarts of the world. It is more available now to many more people who are very artistic and sensitive, but need more guidance in developing their talent. Teaching these people is where I would like to make a difference. Before we started working together, Hannah would start working on a piece from a purely technical place. She had no idea how to train her musical imagination to produce variety and intensity. We moved back and forth from rolling on the floor the *Feldenkrais* way, to playing a few

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phrases of music. Sometimes, I did a "Feldenkrais Dance" with her - together, we played pieces for viola and piano and slowly, nonverbally, I led her through the subtle nuances of the music. Her teacher, with whom I kept contact, was inspired by her progress, and started to work with her on what was happening between the sounds, so as to achieve more fluidity in her playing.

We worked together for 9 months, alternating between *Awareness Through Movement*® lessons, *Functional Integration* lessons and lessons with the instrument. By the end of this period she was practicing as much as she needed with no pain and with a lot more joy and emotional involvement. The last I heard, she was performing, and enthusiastically teaching children, in a "Feldenkrais Way."

Sense: In what ways has the *Feldenkrais Method* changed you - as a musician, as a person, as a teacher?

AS: My original reason for taking *Feldenkrais* lessons was to improve my playing. I felt that flexibility and an increased knowledge of how to let go would improve my sound and allow me to overcome technical difficulties that I had yet to solve. During the first two months of my training, I decided not to practice and not to make music, so as not to revert back to old patterns. As I returned to playing after these months, something very interesting and surprising happened. Not only did my playing change, but the way that I heard music was radically different. I heard details in the musical texture that I had never heard before; the phrasing became much clearer and the emotional content of the pieces became much richer for me. I understood something then that guides my work to this day; there is a circular relationship between the following three elements: understanding of the musical

text, the execution of this text, and the *Feldenkrais* work. Each element enriches the others, and is in turn enriched itself.

The understanding of a musical text so that the musician has a clear intention as to how it should sound is a very complex process which takes years of education. The relationship between intention and action, which, as we well know, should be simultaneous and simple, is more often than not interfered with by social upbringing or bad teaching, or both. Music teachers are beginning to recognize that movement is essential to achieving better posture and injury prevention. What is still left largely unexplored are those facets which are unique to *Feldenkrais*, namely: in increasing the repertoire of possibilities of movement in the nervous system, the repertoire of sounds and the possibilities of the combination of sounds increases, which causes the understanding of the text to become much more sophisticated. In addition, one's increased self knowledge in all areas of life (which I experience continually as a result of this work) makes the communication between the composer and performer through the music much more immediate.

Sense: What advice would you give to someone who is considering trying the *Feldenkrais Method*, but has not begun?

AS: Take a weekend workshop and immerse yourself. The worst that can happen is that you will feel great, even if your playing will not change. In the first workshop I did with Dr. Feldenkrais, the first thing he said was that we will get much more than we are able to imagine. It sounded grandiose. But he was absolutely right. I keep getting more than I bargained for everyday.

*Hannah is not her real name.



Aliza Stewart teaches in New York City and in Baltimore, MD. Visit her website www.alizastewart.com