

Using the Body's Wisdom

to Unlock Technique

by Jacqueline Herbein

As a teacher and performer, it is impossible to have too much knowledge about the body. We owe it to our students to pass along information that will allow them to unlock their musical potential and prevent the possibility of future injury. But what information will we pass along? Will it be recycled information from the latest workshop or clinic we attended or the last article we read? It all sounds

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so good and makes so much sense when that dynamic speaker/writer presents his or her definitive methods, but on what information was that particular presentation based? Do we have enough anatomical knowledge to assess the validity of the information? If it was valid, have we taken the time to incorporate the latest workshop/clinic/article principles into our own playing? If not, how can we teach what we haven't experienced? How does the incorporation of these new principles feel? Are we in touch with the new physical sensation? Does it work? To answer these questions, we need solid knowledge and an understanding of how our bodies work in relation to our instruments.

We now live in an age where more information than we ever dreamed of is only an Internet connection and mouse click away. Understanding and using this information is another matter. A thorough knowledge of basic anatomy is crucial to understanding movement when playing an instrument. Armed with solid anatomical facts, we can guide young musicians into forming good physical habits so when they start practicing longer hours in junior high and high school they are not at risk of repetitive stress or other injuries. This anatomical knowledge also allows us to look at the information presented in many of the beginner methods on the market today and truly question their validity. Position and outward appearance of the hand, arm and body are only part of the puzzle. Creating a movement free from underlying tension is another. It is here that we must tap into our own body's wisdom. In his book, *The Inner Athlete*, Dan Millman states: "A good teacher can speak the language of the intellect—words—and communicate clearly so the student understands. An excellent teacher can speak the language of the body—by showing the muscles, bones, and nerves how something should feel if done properly."

Take a moment to check in with your body right now. How comfortable are you? Are you sitting hunched over in a chair, or are you sitting supported? Are your shoulders tight? Are you gripping the pages, or are the pages resting easily in your hands? What does your body tell you? The majority of us go through our days without listening to what our bodies are trying to communicate. We tune out our bodies to squeeze in all the demands of our jobs: practicing, rehearsing and teaching, not to mention the details of our personal lives. When our bodies finally get our attention with excruciating sensations we can't ignore, how do we respond? Do we quiet our bodies by popping a pill, having a drink or watching mind-numbing television, or do we consider working with them in a cooperative way?

The messages of holistic health abound. Look no further than the offerings at your local health club—in addition to the basic low-impact aerobic and step classes you might find tai chi, yoga, Pilates and therapeutic massage. Hire a personal trainer, and you possibly can enter the field of bodywork, core stabilization, somatic education or movement awareness. Depending on where you live, there might be an Alexander Technique or Feldenkrais Method teacher in your area. As in piano technique, no system or school approaches the body in quite the same way, but most share several basic assumptions:

- ◆ If something is constricting, restricted, blocked or out of balance, it is generally due to excessive muscle tension.
- ◆ The body is not set in stone, but rather plastic and moldable, repairable and educable.

These various approaches involve movement, and why not? Life is, after all, movement. Even at rest we are living, flowing bodies, almost like a stream. As a stream receives new water from a variety of sources, so can we absorb information

from a variety of approaches. Pain is a great motivator, and people frequently turn to whole body approaches after surgery or drugs have failed to give relief from injury or chronic conditions. In addition to relief, what they ultimately find is an increased sensitivity and flexibility when communicating with their own body.

Musicians move for a living, and the movements they make must be infinitely more refined than the movements of everyday life. The journey to unlock technique through body awareness begins away from the instrument. As musicians we need to communicate with our own bodies—our whole body. Tension in one part of the body reverberates through the entire body. In *The Art of Piano Playing* Heinrich Neuhaus states: "It is essential to use all the anatomical possibilities of movement with which man has been endowed...." Certainly, the same can be said about any instrument, not just the piano. As teachers, we need to communicate with our own bodies, so we can intuitively feel what is happening in our students' bodies. In a sense, we can teach them to feel what we feel. In *The Inner Athlete*, Millman writes: "Remember that the best teachers not only teach a subject—they convey principles of living through a subject." When you are alienated from your body, you are unaware of the resources you have for making judgments, decisions and refinements of your technique.

Recognized "experts" tell you how to play and how to teach. Once you start to appreciate your body as an endless source of knowledge, you can listen to those experts and make your own choices. You begin to instinctively know what is right for you, and you can reject what is not. Befriend your body and really discover its wisdom. It may be the greatest gift you can give yourself and your teaching.

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