

The Feldenkrais Method for Percussionists:

An Interview with Richard Ehrman

BY MARK POWERS

Feldenkrais. You may have heard the word, but what, or who, is Feldenkrais? Many musicians are finding that this interesting approach to self-awareness helps them to move more freely and less painfully. As drummers, we can always stand to be more cognizant of our actions—to move more ergonomically, efficiently, and safely.

Richard Ehrman teaches the Feldenkrais Method as an Assistant Professor in the Ensemble Department at the Berklee College of Music. Richard came to the Feldenkrais Method as an injured musician and, through his early studies, was able to return to normal functioning. He has edited two books of *Awareness Through Movement* lessons by Mia Segal/Gaby Yoron and Moshe Feldenkrais, both published by Feldenkrais Resources. Over 20 *Awareness Through Movement* lessons from his class have been published on two CDs entitled *Harmonic Movement*.

Powers: *What is Feldenkrais?*

Ehrman: Feldenkrais was a man who invented a method that bears his name. The Feldenkrais Method is not a thing—noun—but a process—verb—of inquiry. This method leads participants to improve their kinesthetic sensitivity, their sense of themselves in movement, and thus discover self-limiting habits. The Feldenkrais Method teaches how to sharpen the perceptions that control movement. I teach people to govern their own movement through use of their heightened awareness. The Feldenkrais Method improves coordination of movement via the sensory motor image of action.

Powers: *How can a drummer/percussionist benefit from learning and practicing The Feldenkrais Method (FM)?*

Ehrman: Drummers and percussionists can discover their postural habits and mea-

sure the amount of effort used to play. Once they understand their habits, they can generate options, explore different ways of moving, and evaluate the differences in feeling from their habits. They will acquire the capacity to attend to the physical cues of effort, alignment, and coordination while playing so they can find more efficient ways of realizing their musical intentions.

Powers: *Describe how we can apply Feldenkrais principles to a performance or practice situation.*

Ehrman: The FM creates good conditions for learning that are applicable to performance and practice. The pedagogical approach includes:

“Do less to notice more.”

“Go slowly; stay within a comfortable range.”

“Explore options; use more of yourself.”

“Don’t avoid mistakes or try to do it ‘right’.”

These ideas can inform both practice and performance. The practice of the FM leads to changes in awareness that directly impact performance as one learns to distribute attention to both sensory cues and the environment. Connection to sensory information leads to more efficient organization of movement, better precision, and more power.

Powers: *One issue many percussionists struggle with is poor posture. Can the Feldenkrais approach help to correct a player’s errors in positioning and movement?*

Ehrman: The Feldenkrais Method does not seek to correct a person’s movement. Feldenkrais (the man) recognized that we acquire our habits for good reasons and he respected the intelligence that formed the habit. Instead of correcting, a FM lesson leads students to more fully understand why they’ve adopted a given posture so they know what they might



Richard Ehrman

change to find a more efficient organization. The key is that students will discover this through their own experience rather than being corrected by a teacher or conforming to an “ideal” posture. The posture for one activity might not be correct for another. Feldenkrais defined good “acture” as “the ability to move in any direction without preparation.”

Powers: *Might the FM also help us to prevent maladies such as tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome?*

Ehrman: The Feldenkrais Method enables you to feel stress and strain sooner and have a choice to moderate your effort or make an adjustment in skeletal alignment toward a less stressful movement. If one pays attention to this information, overuse conditions won’t arise. If one still ignores this information, one can be at risk. The FM cannot make the choice for you. However, regular practice develops a taste for comfortable movement

A FELDENKRAIS JOURNAL

In a class journal, former Feldenkrais Method student Alex D. cited several examples of how his heightened awareness has helped him to analyze his technique and improve his playing.

"I realized that I was adding unnecessary tension to my grip without even being aware of it. I found that the effort I put into having a strong fulcrum quickly spread and manifested itself as resistance (to fluidity and rebound) in my other fingers. The tension also transferred into my wrist, which threw up red flags: my flexibility and range of motion was decreasing, and this was spreading throughout my hand and working up my lower arm....

"I paid attention to how my fingers, wrist and forearm were functioning as a whole...I [now] try to think about the stroke as 'throwing' the stick at the head and letting it bounce back freely, yet controlled (like dribbling a ball). So the only direction I 'push' is down, and my hand is just 'along for the ride' coming up. This technique is producing better sound from the instrument....

"I have noticed how certain movements are linked with certain feelings. On the drums, for example, dynamic levels are tied to confidence...I have come to learn that what people call 'strength' is actually a combination of flexibility and relaxation, not just muscle force."

that leads to ongoing self-adjustment away from stressful positions.

Powers: *In addition to the obvious physical applications, does Feldenkrais offer any conceptual approaches that might help a performer relax, focus, and reach a better mental or spiritual state on stage or in the practice room?*

Ehrman: Feldenkrais did not make a distinction between physical, mental, and emotional; he recognized, promoted, and practiced a unified approach to the whole person. From this viewpoint, a change in one realm will affect the entire organism. Using the mind to observe physical sensations provides an experience of the unity of mind and body. Extending attention to the environment completes the functional whole of our lived experience. These concepts are not as important as

the practice of doing lessons and exercising the kinesthetic sense to provide better coordination and organization of thought and action.

Powers: *Are there any other treatments or therapies—such as massage, Rolfing, acupuncture, Yoga, or chiropractic care—that you would recommend using, in addition to Feldenkrais, to further promote a percussionist's healing and/or prevention?*

Ehrman: The Feldenkrais Method is not a treatment or therapy; Moshe Feldenkrais was quite clear on this point. The FM is an educational system that might have therapeutic benefit if the learning is applied. The differences between treatment and learning are significant and important to the reasons the FM succeeds when treatments fail. Allied approaches to the FM would be Alexander Technique, Tai Chi, and some Rolfing practices. One should try a few and stay with what seems interesting or agreeable.

Powers: *What is the single most important Feldenkrais principle or approach that you have learned and incorporated into your own life?*

Ehrman: "Less is more." This is not original to Feldenkrais, but he applied it to brilliant affect. I would like to add that the FM is an experiential learning method that will not be understood by reading about it. Take a class, get a lesson, and

you can experience what the method is for you.

RESOURCES

For more information about Moshe Feldenkrais, his method, and to find certified practitioners in your area, visit these online resources:

Feldenkrais Educational Foundation of North America: www.feldenkrais.com

International Feldenkrais Federation: www.feldenkrais-method.org

Worldwide Health Center: www.worldwide-healthcenter.net

Wikipedia Feldenkrais entries: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moshe_Feldenkrais; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feldenkrais_method

Richard Ehrman can be contacted at: rehрман@berklee.edu

Mark Powers has studied and performed throughout the United States, China, Thailand, and West Africa. He is a freelance percussionist and educator, an adjudicator for the Wisconsin School Music Association, and co-holder of the Guinness World Record for longest drum roll by a group. **PN**

It's all about sound.

The Sylvia Smith Percussion Duo plays Fall Creek Glockenspiels

Ayano Kataoka Sylvia Smith

FALL CREEK marimbas
www.marimbas.com

Sylvia Smith
www.smith-publications.com