

## REPATTERNING THE MUSIC STUDENT: BRAIN GYM AT THE CONSERVATORY

Eve Kodiak, M.M.

I had forgotten what it was like. I was scheduled to hold a “Brain Gym® Master Class” in an hour. Meanwhile, I was sitting in back of the second Steinway, in a piano studio at De Paul University, Illinois. P., a graduate piano student, was beginning his lesson on Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” sonata.

His teacher, Mary Sauer, asked him, “How did it go in performance?” He shrugged. “Good until the recapitulation,” he replied.

I was catapulted back to my own days as a graduate student, when competition crackled in the atmosphere and criticism jumped to every tongue. It wasn’t that we weren’t supportive of each other. We simply believed that the way you became better was by nailing every weakness—both in yourself and in others. That attitude was part of what had discouraged me from wholeheartedly pursuing a performing career. Another piece of that discouragement was something I thought I recognized in P.: the frustration of not being able to count on your own hard work to carry you all the way through a performance.

After many years of teaching music, I had found myself caring more about my students’ personal sense of wholeness, than about whether or not they could find middle C. So I had initiated a career change, and become a Brain Gym Consultant. Unexpectedly, this work has made it possible to begin performing and teaching again, bringing me back into music on my own terms—as an experience of creativity, of community, and of healing.

### EMPOWERMENT AND CELEBRATION

Eight students, their teacher, and a case of bottled water were crammed into the studio at the appointed hour. The first minute of P.’s lesson had given me my own goal: to shift that first impulse of self-denial and criticism to an experience of empowerment and celebration.

After we had exchanged names, I introduced Brain Gym as a series of simple movements developed by Paul E. Dennison, Ph.D., and Gail E. Dennison, for correcting learning challenges, enhancing performance, and releasing stress and trauma.

“From running a marathon, to opening our eyes, to thinking the smallest thought,” I explained, “every movement we make has a neurological correlate. What happens when we begin a new piece of music? We take in the notes on the page and the movements of our hands. We also take in the smell of the room, tension in our bodies, random thoughts. All this is “learned” with the notes. Through the practice of Educational Kinesiology,



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we create neural networks that help us to grow, and we allow the patterns of habit and stress to erode away.”

After a break, I introduced the process of “balancing”\* with a group. “First, we clear our systems with some simple exercises,” I said. “Then we determine our goal for the session. By performing actions that represent the goal for us, we experience how it feels in our minds and bodies.” (Usually, the feeling is not very good!)

“We then move on to the learning menu\* – the exercises that we need to perform to bring our goal into being. When we are complete, we perform our actions again and restate our goal, noticing the changes. Then we celebrate.”

Our shared goal was “We are present,” crayoned in the center of a large pad of paper. Each person added an individual goal around the edges. These ranged from “I breathe,” to “I practice through the distractions,” to “I sustain intensity in my work.”

Putting the goal into action came next. When I balance with a new group, I usually make myself the first example. It keeps me in touch with the bravery I am asking of them. I felt that I had to play, although it was the last thing I wanted to do. My tension must have been evident. When the time came for the students to share their observations, T. told me that his throat had choked up the moment I sat down at the piano. (Later, Mary Sauer told me that this happened to him whenever he performed!)

As we went along, some people chose to play. Some chose simply to breathe. When we came to our learning menu, I was not surprised to find that the movement of choice was Dennison Laterality Repatterning (DLR)\*, a metaphor of brain-body integration.

### HOW WE LEARN TO PLAY THE PIANO

As children, pianists learn to practice one hand, then the other, then hands together. We practice slowly, and then speed up the tempo. Our eyes move from side to side and from top to bottom, as we scan the score and glance downward to check hand position. When playing in ensemble, we catch glimpses of our colleagues from the corners of our eyes.

Through its combination of homolateral\* (one-sided) and cross-lateral crawls,\* sounds and eye movements, the DLR simplifies and codifies the type of motions pianists have already been practicing for years! Coupled with a goal, the DLR becomes a powerful tool.

When we finished our learning menu and we revisited our actions, much had changed. People were breathing freely, and playing with a new depth and power. When W. performed again, it was evident to everyone that his playing



Eve with one of her students

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## REPATTERNING

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was freer and more expressive. But W. was not satisfied. He'd made some mistakes.

"You didn't balance for accuracy," I pointed out. "You balanced for sustained intensity in your work. Did you feel that sustained intensity this time around?"

### STUDENTS MAKE THEIR OWN DECISIONS

A couple of days later, I got this report from their teacher, Mary Sauer:

"My students are asking when you can come back! They seemed most impressed that you never told them what to do, never told them how to play, never told them what decisions they had to make—and yet they all felt transformation."

"T.'s congestion is all gone. W. played again in Master Class. He had two days to 'work with sustained intensity,' and it was the most beautifully shaped, poised performance . . . none of us had ever heard him play like that before. He realized it, too."

"And P.?" I asked.

"On Saturday, P. played the first movement of the 'Hammerklavier' in a concert. He had been preparing with some of the exercises you taught. He played it wonderfully—we'd never heard him play that well!"

But does the work stick? A month later, a student sent me this email:

"Now I repattern before performing, as well as repeating my goal to myself over and over. I have a much more positive and confident attitude."

I achieved my goal, too. Balancing "to be present," we play from the heart—and performing and empowering become one and the same.

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