

The Somaesthetics of Musicians: Rethinking the Body in Musical Practice

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Abstract: *Motor skill acquisition is a key element of playing Western classical music. Musicians' repetitive practice demands instrument-specific skilled movement that results in automatic and habitual routines after achieving a certain level of techniques. Professional musicians as a consequence tend to shift their attention to cultivating abstract musical ideas, less thinking about their performing body. This narrative study explores through two musicians' somaesthetic reflections how the awareness of the sentient body influences their lifelong musical development. It demonstrates that the body itself becomes a malleable musical entity, in which technique and musicality are simultaneously achieved. The study challenges the conventional division between "low" bodily technique and "high" artistic thinking which has been pervaded in the current theory and practice of musical performance, enlivening the somaesthetic concepts through lived musical experience.*

Keywords: *body awareness, instrumental education, lifelong learning, mind-body, musical capacity, music education, music performance, musical practice, self-awareness, somaesthetics, transformation.*

Prologue

The idea of body-mind dualism has been pervasive in Western philosophy. In dominant strands of Ancient Greek and Cartesian dualism, the body is conceived as being physical and ephemeral, and the mind as a permanent entity. As a result, the mind has often been valued over and above the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Johnson, 1987). Richard Shusterman (1999), who first coined the term "somaesthetics", challenged a key issue permeating philosophy and aesthetics. He argued that despite our embodied nature, the notion of the body is mostly neglected, and the body itself is considered to be "a mere physical object for artistic representation or a mere instrument for artistic production" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 1). This notion applies to more than just philosophy and aesthetics. Despite the idea that the body is an essential element in the creation of music and art, Western classical music performance has long been influenced by this dichotomized concept of body and mind, which involves the binary conceptions of bodily technique and musical thinking in the theory and practice of music performance.

Professional musicians, as a consequence, tend to shift their attention to cultivating abstract musicality, as if they do not need to concentrate on their skilled movements after achieving a certain level of technical skill which most likely results in the habitual unconscious routines of performance. John Toner and others (2016) have similarly discussed the notion of habitual routines in performing arts, saying, “We are told that skilled performers do not need to think about their actions” (p. 50). This elucidates the corollary myth that outstanding musicians are born talented, as if there is a predetermined level *not* attainable by every musician. This misguided conception hinders the true musical potential of individuals and overlooks the essential role of the body as a transformative subject, that is capable of creating and actualizing an artistic ideal into living sound. Conversely, rediscovering one’s bodily capacity allows the enlargement and rediscovery of one’s musical capacity.

Shusterman (1999; 2004; 2009; 2012) have developed an understanding of the body as the key to understanding oneself and the world. He has discussed how experiential bodily awareness helps us re-educate and expand ourselves. He suggested that “from this somaesthetic perspective, knowledge of the world is improved, not by denying our bodily senses, but by perfecting them” (1999, p. 302). He also argued how our bodies exist as the essential agent of lived experience, for example, by improving awareness of our bodily states and feelings beyond the body’s external representation. Shusterman (2008), in his book, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, described how four different levels of consciousness are involved in the practice of *somaesthetics* (pp.53–56). The four levels are:

Level 1: Corporeal intentionality – Sleep; a primitive mode of grasping without conscious awareness

Level 2: Primary consciousness – Emotion invoked by background music, a reaction of the body to dancing, but not being explicitly aware of our actions: conscious perception without explicit awareness

Level 3: Somaesthetic perception – Explicit bodily awareness; playing an instrument involving a focus on the activity, rather than the consciousness of the situation without analytic reflection

Level 4: Somaesthetic reflection or self-consciousness – A focus on self-awareness; an analytical reflection requiring awareness of one’s own awareness

While professional musicians have undoubtedly reached the third of these four levels of consciousness: the somaesthetic perception of the specific motor skill acquisition necessary to play an instrument, the level beyond the somaesthetic perception—what Shusterman calls somaesthetic reflection *or* self-consciousness—has often been overlooked in conventional musical practice. Such a tendency has hindered potential of musicians to transform and grow.

Based on my own transformative experience as a musician, I specifically conceptualize how increased experiential awareness of the performing body enables musicians to renew their capacity for the sound emanating from their instruments. The recovered sound ultimately enhances the capacity for musical expression, eventually restoring musical capacity and capability, as per the sequential phases herein described:

Phase 1: Newly discovered performing body

Phase 2: Rebuilt relationship between the musician and the instrument

Phase 3: Expanded sound capacity

Phase 4: Recovered freedom of musical expression

Phase 5: Restored malleable musical capacity and capability

In this narrative study, I explore the perspectives and knowledge of the performing body as an essential element for musical transformation and growth. Based on the narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Clandinin, 2013), this article explores the experience of two musician-teachers, with the aim of discovering the meaning of somaesthetics beyond the theoretical perspective. It directs attention to the potential influence of the lived experience by understanding the musical growth and transformation rendered through the voices of musicians. I have borrowed Shusterman's term "somaesthetics," which refers to the "sentient lived body, rather than merely to the physical body in appreciation of aesthetics" (2012, p. 5).

For this study, I developed the semi-structured interview protocol with the three themes: the performing body-mind, musical performance, and education. The interview questions included "What is your daily practice like?", "If there is a true or ultimate level of performance, what would it be like in your mind?" and "Do you have any memories of becoming aware of your body?" The criterion for participation in the study was that musicians and educators must have had experience of musical and educational growth through *bodily awareness* as musicians and teachers at the time of the study. Two college professors of the cello in musical performance were recruited; David and Julia (pseudonyms) have respectively 46- and 25-years' experience in performing and teaching in the United States.

Two separate initial interviews with David and Julia took two hours and one hour, respectively. After 25 hours of work transcribing the interviews, a one-hour follow-up interview with David was further conducted to revisit some of his ideas from the initial meeting. Their somaesthetic narratives were all analyzed and reconstructed in their first-person voice to call forth their experiences as the fundamental source of knowledge about the body in the context of music performance. I then reinterpreted their narratives according to two categories; body in the musical self and body in musical practice.

The Narratives

David's Narratives

"In 1994, I did not know I would reach a turning point in my life until I went to see my chiropractor to release my back pain as usual. Surprisingly, after the treatment, my neck began to hurt, and even worse, I ended up not being able to move my left arm for eight months due to the neck injury. My doctor kept insisting that there was no option but a major operation to my neck. He told me I would be paralyzed otherwise. Instead, I chose to heal myself by adopting new bodily habits. Not only am I now in much better shape than I was before, but I also became a better musician and teacher.

Every morning, I reacquaint myself with the cello, recreating the relationship between the cello and myself; myself and the cello. I do this in many different ways, letting me feel, for

instance, how I am experiencing my weight today; how I must organize myself to get ready to play what I'm about to play; how fluid and fluent things are within me. I believe the cello also feels different every day. The relationship between us therefore needs to be rebuilt daily. I get back to basics to find out how we (the cello and I) are doing today before starting to work on different things.

For example, when I get up and my lower back feels stiff or my left shoulder blade is stuck for some reason compared to yesterday, the outcome on the fingerboard of the instrument will be audible. My entire approach to the cello depends on my daily feelings and finding out how we (the cello and I) relate to each other at that present moment. This requires consistent, ongoing awareness of how I feel every time. I therefore relate to the cello and search for fluency and fluidity in my body. The fluency and fluidity are then directed to the music that I'm creating. I cannot separate the music I'm creating from what I'm feeling within my own body. If I look for fluidity or phrases in the music *without* feeling it in my body, I sense a conflict between my body and the music that I want to create. When I play musical phrases, the musically sensitive audience is especially able to sense whether I am struggling with something in my body that makes me feel uncomfortable. Even though I manage to play the phrase well, despite the discomfort in my body, I cannot fully express my musical ideal in sounds because of the battle between my body and the instrument. All the musically sensitive ears listen to every little struggle that I go through.

For me, musical phrases always start *within my own body*. I have an image of a phrase in my head, and then through my movements, the image is translated and transferred into my movements with the cello and into the sound at the end. If you want these things to flow, your body needs to organize itself appropriately to anticipate the change in movement. For example, for a bow change on a string instrument, your upper arm is already in a new direction, and then it takes over before you get to the tip of the bow; not only your arm but also the rest of your body needs to know what is happening in your arm. The fluency and fluidity can easily be blocked somewhere in your body unless you pay attention and open channels and create new sensations with your bodily sensitivity. This is something that I always learn and develop every time I play music. You play, not to maintain what you have already learned, but to discover new things. We can learn as long as we live. The primary catalyst for this somatic journey is the music I am creating. I am always looking for better music. The ultimate goal of exploring my performing body is to achieve sound and music, which will then lead to the mellifluous freedom of creating and phrasing certain sounds that I ultimately want to express.

In general, Western society values the intelligent cognition functioning at the front of the brain highly. The sensory part, the other part *in* us, is widely neglected in our society. However, the sensory, kinesthetic component in us can teach us much more than the intellectual, cognitive part, providing we learn how to become open to our sensual perceptivity and pay attention to what it is telling us. I believe this should be cultivated more in our education. Our body tells us so many different things, distinct from a cognitive way of thinking, which entails monolithic and mechanical guidance of certain rules in a linear, sequential, and abstract mode. For example, your teacher tells you what to do: 'Play an open G string with a down-bow. Anticipate the bow change and then put your second finger on E flat on the G string.'

The sensuality, in contrast, guides you to *feel* how this open string feels to you when it is just open; how my arm feels when it's on the down-bow, and how it feels different from the up-bow, and so on. Once you're open and aware of all these subtle mixed feelings in relation to the movement, you can guide yourself by getting immersed in those bodily sensations in response

to your music. I want my students to experience all those different little sensations with their bodies, as this will immensely enrich their music.

I learned that *exploration* is key to true learning and teaching, rather than dictating what should be done and how it should be done. Exploration, in contrast to the end result, offers the opportunity for learners to embark on their own journey in search of their own musical ideals, and their own answers about what is best for them. I am not there to provide them with the facts. I am there to facilitate an environment for their musical and personal growth by encouraging them to keep on exploring and looking for things. I'm there to challenge them to open up and see where they are, and what else is there of which they're not yet aware. The world does not need another me. The world needs someone unique. You stay unique if you understand yourself more. We all have habitual routines when using our bodies. Once you realize what your habits are, you're then exposed to other ways of applying yourself. And you will then provide the system with fresh ideas. This sequence enhances your ability to move, leading to increased possibilities for the creation of different sounds within your body and from the instrument."

Julia's Narratives

"When I became older, I could feel I was in a place where I wasn't free. I felt that my playing had become dull and painful. And then I was hungry to be free. Somehow, I had never quite got into the very fundamental technique of the cello, especially the right path of my arm over the whole bow. My college teacher opened up my experience. He was able to get me to play more freely than I could on my own. Yet, I could not do it again when I went back to the practice room by myself. I then realized the importance of knowing how my performing body was working with the instrument and how it was engaging with the mental side of my body. It was indeed a humbling experience to refigure the path of my arm on the bow. It shifted my whole paradigm. I believe that nothing is complicated now. The power is returning to the beginning levels of music, and I can play it more freely.

In both my music practicing and teaching, I explore what it means to balance and be aware of all the elements of playing. For example, there is a lot going on when breathing between the tension and release of our energy; regular contraction and expansion. Awareness of what we're doing *liberates* us in a way that unfolds the complexity of what we're doing in music playing.

In elements of playing, I consider integrating and balancing the left and right sides of my body, both the physical and mental release of tension in any place on both sides and full expression. My awareness of my performing body is interconnected with these elements of playing. For example, I ask myself, "Is this issue related to what's happening in my left side?" "What is happening in my right arm?" and "Does it cross strings or change bow?" My consciousness in integrating and balancing my two sides ultimately helps me experience the full expression of music. For example, one of my practice routines of slurring with every note offers me a sense of whether I should shift what's happening in my right arm and left hand.

I also experience sounds in relation to my pulse. Sounds are always connected to what is happening in my pulse. I started to move my feet back and forth while I'm playing, thus forming a new habit. Therefore, my musical capacity is still a work in progress without limitations.

To me, love really matters in my playing. I sang my 12-year-old son a lullaby for seven years because he couldn't go to sleep without me singing to him, despite my terrible voice. If you listen to a recording of my singing, you would think, 'How could a baby fall asleep to that kind of voice?' But what was there, every time, was love. I've thought about how I can bring the intimacy

of playing the cello more directly to love since I have realized the power of love as a mother. It is not about how impressive my playing is. You aren't trying to impress when you sing a lullaby to soothe a four-year-old with fever. It is impossible to let your ego govern you when you are in this kind of situation. Music isn't about me. Music speaks most powerfully when my ego fades away. My definition of true performance is when the musician is out of the picture and the piece of music has a life on its own."

The Somaesthetics of Musicians

The Body in the Musical Self

David interchangeably used "my body" and "myself" or "me" quite frequently. For example, he said, "Every morning, I reacquaint myself with the cello ... how fluid and fluent things are within me ... search for fluency and fluidity in my body ... if I look for fluidity or phrases in the music *without* feeling it in my body, I sense a conflict between my body and the music that I want to create."

David also mentioned, "knowing how to apply oneself" a considerable number of times during the interview, as the equivalent of being aware of how to use and apply one's body. His notion of the body as *the musical self* indicates that bodily awareness is a pathway to self-improvement, and self-improvement is achieved through the exploration of different sensations and feelings embedded in bodily movement. In other words, David believes that the process of developing bodily awareness enables an inward gaze and awareness of the self.

David's perception of the body as "a large system that constitutes emotional and physical parts with different layers," is indicative of possible preexisting "layers" in the body's system, which can be rediscovered through the elimination of former bodily habits and the exploration of new bodily movements. He views the body as a system within which layers are latent and can continue to be *cultivated*. The system of the body is, in other words, the retainer of thoughts and feelings beyond its interconnection with the mental state. Thus, David's concepts of "feelings" and "thoughts" appear to be indispensable to attaining a holistic experience of the body. He suggests that deepening bodily sensitivity or a sensory/kinesthetic experience leads to new sensations that ultimately create a new system. In other words, musical transformation and growth can be achieved and completed by changing the state of bodily movement, so that the understanding of bodily awareness becomes an ongoing process that leads to the achievement of self-rediscovery.

Based on David's experiential knowledge, I developed a visual conceptualization, depicted in Figure 1. As you can see from the picture below, David's experiential knowledge tells us that the system of the body can be renewed by heightening bodily sensitivity through the exploration of bodily movements and feelings, ultimately leading to self-rediscovery.

Julia's account provides further evidence that increased bodily awareness during a musical performance is a pathway to physical, mental, and emotional liberation. According to her experiential knowledge and practice, "full expression" is actualized by performing bodily awareness, with optimal integration and balancing of the body in particular. It seems that bodily awareness in her practice has been developed through a process of becoming aware of contraction and expansion, or the tension and release of power in the body.

Based on her principal knowledge of bodily awareness, she advocates that musical capacity is a work in progress, "as bodily sensitivity has no ultimate end," she said. Her reflection comes from her belief that the 'ideal' sound is first created from your 'inner ear,' or imagination. Imagining sounds that are based on the "inner ear" cultivates bodily sensitivity in order to meet

the musical ideal of living sound. Julia's understanding of bodily awareness as a work in progress is depicted in Figure 2, in which experiential knowledge points to a specific suggestion about the use of the body that ultimately leads to the full expression and freedom in performing music.

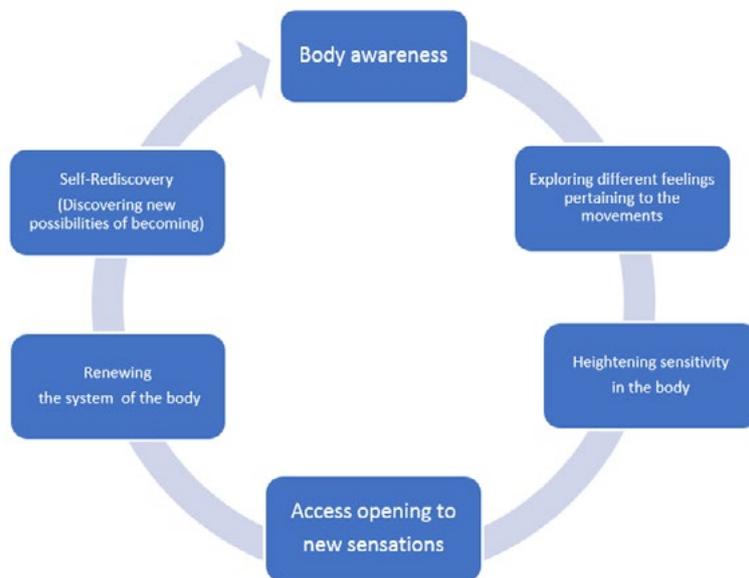


Figure 1: From bodily awareness to self-rediscovery

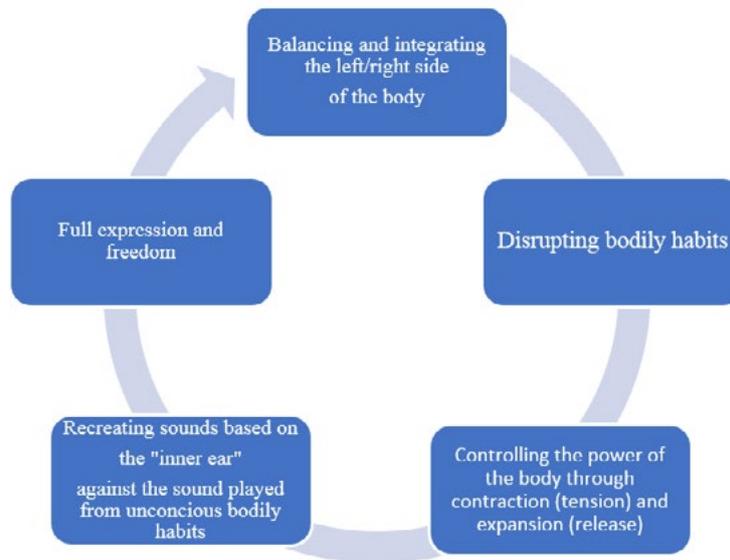


Figure 2: From disruption of “entangled” bodily habits to full expression and freedom

The Body in Musical Practice

David's perspective on musical practice indicates that the way in which a musician organizes and coordinates their body with the instrument actively crafts certain sounds as the outcome. He said, “the sound, phrasing, and everything that we channel directly into the instrument relies on our freedom of movement because our movement is what elicits the sound.” He viewed

musical sounds as another agent of the self, and what it genuinely wishes to communicate to others: “The more genuine you are to yourself, the more your music touches others’ souls ... It is dangerous to impress or please others with fast fingers because you don’t know what you’re sacrificing.”

David frequently used the term “exploration” when referring to his musical and teaching practice. His notion of exploration speaks to *searching and improving* oneself, a concept that relates to his educational philosophy that the sheer value of music is closely tied with self-awareness. His statement that “We can improve *legato* (‘smooth’) as long as we live,” powerfully informs us that the development of bodily sensory experiences leads to new daily discoveries.

His musical practice is in line with his perspective that the process of cultivating lived sounds depends on his understanding of his performing body (Figure 3). This finding turns out to elaborate my own understanding of enhancing musical capacity through body awareness, as previously described.

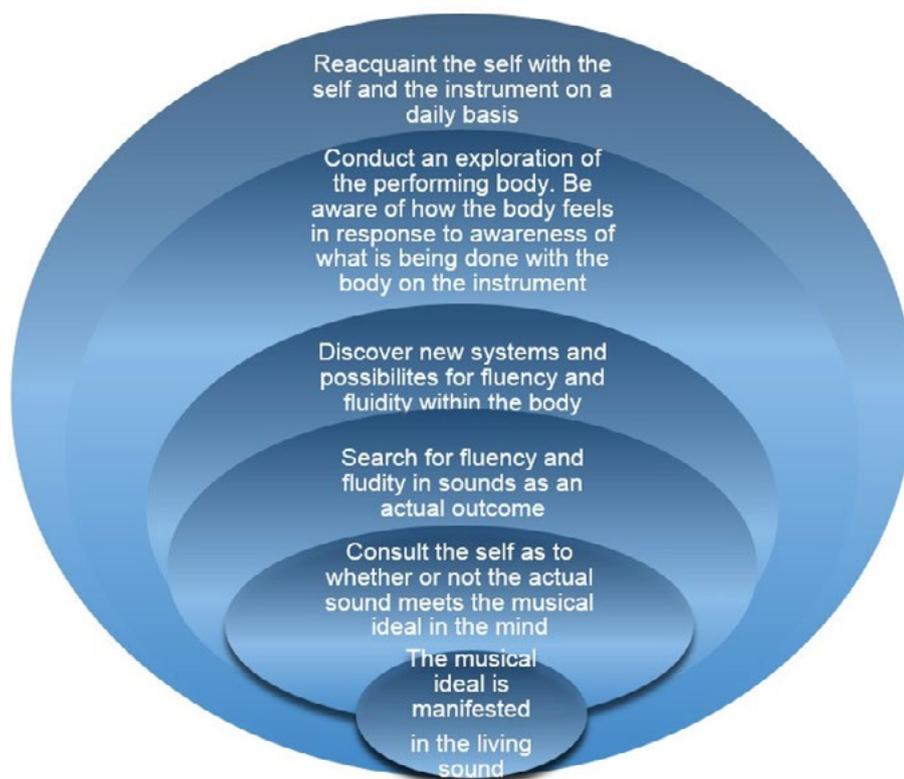


Figure 3: The process of sound cultivation within the performing body

The process can be summed up as David:

- Reacquainting himself with himself and his cello every day (he explained that they both felt different every morning);
- Exploring fluency and fluidity in his body at a “sensory” and “kinesthetic” level;
- Gaining access to the “new system” in his body;
- Searching for fluency and fluidity in sounds as an actual outcome;
- Consulting himself as to whether or not the actual musical sounds were the ones

he had sought in his imagination and/or whether the musical ideal had been reflected, and therefore achieved, in the sounds; and

- Reverting to the beginning and repeating the sequential process until he was able to discover a new system in his body and the sound possibilities that met his musical ideal of living sounds.

Julia's approach to bodily awareness as a musician and as a teacher is somewhat more explicit:

- Release the left side of the body,
- Release the right side of the body,
- Integrate and balance the two sides of the body
- Leads to full expression of music

Julia's ultimate goal as a teacher, similar to David's, was to help her students to become aware of themselves and understand what they are capable of and who they are. What remains distinctive about her approach, in comparison to David's, is her idea that self-awareness is tied to the concepts of loving others, creating music that is connected to the heart, and releasing ego. She supported this idea by providing an example of her personal experience singing lullabies to her child. Loving others decentralizes the innate power of the ego, rendering it unnecessary, and results in a connection to the heart of others.

Epilogue

The most predominant theme identified in the two musicians' narratives was the value of "self-awareness" as the ultimate purpose of musical performance and education. They both also believed that music is a vehicle to self-understanding and a belief in the world, and that the sole purpose of playing music should not be pleasing others but rather be expressing what it truly means to oneself.

The role of imagination in musical expression was also revealed in David and Julia's somaesthetic reflections. In relation to what they perceived to be ideal musical phrases and sounds, imagination was essential to challenging habitual musical thoughts and movements and to recovering the bodily sensitivities of their musical practices. Their somaesthetic reflections, what Shusterman considers to be the highest level of consciousness, were distinctive in that the idea of *bodily* exploration was key to David's somaesthetics, while Julia focused on the *mind* of the musician.

David believed that heightening bodily awareness through feeling and exploring bodily movements was an important means of achieving self-awareness as a musician and educator. David's *exploration* of his bodily knowledge and practice as a musician and teacher was evident. In other words, his exploration and cultivation of different feelings in his body informed his lifelong learning as a musician.

The concept of exploration in David's musical practice transferred to his pedagogy, in that he guides learners in exploring themselves by posing them questions, rather than providing the definite "how-to" answers that he has acquired from his own musical practice. The idea of exploration in his musical and educational practices recalls Shusterman's (2004) argument that "[e]ducation is not so much a matter of working on particular emotions or movements, but of reorganizing or retraining *habits* of feeling and movement and habits of conduct to which

feeling and movement contribute” (p. 57). This is compatible with David’s belief that bodily awareness leads to lifelong musical learning and growth.

By contrast, Julia contemplated self-awareness in the abstract, particularly the relationship between ego and love, based on her dual identity as a mother and professional musician. She believes that one can obtain liberation from integrating performing bodily movements and increasing bodily awareness. Conversely, from David’s perspective, freedom principally means the ownership that he had come to possess as a musician and teacher rather than musical playing itself. His concept of freedom as ownership is also manifested in his teaching practice of giving his students choices by which to explore different ways of playing music, either as independent musicians or, possibly, as teachers later in their development.

While the approaches that these two musicians take to somaesthetic reflections are distinctive, their experiential knowledge is lived through Maxine Greene’s (1975) contemplation of the true meaning of education:

The chain of daily gestures must be broken. The habitual rhythm of experience must be interrupted ... Freedom may indeed be thought of in terms of beginnings and interruptions, even as it is thought of in connection with being reflective and self-aware. The person chooses to break the chain of causes and effects, of probabilities, in which he normally feels himself to be entangled. He breaks it in part by asking “Why?”, by perceiving the habitual itself to be an obstacle to his growing, his pursuit of meaning, his interpreting and naming of his world ... The individual, aware of being blocked in some way, must posit the situation as one in which there are alternatives, as well as obstacles, to be overcome. To do this, he must have the capacity—or enabled to gain the capacity—to reflect upon the situation in its concreteness (p. 7).

Self-awareness is key to self-transformation. The somaesthetic reflections of the two musicians demonstrate that the performing body itself can be a pathway to a malleable musical capacity if we can break, what Maxine Greene calls “the chain of daily gestures” in musical practice. Through this recovered musical capacity, the ideal technique and musicality are *simultaneously* achieved, leading to a musician’s lifelong learning and growth. By bridging theory into the practice of somaesthetics, this study advocates the potential influence of the lived musical experience on academic studies. It is essential for future studies, to continue exploring lived experiences as foundational knowledge of the body and musical practice.

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