


THE LANGUAGE OF AWARENESS

How Cueing and
Breath Work
Impact the
Music Lesson

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As a piano teacher and practitioner of yoga for an equal number of years, I have long been aware of yoga's benefits for the performing musician. A few years ago, I began to feel a calling to share a practice that had instilled awareness, joy and calm in my life and completed an RYT-200 teaching certification in yoga. I had already been incorporating mindful movement in piano lessons and wellness classes for music majors and wanted to deepen my practice because of the positive results I had witnessed. Amid the ravages of a worldwide pandemic, I have been grateful for a tool I could share with students who were facing fear, anxiety and isolation—students whose ability to share music with others in person had been largely stolen from them. As teaching yoga has become a more consistent part of my life, its influence has woven its way into my interactions with students, my physical approach to playing and the way I help students prepare for performance.

Something I immediately loved when I first started teaching yoga was how my students took time to thank me after class, often adding comments such as “I feel so good!” and “That was wonderful!” I could not remember the last time that I had taught a music lesson where a student told me they felt good afterward. Not just physically, but emotionally and mentally, in performance and practice we should enjoy the same clarity and headspace that results from mindfulness practices. I realized that in particular, two elements in a yoga class—the breath as a tool for awareness and relaxation, and the language that we use to deepen our students’ understanding of their mental, physical and emotional state—could just as easily be integrated into a piano lesson. Such awareness not only increases focus and progress in a lesson but also evokes joy.

With the onslaught of the pandemic and the mental health crisis it has created in young people, the need to build relationships and share coping tools for stress has only become

more urgent. Evidence from fields like neuroscience and cognitive psychology shows that a challenging yet supportive environment of mutual respect boosts learning, with memory and cognition lagging when students feel anxious. (Lupien et al. 2007, 209–237) An environment where students fear being criticized or ridiculed leads only to physical tension, the stifling of creativity and the inability to take intellectual risks. Teachers know this intuitively; and yet, so often we react instinctively and habitually without attuning to our student’s needs. My experience teaching yoga has caused me to think more carefully about how I use language, tone and pacing to help my students feel more relaxed to learn more effectively. When I “hold space” for my students, I let go of anything I might be bringing into the lesson so I can listen, observe and respond with intention.

Establishing Focus

Sometimes, our students rush in from a long day of school, perhaps even followed by another extracurricular activity, and they feel “wound up” when they walk in. Simply sitting with students and taking just a couple of deep breaths together before beginning the lesson helps them let go of distractions from earlier in the day. A single deep breath initiates the relaxation response and stimulates the vagus nerve, which carries neurotransmitters between the emotional center of the brain and other organs to cue a “safe and social” rather than anxious state (Gerszberg 2021). A chatty or anxious student might begin to settle in after taking a few deep breaths, while a shy student might feel a bit more open and comfortable. Experiencing even a few moments of quiet stillness helps both teacher and student to hit the “reset” button on their day and engage together with more focus and presence.

In addition, a short, simple body scan from head to toe helps students tune in to how their body is feeling, so they are more aware when tension sets in during the lesson—whether it is a result of frustration or technical challenges.

So often, our students are unaware of the physical tension residing in the body and its impact on sound quality. We can also guide students through gentle warm-ups away from the instrument with slow, repetitive movements to lubricate the joints of the wrists and shoulders and allow for safer use of the hands, arms, neck, back and shoulders. In connection with the breath, even something as simple as rolling the shoulders slowly or turning the head from one side to the other teaches attention to the body and awareness of its needs.

The Teacher as Role Model

I have also become more aware of the tone of my voice and how much it matters in conveying space and energy versus relaxation. When teaching yoga, I am careful to speak slowly and softly, not rushing my words but allowing space between them so students, too, feel unrushed and open. The concept of “space” can be deepened to consider space in the body—space between the vertebrae, with a tall, stacked spine; space for the heart, an emotional “hub” of the body that is closed off when we slouch forward and turn our emotions inward; and space for the mind to think deeply, reflect carefully and make connections. There are times when I might speak faster or more loudly to convey musical changes or to get a student’s attention, but I start each lesson with a friendly, relaxed tone to connect with the student, and I can return to this more relaxed tone if I sense nervousness, frustration or tension. Some students tense up when they are touched, and some need time to feel safe with a teacher before their physical space is invaded. If students respond in a negative way to physical touch, or when physical touch is not possible due to a remote lesson, tone of voice can be a powerful way to soften the body and release tension.

Equally powerful are the words that we use with our students. One harsh or insensitive word can stay with a student for years. It can be the voice in their head that whispers judgment and shame, inhibiting risk and creativity. But words can be even more carefully examined to determine how they affect a student’s physical approach to the instrument. I often hear young teachers instruct their students to “hit” a note, for example. When

they say, “Make sure you hit the C,” of course they never intend for students to use such an aggressive attack. But thinking about the precise gesture that is desired helps us to be more intentional. To “place” a note, for example, conveys not just a physical gesture but a bit of extra time, too. If we ask a student to “cushion” a note, they will be more likely to use a softer approach, more on the pads of their fingers, for a gentler tone quality. Having a variety of words in our vocabulary helps us be more proactive with our students.

The Sensation of Passive Relaxation

One of the first actions that a young student should learn at the piano is the release of weight into the key, which requires feeling the contrast between relaxation and tension. Relaxation is a passive response, which requires inaction and is often much harder to teach than its opposite: tension. Students can easily tighten or tense their forearm, for example, first by clenching their fist and bending their elbow, and this leads to a deeper sensation of the subsequent relaxation.

At the first lesson, I like to teach my students to lie with their hips over their heels in “turtle pose” (Figure 1), letting their “flippers” (their arms and hands) fully relax and lie heavy on the floor with the palms resting up. Then I lift their “flipper,” shake it gently to help release tension and then drop it. It will drop heavily into the floor if it is relaxed. In the “Sleepy Turtle” piece that I created for students to learn by rote (Figure 2), they practice lifting their own hand and then dropping their third finger into D. The effect is an unforced, projected tone.



Figure 1: Turtle pose

Student

Teacher

Rest and relax

Lift with opposite hand

mp Slee - ping tur - tle, soft - ly rest. While I lift, stay in your nest.

With pedal

Drop

(Lift) Drop

(Lift) Drop

When you bite I'll let you go, drop - ping bea - vy ne - ver throw.

Figure 2: "Sleepy Turtle"

This use of physical touch, modeling and demonstration is commonly used and quite effective. The language we use reinforces and, in the context of remote lessons, replaces the immediate effect of physical touch. Specific verbs can be used to evoke either an active response, which is often easier to learn, versus a passive response, which requires awareness and trust between student and teacher. It is impossible to be completely relaxed while playing the piano; certain muscles need to be activated to lift and lower the fingers, for example. However, knowing when to activate and when to release is crucial so tension does not build up unnecessarily.

To the right is a list of specific verbs that I use in teaching both yoga and piano to elicit an aware, relaxed and intentional approach. Keeping this list prevents me from saying the same thing over and over again and instills in my students a vocabulary of physical gesture. At times, a verb that conveys active motion is most appropriate, such as striking a key for a loud sound or pressing it slowly for a soft, cushioned sound. Pianists must be careful not to continue this active pressing action once the sound is made, when we no longer have control over the tone quality or volume, and must allow natural decay to occur. We should also use verbs that convey the passive release of effort or motion in our teaching, as well, at times using them as follow-up phrases so that students understand the alternating nature of such verbs as press/release or engage/soften.

Active	Passive
Press	Release
Engage	Soften
Activate	Let go
Move	Rest
Place	Drop
Align	Free
Direct energy to	Disengage
Ground	Settle
Stabilize	Ease
Tone	Lighten
Awaken	Trust
Lift	Sink
Secure	Loosen
Firm	Spring
Strike	Land
Attack	Rebound

Process Cues

When we find cues that work to convey the physical gesture for a specific musical result, we should use these cues as often as possible as musical "hitching posts" to help students refocus in performance. When students and teachers write these words in the score and sing or chant them often, it helps solidify them as part of the memorization process. They then become "trigger words" to use immediately before a performance or "process cues," which are short, technical cues related to a physical gesture. "Tall wrists," "bouncy fingers," or "loose arms" are examples of such process cues.

In approaching performance, students can get derailed if they get too analytical or judgmental about their playing. These are signs that they are letting their head get in the way of what the body can do on its own. It can be difficult, in times of stress, to simply drop into the feeling body and out of the conscious mind. Yet, the trust and awareness needed for musical flow and emotional engagement require just that. Tuning into the body regularly, in lessons and practice, allows us to trust the body to respond as it has been programmed when we get into performance situations where our brain wants to take over and do the work.



The Role of the Breath

The breath is also a powerful force for creating both action and release in the body, yet it is often ignored by musicians who do not use it to play their instrument. Since breathing is usually unconscious, we might not think about the way the breath creates physical changes in the body, supplementing the use of force, awakening energy and space and eliciting a sense of flow for musicality and emotional involvement. The breath creates one of the natural rhythms of the body, usually without conscious control. Inhalations create space and energy, activating and priming the body, while exhalations tend to be relaxing and calming, allowing release. The verbs of action and release listed above can thus correlate with the rise and fall of the breath; the inhale opens and expands the body actively, while the exhale happens more naturally as a passive result, deepening the effects of the inhale. The breath, like a musical phrase, has forward direction toward the peak (inhale) and a sense of release away from the peak (exhale). The practice of deep breathing at the beginning of a lesson, then, is practice for musical flow.

For instance, a student could match a breath cycle with the following opening phrase from

Gurlitt's *Etude* Op. 82, No. 65 (Figure 3), which is in a common “question-answer” design. The ascending melodic material of the first three measures could match an inhalation, creating excitement and activation toward the peak; the last two measures might occur on an exhalation, connecting with the relaxed conclusion of the phrase. The student might take one full breath to hear the first phrase and set their tempo before “sneaking in” to the soft opening with a deep inhale. In the musical examples that follow, sample process cues are given in quotation marks, such as “loose hover” for the soft repeated thirds in the right hand.



Figure 3: *Etude* Op. 82, No. 65, by Cornelius Gurlitt

Many performers find their breath becomes shallow and quick during a performance, which is a common sign of anxiety. Considering the ebb and flow of the musical phrase by inhaling and exhaling deeply helps performers have more control over the breath when they are experiencing sympathetic activation of the nervous system while performing. In addition, breathing deeply before a performance—perhaps while hearing the first phrase of the music in your mind to set the tempo—helps focus the mind and release distracting worries.

This centering breath might lead directly into the flowing breath of the musical phrase, as illustrated in Figure 4 with the Chopin *Mazurka in A Minor* Op. 67, No. 4. The student might inhale, hearing in their mind measures 3 and 4 to set the rhythmic pulse. Hearing the forward momentum over the barline, they might then exhale while dropping into the bass note of the left hand.



Figure 4: *Mazurka in A Minor* Op. 67, No. 4, by Frédéric Chopin

In *The Boys' Round Dance*, Op. 36, No. 2, the opening figure could be played with an exhale to direct energy into the opening notes followed by an inhale in measure 2. Exhaling provides power in the accented downbeat with a process cue of "land." The down-and-up wrist motion, with the process cue of "drop and swing up," provides a rapid press-and-release motion through the forearm.



Figure 5: *The Boys' Round Dance*, Op. 36, No. 2, by Niels Gade

In Figure 6, in the *Warrior's Song*, Op. 45, No. 15 by Stephen Heller, the exhalations would occur with the dramatic release of heavy weight into each opening half note. Drawing the navel in toward the spine on each exhalation engages the core, providing additional power and richness of tone without pushing into the keys.

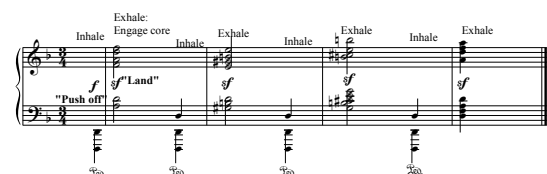


Figure 6: *Warrior's Song*, Op. 45, No. 15, by Stephen Heller

When working with students to correlate breath with movement and sound, it is important to let the student experiment with what feels intuitively "right" in their bodies. Forcing the direction of the breath to match the phrase results in a controlled and careful approach without musical freedom. While some breath work might be planned, especially at the beginning and at musical peaks, the student should feel free to act spontaneously in performance, once they have given themselves the reminder—and the permission—to breathe. Singing while playing, either on a neutral syllable or with lyrics designed to reinforce the rhythm and character, is an effective way to find a beautiful legato and well-shaped phrases that flow like the natural breath.

The way we speak, carry ourselves, make eye contact and manage our time all have an effect on what our students learn in the lesson, whether musical or personal. As teachers, we model much more than our music making. Through our words, our tone, our mannerisms and our actions, we model how we respond to stress: either as eustress, finding joy in challenge; or as distress, which is inhibitive. Videorecording oneself while teaching is a great way to gain better awareness of our own characteristics and habits. When watching these videos, it becomes obvious that our words impact much more than musical or even physical responses—they impact how a student sees themselves and how they connect to their larger purpose through music.

In teaching both yoga and music, every lesson is different, because every student is unique. Yoga, which translates to "union," has taught me much about the way mind and body connect and influence each other. Now I see every music lesson as a form of yoga—a way to build awareness—and, through my connections with my students, to find greater meaning and purpose through the shared experience of making music.

References

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