Music is a gift to yourself, others

Linda Freeman • October 31, 2010

There’s nothing institutional about the Institute for Music and Health in Verbank. On a dead-end road, past a pond and around a circular drive is a multi-level house. But enter the sliding glass doors of the lower level and like Alice in Wonderland, you pass into another world where music reigns supreme. Not just any music, but music that reverberates in giving and receiving well-being.

Based on the work of Dr. John Diamond, an authority on music for healing, the institute is founded on the belief that the purpose of music is to help people. Backed by a half century of research and clinical work, the Diamond Method for Music explores not only music’s effect on well-being, but also on cognitive and personal growth.

At the root of Diamond’s work is the concept of life energy, which he claims is the most basic health indicator. When it is high, we are healthier than when it is low. According to Diamond’s bestselling book, “Your Body Doesn’t Lie,” everything we encounter — the people we meet, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the books we read — affects our life energy. Music, he asserts, has the ability to rise — or, surprisingly — to lower our life energy.

How it works:

The freedom and joy of my first apartment was diminished by a roommate obsessed with Phil Collins’ "Sussudio." She played that song incessantly. To this day — nearly 25 years later — my stomach tightens when I hear it. While "Sussudio" evidently raised her life energy, it reduced mine.

According to Diamond, the composer, the specific work, the conductor, the singer, the orchestra or band, even the recording and playback system can affect the energy a piece emanates. He has accumulated an enormous body of data on these factors over decades. Similarly, he says, when we make music ourselves, we need to consider not only the music we are making but our posture, our intention and our preparation.

The experience:

I have a vague notion we will play some records and talk about how I feel after listening to them, so I'm shocked and terrified when Dr. Peter Muir, co-director and co-founder of the Institute for Music and Health, asks me to sing. I was the kid who only pretended to sing in school for fear my classmates might hear and torture me for the rest of my life.

I am the adult who doesn't even sing in the shower or the car. Convinced I cannot sing, I will not. But now here I am, and this man, with his doctorate in musicology, is perched behind his baby grand, hands poised over the keyboard, asking me what I want to sing. And I have a column to write about it. I can't very well run out of the room. I can't give up — but neither can I sing.

I itemize all this for Muir. He asks who told me I couldn't sing. I think it was me. Since nobody ever heard me sing but me, how could anyone ever have told me I couldn't? But I can't, I insist.

“Let's hear it,” he says, suggesting, "You Are My Sunshine." This was a song my mother always sang to me.

I stand by the piano clasping my hands like a nervous cabaret singer and squeak it out. For the first time in my life I am singing in public, and in front of someone who knows more about music than any of my snickering schoolmates. Muir says I have a lovely voice.

But I don't really believe him. He asks for a song I've always loved and "Somewhere over the Rainbow" pops out of my mouth. He continues to give me no
He expects me to sing, so I do. There's no one to hide behind. But my breath or lack of breath can't sustain the lyrics or melody. He hands me a microphone and asks me to picture the lines as poetry with line breaks and to breathe only at the end of the line. Surprisingly, the mike gives me confidence. It's something to do with my hands, for one thing, and it provides the illusion of professionalism, competence. Once I start singing, I look around the room to identify the sweet voice coming out of the speakers. Is that mine?

Next he plays scales to test my range, and the next thing I know I'm singing Puccini. This is quite thrilling and I can feel my energy raising. He tells me everyone is born able to sing, but along their lifetime they shut it down, and like me, become self-conscious, judgmental. Someone says you can't sing, and you believe them. He says I can, that I must break through my brainwashed mind, that I was never taught how to sing, but I can. Everyone can. I have musical ability but no singing technique, they are different things. I am not a person who can't sing; I am a person who has never sung. Until now.

Breakthrough: Two weeks after my session with Muir, I do something I know I would never have done before. I sit my husband, my brothers and sister, my aunt and uncle, my dad, my mother and her health aide down in my parents' living room and stand in front of them all, leading a rousing rendition of "You Are My Sunshine."

It's my mother's 83rd birthday, and all I want to do is bring her joy. My voice is clearly the loudest and most distinct. My mother is beaming. I am throwing everything I've got into that smile — so focused on her that I don't care how I sound. I am — we are all — transported to a time of joy and exuberance, something none of us have felt in the year of my mother's illness.

I tell Muir about the experience singing for my mother and he says that's it exactly. The basis of the Diamond Method is altruistic, which comes from the Latin "alter" for "other." The method encourages people to think and relate outwardly. When you do that, he explains, it benefits the person receiving the music (through relating/connecting) and it benefits you because you are making the connection, and that is the most important thing, not the music itself.
musical talent, is capable of using music to enhance their lives and the lives of others.

Diamond likens this to a mother singing a lullaby. A mother's focus, like mine with my mom, is on bringing joy, not on how well she is singing. Singing in such a way is giving music altruistically from your heart to theirs. Singing for health isn't about the notes but, Diamond says, on giving enthusiastically, passionately, wholeheartedly, gratefully and embracing life. This is how he defines life-energy-enhancing music making.

Participants in the institute's programs include mainstream and special-needs children, seniors, music therapists, musicians, singers and anyone who seeks to discover his or her own voice. A crucial component of the work at the institute is community outreach programs in nursing homes, retirement communities and hospitals. You can participate in the programs and experience their benefits, regardless of how well you think you can or can't sing.

I think this is the key: singing with and for one another. Not singing to others but singing for others. Shift your focus from self to other and discover vitality.

The Holistic Guinea Pig is a monthly experiential look at holistic practices in the Hudson Valley. Linda Freeman is a local swing dance teacher, certified yoga instructor and the president and founder of the Hudson Valley Celiac Support Group. If you have a holistic practice or therapy you would like her to experience and report on, contact her at holisticguineapig@gmail.com