

Natural Singing: A Guide for Using the Alexander Technique to Teach Voice
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Abstract

This thesis discusses various ways in which voice teachers can use principles of the Alexander Technique to help students sing with more freedom and efficiency. I first define these principles, and then explain their applications to singing. By examining several published sources and conducting interviews with teachers of both the Alexander Technique and voice, I have compiled practical advice and exercises together into a guide for those who study the art of singing. This research not only helps with efficient singing, but also dispels misconceptions of kinesthetic awareness and body use in relation to vocal pedagogy. The goal of this thesis is to provide teachers with more tools to prevent and solve vocal problems, create a safe space for exploration and expanding awareness, and promote beautiful singing.

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Introduction

Those who study the art of singing recognize a need for freedom in the body in order to produce a healthy, beautiful sound. Voice teachers know this, and they teach a myriad of techniques to help singers use their bodies more efficiently. They read literature on teaching voice written by the great bel canto pedagogues such as Manuel García and Giovanni Battista Lamperti, as well as works by Richard Miller, Scott McCoy, Kenneth Bozeman, et al. From these sources, teachers glean all of the technical wisdom and scientific knowledge that has been passed down through the generations to impart to their students. However, here is where the problem arises: the original intent of vocal technique is often misconstrued, and advice that is meant to create efficient singing sometimes does the opposite.

This is especially true in regards to kinesthetic awareness and creating freedom in the body. Attempts made by voice teachers to make improvements in these areas can unintentionally cause more problems or worsen existing ones. In order to better help students develop and increase awareness and freedom while singing, we can use the Alexander Technique as a guide. Many voice teachers are already aware of the Alexander Technique and the benefits it can provide if studied alongside vocal technique. For those who are unaware, there are many biographies on the life of the originator of the technique, Frederick Matthias Alexander, that outline his discoveries. For the purpose of this paper, it will suffice to say that he was an accomplished actor who was suffering from hoarseness, and after advice from doctors to rest did not alleviate his hoarseness, he endeavored to observe himself in the mirror while he breathed and spoke in order to figure out exactly what was causing his problems. After about ten years, his findings, once processed and finessed, created what is now known as the Alexander Technique.

A concise definition of the Alexander Technique is hard to formulate, but one of the best is given by Frank Pierce Jones: “The Alexander Technique opens a window onto the little-known area between stimulus and response and gives you the self-knowledge you need in order to change the pattern of your responses—or, if you choose, not to make it at all.”¹ The Alexander Technique changes habitual responses, increases awareness, and helps create the opportunity to make choices. Ultimately, how we choose to respond will affect our Use, a topic which will be discussed later. To put all of this in another way: to every stimulus, there is a response. Often how we respond is due to habit; it is reflexive and does not require thought. This means we respond due to our habit, and if it is a bad habit, then it can be detrimental to our well-being. For example, when prompted to stand by a stimulus, we may habitually pull our heads back and put excess stress on our necks. The Alexander Technique is about creating options for how to react to stimuli. In order to have a choice, we must become fully conscious of how we are using our bodies.

Understanding a bit of what this work can do in general, such as giving us choices, reveals its potential benefits for singing. Jane Heirich, voice teacher, certified Alexander Technique teacher, and author of the excellent resource *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, describes how the connection between this work singing is at the core of the Alexander Technique:

Why should we connect the Alexander Technique with voice work? From the Alexander perspective, the most obvious reason is both historic and practical—because that’s where it all started. F.M. Alexander found that he needed to assess his voice-loss problem in the broadest way possible. To regain the full use of his professional recitation voice, he needed to look at how he did everything he did—how he responded to every stimulus he received.²

¹ Frank Pierce Jones, *Body Awareness in Action: A Study of the Alexander Technique* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 4.

² Jane Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique: Active Explorations for Teaching and Singing* (Berkeley: Momum Time Press, 2005), 76.

Each response to stimuli affects everything in our bodies. Therefore, how we perform every action affects how we sing. Alexander Technique principles can help singers have a career free of voice problems. Barbara Conable explains that “movement is the reason singers suffer, that is to say, faulty movement, tense movement, movement done without awareness and therefore without discernment.”³ The goal, then, is to connect good vocal technique with efficient body use, which will give singers stability and longevity. The Alexander Technique gives us many tools to accomplish this.

The purpose of this paper is to outline some useful Alexander Technique principles and tools that would be beneficial for voice study, that teachers can use as a guide to help students sing with greater efficiency. Everything described here has been researched and deemed appropriate for self-study, or for a voice teacher to guide their students through, in order to improve their overall body use and singing. However, it is absolutely imperative to note that *nothing can replace one-on-one work with a certified Alexander Technique teacher*. What can be learned here is a good start on the path to more efficient singing, but it is highly encouraged that if one wishes to continue with this work that they take lessons from a certified Alexander Technique teacher.

Awareness

One of the first things to discuss is kinesthetic awareness. Kinesthesia is the movement sense, and “it tells us about our moving and our position and our size.”⁴ It is knowing where you are in space, what you are doing in space, how you are moving in space. Significantly, “singing is movement pure and simple, nothing else, and it must be conceived as movement so that it may be

³ Barbara Conable, introduction to *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*, 2nd ed. by Melissa Malde, MaryJean Allen, and Kurt-Alexander Zeller (San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2013), vii.

⁴ Conable, introduction to *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*, viii.

perceived as movement and so that the best movement may be chosen in the moment.”⁵ Again, the Alexander Technique gives us choices, but we only have choices when kinesthetic awareness of our movement is established. A singer without a developed kinesthetic sense is effectively limiting their most useful tool for improvement. Singing is unique because the human body is the instrument, and to not know what the instrument is doing while playing seems quite strange.

Therefore, “to gain mastery, these singers must learn to feel their movement and constantly evaluate its effectiveness.”⁶ The relative effectiveness of any movement is directly related to how much effort it takes. If a movement takes a lot of effort it is important to check in and ask if it is the best choice for the task. According to MaryJean Allen, voice teacher, licensed Body Mapping Teacher, certified Alexander Technique teacher, and co-author of *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*, it is especially important to “train your kinesthetic sense so that you can determine exactly how much effort is necessary for a particular movement . . . by determining [this], we will move efficiently and smoothly, thereby producing beautiful singing.”⁷ Naturally, it is possible for an activity to require a significant amount of effort; however, oftentimes we can perform tasks with a much smaller amount of effort than we think. On the other hand, “there are students who are by nature kind of phlegmatic and ‘flabby’ in their movements, and they do not make enough effort. So finding that Goldilocks ‘just right’ amount of effort necessary for each movement is key for both teacher and student.”⁸ And this is impossible without well-developed kinesthetic awareness.

⁵ Conable, introduction to *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*, viii.

⁶ Conable, vii.

⁷ MaryJean Allen, “Body Mapping, Kinesthesia, and Inclusive Awareness” in *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*, 2nd ed. (San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2013), 6.

⁸ MaryJean Allen, interview by Paige Sentianin, Email message to author, April 6, 2018.

When discussing awareness in conjunction with the Alexander Technique, we then need to identify the terms ‘Use’ and ‘functioning’. In the Alexander Technique, the word ‘Use’ was always capitalized by F.M. Alexander. The word Use refers to how we use our bodies, and functioning is the result of our Use, or how well we perform whatever activity we are doing. In order to improve the result, the functioning, we must be aware of our Use. This is a logical premise, but it has significant implications for singing as shown by this example:

A singing teacher asks her pupil to sing in the mask, or to ‘bring the tone forwards’. . . A singer who sings in a certain way may subjectively feel as if she were placing her tone forwards. Frederick Husler and Yvonne Rodd-Marling write that, useful fiction that this may be, ‘the sounding of a resonating chamber [in this case the so-called mask] is always a secondary manifestation, the result of muscle movements in the vocal mechanism . . . It goes without saying that the first causes for the various acoustic phenomena that occur in singing lie in the vocal organ itself, and it is these that the voice trainer must learn to hear.’ In other words, the sounding of a resonating chamber is an aspect of the functioning of the singing voice, and the muscle movements in the vocal mechanism constitute its use. To affect the functioning of the voice the singer has no choice but to act upon its use, to try to place the tone forwards directly is a patent absurdity.⁹

To reiterate: how the sound resonates is the functioning of the voice, and the laryngeal muscle movements are the Use. This distinction is hugely important, and many singers do not think of it this way. The Alexander principle of Use and functioning teaches us that the Use will affect the functioning; we cannot affect the functioning any other way. Therefore, we can only affect a singer’s sound through the Use of the vocal mechanism.

Practically, there are difficulties: “It’s very hard to teach kinesthetic awareness. Some people have to start from zero and it will take four years of nagging (say, in an undergraduate degree) to correct what seem like simple problems.”¹⁰ This is where the Alexander Technique can be extremely helpful. The first thing to do when helping a student become more kinesthetically aware

⁹ Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 16-17.

¹⁰ Patti Peterson, interview by Paige Sentianin, Email message to author, March 2, 2018.

happens before they even step into the studio. We as the teachers need to work on our own awareness so that we may be receptive to what the student is doing and more accurately analyze what they might need. This advice comes from MaryJean Allen, and she further explains:

A really wonderful thing about [the Alexander Technique] is that when I am more aware of my own body, then I will be able to be more aware of my student, and to help them more, since not only will I then be modeling good Use for my student, but also I will have first taken care of myself, and then I'll more easily be able to fully focus on my student, and, importantly simultaneously continue to take care of myself.¹¹

Once the teacher has taken the time to work on their own awareness, they are better equipped to guide the student through the same process. One tool for helping students build better awareness is described by Alexander Technique teacher Pedro de Alcantara:

It is often useless to tell a pupil that he is doing something wrong; he will not necessarily feel it by being told about it. It may be useless too to tell him to do the right thing, as he will probably be unwilling or unable to do something of which he has no conception. The most productive way of working is to give the pupil an experience of good use that contrasts with what he normally does. . . In other words, do not tell a pupil that what he is doing is wrong; give him something new and different to do, and let him come himself to the realization that what he was doing before was indeed wrong.¹²

The sensation of doing something completely different is a powerful teaching tool. It lets the student make their own discoveries, which is the goal of being aware of oneself. It is a genuine, deeply personal process.

It may sound simple, but another way to build awareness is observation. That is what F.M. Alexander did; he spent countless hours observing himself in mirrors to solve his problems. It takes patience and dedication but it is something everyone can do to better themselves. The simple act of watching—not passively looking, but *seeing*—the student while they are singing (and not singing) can be quite revealing. Additionally, students should watch themselves, though many students are

¹¹ Allen, interview.

¹² Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 45.

reluctant to participate in this regard. Singing requires great vulnerability, and can be especially difficult for younger singers. True observation, however, is non-judgemental and unbiased. It may be difficult to separate emotion from observation at first but with time it will become more natural.

Here is one way to communicate self-observation and awareness to students:

Stay tuned in while you are singing. It is important to ‘sing’ and communicate what you wish to communicate and still stay conscious (no checking out on high notes). It can be a delicate balance between focusing on the technical things you know you need to attend to, being in character, and giving it your all. Another way of saying this is to find a balance between the specific aspects of what you are doing and the more global overall full body awareness you need for singing.¹³

This distinction is described by famous martial-artist Bruce Lee: “‘classical concentration . . . focuses on one thing and excludes all others, and awareness . . . is total and excludes nothing.’”¹⁴ Singers, and all musicians, are trained to focus on details—of which there are many. These details are not unimportant, but when performing it is much more authentic and necessary to become aware of the whole.

There is a caveat to consider when working on kinesthetic awareness, and that is the Alexander Technique principle of faulty sensory perception. F. M. Alexander discovered that our senses are often unreliable, meaning what we perceive about our bodies may not actually be the reality. A student may think they are standing ‘straight’ with ‘good posture’ but in reality, if they looked in the mirror they may be surprised to see that their shoulders are slumped. This is an obvious example, but faulty sensory perception can involve much subtler issues, such as those we find in singing:

Alexander talked a lot about what he called ‘debauched kinesthesia’ or unreliable sensory appreciation. And Cornelius [Reid] did too, saying you may feel vibrations in your chest when

¹³ Ann Rodiger, “5 Alexander Technique Tips to Help with Your Auditions,” Blog, Balance Arts Center, December 6, 2011, <http://www.balanceartscenter.com/blog/2011/12/6/5-alexander-technique-tips-to-help-with-your-singing-audio.html>.

¹⁴ Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 70.

you sing a chest voice note but you can't try to put the tone in your chest to sing well. It doesn't work in that direction. The sensations that we feel when we sing are largely illusions and they can change pretty radically from moment to moment or from day to day. If you have a cold, say, the feelings in your head may be very different and if you're relying on a feeling to sing well, you're gonna be out of luck.¹⁵

Because singers rely on sensation in order to gauge how the vocal mechanism is working, this can be a difficult roadblock. The first assumption to overcome is "*if it feels right, everything is OK*."

What is familiar, by its very nature, feels right; and it is difficult to challenge familiar habits, even if those habits are leading us into pain. Our kinesthetic sense is based on our existing habits, and we often need to change both the habits and our kinesthetic awareness."¹⁶ Again, instead of focusing on right and wrong, allowing ourselves to be open to completely new experiences and sensations will guide us into a new awareness.

Finding this new kinesthetic sense, of course, takes time. During this time, singers still have to sing, perform, and practice because there is no realistic alternative. Every time we do an activity, the way in which we do that activity is reinforced, meaning it becomes habitual. This is obviously why we practice, so that the act of singing with proper vocal technique becomes habit and we do not have to think about it. Now that we know about faulty sensory perception, however, we can see how this might be problematic: "Faulty sensory awareness is such a powerful force that practising on your own may be actually harmful. 'Results are rarely satisfactory if a singer, particularly a beginner, practises a great deal on his own what he calls "technique",' wrote Husler and Rodd-Marling."¹⁷ No one is advocating for not practicing. It must be a mindful practice, and one that takes place in the spirit of play and an openness to new experiences. A singer mindlessly

¹⁵ Michael Hanko, "A Conversation with Michael Hanko, Voice & Alexander Technique Teacher," Interview by Peter Jacobson, Total Vocal Freedom (May 4, 2015), <https://www.totalvocalfreedom.com/conversation-michael-hanko-voice-alexander-technique-teacher/>.

¹⁶ Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 97.

¹⁷ Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 161.

“doing breathing exercises while maintaining bad breathing habits will exaggerate their bad habitual use of breath,”¹⁸ but if they decide to lie on the floor and breathe they might experience a new sensation and begin to break into their habit. Looking in a mirror like F.M. Alexander did, or just having the good eyes of a teacher, can also provide the feedback needed to combat faulty sensory perception.

Interference

How singers interfere with themselves is a crucial topic. Interference can stem from faulty sensory perception because we may think we are doing what we need to in order to succeed, but our very actions are getting in the way of natural functioning. From an Alexander Technique perspective, we can truly discover the depth at which it is possible to interfere with ourselves. This can be simply trying to ‘do’ something, when we need to ‘not do’ what will get in our way. For singers, it can be extremely detrimental to interfere because the best Use of ourselves creates the best singing:

[One of the great pedagoges] defines the height of Western aesthetic as being the epitome and extension of the design, function, and best use of ourselves. That means we are designed to sing correctly. Any problem in singing is therefore interferences in our natural design. It is not an external ‘technique.’ I see my role as a teacher as one who can observe from the outside interferences both in thought and body that are restricting the most efficient and artful use of the voice. To help open up an exploration of new experiences that occur when old habits are inhibited. Not to give the student a thousand things ‘to do.’¹⁹

Singers, and all musicians, are very familiar with all the things they need to ‘do.’ As singers, we need to sing with proper diction, gesture effectively, have an inviting stage presence, breathe efficiently, use accurate musical articulations, think of the character, and on and on. We have become excellent at ‘doing’: “The perceived need to do something is one of the biggest hurdles for

¹⁸ Maria Weiss, *The Alexander Technique and the Art of Teaching Voice: Speaking and Singing with an Energetic, Free, and Beautiful Voice* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009), 32.

¹⁹ Karl Snider, interview by Paige Sentianin, Facebook direct message to author, February 12, 2018.

dancers, singers, actors, and instrumental musicians, for they are all very disciplined learners. They have worked hard at their respective crafts for years, and they are accustomed to correcting themselves.”²⁰ As we know now, because of faulty sensory perception, correcting ourselves in our usual way is not always the best option. ‘Doing’ more feels right because it takes more effort, and it is easy to equate more effort with the potential for success. From an Alexander Technique perspective, the exact opposite is true: “I was brought up to believe that the harder I tried, the more I would learn. In my Alexander lessons this strategy simply did not work. . . . At first this was baffling, but I went on to discover that the solution to many seemingly difficult tasks is not to ‘try harder’ but to leave oneself alone.”²¹ This is not to say that one should not work hard; it is all about efficient use and only giving the precise amount of effort necessary for the task.

Dr. Patti Peterson, former head of the Vocal Pedagogy program at University of Colorado Boulder and student of Barbara Doscher, describes some of the things singers do to interfere with themselves:

Most singers get in their own way by developing tics that they think are expressive movements—waving the arms, lifting the chest too high, standing with the weight on one leg, grinding the jaw, etc. Bartoli is a prime example of someone who makes her singing twice as hard with all the facial tics she employs to do runs; none of it is necessary. Other singers adopt what they think is a great posture and then hold it—we call them Alexandroids! The other way so many get in their own way is by over thinking every aspect of singing. There is a fine line between good preparation and intellectual paralysis! [The Alexander Technique] encourages a mental state that is spontaneous and in the moment.²²

Of course, no one can deny that Ms. Bartoli can sing superbly, but the bottom line is that none of her facial tics and muscular overwork are necessary. Having the choice to utilize bodily movements

²⁰ Heinrich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 97.

²¹ Gelb, *Body Learning*, 97.

²² Peterson, interview.

to help singing is one thing, but not being able to perform a task without these movements is what the Alexander Technique aims to avoid.

One of the most significant ways in which a singer interferes with their natural singing is with their breath. Jane Heirich writes that “there is an almost universal need to undo habitual and systematic interference that is preventing a natural breath from happening.”²³ She describes the natural breathing process:

During the inspiratory part of the breathing cycle two things happen: The rib cage expands slightly upwards and outwards in all directions, while at the same time the domed diaphragm contracts and descends. The thoracic cavity thus expands in all dimensions automatically, lowering the air pressure within the lungs. Air rushes in from the outside in order to equalize the pressure—unless it is prevented from doing so.²⁴

Many singers do inadvertently prevent this natural action when they ‘try’ to breathe. They think that they must put forth effort, they must ‘do’, and because of this they interfere with their natural breath. Singers interfere with their breath in a number of ways, the most common of which is over-utilizing the abdominals, which creates more problems than it solves.²⁵ This is due to the creation of excess breath pressure, which “is likely to disrupt the delicately balanced vocal mechanism because muscular overwork anywhere in the system affects the voice.”²⁶ As stated previously, how the body does anything and everything affects the voice. It can only be assumed that what the body does for the breath, which is so intimately connected to the vocal mechanism, affects the voice at an even greater degree. Singers can manage to produce beautiful sounds with these interferences, but “when the singer lets go of all interferences including the effort to breathe,

²³ Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 33.

²⁴ Heirich, 35.

²⁵ Heirich, 36.

²⁶ Heirich, 57.

he most likely will sing with a different, rich and free quality of sound.”²⁷ It seems a shame for a singer to get in the way of their own full potential in this regard.

Inhibition and Non-doing

In order to stop interfering with ourselves, we can practice the Alexander Technique principles of inhibition and non-doing. Inhibition is like Simon says: in this game we are trained not to perform the action until we hear the phrase “Simon says.”²⁸ The choice to stop the action before it is carried out is inhibition. Another way to describe it is “the act of refusing to respond to some stimulus (or stimuli) to psycho-physical action (not doing).”²⁹ We can now begin to see the progression of retraining one’s habits. The first step is to create a new kinesthetic awareness that does not fall prey to faulty sensory perception. At this point, we can begin to become aware of our habitual reactions and how that affects our bodies. Then, through inhibition, we can start saying no to our reflexive responses in order to make room for better choices: “Imagine a singer who always turns the head for a high note. The ability to say ‘no’ to this particular habit will always change the whole attitude of this particular singer. If the teacher gets the student to say no in order to stop the instinctive response to the stimulus, he already wins half the battle.”³⁰ The next step is to practice non-doing, which is exactly as it sounds. Instead of working so hard to ‘do’ the right things, decide not to do the things that interfere with natural use. This creates an atmosphere where natural function is allowed to occur:

The science of voice is a critical area in which all students and teachers of voice should be current. However, knowing what should be happening does not mean that you also know what the experience in your body will feel like when that event is occurring. So many students will know something that should be happening, and then get stuck on trying to make that thing

²⁷ Weiss, *The Alexander Technique and the Art of Teaching Voice*, 44.

²⁸ Snider, interview.

²⁹ Weiss, 24.

³⁰ Weiss, 29.

happen, when the event will usually occur on its own if we stop interfering. That is the nature of non-doing.³¹

For singers, this opens up a world of possibilities. So many vocal problems are made worse when singers try to ‘fix’ them. For example, ““Sometimes I think that when I try to open my throat I get in my own way by tensing something else. I need to realize how not to do something [closing the throat] instead of trying so hard to undo it.””³² It can be difficult to sort out the difference between trying to do something the right way and not doing something the wrong way. We have to be open to letting our body do what it naturally wants to do, and that takes a lot of trust and patience.

Non-doing in relation to singing can mean “I’m not going to make my back wide, I’m going to allow my back to widen. . . [not saying] ‘raise your soft palate’. . . when you sing well, your soft palate might rise, but that doesn’t mean you can effect good singing by raising your palate mechanically.”³³ Another example is “a singer being told his ribcage has to move out while inhaling. Being a ‘good’ student, he obeys and pushes his ribcage out with too much force. . . If he only works on his head-neck-back relationship, for example, and letting the shoulders spread apart, the rib cage would open by itself. . . if he stops doing the wrong thing, the right thing does itself.”³⁴ Much of this has to do with how instructions are given to the student, which will be discussed more in-depth later. The student just has to be open to allowing this freedom and stopping interference.

Directions

Creating the space for non-doing allows us to make new choices, and this can come in the form of the Alexander Technique principle of thinking Directions. This means that before we perform

³¹ Snider, interview.

³² Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 97.

³³ Hanko, “A Conversation with Michael Hanko.”

³⁴ Weiss, *The Alexander Technique and the Art of Teaching Voice*, 27.

the action we want to undertake, we ‘think’ the action. Michael Gelb, in his introduction to the Alexander Technique, *Body Learning*, describes how to conceptualize this process:

Direct your attention to your right hand without moving it at all in space. Focus on the index finger of the right hand as if you were intending to point the finger still further in the direction in which it is already pointing, but remember not to move it at all. Look at whatever your finger is pointing towards and sharpen the thought of your finger pointing towards it. This act of attention alone may have produced a change in the muscle tone of your finger.³⁵

It is simply using mental focus to prompt actions instead of letting habitual responses take over. As described above with the muscle tone in the finger, there is a lot that mental energy can do without us consciously trying to ‘do’.

The most fundamental Direction in the Alexander Technique involves the concept of Primary Control, which is the relationship between the head and the neck, as well as the relationship of the head-neck with the rest of the body. F. M. Alexander discovered that this relationship had “immediate consequences for the condition of his larynx and breathing mechanism and then that the Use of his head and neck was the prime factor in coordinating the Use of the rest of his organism. He functioned best when his stature lengthened, and this came about when he allowed a Use of his head that he described as ‘forward and up’ in relation to his neck and torso.”³⁶ This ‘forward and up’ is used quite often in the Alexander Technique world. Some people find it problematic because some people can take that Direction and go too far, creating undue tension and rigidity. ‘Releasing up’ may produce a desired effect of upward buoyancy. Jane Heirich describes ‘up’ as “the direction in which the head is releasing away from the other end of the spine, the tailbone,”³⁷ which is another useful image.

³⁵ Gelb, *Body Learning*, 75.

³⁶ Gelb, 42.

³⁷ Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 99.

Primary Control is an essential principle of the Alexander Technique, and it is also known as Primary Coordination. This is the head-neck-spine-body relationship that we were born with, and by taking Alexander Technique lessons and applying Alexander Technique principles we learn how to recover and enhance our Primary Coordination. Achieving good head balance (relationship of the position of the head in relationship to the rest of the body) is an important component of Primary Coordination. In fact, head balance is crucial for good singing, and there are many excellent singers who have never studied the Alexander Technique and yet have realized the importance of Head Balance.³⁸ This coordination, as we have learned, comes from a place of allowing it to happen and thinking the Direction rather than trying to physically ‘do’ it.

Because thought moves muscle, thinking Directions positively affects singing. When a singer tries to ‘do’ an action, for example releasing the muscles holding the jaw closed, it can often have the effect of creating another set of excess tension. The muscles that pull down the jaw can unnecessarily engage. However, if the singer simply thinks the Direction to allow the jaw to hang, without trying to do it, the results will likely be more beneficial. It is common to see a student with a limited experience of their body awareness try to release excess tension in the neck, so he “shakes his head because he thinks that will free his neck, [instead] he probably adds more tension to the already existing tension. The student should not do the direction, but should let them happen instead.”³⁹ Another example is a common issue especially for young singers:

We might observe a singer trying to squeeze out the last available ounce of breath at the end of a long phrase, and that she is subtly pressing the rib cage downward into the gut while doing so. If the same singer is trained to ‘go up’ or ‘think up’ while singing a long phrase, the bellows (rib cage muscles) will work in a more lateral direction and she will produce a better sound quality than would result from that downward squeeze.⁴⁰

³⁸ Allen, interview.

³⁹ Weiss, *The Alexander Technique and the Art of Teaching Voice*, 33.

⁴⁰ Heinrich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 99.

The best part about thinking Directions is that it puts us in direct control of our bodies (which we already possess, but we may not have been able to truly access). We choose to not be slaves to habits and reflexive responses, and we can then take ownership of how we sing or perform any action. It provides the freedom to make the choices that will lead us to a more desired outcome.

End-gaining and means-whereby

We keep reiterating the need for creating choices in how we use our bodies. This means we can choose to get ourselves to our goal the quickest and easiest way (end-gaining) or in a way which considers the process of getting to the goal (Means-whereby). End-gaining is a reality of life. The world we live in is fast-paced and we are constantly over-burdened. We all end-gain because it works; for the most part, our goals are achieved if we go after the result and worry less about the process. However, end-gaining means we are very likely using ourselves in a manner that may harm us in the long run. Returning to our discussion of Use and functioning, “The singer who attempts to bypass use and to control functioning directly is an end-gainer. She goes directly to her ends—the sounding of a resonating chamber, the economy of breath, the beauty of the tone—thereby neglecting the means whereby she can achieve these ends.”⁴¹ As singers and voice teachers, we tend to parcel these things out and consider them when issues arise. A teacher may notice a singer cannot get through a long phrase, so they tell the singer to take in more air using one of the many methods of teaching breath management. They may even discuss the anatomy of the ribs and diaphragm and explain the concept of *appoggio*. However, even if the student finds improvement, this is an example of end-gaining. In order to consider the Means-whereby to better breathing, the student must gain an awareness of their body, how they use their whole body to

⁴¹ Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 19.

breathe (not just in the torso), inhibit habitual responses, and allow their body to expand without forcing it to do so.

Once again it should be said that our world leads us to end-gaining, and that is not always our fault. All we can do is try not to let it get in our way:

Voice teachers of the students themselves give certain goals as important sources of motivation, but focusing too quickly on them without much thought to how to achieve this goal can prevent achieving it. Thoughts such as ‘I must learn this concerto aria this week’ or ‘I have to give a recital this month’ can destroy the process the student has to go through to change his habits and to regain or gain the confidence and knowledge for performance.⁴²

We see it in music schools especially: in order to get students through juries and recitals, end-gaining can be seen as necessary.⁴³ How can we be totally process-oriented when students ultimately need to graduate? This is a question every teacher must consider, and personally decide how they want to answer it.

The last principle to consider is psycho-physical unity and the idea of the whole person. These refer to the undeniable reality that our minds and bodies are one, and that our whole bodies perform every action we undertake. Psycho-physical unity forces us to take responsibility for our Use, and our functioning. We often hear the phrase: “My shoulders are tense,” or “My back hurts.” We control our bodies with our minds because they cannot be separated. Our shoulders are tense or our backs hurt because we misuse ourselves; this occurs even when we have not been aware of it, or feel like we cannot help it. The Alexander Technique teaches us that we can. To put it another way, “It is not what a singer experiences from the outside that creates a problem, but how he reacts to a specific stimulus that will trigger either misuse or good use. . . [for example] ‘My jaw feels tight’ into ‘I tighten my jaw.’”⁴⁴ Additionally, our shoulders, backs, or jaws may be in discomfort

⁴² Weiss, *The Alexander Technique and the Art of Teaching Voice*, 42-43.

⁴³ Snider, interview.

⁴⁴ Weiss, 15.

not just because of how we use these specific parts. Every part of the body is connected to every other part. This means we sing with the whole person as well:

Singers often look for solutions to vocal issues in their throat. Sometimes they will extend that to the manner of their breath. As a teacher it is tempting to go directly to what seems to be an obvious area of the problem. Tightness in the upper register would logically be a problem with the tightness of the throat. However, the tightness of the throat could be associated with tightening of the feet against the floor, over-exertion of the abdominal muscles, locking of the knees. It's important to always keep the entire mechanism in mind.⁴⁵

Psycho-physical unity and its relationship to artistry in singing is beautifully expressed by a teacher of the Alexander Technique and voice, Dr. Karl Snider:

I believe artistry in music comes from the expression of movement in our bodies. Phrasing, dynamics, emotional expression, rhythm are not external things we impose on our music, they come from the psycho-physical unity and movement of our whole selves. I often see stagnant bodies and minds trying to impose the elements of interpretation on music, instead of living, breathing, and moving with the music. Movement can be completely internal, it is not gross movement, it is dependent on your intent.⁴⁶

Artistry is, at the end of the day, the goal of singing. We have the incredible responsibility to communicate stories and engender emotional responses. The Alexander Technique can help guide us to a place to accomplish this more authentically.

Misconceptions

Many voice teachers offer advice to their students in order to create more freedom in the body to allow for more efficient singing. They try to convey conventional wisdom that has been studied and reported by voice pedagogues throughout the generations, but somewhere along the way it has been misconstrued. Much of this advice, well-meaning though it is, can be ineffective or actually harmful.

⁴⁵ Snider, interview.

⁴⁶ Snider, interview.

One of the most common misconceptions involves relaxation versus tension. How often do we hear “my shoulders are tense, my neck is tense,” etc.? It is true that these are common areas of the body for excess tension. However, to tell that person with these issues to “relax” is not helpful; a body needs a level of tone to function. Famous voice pedagogue Cornelius Reid said, “Tension is used so as to consistently imply wrong tension, without regard for there being such a thing as right tension, while to relaxation is imputed a state of being which the attainment of absolute passivity is assumed to correct activity.”⁴⁷ It is all about finding the right level of tone, which comes from the work of awareness and self-discovery. Additionally, Lamperti stated that “It is co-action, not non-action that causes controlled effort to feel effortless. . . . Singing is accomplished by opposing motions and the measured balance between them.”⁴⁸ This balance, in Alexander Technique terms, means singing with good Use and focusing on the Means-whereby. If a voice teacher finds that their student is singing with too much tension, they should be careful in how they go about addressing it. According to Reid:

The teacher must not directly address the problem of incorrect tension. ‘All visible, external signs of effort reflect a condition in which muscles are relaxed when they should be in tension. If the muscles of the laryngeal and pharyngeal tract are not properly engaged, the energy used in singing must be directed elsewhere and, as a consequence, the muscles of the jaw, neck, shoulders, and chest will come into tension when they should be relaxed. These muscles can only be made to relax however, when the coordinative process is reversed. Successful reversal of a faulty technique will cause interfering tensions to disappear without their ever having been made a matter of direct concern.’⁴⁹

Reversing faulty technique involves the process of learning one’s habits, inhibiting them, and then creating better Use in order to build an improved vocal technique. When teachers address the issue of tension with their students, they should be aware that employing the Alexander Technique can

⁴⁷ Weiss, *The Alexander Technique and the Art of Teaching Voice*, 47.

⁴⁸ Weiss, 48.

⁴⁹ Weiss, 49.

at first appear to make things worse. This is because students “start only to be aware and feel the already long-established tension in their own bodies.”⁵⁰ No singer wants to add excess tension, but they can be assured that practicing the Alexander Technique will help them over time.

The next topic is posture, and it is one of the biggest ways in which voice teachers can lead their students astray. The very word implies a static position which is ‘correct’, and all other positions are wrong: “Many of us have been taught that to speak or sing well, we must stand ‘properly’ . . . Even with the best of intentions, we can fall into a distorted and misguided use of the musculoskeletal system.”⁵¹ Then, when this thinking inevitably causes vocal issues or body pains, many singers will turn to the Alexander Technique. This is because they think that the Alexander Technique is all about posture: “Singers often falsely recognize the Alexander Technique as a technique for posture instead as a technique of inhibition and directing. Singers generally come to Alexander lessons because they want to learn how to stand in the right way or how to get rid of their backaches.”⁵² What singers learn is that there is no “right way” to stand, there is only good Use and balanced coordination, or misuse.

Because singing is movement, we need to find a new way to describe posture to singers that does not imply a fixed position or rigidity. Phrases like “postural activity” or “poise” can be helpful.⁵³ Common phrases such as these are unhelpful:

‘Chest up’, ‘abdomen in’, ‘shoulders back’ . . . ‘To arrive at the proper posture, stand up straight, one foot slightly in advance of and apart from the other. Lightly dig in your toes as if to grasp the floor with them. Tuck your hips under without allowing the upper part of your body to change its position. This will tend to keep your knees from locking (they should be just slightly bent). Next, stretch the muscles of the lower back from the tip of the spine to the point of their attachment to the lower ribs. This action should make you feel an expansion of the

⁵⁰ Weiss, *The Alexander Technique and the Art of Teaching Voice*, 49.

⁵¹ Heinrich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 64.

⁵² Weiss, 67.

⁵³ Weiss, 68.

lower ribs at the back and a drawing in of the pelvic muscles. Keep this posture.⁵⁴ [Other posture myths are:] Stand against the wall to achieve good posture. . . Stand ‘straight’ as if the spine were a straight, solid broomstick. . . Lift the sternum high. . . Roll the shoulders back and/or hold them down. . . Tuck the pelvis under. . . Suspend your head by an invisible string from the ceiling.⁵⁵

There are good reasons why these instructions are misleading. The first instructions involve a manipulation of the specific body parts without considering their relation to the whole body. The second, beginning with “To arrive at the proper posture,” again implies a fixed position. Digging in the toes adds excess tension that does not contribute to efficient Use. Slightly bending the knees does not keep them from locking: “Several choral singers, choral directors, and medical professionals have been startled to discover in Alexander lessons that bending the knees slightly does not necessarily unlock their knee joints. . . The mind alone can unlock the knee joints. Unlocking means just that—simply do not do what you do that locks up your knees.”⁵⁶ We know that “keep this posture” is especially problematic for reasons we have already discussed. Then, as MaryJean Allen describes, standing against a wall makes it seem as if the spine and back muscles hold everything up in front of them, which is inaccurate. She also explains that imagining the spine as a broomstick does not work because the spine has curves, and lifting the sternum does not consider that the sternum rises and falls slightly with natural breathing. Additionally, Allen states that rolling the shoulders backwards and holding them down puts pressure on the nerves, and tucking the pelvis under reduces lengthening of the spine and tightens the hip joints. Finally, suspending your head from a string creates the incorrect perception that support of the head comes

⁵⁴ Weiss, *The Alexander Technique and the Art of Teaching Voice*, 69.

⁵⁵ MaryJean Allen, “The Core of the Body and the Six Places of Balance,” in *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*, 2nd ed. (San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2013), 49-51.

⁵⁶ Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 67.

from above, when it actually comes from below from the rest of the body through the atlanto-occipital joint.⁵⁷

Furthermore, we have to consider that “all instructions to position a student will have an ill effect in the long run, because he will try to do it instead of allowing it to happen.”⁵⁸ The student must be in control of their own Use, so teachers need to be aware of how they guide their student into the Use that will benefit their singing. As a general rule, “the less specific postural information the singer gets about how to stand, the more he can find out by himself.”⁵⁹ This does not mean that the teacher has no input about a student’s Use. Teachers can be creative and establish an atmosphere where play and self-discovery are encouraged, then use their eyes and ears to provide the feedback needed for improvement.

The last and most significant misconceptions are centered around breath and the idea of support. Some may find this information controversial. Singers spend a lot of time working on breathing, and voice teachers spend a lot of time researching how to teach it. As previously discussed, singers are more likely to focus on ‘doing’ rather than non-doing. This leads to a common misconception about breath:

Many singers and some actors fall into the trap of trying to over-manage or over-manipulate the breathing mechanism. . . a complicated balance of power is taught to some singers. This method asks for a conscious maneuvering of the abdominal group of muscles in coordination with the rib cage muscles in order to maintain an expanded rib cage as well as a descended diaphragm while singing a song phrase. These efforts can prevent the rib cage and the diaphragm from returning home with their natural elasticity.⁶⁰

No teacher intends to get students to over-manipulate the breath, but that is a common result. When students are just starting out in voice lessons, breath is often immediately addressed because

⁵⁷ Allen, “The Core of the Body,” in *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*, 49-51.

⁵⁸ Weiss, *The Alexander Technique and the Art of Teaching Voice*, 70.

⁵⁹ Weiss, 70.

⁶⁰ Heinrich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 72.

students cannot sing through long phrases or their tone is suffering. What studying the Alexander Technique tells us, however, is the student is likely already getting in the way of their natural breathing through misuse. The teacher accurately identifies misuse of breath, but through well-meaning instruction often creates new tension and manipulation. Teachers may even over-prescribe breath work: “exaggerated importance may be attached to breath manipulation as the solution for a variety of ills (lack of power, difficulty with high notes, ‘breathy’ voice quality, etc.).”⁶¹ Teachers frequently ask students to increase the amount of air, the breath speed, or the breath pressure to solve a variety of issues. Students can interpret this instruction as needing to increase tension in the abdominals, ribs, or a number of other places throughout the body to assist the breath. In this case, both the teacher and the student would unintentionally be end-gaining because they are trying to go directly for the desired sound without considering the precise problems and Means-whereby.

End-gaining also comes in the form of over-using the abdominal muscles when exhaling, especially when singing a long phrase. This is not the best way to manage breathing “except as [the abdominals] are part of the integrated muscle activity of the whole torso. For example, we many indeed feel some firming up of the abdominal muscles as result of the natural breathing process. . . [but it] should be the result rather than the cause of breath leaving the lungs.”⁶² Any form of ‘doing’ such as using musculature to force or push air out with interfere with natural breathing, or the elastic rebound of the ribs and diaphragm. This also applies for those who think it is appropriate to try and hold this ribs out, or ‘rib reserve’. This is “consciously holding the rib cage up and out after completing a deep inhalation, and maintaining this elevated and expanded position

⁶¹ Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 33.

⁶² Heirich, 36.

while singing. . . In this condition, the diaphragm moves up with the exhalation as best it can, but the ribs hardly move laterally at all.”⁶³ In order to achieve more efficient singing it is important to have flexibility.

How we think of breathing is directly related to the contentious topic of support. Some voice teachers have strong opinions about it: “I hate the use of ‘support the sound’ terminology, as it promotes holding of the abs and torso, rather than the flexible use of them.”⁶⁴ Others, such as Cornelius Reid, think it is actually impossible because vocal tone “is nothing more than pressure variations created by an oscillation movement of the vocal folds whose frequency determines pitch. It is a physical impossibility to ‘support’ these vibratory patterns.”⁶⁵ Many have vague ideas about what ‘support’ should be, often involving some sort of muscular effort in the abdominals or lower body in general, or something involving the rib cage. Another description is “something you do with particular muscles in order to produce a certain kind of sound—a sound that will carry or ‘project’ over some distance.”⁶⁶ Support as it is thought about currently is problematic, but if we reframe our ideas of support we may find it to be a useful concept.

Michael McCallion describes support as ‘the refusal to collapse’, and “seen in this light support is not something you do, but something the contrary of which you inhibit—a non-doing rather than a doing.”⁶⁷ Non-doing allows less interference and therefore more efficiency. The refusal to collapse implies an idea of support but creates more possibilities. There is not one set way to ‘do’ support. Reid takes it a step further, suggesting that “in an ideal technique all of the muscular

⁶³ Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 67-68.

⁶⁴ Peterson, interview.

⁶⁵ Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 93.

⁶⁶ Heirich, 116.

⁶⁷ Alcantara, 94.

systems involved are in equilibrium, which means that they are self-supporting.”⁶⁸ Equilibrium is an excellent way to frame this concept. It ties in the idea of singing with the whole body, which is the reality. We do not have to do anything to support because our body supports itself naturally when we employ good Use. Michael Hanco, Alexander teacher and former student of Cornelius Reid, addresses it in terms of what is occurring in the vocal mechanism:

Really it's what's happening at the top of the tube that determines how good your support is. If your vocal cords are not able to maintain their approximation precisely then there's gonna be gaps in that and the air leaks out and you don't have a good support. But it does not come from the bottom and it certainly does not come from any kind of muscular engagement that one can do. But many people have come to me pushing their stomachs out or pulling their stomachs in or squeezing the ribs or doing something with their low back. Just creating all kinds of rigidity in the name of support. I never talk about support. I don't use the word, I don't think it's an important concept. I don't even think it's a useful concept.⁶⁹

Hanco returns to the concept of Use in relation to singing. The Use of our body affects our functioning, and how we use our vocal mechanism affects our sound. It all happens at the source, i.e. the vocal folds. As Reid said, it is impossible to ‘support’ vocal fold oscillations, and how the folds come together determines our management of air. Any other concept of support, one that causes excess tension, will only interfere. This includes what many people think about *appoggio* because they define it in a way similar to rib reserve. Pedro de Alcantara quotes Richard Miller describing the original intent of *appoggio*:

‘*Appoggio* embraces a total system in singing which includes not only support but resonance factors as well’ . . . [it] is a ‘total system’, of which breathing is but an aspect. Reid clarifies matters further: ‘It is true that when all of the muscular activities involved are in equilibrium one is aware of the body being in a comfortable, poised condition and of the voice being “supported.”’ But this feeling of support is an end result of good singing, not the process by which you improve your voice—an effect not a cause.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 94.

⁶⁹ Hanco, “A Conversation with Michael Hanco.”

⁷⁰ Alcantara, 94.

Appoggio in its original form as a ‘whole system’ is a very useful concept. Interpreting it to mean a state of keeping the ribs lifted on an exhale can cause issues. Returning to the original intent, or finding a way to redefine some of these concepts in terms of good Use and natural functioning, can help students sing with more efficient Use.

Practices for the studio

We have spent a fair amount of time discussing principles of the Alexander Technique as they apply to singing and misconceptions that exist for how to teach voice. Now we can consider what can realistically be done in order to help a student use these principles and sing with more efficiency. Again, none of the activities, games, and methods listed here will replace work done one-on-one with an Alexander Technique teacher. They will however start to build awareness and practice efficiency.

F.M. Alexander did not have ‘exercises’ for the Alexander Technique. In fact, performing activities for their own sake is just an opportunity to practice bad habits. With that in mind, remembering the principles we have outlined will help inhibit these habits and focus on a new Means-whereby. How we work on these principles is by “giving you a stimulus, and [then] your reacting to it. . . you go in and out of chairs, squat, walk, or lift your arms, not to perfect these different activities but to examine your reaction to a given stimulus, to become aware of what you are doing, to inhibit end-gaining and misuse, and to direct your whole self.”⁷¹ These will apply to any actions including those involving singing.

⁷¹ Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures*, 84.

The first thing we can do for our students is simple: be a good model. If we use ourselves well, students will unconsciously take our lead. Certified Alexander Technique and voice teacher Marisa de Silva describes how she uses modeling for both her benefit and the student's:

I am always conscious of [the Alexander Technique] when I teach—not only for my own student, but also for myself. If I find myself overworking or getting tense about something, I immediately think of my use and it allows me to live in the moment. With recent research in mirror neurons you are probably aware that students mimic the teacher's mannerisms/expressions etc. (and 'use,' of course) and I find that my own use actually affects the student in front of me through their mirror neurons. So, [the Alexander Technique] not only helps me in my own self-awareness, but also in my student's 'use' during the lessons.⁷²

We have already discussed how working on our own kinesthetic awareness can help the student with theirs, and this is right along those same lines. It can be difficult when teaching to focus on oneself when there are so many things to think about concerning the student. However, it can solve problems without any additional time used.

We have already discussed another great tool: using a mirror or a video recorder, which allows the student to visualize their habits in a concrete way. In fact, “most of what happens in studio is about awareness of habit. The exercises can be quite personal between teachers and students. The important thing is the focus on the student realizing their habit and possible new experience when the habit isn't engaged.”⁷³ It may take some creativity, but ultimately whatever works to help students achieve these new experiences will be beneficial. Dr. Peterson says she “always tried as many different methods as [she] could, from simple walking, ball bouncing, elastic bands, sitting in chairs with the legs up on another chair, to the use of a complex balance board for the more advanced singers.”⁷⁴ Special tools are not necessary but can be useful aids in creating new sensations and experiences.

⁷² Marisa De Silva, interview by Paige Sentianin, Email message to author, February 19, 2018.

⁷³ Snider, interview.

⁷⁴ Peterson, interview.

The next thing to consider in the studio is how we communicate instructions to our students. It is a matter of semantics, but it is surprising how much certain words and phrases affect results. For example, there is a debate about whether imagery or ‘technical’ language is more useful for students. Of course, we must consider that all students think differently so a teacher has to be adaptable regardless. From an Alexander Technique perspective, we can make a good case for using imagery because it allows students make their own discoveries and sense how the instructions work in their bodies. This is not to say we should not explain the science of singing or use anatomical charts. We should all study this information and make sure our students have an accurate knowledge base. However, if we think about the benefits of non-doing, then perhaps less mention of precise terms will help prevent ‘doing’ and excess tension when we are trying to achieve efficient singing. This may mean playing with direct and indirect language:

I do sometimes address things directly because sometimes it works, but there’s always the danger when you tell somebody what to do with a part of themselves that they will latch onto that as, ‘now I’ve got it.’ Then what they did a little bit becomes a caricature of itself. Like, if I told somebody that their tongue was going back and down and to think of their tongue going forward, that might work really well for a few minutes. But then they’re starting to actually put their tongue forward and tense it in the opposite direction. So what started out as addressing an imbalance has become a new imbalance. It’s my preference to find indirect ways; like if somebody was pulling their tongue back I might design an exercise that I thought would get their tongue going forward without having to mention their tongue. That’s always my first strategy, to see if I can indirectly allow something to come about. That’s when the creativity of teaching really comes in.⁷⁵

When we do want to use direct language, the Alexander Technique encourages the use of the words ‘allow’ and ‘let’. For example, “‘Allow your experience of the breath to be lower, or more into your back.’ . . . Let the soft palate raise as you exhale on a whispered ‘ah’. Depending on the student it can be more effective to be more aggressive. Just watch and see what tends to work.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Hanko, “A Conversation with Michael Hanko.”

⁷⁶ Snider, interview.

Using this wording creates the space for the student to stop their own interfering and tap into their natural function. Most of all it is important to keep an open mind and never stop trying new ways to say things. As Hanko describes it, “whatever it takes to kind of trick a student into doing something a little more freely.”⁷⁷ Every teacher will find what gets them the best results.

Body Mapping

When we build a student’s knowledge base in vocal technique, it is incredibly useful for singing to include Body Mapping. In the authoritative text on Body Mapping for singers, *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*, the body map is defined as “your mental representation of your body’s size, structure, and function. . . Because your body map governs your movement, you move according to what you believe about your body.”⁷⁸ This means if we have an inaccurate picture of our bodies then we have the potential for misuse. For example, a common mapping mistake is when a singer “erroneously believes he has an ‘upper jaw’ [so he] will try to open his mouth with the non-existent upper jaw. . . Because he has mapped two jaws instead of one, and tries to open his mouth as if he had an upper jaw and a lower jaw, his head must tilt slightly back in order to open his imagined upper jaw. Therefore, his movement is awkward, and his singing is tense.”⁷⁹ To prevent such misuse, a voice teacher can help the student map these areas in their own body. Then, it is important to translate this information into movement. Co-author of this text MaryJean Allen states:

You must learn the anatomical information to correct and refine your body map, but your map will not be refined or corrected until you translate the anatomical information into movement. . . Once you have that, you can use your kinesthetic and inclusive awareness to move in ways that produce a healthy and graceful musical performance.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Hanko, “A Conversation.”

⁷⁸ Allen, “Body Mapping, Kinesthesia, and Inclusive Awareness,” in *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*, 2.

⁷⁹ Allen, 4.

⁸⁰ Allen, 3.

The voice teacher can address this in the studio by pointing out ways in which the student moves according to an accurate versus and inaccurate body map. For example, seeing the student bend over to stretch in a forward-fold from the hip joint would show an accurate map translated into movement. This also may be a useful tool for when a student does not find imagery helpful.

There are several steps for correcting body map. First, the student can study anatomical illustrations. They can also use the mirror and compare their imagination of their body to what they see. Then, they can also draw the area to be mapped (and they do not need to worry about artistic ability). Making sure they are not afraid to ask specific questions about the size and shape of parts, where it is located, and how it moves in relation of the parts to the whole will help as well. Finally, it is important to move their body according to what they now know.⁸¹

Tools for Breathing

Although the Alexander Technique does not advocate for ‘exercises’, and for good reason, there are movement activities voice teachers can do with students in the studio to reinforce some of the principles we have discussed. The purpose of these is simply to introduce new experiences and sensations to students, and hopefully expand awareness and open up possibilities. They should be done with an open mind and a spirit of discovery.

For the first exercise, the student should pick a couple lines of an easy song. Then, the teacher will read this series of instructions to the student, and the student should think them and allow their body to respond:

[Before breathing, remember:] The inhale will help you define your length, width, and depth and lead you to your best support. [Now:] Let the air come in above your tongue and travel all the way down to your sit bones and then into your feet, lengthening your body in two directions at once. Start each phrase by catching the initial movement of your air as it turns

⁸¹ Allen, “Body Mapping, Kinesthesia, and Inclusive Awareness,” in *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*, 5.

around to an exhale and singing on that air. Make sure not to blow the air or push it up through your body by squeezing your ribs.⁸²

The first phrase helps the student visualize the breath they are about to do, and what that breath is trying to achieve. The idea of catching the initial movement of the air as it turns around to an exhale encourages true efficiency. The next exercises reinforce this idea:

Choose a song or monologue and speak/sing the first phrase/line, or ‘one breath’s worth.’ Wait and allow the breath to return before proceeding to the second phrase/line of text. . . This ‘waiting and allowing’ mode of working makes a mess out of the rhythmic flow of the poem or song, and is therefore disconcerting to many people; but it is a very effective way to re-educate breathing habits. . . Elastic rebound is the name of the game; and if you do not block the air out, it will come in as needed.⁸³

[First instruction:] Permit the diaphragm to relax back into its domed shape, rather than forcing it back with extra push from the abdominal muscles. The second [instruction] is to allow the intercostal muscles slowly to go back to their starting place rather than trying to squeeze the air out of the lungs forcefully. Here is where the request to ‘think up’ comes to our rescue: If the musculature of the whole system is working well, we will naturally have a slow leak of air for singing and we will not collapse on the exhale.⁸⁴

These emphasize the elasticity of natural breath during which air will come in without ‘doing’ anything. These also help release excess abdominal tension. Some may think that exercises such as these cause breathing that is too ‘lazy’ and therefore cannot be used to support singing. This is because their habits tell them they need more effort than is actually necessary, and if they continue to work on this method of breathing the sound would get stronger with new coordination. We can also perform activities with more physical movement:

A very simple one is just looking straight forward while twisting the body. I’m sort of flailing my arms out, spinning like a helicopter, letting my body twist at the atlanto-occipital joint while my head stays forward. . . You can sing while you’re doing those spirals and it’s been mind-blowing how effective that is. Because—and this is where we get to the abs—another thing that twisting makes it really hard to do is any kind of “support” with the abdominal muscles. It

⁸² Rodiger, “5 Alexander Technique Tips.”

⁸³ Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 38.

⁸⁴ Heirich, 37.

helps the abs to remain neutral while people sing and that has enabled me (and my voice teacher also, I presume) to clear up a list of vocal challenges you would not believe.⁸⁵

The effects are indeed very apparent, as one will discover when they give it a try. It creates a sense of great freedom in the entire body, a feeling which translates when singing. There are also exercises that offer a new perception of ‘support’:

[Imitating crawling like a baby:] Face the wall. . . Give yourself room to be able to move your arms. . . Take a wide enough stance so that you feel balanced and secure, toes close to the wall, body leaning into the wall, resting on your forehead or on your side. If you prefer, your whole body can be slightly farther away from the wall, with your arms up alongside the head, elbows bent, arms but not forehead resting on the wall. The wall is now your ‘floor,’ and you can reach up and out with alternating hands and arms, or with both arms simultaneously in order to crawl up the wall. Make sound with the ‘pull to the elbows,’ [sensing a pulling sensation in the direction that the elbows are pointing, whether straight down or at an oblique angle] always allowing the breath to return. Think about releasing your head up toward the ceiling. (Remember that this should not be a ‘doing’ or trying to make the release happen.) . . . The front of your torso is lengthened from the pubic bones up to the collarbones as you ‘pull from the fingertips to the elbows’ and make some sound. This lengthening up the front of the torso tones up the muscles and we can feel supported. Then, come away from the wall and compare this sound to when you use a traditional idea of ‘support’, such as tightening the abs, buttocks, etc.⁸⁶

This exercise takes some practice and experimentation in order to see any benefits because it is rather long and complicated. It does have the potential to be useful, however. The wall helps enforce the idea of lengthening without overextension. When contrasted with the traditional concept of ‘support’, it will highlight the differences in tension.

Constructive Rest

Constructive rest is fundamental to the Alexander Technique. It involves lying down in a semi-supine position, meaning the back is on the floor, the knees are bent, and the feet are flat on the floor. In order to maintain a natural curve of the spine in the neck, it is helpful to place a thin (about an inch thick, but it depends on the person) paperback book under the head. This activity

⁸⁵ Hanko, “A Conversation with Michael Hanko.”

⁸⁶ Heirich, 123.

allows for exploration of awareness and true rest to release excess tension. It is something anyone can do at anytime because it is not harmful and it has numerous benefits. It can be used for a variety of things: “In my group voice class I use constructive rest quite a bit. This not only seems to calm down a student's nervous system, it allows for the student to become aware of tension habits (for example, holding of the breath).”⁸⁷ Furthermore, adding singing to constructive rest can be very revealing. It can help show us how much excess tension we use to sing when we are standing:

Singing in the lying-down position takes us out of our usual habits. It is confusing to some people, because to them the voice sounds and feels weak or ‘wimpy.’ This may be true particularly if they are habituated to using excess abdominal muscle work for singing. When we are in the Lie-Down position, things do not work the same in relation to gravity as they do in the upright posture; and this has the benefit of allowing us to approach things in a fresh way.

⁸⁸

The following exercise helps with building awareness in constructive rest. These are Directions that the student must think, but not try to ‘do’:

Allow your neck muscles to release any excess tension. Allow your head to go forward and out, away from your spine. Allow your back to lengthen and widen. Allow your shoulders to widen away from each other. Allow your elbows to release away from one another. Allow your right shoulder to spread away from your left hip and your left shoulder to spread away from your right hip. Allow your knees to move away from the back towards the ceiling. Allow your feet to spread apart, including your toes, to lengthen away from the feet.⁸⁹

An added benefit of this activity is that it can help change how we perceive the relationships between some of these body parts (such as the right shoulder and the left hip). Constructive rest can also be a great tool for instilling a sense of natural breath, one that is done without preparation.

It is important to note that the sound may be weaker at first:

Assume the Lie-Down position and observe yourself in that moment between the decision to speak or sing and the actual moment of making sound. Without any preparation of your

⁸⁷ De Silva, interview.

⁸⁸ Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 52.

⁸⁹ Weiss, *The Alexander Technique and the Art of Teaching Voice*, 56.

breath—just use what is already there in the pipeline—. . . sing a song phrase. See if you can use less muscular effort than you habitually do now that you are letting gravity and the floor take care of you. Wait until the breath returns before saying the second line or singing the second phrase.⁹⁰

This can be disconcerting for singers, again because they are not used to using less effort to breathe and sing. They should be aware of the weaker sound before doing the exercise so they do not try to compensate by tensing the throat.

Tools for Awareness

This exercise helps highlight the contrast between the sensations of being free in the body and not being free. The actions listed are only a few possibilities, the teacher can decide what actions work best for their students:

Move the head on top of the spine to its freest motion, and then have students make a fist, grab the floor with their toes, play air guitar, or sing, and notice that the movement of the head becomes quite constricted and the neck tightens. This also gives an introduction to the thought of primary control.⁹¹

The results of this are staggering. We can feel how much tension a small act such as clenching the fist can cause throughout the whole body. This reinforces the idea that any such action can greatly affect our singing. Similarly: “If the student does not know what freeing means, imagining and experiencing the opposite, i.e. tightening for a short period of time, helps to create an understanding of freeing and releasing up.”⁹²

Then, we have an exercise that has particular benefits for jaw awareness, which the teacher can read to the student and have the student sense in their own body:

Keep gently lengthening through your easy neck behind your tongue and jaw out through the top your head (no reaching or pulling on your neck) while your head balances on the top of your spine. . . Let your tongue be easy and wide, and your jaw move on your skull from the joint (back by your ears) so it doesn’t disturb the balance of your head on your spine. Through

⁹⁰ Heinrich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 82.

⁹¹ Snider, interview.

⁹² Weiss, *The Alexander Technique and the Art of Teaching Voice*, 33.

developing an awareness and conscious perception of the head-neck tongue and jaw independently you will be more aware of the whole. And you will have a better ability to articulate your vowels and consonants.⁹³

We can also do the following activity to build awareness of using the whole body while singing:

To find your whole body, sense the ground and your own body weight through the bottom of your feet (let your feet spread out on the floor – no gripping of the toes of arches of the feet) into the ground. Notice that you can then sense an easy upward motion coming up from the ground through your entire body and out the top of your head. This buoyancy comes from keeping all of your joints free and easy – from your ankles to the top of your spine (keeping all of the natural curves in your spine so your neck isn't over straightened). Allow this movement to happen by letting your body balance easily rather than "fixing" or 'reaching' for a position or direction.⁹⁴

Many of these exercises bring awareness to the feet and ankles, which are areas that many singers do not think about when they are singing. Allowing for freedom in these areas can have profound effects, so these exercises are quite practical to have in our toolbox.

The following exercises are all partner 'games', according to Jane Heirich. Therefore, they are ideal for the teacher and student to perform in the studio, or for the student to do with a friend under the teacher's supervision. The reason why it is helpful to have a partner there when beginning to create an awareness of habits is because the other person can better see what may be difficult to perceive in oneself at first.

Lightly put a soft, opened-out hand on the back of your friend's neck as s/he moves across the room. What do you notice? Any unnecessary activity in the neck muscles gets in the way of good function.⁹⁵

This partner game is to be done very gently, with no more force than absolutely necessary. . . Partner #1 lightly puts one hand at the forehead and one at the base of the skull of partner #2. #1 very gently nods the head of #2 as if to make #2 say 'yes.' (If the head doesn't move, don't force it to do so. Stop the game or switch roles.) The challenge is for #2 is to let the partner do the nodding for her and not to do it herself. Partner #1's task is to notice what happens to the

⁹³ Rodiger, "5 Alexander Technique Tips."

⁹⁴ Rodiger, "5 Alexander Technique Tips."

⁹⁵ Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 76.

freedom of #2's head and neck during the game.⁹⁶

This is definitely a partner game. Face each other and shake hands as in greeting one another. Decide who is the Swinger (the one who swings the other's arm) and who is the Swingee (the one whose arm is being swung). The Swingee will let his/her arm be swung gently within the normal range of the arm. Sometimes it takes a while for the arms to get going in an easy swing; and if either partner is especially tense throughout the shoulder girdle, the game may not work . . . Once the arms get swinging as freely as possible, the Swinger closes the eyes and tells the Swingee to start doing some subtle movements. Some possible activities: clenching the jaw, locking the knees, making a fist with the other hand, scrunching up the toes, tightening the buttocks, and at least once—holding the breath. It works best if there is a moment between the Swingee's varied actions, which the Swinger tries to do without being detected. With eyes closed, the Swinger comments on whether it suddenly becomes difficult to swing the arm, for example, or whether the Swingee seems to be trying to take over the control of the movement.

⁹⁷

This last exercise is fun to do because it really feels like a game. The result is still just as meaningful; the changes in tension and freedom really are apparent.

Additional Tools: Whispered 'Ah' and Monkey

The whispered 'ah' is just as it sounds: it is a whispered vowel, usually an 'ah' that helps teach new breath coordination. The exact procedure is as follows:

The first directive to a pupil is 'to notice where his tongue is and to leave it with the tip touching his lower teeth. . . As you begin to explore the whisper mode, think about the beginning of a yawn or an 'inner smile,' which coaxes the soft palate into a dome. . . [it] will 'relax his lips and free the passages leading to the throat'. . . The [α] vowel was often chosen because that particular vowel shape requires you to open the mouth vertically, releasing the lower jaw slightly down and forward with gravity.'⁹⁸

It is useful to whisper because we often do not have too many severe habits involved in it.

Whispering is often thought to be damaging, but in reality it "does not include vocal fold vibration.

It occurs when the vocal folds are held together just closely enough that air flowing between them creates a 'rushing' sound. . . A soft, easily produced whisper is not abusive to the healing voice."⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 92-93.

⁹⁷ Heirich, 92.

⁹⁸ Heirich, 88.

⁹⁹ Heirich, 85.

However, those who have had or currently have nodules should avoid this exercise. Heirich explains the benefits for those who can do it:

To my mind the genius of the Whispered [α] is this: The exhale uses up breath energy by whispering a vowel; and the inhale will then happen if we leave things alone after we are done with the exhaling task. It is startling in its simplicity. With this ‘allowing’ kind of thinking, we start at a different point in the breathing cycle from an all too common way of teaching breathing for singing: ‘Make sure you take a deep breath before you sing anything’ . . . It is often very difficult to persuade classically trained soloists or choral singers that they can sing a note, speak a line, or do a Whispered [α] without their usual preparation.¹⁰⁰

The final exercise we will discuss is Monkey. When learning how to do Monkey, it is useful to the motion of the back as if it were a teeter-totter (or see-saw). In Monkey, we bend at the hip joint and form a sort of squat with knees and ankles providing a counter-balance (like a monkey). We have to imagine the top of the spine is directing up and the bottom of the tailbone directing down, so it is one continuous line of opposing directions. When we go from standing to Monkey, the swing creates the motion similar to the teeter-totter.

There are at least three advantages of working with a Monkey while developing the singing voice. First, the speaker/singer’s larynx—housing the vocal folds (vocal cords)—may experience for the first time what it is like to hang freely, because gravity works on us at a different angle in the Monkey position than when we are standing vertically . . . Vocalizing in a Monkey also directly benefits the lower jaw, which can learn to hang more easily from the skull . . . A third and major benefit of the Monkey is that it can dramatically affect the rib cage. Freeing up a fixed rib cage is more likely to happen in Monkey than any other position . . . Gravity directly assists with natural, unforced breathing.¹⁰¹

We can then use Monkey with breathing and singing and explore these effects. The precise body use in Monkey is hard to determine without an Alexander Technique teacher, but as long as it is experimented with carefully it can still provide useful feedback.

¹⁰⁰ Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique*, 89.

¹⁰¹ Heirich, 108-109.

Conclusion

The goal of this research and the purpose of this guide is ultimately to give voice teachers a higher quantity—but more importantly, quality—of information and tools to help students sing more freely and efficiently. We all study the art of singing because we respect the craft and wish to perpetuate it into the future; this means we rejoice not because a singer merely sounds good, but because their ease and ability allow them to transcend technique and surrender completely to artistry. This is what the Alexander Technique was created to achieve: getting rid of unnecessary interferences so we can focus on the art. Using the principles and methods outlines here, we can return to natural singing and our love of music, and let go of everything else.

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