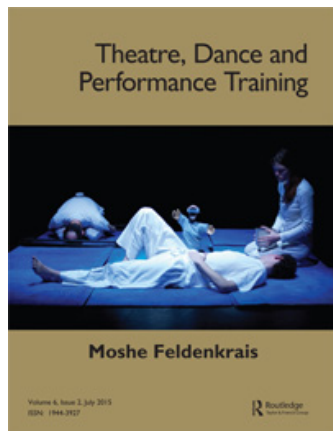


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Connecting through the breath towards expressive communication in performance: an enquiry into the training of opera singers

Rebecca Meitlis

This article explores how poor communication in performance by opera singers can be the result of limitations in natural breathing and how, in turn, improving the breathing and awareness of the movement of the breath through the Feldenkrais Method® can improve a singer's self-image, and become a foundation for a more expressive performance. Looking at these limiting factors – the method of teaching and learning the Feldenkrais Method®, recent writings on brain plasticity and Kristin Linklater's work on freeing the natural voice – we see how an individual can change unhelpful patterns of behaviour and experience breathing and singing with their whole body. This paper is based on four interviews with participants from the Opera Academy at the National Opera, Teatr Wielki in Warsaw, Poland.

- I. Thanks to Beata Klatka, Artistic Administrator, Opera Academy, for her vision in including Feldenkrais lessons as an integral part of the Academy courses; Professors Anita Garanča, Eytan Pessen, Isabella Klosinska, Matthias Rexroth, and Paola Larina for their insights in developing young singers and wealth of knowledge and experience; the young artists from the Opera Academy for their engagement, curiosity and generosity in sharing their discoveries; Henrietta Bredin, Ian Rutherford, Anna Carlisle and Eytan Pessen for their valuable suggestions and help with editing.

Keywords: opera singers, breathing, Feldenkrais, Kristin Linklater

Introduction¹

'A lovely voice but he didn't move me.'

The first time I realised that I could apply my Feldenkrais training to classically trained singers was at a lunchtime recital. It was given by a young baritone; he had excellent technique, good grasp of style, perfect diction, but I was completely unmoved. After a bit my gaze rested on his wide, shiny tie that did not move and there was no movement beneath it. It was like an armour plate across his sternum. This area of the body is associated with the outpouring of emotional feelings. Sometimes it has to be protected, but if rigidly protected will stem the expression of deep emotion. This is what singing is concerned with: our deepest, most intimate emotions.

Opera singers need their whole physicality, intelligence and all their emotional resources to produce the vocal and acting skills for the art form.

You would expect that with their specialised breath control, amazing range of notes, and ability to be heard by vast audiences over an orchestra without a microphone, they would be fully aware of the potential of their breathing. However, in the work I have done with students and young professionals I have found this is not always the case. What then are the limiting factors? I would like to explore how the Feldenkrais Method® helps to develop an awareness of breathing and consequently that the more a performer can be conscious of their breath, the more powerful their performance will be.

It is through breathing that musical meaning, textual meaning and emotional veracity are expressed. It is also an important way in which musicians interrelate with each other. As Kristin Linklater says, 'The ultimate controls for the breath are thoughts and feelings'² (Linklater 2006, p. 64).

2. Interestingly, the vocal coach Kristin Linklater talks about the formative body work she did in the 1970s, which includes the Feldenkrais Method®.

Background

My background is directing opera. What I am interested in as a director is how a performer with this phenomenon of the operatic voice can communicate with an audience and move them. I am not a vocal teacher; I do not teach breathing technique for singing. However, I think that the way in which a singer experiences breathing is fundamental to how they perform.

This article is based on my work at the Opera Academy of the National Opera, Teatr Wielki in Warsaw.³ At the Opera Academy a select group of international young soloists works intensively for week-long residencies with a range of specialists: conductors, vocal teachers, language coaches and directors.

I have based my enquiry on interviews with four of the singers, my observations in coaching sessions, rehearsals, and performances and my notes from group classes and one-to-one Feldenkrais sessions. For the interviews I selected singers who had expressed an interest in the effects of the Feldenkrais work on their development and were confident in speaking English. Of the interviewees, Tomasz and Diana have had lessons over a period of two and a half years, Joanna for a year and Jakub Józef for six months.

During the residencies the singers take part in daily Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons and each singer has at least one Functional Integration (FI) session with me. Awareness Through Movement lessons are the group lessons that Moshe Feldenkrais devised to guide participants through experiences of themselves in movement. There are hundreds of these beautifully structured lessons. I liken them to compositions; each one has a clear theme, there are sets of variations, a return to the original theme, sometimes an improvisation section and often a coda. The lessons are spoken and not demonstrated. Functional Integration lessons are one-to-one sessions based on the same strategies as ATMs but adapted to the individual. In FI lessons awareness is encouraged primarily by touch.

When singers perform, they are concerned with the music, the role, the narrative, and the text, which often will not be in their native tongue so they are also thinking of the translation and meaning. They interact with their fellow singers, watch the conductor, and need to remember what the director, vocal coach, language coach and choreographer have demanded. How can all this be unified in a performance that thrills and is cohesive? How can a singer's imagination, creativity and intuition be freed to communicate

3. This is a short video about the work of the Opera Academy. The section on the Feldenkrais work starts from 5:30: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQq0VVxQdG4&feature=youtu.be>

their own interpretation and artistry? Can this be done with ease, spontaneity and enjoyment?

How can the Feldenkrais Method® help?

My first workshop in Warsaw was a trial session to see if the singers and staff thought the method could be a useful addition to their programme. Anita Garanča, the highly respected Latvian vocal coach, observed this first session and afterwards exclaimed, 'I am always asking my students to have more movement in their ribs and feel grounded, but you have shown them HOW!' Indeed the simple 45-minute lesson helped the singers feel, with pleasure, new spaces in the torso where they could feel the breath 'invited in' as they found more mobility in the chest. When they came to standing they were better balanced with the weight clearly through their planted feet and several of them felt the experience of being 'grounded' for the first time. This is something teachers demand of students, but if they have never had that experience how can they know what it means? Once having experienced 'groundedness' it is a state of being that can be called upon.

The Feldenkrais Method® can help discover the potential of our breathing mechanism, and find out how it feels when we breathe completely and freely. By observing ourselves and noticing our habits of stopping the breath, or limiting the intake of breath by not exhaling sufficiently, or restricting the movement of the chest, we can begin a new learning process. This exploration of the movement of the breath encourages a fascination and pleasure in this most basic human function. Singers are hungry for this renewed experience of breathing.

The experience of breathing

As a teenager I was confused about breathing, having studied voice and flute and it seemed that every teacher told me something different. Which was right? It was during my Feldenkrais training that I realised there is no 'right' way to breathe, but a myriad ways to breathe for different functions.

As Moshe Feldenkrais repeatedly states: 'I would never say, "This is correct" or "This is incorrect". To me nothing is correct.' His intention was to explore possibilities and then for the student to be free to choose that which is most appropriate for a particular function.

In relation to singing Elizabeth Blades-Zeller, professor of voice, says:

'It is very easy to fall into the trap of thinking that there is one right way to breathe. Actually there are many options available for breathing. Only a few of these are effective for singing, and for any singer there will be a best way to breathe at any time'. (Nelson and Blades-Zeller 2002, p. 76)

How we breathe is an immensely complex matter. Luckily we rarely have to think about it. It happens. But it happens with many different qualities in many different ways. We can breathe fast and heavily as a result of physical effort; the cause of this can be explained physiologically; the chemoreceptors in the

medulla oblongata and in the aortic bodies alert the respiratory centre that levels of oxygen have fallen and levels of carbon dioxide increased and then messages are sent to the muscles of respiration to redress the balance. Or we can sigh with pleasure at a beautiful view, so there has been a psychological effect on the quality of breathing. So what is it that controls a singer's breath? Is it the chemoreceptors or thought? When is it a pragmatic thought: 'I must breathe here for this phrase' or an imaginative thought: 'I love you'?

The process

In my work with singers I do not teach breathing technique lessons. I have collected a constellation of ATM lessons that together allow the breath to flow freely and responsively. These lessons lead to exploring breathing and help the student to have a gestalt experience of themselves, breathing freely and effortlessly, at ease with themselves, and in a state of readiness to perform.

To have this experience of breathing, a number of physical conditions need to be in place, these include: being in a state of balance; a sense of support from the ground and your feet; freedom in the pelvis; flexible, well-articulated spine, mobile ribs and sternum. As Feldenkrais explains:

the skeletal structure should counteract the pull of gravity, leaving the muscles free for movement. If, on the other hand, the muscles have to carry out the job of the skeleton, not only do they use energy needlessly, but they are prevented from carrying out their main function of changing the position of the body, that is, of movement. + (Feldenkrais 1972, p. 68)

As the function of the skeleton becomes clearer to the student, parasitic movements that might limit the freedom of breathing can be identified. Feldenkrais coined the phrase 'parasitic movements' to explain unconscious movements that not only are not necessary for a function but also impede this function. For instance, clenching your fist when singing can limit the movement of the chest, curling the toes can cause imbalance, or a slight raising of a shoulder cause tension in the throat. After this, students learn how to use appropriate tonus of the muscles of the abdomen, ribs, neck, shoulders, jaw and tongue, for their breathing and voice.

There is no linear way to learn all of this. The order in which I deliver the lessons depends on the group's needs. There are many lessons that can address these related issues. The following selection demonstrates some of the basics to experience greater freedom of breathing:

- Feeling balanced in standing or being grounded, e.g. *Co-ordinating the flexors and extensors* (Feldenkrais 1972, Lesson 5, p. 109) or the *Pelvic Clock* (Feldenkrais 1972, Lesson 6, p. 115).
- *Lengthening the spine*, and feeling the breath along the spine (Arlyn Zones London training).
- Releasing unnecessary effort in the shoulders and neck (Ruthy Alon, *The Grammar of Spontaneity*, Audio set, 1978).
- Freeing the shoulder girdle from the rib cage, such as the *Chanukia* (Feldenkrais 1994, vol. 1, part 1, p. 103).

- Sensing the movement of the ribs in relation to the shoulder *blades*, as in *Breathing and mobility in the shoulders and the entire side* (Beringer, 2009. *Embodied Learning: Focus on Breathing*, audio CD).
- Finding flexibility in the sternum (Feldenkrais 1974, vol. 5, #217).
- *Freeing the jaw and exploring the mouth cavity* (Variations from Feldenkrais practitioners, Livia Calice, Günter Bisges and David Zemach-Bersin based on several *Alexander Yanai Lessons*).
- *Carriage of the head* (Feldenkrais 1972, Lesson 7, p. 123).
- Finding movement in the ribs, e.g. *Mobility of the chest* (Mary Spire audio CD series; *Five Awareness Through Movement Lessons for Musicians/Computer Keyboard Users*, 2004).

Through these lessons the student can experience changes in their physicality and psychological state that can lead to freer breathing and a new image of themselves. To complete this learning cycle and help students take back what they have learnt in Feldenkrais classes to their coaching sessions and performances, I suggest that they use their own images or phrases to recall their newfound kinaesthetic experiences. We also discuss how they can create their own mini ATMs to use when needed.

Teaching and learning in the Feldenkrais Method®

It is not only what is learnt but also how the teaching and learning happens that is significant. Essential to the way Feldenkrais is taught is to observe yourself non-judgementally as you are at that moment in time and space. This in itself can be a challenge to musicians whose whole training is towards perfection and excellence achieved by unrelenting self-criticism. Once students notice differences in themselves throughout a lesson they can then learn how to change habitual patterns of behaviour.⁴ For the performer it is also an exercise in being present, and that invaluable feeling of being comfortable with yourself in the here and now. The experience of your 'self' throughout a lesson, whether it is an ATM or FI can be thought of as a lesson in phenomenology. The only chance to move forward, according to Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* is 'by being unrestrictedly and unreservedly what I am at present' (Friedman 1964, p. 148).

As a teacher I often question the role I play in this process of change. I am not teaching knowledge, facts and opinions but rather, creating an environment in which learning can happen, something Feldenkrais frequently expounded.

The way Carl R. Rogers, the humanistic psychologist, wrote about learning change in *On becoming a Person* helps explain this process.

No approach which relies on knowledge, upon training, upon the acceptance of something that is *taught*, is of any use . . . The most they can accomplish is some temporary change, which soon disappears . . .

The failure of any such approach through intellect has forced me to recognise that change appears to come about through *experience in relationship*. (Friedman 1964, pp. 479–480)

4. Gregory Bateson, anthropologist and husband of Margaret Mead who was a student of Feldenkrais, develops this idea of learning through difference throughout his works specifically in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972).

Rogers describes his approach as based on his own ‘transparency, empathy for his client and openness to his potentialities’. He cites Martin Buber’s phrase ‘confirming the other’:

He [Buber] says, ‘confirming the other means ... accepting the whole potentiality of the other ...’ If I accept him as a process of becoming, then I am doing what I can to confirm or make real his potentialities. (Friedman 1964, pp. 479–480)

I have previously thought of myself as ‘witnessing’ the student’s journey but I find this idea of Buber’s of ‘confirming’ is much more true to the experience of relationship in a lesson.

It is through this ‘experience in relationship’ of Feldenkrais lessons that I am constantly surprised by the effect a lesson might have on an individual. Each student will have their unique discoveries arising from their previous experiences and image of themselves.

What are the limiting factors of easy breathing?

I have chosen to look at the following three interrelated limitations to easy breathing:

- Misinterpretation of breathing technique.
- A lack of understanding of anatomy.
- Incomplete or restrictive self-image.

Misinterpretation of breathing technique

The breathing technique itself, or rather a misunderstanding of the technique being taught, can cause problems. In some cases the singer over-develops the muscles of the torso so that elasticity is diminished. This limits ease of breathing and the capacity of breath.⁵ Over-developed, muscular rigidity detrimentally affects the voice, causes discomfort for the singer and like armour curbs expressivity. The musculature must be ready to respond to the physical and emotional demands of the music.

Recent developments in understanding brain plasticity, which is how the neural pathways continually change and develop through thought and activity, help to explain how Feldenkrais lessons are effective. Although Freud proposed this concept as early as 1888, it is only in the last decades that these changes can be perceived because of technological innovations in imaging the brain. Norman Doidge (2007, p. 208), in his overview of these developments cites the neurologist Pascual-Leone, explains that the brain is so plastic that it is changing all the time. However, plasticity can create rigidity through repeated behaviours. Doidge (2007, pp. xvi, 242–243) terms this ‘the plastic paradox’. This concept can help a singer understand how they have created their own limitations, such as rigid musculature and how they can choose to change. Feldenkrais lessons help recognise such unhelpful behaviour patterns and develop new, more beneficial options.

5. Mabel Todd, author of *The Thinking Body*, has a full description of breathing in Chapter VIII and specifically about this problem on page 231: ‘Wide and too full breathing brings into play the upper accessory muscles, before the diaphragm has made its fullest possible vertical excursion ... The result of this type of breathing if taken to its extreme, is to tense all muscles of the shoulder structure, neck and jaw and to reduce the longitudinal diameter of the chest cavity by increasing the horizontal diameter. If the vertical depth is attained, to the full extent of the stretch of the thoracic spine, the expansion horizontally will accompany it in extended breathing’.

A lack of understanding of anatomy

Singers are often unaware of the anatomy of breathing. They might not have an accurate idea of the size of their lungs, or realise how much movement there is in the ribs, both at the sternum and spine connections. They might not feel the movement of their breath in their spine, or realise how breathing connects to their pelvis, legs and locomotion. There can be a mismatch between what they have seen in illustrations and videos and what they actually feel in their own body. Two-dimensional representations of anatomy cannot convey the information a singer needs. Personal testimonies of how Feldenkrais lessons, both individual and ATMs, can help with these misunderstanding of anatomy are given in the following extracts from the singers' interviews.

6. Jakub Józef O. is a countertenor and is finishing his studies at Frederick Chopin University of Music. As well as training as an opera singer he is a dedicated break-dancer. He was interested in Feldenkrais lessons to help him find a way to use his body in such contrasting ways. The following videos show his remarkable challenge. Here he is singing Ruggiero in Handel's *Alcina* at the Aachen Theatre: <http://vimeo.com/95490026>. The following extract shows him in a break-dance battle: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeZvMzgu7LY>

7. The lesson was *The Chanukia*, see the section on the Feldenkrais work starting from 5:30: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQq0VWxQdG4&feature=youtu.be>

8. This relates to the idea Body Mapping, your mental representation of your body's size, structure and function and how the individual's concept of their body map affects their potential in functional movement. For a full description of Body Mapping for singers see Malde et al. (2009).

Józef:⁶

RM: In your first individual session we investigated what you thought about your breathing capacity. How big did you think your lungs were?

JO: They were small [pointing to the level of his nipples to the bottom of the sternum], maybe 10–15 cm long. Now I feel my lungs from here [pointing below his navel], to here [pointing to under the clavicle] and starting very deep. I feel the length now is half a metre or even more! After the group session today⁷ I felt the same and if I remember this feeling in performance I am really comfortable. Now I know how deeply I can go with my breath, how far down and how wide my ribs can be.⁸ I feel my whole body is filling up with breath.

I am curious how Józef takes this experiential learning into his artistic life:

RM: Are there any contradictions between what you are doing for break-dancing and for singing?

JO: Yes, you have to learn how to use your body so you are not so tight when you are doing those movements and to keep the breathing really flexible and deeper for singing. In singing you have to be ... I don't want to say relaxed ... not relaxed but conscious of how the muscles need to be flexible, but in breaking there are a lot of specific moves like 'figures' where all the muscles have to be really tight. This is really interesting. This is a challenge I am working on.

RM: Here in the Opera Academy you have the opportunity to work with wonderful vocal coaches. Is there anything that we have done in your sessions that connects with what they are asking you to do?

JO: Yes most of all in the Handel cantata I am singing. There are extremely long coloratura phrases. Before I was breathing every two bars, but now I am singing the whole phrase on one breath and with dynamics. I was impressed with myself, it was really surprising that I can use your method for what Eytan and Matthias are asking because my body is prepared to do things.

9. Joanna M. is a mezzo-soprano; she is currently a soloist with Białystok Opera and has her debut at Frankfurt Opera in 2015 in Weinberg's opera *The Passenger*.

10. This is how Elizabeth Blades-Zeller (2002, p. 75) explains this 'long' breath that Joanna and Józef describe: 'The lungs open in 6 directions, forward, where the ribs and belly expand; backward where the spine lengthens and the viscera move back, and the ribs expand, to the left and right where the ribs and belly expands, upwards lifting the scapulae and clavicle and down into the pelvic girdle. Should any of these movements be impeded there will be a corresponding restriction in the flow of air.'

11. Tomasz K. is a baritone who finished his studies at Frederick Chopin University of Music, and has recently sung in *Lohengrin* at the Teatr Wielki. He has joined the Atelier Lyric at the Bastille Opera in Paris.

And with Joanna:⁹

RM: We've done a lot of work together on breathing and the movement of the ribs. Can you describe what you thought about breathing before?

JM: Before I started Feldenkrais I thought I had no problem with breathing but you showed me how I wasn't using the back of my chest, my back was just like a stick, and my ribs were just moving in the front but in the back, nothing was working. Now I can feel that as I am breathing, I am breathing with the whole of my body. I now have a really long breath when I'm singing, so that's useful!¹⁰

Here Tomasz speaks of his experience of discovering his potential breath:¹¹

TK: Before I think I used 2% of my breath and 2% of my body. My breath now is longer than two years ago, and I think this is not only a technical problem, or a vocal problem but it was also my body problem. Now I have discovered many spaces in my body not only down to my abdomen but up here [pointing to his upper chest, behind and above the clavicle] and now I can use these spaces. It is a big support . . .

RM: Do you need a lot of breath to make a big sound?

TK: I use all my body better to take a small breath, it's better because when I take a big breath it is like a cork coming out of a bottle, but if I take less breath and use it all, it is better. It helps because I have opened these new spaces. Before my warm up I take my breath high up, not down, it opens the space and opens my body. When I have an open body the singing is simpler. When I close, everything is closed, my muscles are closed, my legs are closed, my neck is closed and it's not good.

Anatomical knowledge and kinaesthetic experience

This experience that Józef, Joanna and Tomasz have had of breathing with the whole body might not be thought to be anatomically correct, in textbook terms the respiratory system includes the air passage ways, lungs, diaphragm and intercostal muscles. However, for the opera singer 'breathing with your whole body' is a helpful image, for it unifies the voice and body, singing and movement. As Joanna explains:

JM: I learnt that my legs are connected to my head, actually with my whole body and that when I'm walking my ribs are moving. That is really interesting for me because it means that my whole body is moving together. Every single part of my body is connected, I just realised that they *have* to be together, its not like that my legs are moving and that my hands are somewhere in the universe! They have to be together because my body is my *whole* body. I have to be self-confident with my body and treat it well.

12. Explained in Experience Bryon's book the *Integrative Performer*: 'When working from the perineum is done correctly it will allow an exact engagement with the iliopsoas muscle system ... allowing the release of superfluous tensions in an economical use of the skeletal, muscular, and fascial systems in the act of moving and voicing' (Bryon 2014, chapter 5, *Working from the Integrative Centre*, p. 101).
13. For a clear explanation of how the pelvic floor is involved in breathing see Malde, Allen, and Zeller (2009) *What every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*, p. 63.

Through her Feldenkrais sessions Joanna discovered the source of her breathing deep in her pelvis.¹² Kristin Linklater (2006, p. 14) expands on this:

The anatomically accurate fact is that breath goes in and out of the lungs and the lungs exist in the space between the collar bone and the bottom of the ribcage. But when the imagination extends the dwelling place of the breath to the pelvic floor or even to the legs, the actual lungs respond with an expansion of their capacity. Even more importantly the image of the breath entering and filling the spaces of the pelvic basin ... stimulates deep and involuntary breathing musculature and connects the mind to primal energy sources in the sacrum nerve plexi.

Joanna learnt this through self-observation of her experience, not through a didactic process. Often it is helpful to have a physiological interpretation of what is happening,¹³ but the memory-image of such an immediate experience of connectedness is more useful for the singer to integrate in performance. By such a process of discovery this knowledge is theirs.

A singer's self-image

The examples above show how these singers changed their understanding of their breathing mechanism and so their self-image.

Moshe Feldenkrais explains his idea of 'self-image' in the following extract:

If while lying on your back, you do a careful mental survey of your entire body, you will notice that some parts of your body are more easily sensed than others. The parts that are less easily sensed are not part of our conscious actions ... indeed, some areas are almost never present in our self-image. (Feldenkrais 2011, p. 9)

We have seen how an improvement in the somatic self-image can help a singer. However, limitations in self-image can also be from an internal, psychological image that has become embodied. Singers work hard, as do all serious performers, and often they have worked hard at imposing corrective and limiting patterns on themselves in response to criticism from their parents or teachers.

The following examples illustrate how well-intentioned ideas about 'correct' behaviours can be implanted in childhood and become deeply ingrained patterns that can limit performance – another example of Doidge's 'plastic paradox'.

This is Joanna's story:

JM: When I was little, I was a fat girl, my grandmother told me that to be a lady I had to be very straight, because it looks nice and it would be 'nice' for me not to be like a little ball! I tried to be very straight, but it wasn't good for me on stage because I was like a column, like a stick, and my ribs weren't moving and they were in a strange position. Now I am straight, but not in an abnormal position ... Straight means my spine is straight, I am tall and long, but *flexible*.



Figure 1 Joanna doing ‘Balancing the flexors and extensors’ lesson. Photo from the archives of the Polish National Opera, Tietr Wielki, Warsaw.

Tomasz had a habitual pattern from his upbringing that inhibited his breathing and looked uncomfortable on stage. He could be very flexed in the upper chest area while also holding his legs close together in standing. This compromised the space in his chest and the connection between the lower lumbar vertebrae and breathing, through the diaphragm.

RM: I remember one of the coaches saying you stood like a soldier on stage, has this changed?

TK: I was like a soldier inside, I am like soldier, because, I don’t feel comfortable in my body, sometimes it’s not free, this is when I feel like a soldier. This is in my mind but shows in my body, I come from a family of soldiers, my father, uncles, grandfather, it is in my character, I never think about it, but maybe not now . . . [after an FI session] Now I feel like a boy who is 15 years old!

Through several one-to-one sessions we explored this pattern through various different strategies, and after one session Tomasz came up with the powerful image that he had discovered another room for his breath, like in a dream where you imagine there must be a hidden room in a big house, a house that you often find yourself in, in your dream-world and suddenly you find a way into this new space, this new room. He discovered this on both



Figure 2 Joanna in standing after a lesson feeling her length and flexibility. Photo from the archives of the Polish National Opera, Tietr Wielki, Warsaw.



Figure 3 Tomasz after a lesson experiencing the openness of his upper chest: 'I feel in paradise!' Photo from the archives of the Polish National Opera, Tietr Wielki, Warsaw.

sides of his upper chest. After one Feldenkrais lesson Tomasz smiled gently and said, 'I am in paradise!'

TK: Now I want to discover many places in my body that I don't know now, maybe my hands, and my legs . . . Because I remember Anita Garanča said 'Your body must sing, not only your head, not only your neck, not only your torso, all your body must sing!' Also I want to discover my breath everywhere, because this is my resonance.

How is freeing the breath linked to expressive communication in performance?

It is common that people are not aware of their backs in their self-image. Diana G.¹⁴ had the opposite experience. She had studied ballet as a child and when she trained later as a singer she was told her back was too arched and to lower her sternum. So in an attempt to stand 'straight' she pushed her chest backwards and had erased her front from her self-image. At the time of her breakthrough she was deeply upset because a director had said she couldn't communicate, that she was cold and unfeminine. I noticed that her sternum

14. Diana G. is a soprano, currently at the Queen Elisabeth Chapel, Brussels.



Figure 4 Tomasz demonstrating to the class his more familiar habit of standing with legs like a soldier but with flexed upper chest. Photo from the archives of the Polish National Opera, Tietr Wielki, Warsaw.

was immobile and the ribs in the upper chest also did not move. By working on her extensors, that is working with her old pattern, she began to experience movement in her front and she felt 'so big', her breath felt 'enormous' and it 'clarified her experience of breathing in and breathing out'. Not only that, but in performance her natural passion and warmth became apparent.

The link between the Feldenkrais work I have done with singers, particularly with breathing, and their ability to communicate more effectively in performance would not be possible to 'prove'. It is in Kristin Linklater's work with actors that I have found a convincing explanation of what is happening. The basis of her approach is that 'The power of the imagination properly used, can stimulate breathing on a profound level and enhance the function of the voice to maximum effect' (Linklater 2006, p. 14). In her analysis of how the voice works she interprets physiological events in terms of function. So, if the beginning of voicing is said to be an impulse in the motor cortex of the brain, she suggests that this impulse is 'the need to communicate'. This impulse from the motor cortex stimulates breath to enter and leave the body through electric impulses which in turn stimulate the complex organisation of muscles that move the diaphragm, the intercostal muscles, the inner abdominal muscles, and so on. The amount, or voltage of the impulse depends on what is being communicated, so the intention of singing a baby to sleep would produce a different muscular effect than declaiming revenge.¹⁵ Linklater has developed a series of exercise where after noticing the natural rhythm of your breath you ask yourself to have a sigh of relief. If you try it, you can directly feel how the thought-feeling stimulates the breathing mechanism in a particular way. 'The sigh of relief is the first key to unlocking the doors to those primal impulse centres and reopening the primary neuro-physiological routes between brain and body' (Linklater 2006, p. 15).

15. 'It is the same impulse that simultaneously activates the vocal folds and the rest of the vocal mechanism' (Linklater 2006, p. 15).

However, if the breathing is limited, as in the examples we have looked at, by non-elastic musculature, inaccurate concept of the anatomy or restrictive self-image, then the neurological pathways of thought to breath are hindered or blocked. As Linklater (2006, p. 22) explains, 'Defensive musculature programming develops habits of mind and muscle that cut off the instinctual connection between emotion and breath. The voice cannot work to its true potential if its basic energy is not free breath'.

Linklater teaches that the actor's muscles must be ready to respond to the imaginatively created state of being for the expression to be 'truthful'. This state of being enables the spontaneous connection of thought to muscles. She suggests that conscious control of the breath as in opera singing, yoga and professional swimming is developed so that it is not disturbed by these thought-feeling impulses. I believe that a singer must also have that receptivity to respond to these impulses at the same time as using their breath in such a specific way. However, the thoughts and emotions are not only textual and dramatic, but also musical. If a singer does not hold the complete musical and textual phrase in their imagination before singing, the breath taken might not be sufficient and the communication empty of meaning. There is a clear connection between the musical and dramatic imagination informing the body that allows the appropriate movement of the breath and meaningful expression of the text, music and situation. A singer who is brave enough to

let the emotional impulse sound in their breath and voice might disturb purists, but will touch hearts.

Conclusion

For the four students discussed above, the Feldenkrais work that focused on freeing the breath helped find new inner connections, so integrating the whole self. Learning experientially what is limiting freedom of breath and feeling afresh the ease of breathing in your whole self, mind and body channels are open for the spontaneous flow of thought and emotion that leads to the expressive communication of the singer's own unique personality, understanding and musicality. Finding these connections within develops the singer's self-image and self-confidence and is a firm foundation on which to develop all the aspects of performance.

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