

Singing with freedom and ease

Developing a healthy singing voice at all ages and levels of ability;

How the Feldenkrais Method® can help every one of us

“Stand up straight; tuck your pelvis under; don’t lift your shoulders as you breathe; breathe into your belly; fill an inner tube around your waist; support from your diaphragm; tuck your tummy in; keep your ribs out; bring the sound forward; sing with a yawning sensation; smell a rose; sip in the breath; take a 'surprised' breath; sing through a hole in your forehead; sing through a hole in the top of your head; sing into your chest; lift your cheekbones; smile!”

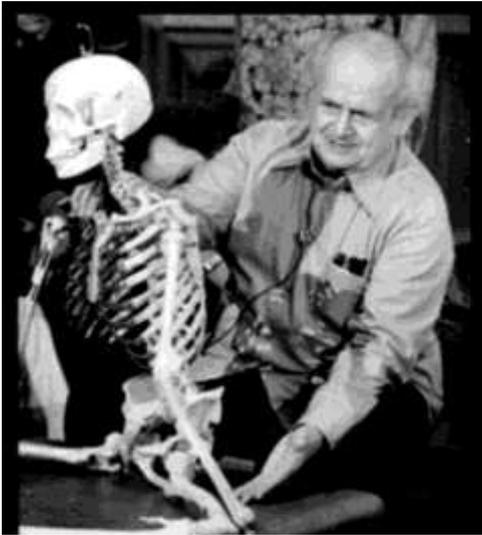
These phrases and many like them issue forth from singing teachers, vocal coaches and choral directors daily, the world over. Most are rooted in some kind of fact or experience but many have become folklore, unexamined traditions and stock phrases of the singing world which can be misleading and inhibiting to development. Every one of us is unique and our life journey shapes us and is shaped by us. There is not, and cannot be, a prescribed formula which produces ‘the perfect singer’; rather every singer is a product of all of their life experiences and has it within them to learn, grow and develop.

As singers we can very easily lose sight of what we have already learned to do and many of my students believe they have to do something special in order to sing or that there are ‘tricks of the trade’, secret shortcuts to successful performance. Of course we would all love a magic cure, the right pill or a quick fix but anything done with this as its aim will, at best, only ‘paper over cracks’ and is not a long term solution. In truth there is only one way to achieve successful singing and that is to identify and adopt a healthy, free voice supported by an understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses. Since everyone’s life journey is unique to them, so developing the necessary awareness can only be done by building self - knowledge.

There are many body work practices which can help us to truly understand our bodies and voices. My first experience was with the Alexander Technique when I was in the first year of my teaching degree. My singing teacher advised me to take lessons in order to correct my posture as I tended to poke my head forwards, collapse my chest and lift my left shoulder as I breathed. I suspect that these habits date back to playing the French Horn regularly from the age of 9. The lessons helped me to have a deeper understanding of my alignment and allowed me to find more ease in my singing. I also studied Tai Chi for several years, worked with a movement teacher who integrated Shiatsu work into her teaching and I took individual Pilates lessons. All of these had an influence on my own development as a singer and teacher, building on my deeply held conviction that it vital to sing with the whole self.

As my focus shifted away from performance to teaching I became increasingly frustrated that whilst I could identify physical issues with students which were holding them back or undermining their performance, I lacked an effective ‘tool-kit’ to address them. About 7 years ago I had the opportunity to experience the Feldenkrais Method at a workshop exploring the shoulder girdle. At the end of the workshop I observed a completely new organisation of my shoulders and sternum; this was the first of many ‘wow’ moments which led me to explore the method further and ultimately commit to four years training as a

practitioner. The Feldenkrais Method has informed and supported not only my teaching style and my own singing but the way in which I use and organise myself every day.



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Bob Knighton

Moshe Feldenkrais, scientist, engineer and martial arts pioneer, born in Ukraine in 1914 developed his method as a result of exploring ways to help himself to rehabilitate following a sporting knee injury by applying his knowledge of Judo, child development, neuroscience and bio-mechanics. The method grew and became more refined as he shared his ideas and absorbed and explored the work of other somatic practitioners and thinkers including FM Alexander. He devised structured lessons called Awareness Through Movement (ATM) in which the student is guided verbally through a sequence of movements, engaging their curiosity to find new options. He developed the method further, evolving one-to-one, hands-on lessons where the student is gently moved and supported by the practitioner, now known as Functional Integration (FI).

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks". Really? In the latter half of the 20th century, new research showed that many aspects of the brain remain changeable (or "plastic") and that we continue to make new neurological connections throughout our whole lives. This notion contrasts with the previous scientific consensus that we are born with billions of brain cells which die as we age. Neuroplasticity *'allows brain cells and nerves to change their appearance and function, to grow, shrink, connect, disconnect and re-connect to each other in entirely new ways, to exchange duties and functions, to use unexpected parts of the brain for novel tasks, and to be malleable and accessible to new needs as they arise during an experience-driven life'*. Moshe Feldenkrais, having relearned how to walk held firmly, long before this research was published that the human brain had much more potential for learning than contemporary science allowed. The Feldenkrais Method is rooted in his deep belief in the limitless potential of the human species to learn, change and adapt.

From birth we constantly refine, through play and experimentation, the way in which we shape our breath, the articulators and our intonation/pitch in order to communicate. We learn to move and manipulate objects around us, eventually balancing on our feet and moving in space. Later in life if we try to revisit, re-learn or refine these fundamental functions we find the childish playfulness lost, replaced by a more adult judgemental approach which is not always helpful. For example, if our attention is focused on something as simple, natural and automatic as breathing it is easy to become confused; if you're asked to take a big breath, what do you do? The unconscious has become conscious and the resulting intake is often a tight, high-chested breath which has little or no functionality.

During a Feldenkrais lesson we have the opportunity to 'stand back from ourselves' and non-judgementally notice what's happening. From here habitual patterns become highlighted which may have developed over years of use and in a playful, comfortable manner we explore other options. The movement is slowed down in order to pay attention to its quality, made smaller and the level of effort reduced. It is enriched to add variety, which our nervous system craves, exploring different directions, varying the speed, changing where the movement



An ATM lesson

is initiated, noticing the natural pattern of the breath and differentiating one movement from another. The lessons are presented as physical riddles asking questions which lead to physical experimentation rather than giving answers. The results are unique to the student rather than prescribed by the teacher. This gives a sense of independence and autonomy to the student and the resultant learning is more concrete.

Habitual patterns of body use can work against us, standing in the way of growth and development. Many of us have experienced discomfort or pain in specific areas of our bodies, often as singers this manifests around the neck, jaw or tongue area. Leaving aside disease or traumatic injury, the usual cause is an accumulation of tension where the effort is not being distributed or supported by our whole self. Using the Feldenkrais Method we can learn to spread the load, to notice what is or isn't contributing to the movement, to identify options to address bad habits and to invite the rest of our body (and mind) to 'join the party' whilst speeding the departure of the unwelcome guest.

In my experience as a singing teacher most people want to know what they ought to do and often ask "is that right?", "does that sound alright?" My response is usually with another question such as; "what does it feel like?"; "was that easier?"; "what did you notice?"; "how was it different?"; "can you do it again?"; "can you repeat what you did previously?". I am careful to do this as I am aware that if we are told something is correct but we don't fully understand exactly how we did it we can easily hold onto some element of the experience like a crutch and even exaggerate it because 'more is more' and must be better. We are human and desperately want to do the right thing but often in doing so build barriers to learning and growth. It is important to me as a teacher not to create these barriers for my students, instead I attempt to apply the principles of the Feldenkrais Method to create a safe non-judgemental environment in which genuine learning can take place.



A warm-up with the London Oratory Schola

I often begin a singing lesson with movement. In the past I have incorporated a stretch up with one arm in order to lengthen and find space in the ribs. With my 'Feldenkrais hat on' this has evolved into reaching dynamically rather than stretching, exploring different directions, noticing the sliding of the shoulder blades, the opening and closing of the ribs, the direction of movement of the clavicles, the direction in which the palms are facing, how the movement is affected when the arm is turned, how the weight changes in the feet,

which movements feel most natural with an intake of breath and which with an exhalation and whether it can be reversed. By directing attention in this way the quality of the movement is enriched and improved.

Moshe Feldenkrais describes 'good posture' as "the ability to move in any direction without hesitation or preparation" and as a singer this manifests as a sense of skeletal alignment.

Try this for yourself:

- Stand comfortably. Begin by noticing where you feel the most contact with the floor one foot at a time.
- What sort of imprint would you leave if you were standing on a sandy beach? Front? Heel? Inside? Outside? Is it the same on both feet?
- Transfer the weight to one foot and return to the middle and then move to the other.
- Which way was easier? Which way did you have a shorter/longer journey?
- When you transfer your weight slowly from one foot to the other how is your head carried? Do your shoulders tilt as though your spine were a stick or do they stay level?
- Can you move in both ways? When do you feel your ribs opening and closing?
- Where is the movement initiated? Ankles? Knees? Pelvis? Shoulders? Head? Does it feel different if you think of initiating the movement from each of these places?
- What do you notice in your hip joints?
- When do you breathe in?
- What are you doing with your eyes?
- Move your weight a little forwards and backwards. Where is the mid-point?
- 'Move like a stick' so that your head moves forwards and backwards in space. Now keep your head in the middle but continue to change the weight in your feet. What needs to change?
- Begin to make circles first moving like a stick and then keeping your head in the middle. Where else do circles take place? Knees? Pelvis? Ribs? How do your hip joints move?

Take a little walk and see if you notice any change in the way in which you move or stand. Think back to the feeling of contact with the floor when you began the exploration. Has it changed? Do you feel lighter? Heavier? Taller? Shorter? This exercise gives an idea as to how a Feldenkrais ATM unfolds and what you are likely to experience.

The Feldenkrais Method can take centre stage in a singing lesson as we have seen but it is also a first class supporting player. When addressing a technical aspect of singing teaching I draw on the method as the non-judgemental explorations are invaluable when supporting a singer's experimentation as a means to learning. For example, when working with a student to develop more clarity and ease as they onset onto the beginning of the sound, which requires accurate coordination of the breath and vocal folds, I incorporate a physical step at the beginning of the note, noticing its effect on the vocal quality. I enrich the movement by changing the step to a stamp, a glide, a slouch, both forwards and backwards, noticing the change in quality and ease of the tone produced, exploring more options to generate more choices. This exercise can be extended using an aspirated beginning ('ha, ha'), a glottal onset ('uh, oh') and coordinating both breath and phonation together, focusing on differing lengths of aspiration before the sound, whether it is audible or silent, the length of time the glottal closure is held, the amount of pressure it is held with, how explosively or gently it releases and what effect each has on the resulting tone. Rather than focussing on preconceived ideas of what is right or wrong, the emphasis throughout remains on 'what if..?'

I hope I have demonstrated the enormous potential that the Feldenkrais Method offers to everyone in all walks and at all stages of life and particularly to my fellow singers. The last word should go to the man himself. When asked to summarise the method, Moshe Feldenkrais replied "Well it is difficult to say in a few words...because it is unfamiliar, just like telling somebody what is the taste of a mango. Unless you eat it, you don't know what

the taste is. It doesn't matter how clearly you describe it. Therefore this is a thing to experience....”



Anita Morrison is a classically trained singer who studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (GSMD) and subsequently at the National Opera Studio, during which time she began to teach the choristers of Westminster Cathedral, a post she still holds 25 years later. She sang professionally for a number of years, developing a deep interest in the workings of the voice and how the mental and physical processes of learning take place, shaping the singer.

Anita's teaching practice comprises the choristers of Temple Church, St George's Windsor Castle, Cardinal Vaughan and London Oratory Scholae Cantorum, developing voices at Eton College/Eton Choral courses and choral scholars at Cambridge University. Anita's teaching experience includes working with undergraduate singers at the GSMD and workshops with Guildford Choral Society and City of London Choir. She teaches young professional singers and keen amateurs of all ages privately and gives Awareness Through Movement (ATM) / Functional Integration (FI) lessons to both singers and non-singers.

For more information please visit my website wholeselfsinger.co.uk

¹Neuroplasticity and The Feldenkrais Method 30/4/2007 Eileen Bach-y-Rita, GCFP
http://www.feldenkrais.com/article_content.asp?article=47