

free space, a unified field of attention, taking in the environment, ourselves and our activity.

We took quite a journey together in one hour and ten minutes. Time flew by. We were enjoying ourselves – and being very present in the moment.

Thanks to all my teachers – acting, Alexander, NLP, accelerated learning, T'ai Chi, Japanese Tea Ceremony, my students, and all those waiting for me in my future.

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Thought Shepherding in Singing

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INTRODUCTION

Singing has been my great joy for as long as I can remember. It has been my profession for 35 years. The process by which I learned to sing was rewarding in itself, because it demanded self-reflection. I was blessed to cross paths with several wise souls who guided me in ways I wouldn't have imagined. One told me once, 'Singing is not difficult, but learning to sing is very difficult'.¹ I have mused on those words for years now and their meaning rings truer and truer to me. Singing is easy, and learning how is murderously difficult. Why is that?

First of all, singers *are* their instruments. Every aspect of their art is contained within their individual selves. Their voices reside unseen within them and in that area so prone to human habitual tensing, the neck. Unlike any other musical instrument, singers' instruments cannot be touched or held in their hands. The singer does experience sensation while singing. But, as Alexander Technique students know, attempts to recreate sensation draw the singer away from the more important process – the 'means whereby'. Singers cannot even hear accurately the sound they produce. So how the tone sounds to the singer cannot be a reliable gauge of success.

How, then, is one to learn to sing deprived of the several senses on which one usually relies so heavily to make music? In my long study of singing, I have found that this conundrum is also the singer's greatest blessing, because he is forced to traverse internal pathways sadly forgotten by most human beings and to learn to tap inner resources much less perceptible than the five senses. There is, of course, the kinaesthetic sense. Housed within the kinaesthetic sense is the potential for the psychophysical re-education that we teach in the Alexander community. Poised in the nervous system is a delicate balance of mind and body cooperation. Our kinaesthetic

sense enables us to tap the mother lode of the self and unleash all the potentialities that reside there. Gradually the singer must accept, even revel in the knowledge that his instrument is his all-inclusive self, and that suppression of any part is limitation of the whole. He must know himself well, in all aspects. He must learn to use himself lovingly, gently, intensely, passionately, to unleash the full potential of his instrument.

A healthy and beautiful sound is the result of the singer's cooperation with the laws of physics. These laws are predictable; that is, the results of cooperation or non-cooperation are insistent and inevitable. Yet, there is another important ingredient to beautiful singing that is much less tangible, and it is the second aspect of singing I wish to explore. It is the conscious investment of self in one's singing. It is not just that one breathes. Important also is the state of mind with which one breathes. It is not just that one offers space for the tone to resonate, but how that space is offered by the singer. In short, the singer must continue to nurture and involve herself, while learning how to cooperate with the technical demands of singing. So a more complex question arises. How does one learn to involve herself in her singing and yet at the same time observe the laws of healthy, vibrant singing?

As a young singer I was fortunate enough work with voice teachers who understood the importance of the singer's thought process. One in particular literally programmed me patiently and methodically to shepherd my thoughts while singing. The thoughts I dealt with usually fell into two categories. First were those that pertained to the performance itself, such as managing the singing technique, interpreting the music, etc. And second were those that pertained to my 'self' and my state of being. Both thought processes are intricately linked, and so each has the potential to enhance or sabotage the other. Therefore, I am convinced, a singer must become versatile in dealing with both. And achieving the cooperation between the two in the utmost harmony is vital to the success and enjoyment of the performer.

Bringing the singer and the self into an harmonious whole is both devilishly difficult and wondrously rewarding. Alexander teachers and singing teachers are often reluctant to explore too deeply with the student the thinking process in activity. Perhaps we are understandably fearful of venturing too far into the realm of psychology. Yet I have found as a teacher of singing that I must be willing to accompany the student wherever he needs to go to slay the 'inner dragons' menacing the possibility of a satisfying performance. I am utterly convinced that the singer must be willing and able to abandon the mental frenzy which all too often accompanies his quest to sing 'beautifully'. So, among other things, I wish to offer some strategies for dealing with that often debilitating mind-chatter that singers experience when learning and practicing their art.

With the ideas of my introduction in mind I offer now a few excursions in 'thought shepherding' that I have found particularly useful to me as a singer and a teacher of singing. I have chosen to list my ideas in three categories which are also the Alexander Technique guideposts – *awareness, inhibition and direction*. As in any activity, the singer must learn to balance all three with equal attention.

AWARENESS

Feel the fear

I am now pleased to offer you the recipe for gold. It is 100 percent reliable. It never, never fails. Just boil water. The kind of pot doesn't matter. Just stir the boiling water without thinking of the word 'hippopotamus', and it will turn to gold. Now all we have to do is figure out how NOT to think of the word 'hippopotamus'. What would be hippopotami for the singer? Just to name a few: high notes, low notes, long phrases, slow tempi, fast tempi, coloratura passages. All these are capable of striking terror into the heart of a singer. And right when my student is grappling with his fear I remind him that he has an important choice to make. He can decide to feel the fear or suppress the fear. Usually, the singer doesn't like how fear feels, and unfortunately believes that the energy of fear

is not usable energy for singing. I want to encourage the singer to become interested in his fear, to embody his fear, to be curious about how fear feels in his body. Often, when I ask the singer to notice how the fear feels, he describes a stiffening sensation which is not really the fear but his attempt to suppress it. Once we've gotten past that hurdle, and the student begins to describe the sensations of fear-butterflies, sweaty palms, dry mouth, they often subside.

We observe this phenomenon when a screaming child is placated simply by acknowledgment of his rage by his parent. Before energy can be transformed, it must be accepted as it is without judgement. Otherwise any attempt to change it will involve 'endgaining'. Eventually, I wish to the student to get to the point of noticing, accepting, then transforming and directing.

Benevolent observer

The first internal presence I encourage my singers to cultivate is the 'benevolent observer'. This part of us, which some like to call the Higher Self, is always available to us and possesses extraordinary wisdom in dealing with any situation. The benevolent observer would hold the singer in the utmost esteem and wonder, even as a world-class violinist cherishes her Stradivarius. Without judgement, she would acknowledge the pure reality of a situation. Her patience would be boundless. Her sense of humour would be infectious. She would encourage, inspire and nurture. Like a best friend, utterly and completely invested in the welfare and growth of the singer, the benevolent observer would perpetually 'behold' the singer.

Our judges

Our mindless, habitual tensing is invariably the result of something we have also mindlessly told ourselves. When I work with a student who has difficulty 'sticking with the decision' not to stiffen the neck, I find it enormously helpful to ask the student what she is telling herself at that moment. Often the student is surprised and puzzled at the question. Usually the idea has never entered her mind. What am I telling my-

self? Well, what *am* I telling myself? Usually students have access to that information fairly quickly, by checking within. Their responses reveal to them a lot about their habitual thinking patterns and tend to range within the territory of demands or judgements. 'Tick, tock, time is wasting, I should have this by now.' 'Here comes that high C I blew last time I sang it!' 'Will I ever get it right? I'm so stupid, lazy, untalented, undisciplined.' As they begin to verbalize what they are telling themselves, many can even laugh at how irrational their thinking is. Some are even able to personify their judges. Then comes the process of reasoning with the judges. This would be an excellent task for the benevolent observer, who has no investment in preserving the status quo. Because he is privy to the wisdom of the ancients, he will find just the right mixture of patience, humour and straight talk to mediate between the judge and the singer, helping them to come to a meeting of minds. The judge, who usually has the singer's best interest at heart, can often be persuaded to engage in an activity more productive for the singer's needs. In time the judge often simply evolves into the benevolent observer.

'Know thyself' (Plato)

Sadly, the educational principles of western civilization do not encourage the exploration of 'self'. Observe how the meaning of one word in biblical scripture has been distorted in translation. The word is 'repent'. Its dictionary definition is 'to feel remorse or self-reproach for what one has done or what one has failed to do'. The Greek word is '*metanoia*' which means simply 'to change one's mind'. However, the original Aramaic, to me, is the most telling. It is '*taboul*', which means 'to flow back to one's source'. The ramifications of this one interpretation are enormous. The English word encourages self-alienation; the Greek word encourages trying to become what one believes one should be; and the Aramaic word invites reunification with the self. Seldom have I met a young singer who was not struggling in some way to sing in spite of herself, instead of with herself. I believe that the singer must blaze *all* trails of the psyche, and clear the cobwebs from the

suppressed aspects of herself and learn to love them. The more thoroughly the singer can know and be at peace with *all* aspects of her being, the freer and more beautiful her singing will be.

INHIBITION

The eye of the hurricane

In Louisiana we are familiar with the experience of being in the eye of the hurricane. Violent winds have been raging outside, wielding their destruction. Then, when least expected, comes an eerie time of utter silence and calm. We are warned to remain in a safe place, because the winds on the other side of the hurricane can be just as fierce and deadly. Interestingly, it is the eye of the hurricane that provides organization and stability to the hurricane. When the eye dissipates, the winds of the hurricane quickly subside.

For the singer, the eye of the hurricane is a marvellous metaphor. For me the eye represents several different aspects of the singer and singing. It is the singer's peaceful centre that permits the organization of the being for singing. I have often told my students that a great portion of their work will be coming to grips with their neuroses. We all have them, of course. And it is the singer's job to come to peace with these intruders. To realize that they are merely suppressed parts of himself, who have not been allowed to play their part in his existence. In this process there will certainly be demons to face and dragons to slay, suppressed parts of himself to know and give voice to. And in the wonderfully wacky world of operatic literature, each will inevitably have its part to play. For me the eye of the hurricane also represents my holy of holies, the mother lode of my self, if you will. When I am at peace there, the spiralling of my energy force can begin to organize and be directed into any expression I wish – from a gossamer zephyr to the wildly fierce winds of a hurricane.

The Now

I encourage my students to become fascinated with 'now' and how the awareness and savouring of all the facets of the mo-

ment can expand it into an eternity. One need only observe Baryshnikov, suspended mid-air during a jump. What is this phenomenon that allows us to have more time than we actually have to experience the moment? And in this expanded 'now', to our surprise, more and more facets of ourselves reveal themselves and participate in the performance.

The aliveness of the moment fully experienced is a great wonder to me. The Japanese Tea Ceremony, where each detail is meticulously observed and fully experienced, is a particularly beautiful model that I suggest my students emulate. One of my wonderful teachers, Professor Margarete von Winterfeldt, with whom I studied in Berlin, programmed me patiently to savour every aspect of singing. Before I inhaled, she would say, 'Now I may breathe. Now I may experience the coolness of the air as it travels through my vocal tract to my lungs.' As I approached a difficult passage, she would say, 'Now I may sing this beautiful phrase. Now I may experience the vibrations of the tone in my resonances. Now I may dance with the tone.' Before a high note, she would say, 'Now I may sing this high C.' Nearing the end of a long phrase, she would encourage me to fully savour the cleansing experience of emptying the lungs of breath. And magically, as I slowed down, I could allow and experience more fully the emergence of my own personal artistry.

The elusive 'it'

Singing is a journey with no destination. How many of our students have offered the query, 'Is that it?' As if there were an 'it' to get. What is this 'it' that we humans want so desperately? It is very difficult for singers to believe that there is no 'it', no perfection. That the beautiful tone they just sang cannot be freeze-dried and preserved forever. I like to help the student see the attainable 'it' as not elusive, but uninteresting. I like to encourage her to savour the newness of each singing adventure. There is always the unanticipated to address and the possibility of new discoveries, like even more freedom and ease, to enjoy, and perhaps even a greater depth of interpretation to reveal itself.

How I sound is none of my business

One of my most difficult tasks is getting my students not to care about the sound they are making. A singer caught up in making a beautiful sound is distracted from the real joy of singing – the experience. The sensations of singing are deliciously enjoyable. Why would want to distract oneself with listening to the resulting sound, which the singer cannot hear accurately anyway? The process of singing is utterly satisfying, if observed with the patience and attention to detail one also observes in the Japanese Tea Ceremony.

DIRECTION

Singing is speaking on pitch

Singing is cultivated speaking, cultivated laughing, cultivated weeping, cultivated screaming, cultivated sighing. Everything we must do as singers we have already done in our own personal vocal expressions. Who taught us to speak? Well, we did. We weren't very scientific in our approach to learning to speak. Why is it that when we begin to sing, we believe we must start from scratch? Are we not already virtuosos in directing our breath energy throughout a sentence or emphasizing particular words in speech? Do we worry that we will not have enough breath for a phrase while speaking? Can we not colour our voices at will, not knowing what we are doing to achieve the colour? Do we give a thought as to how we are doing these things? No, they are instinctive. Singing and speaking start off at the same point.

If I ask a student to speak a phrase and then sing from that same speaking place, they are usually in the ballpark of good coordination for singing. When singers grasp that directing the breath energy for singing isn't much different from directing the breath energy for speaking, they can begin to trust that a wisp of breath is all that is needed to negotiate even the most difficult of phrases. When we speak, we breathe in the mood of what we are about to say. In singing we must do the same. When speaking we seldom take a huge breath. It is seldom necessary for singing either. Thinking in this way usu-

ally brings the student to a great place of ease, and then we can do whatever tweaking is necessary to eliminate any residual tension.

Singing is movement

Music implies movement. I tell my students that it is wonderful to savour and fully experience the process of singing, but only in passing. As in any activity, the movement is perpetual. The singer must balance countless factors, both physical and mental, that are perpetually shifting from moment to moment, and the margin for error is minuscule.

Add to this the singer's knowledge that she is utterly vulnerable before an audience of listening ears, seeing eyes, discerning minds, and all that this implies to the individual singer's psyche. Little wonder that she might be tempted to resort to the old, familiar habits of holding on. However, it is when she attempts to freeze-dry that perfect tone that it most eludes her. What is there to do, but welcome this evolution and view it as a wondrous adventure with new surprises at every turn?

Now I may breathe

Why is it 'air' that we breathe in and 'breath' that we breathe out? Is what we breathe in different from what we breathe out? If so, what is different about it? What happens that makes it different? I like to ask my students these questions. It helps them realize how our uniquely personal signature mingles with the air as we inhale it and exhale it within our beings. As it takes on our energy it becomes breath. In Hebrew 'wind', 'spirit' and 'breath' are the same word: *'ruach'*. Hebrew understands this idea as do speakers of the most ancient earth languages. A way to help my student to gather himself before a phrase would be to have him notice his energy. This is his present reality. It is the energy he has to work with, and it can be transformed into any energy needed for the phrase. Then I ask the singer to allow the energy of the phrase to move through him. Just like any good surfer, he must wait for the wave. He can't stop the wave to get on; he gets on the wave

while it is moving. Nor can he push the wave, once he is balanced on it. He must let it carry him.

At their very first voice lesson, singers are usually told that they have to learn how to breathe. No matter that they have managed to stay alive by breathing up to that point. They are now to toss all they know about breathing and adopt a more conscious control of the breathing mechanism. It is true that measured breathing is a requirement in singing. The length of a phrase is dictated to the singer by the music, and he must be able to sustain the exhalation for that long. And when a particularly long phrase is looming, the singer often responds by taking more breath. I like to ask my students whether they give one thought to managing their breath when talking. Are they afraid of running out? 'No,' they must admit. This is when I introduce them to their 'breath genie'. And when a difficult or long phrase looms, I encourage them to leave the pacing of their exhalation to the breath genie. Of course, the breathing process can be voluntary or involuntary. I want my students to avail themselves as much as possible of the involuntary process, reflexive breathing. Invariably there will be some tweaking of the body map and freeing of excessive habitual tensing necessary to enhance the ease in the reflexive breathing. If the singer realizes he already owns the process as part of his 'supreme inheritance',³ most of the battle is already won.

It is a good day to die

An equestrian was asked once how she inspired her horse to jump. She replied, 'That's easy! I throw my heart over first.' Learning to sing high was an enormous labour for me. One day I was working with my mom, who was a voice teacher, on a particularly difficult high passage. With frustration, I found myself repeatedly backing off a high note. At this point my mom said, 'Patt, in order to learn to sing high, you are going to have to crack a few times!' There were many dragons to slay before I was able to sing high joyously and fearlessly, but the realization that I had to give myself permission to be awful before I could also give myself permission to be wonder-

ful has gone far to help me embrace my humanity, as well as my 'inner kamikaze' in my singing.

Whether you believe you can or you can't, you're probably right

I love Elizabeth Walker's favourite definition of direction.⁴ The easy, yet unrelenting inevitability of the 'fairy wish'. It is a perfect metaphor for what must occur in singing. There is a vulnerable quality about the fairy wish, because there is no pushing, no exertion of will-power, just the simple knowledge that is it so. This confirms for us that our true power resides in letting go and simply being who we are.

The singer's language is space and energy

Yes, singing is that ethereal. Often when my students manage to achieve good coordination of themselves and produce a gorgeous sound, their initial response is, 'That can't be right. It's too easy.' How slowly the Puritan ethic dies here in the West, where the amount of effort is the gauge by which success is measured. No pain, no gain. Little wonder that singers often confuse muscular effort with being expressive. Intensity does not have to be achieved with excessive muscular tension. But for the singer who is schooled since childhood in the idea that 'more is more' it is hard to grasp that actually 'less is more'.

The truth is that singing is quite ethereal. The breath energy can be recycled. Singing energy perpetuates itself. Like a laser beam it is powerful, light, and easily directed. Only our clear direction is needed for the vocal mechanism to achieve the delicate and precise coordination of a finely tuned Swiss watch.

As for the space, well, volumes could be written on this subject, but suffice it to say, the singer is limited only by the amount of space she can imagine within her. As she moves into more and more length and width and depth, mental shifts begin to occur about what is really possible to her. Space is also about resonance, a vital ingredient in producing a beautiful sound. One need only draw a bow across a string tightened between two pegs separate from the rest of the violin.

The unremarkable sound makes it easy to realize where the beauty and colours of the sound are born. And so it is with the singer's resonance. Within the resonances – pharyngeal, nasal, and oral – the tone is housed. I encourage my students to think of their resonance as their 'holy of holies',⁵ where they may further personalize the tone and dance with it, play with it, caress it, make love to it. As long as the resonances are alive and inviting, the tone remains vibrant and alive. This thinking also encourages the singer toward the idea that the tone can be managed with delicacy and ease. At first the student is fearful of losing control, but soon learns that even greater control is achieved and even more intensity is available to her, as well as a formidable palate of colours and (my personal favourite), serendipitous nuance. Space can ever widen and deepen, even as the expanding universe. When I begin to use my resonances with the knowledge that I am expressing myself with them, it helps me realize I can sing with myself instead of in spite of myself, and more dimensions of myself begin to emerge. I evoke and am possessed by the song of the spheres. I am being sung.

CONCLUSION

These are a few of my ideas about 'thought shepherding in singing'. I hope they fully support my belief that all the resources needed to sing reside within the singer. As I work with singers throughout the years, I grow increasingly awed at the hallowed ground I tread. And I am convinced that it is my task not to mould my students into singers, but to help each one 'flow back to his source' and to facilitate the emergence of the artist from within each one's unique self.

Notes

1. Professor Margarete von Winterfeldt: 'Singen ist einfach, aber Singenden ist sehr schwer.'
2. F. Matthias Alexander: 'They can teach you anatomy and physiology until you are black in the face but you still have this to accomplish – sticking with a decision against the habit of life.'

3. F. Matthias Alexander: *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, 1918.
4. Master Alexander teacher Elisabeth Walker trained with F. M. Alexander from 1938-1947.
5. Most sacred area of the original Jewish temple in Jerusalem, where the high priest communed with the Lord once a year.

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