

Bodywork for Singers

A discussion of bodywork practices and their benefits for classical singers in training

I. Abstract

For a singer, the body is the instrument. The training of a young singer at conservatoire, however, seems to focus mainly on singing technique and not so much on bodywork supporting their physical well-being and the development of kinaesthetic awareness. This thesis aims to find out how young singers can complement their training through bodywork and what the benefits of those practices are. The first part gives an overview of four bodywork practices that have the integration of mind and body at their core and enhance kinaesthetic awareness: Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, Yoga and Pilates. The second part presents the results of six semi-structured interviews with singing teachers at the author's conservatoire, discussing the main areas of tension for a singer, the teachers' own bodywork practices and what effects these practices have on their singing. There is a strong consensus among the teachers that bodywork practices are of great importance for a young singer to enhance their kinaesthetic awareness and thus assist their learning process. It is clear that it depends on many different factors which bodywork practice is most beneficial for a student. Therefore, conservatoires should introduce their students to various practices and give them the choice to explore at least one of them more in depth.

II. Conclusion

It is clear from both vocal literature and the interviews that tension, posture, breathing and body awareness are intrinsically linked. Some teachers attribute tension in different areas of the body – such as tongue root tension or jaw tension – to the breath not working properly. Good posture, however, is a prerequisite for good breathing, as Feldenkrais and Alexander established in their respective work.¹ Since posture is about how the body is being positioned and used, sophisticated kinaesthetic awareness, in turn, is essential to proper use of the appropriate muscles and the body. It seems therefore to be a foregone conclusion that bodywork that trains kinaesthetic awareness is an integral part of voice education and the training of classical singers.

1. Results

Through the interviews with singing teachers and my own personal experience, it seems clear that there is no one bodywork practice that can be labelled ‘the most beneficial’ and that it depends instead on the individual. However, each practice has, at its core, an enhancement of kinaesthetic awareness, and comes in many different variations (e.g. Body Mapping that evolved from Alexander Technique teachers²).

Since tension in different areas of the body is a fundamental issue in learning how to sing, awareness of it is – as one of the interviewed singing teachers put it – ‘half the battle’. Considering that bodywork techniques like the ones discussed in this thesis are all about increasing kinaesthetic awareness of the body, it seems very logical that doing bodywork alongside singing lessons would be immensely beneficial to the learning process. After all, the aim is to ‘become so familiar with all parts of your body, so they work together as one [...] fluid [...] connected organism’.

As Dora Ohrenstein described: it is essential to understand that,

‘to make profound and long-lasting changes in deeply ingrained physical habits, one must address physical tensions apart from the act of singing. The most powerful tool for correcting persistent tension patterns is the mind’s awareness of the body.’³

¹ Feldenkrais, *Awareness through Movement: Health Exercises for Personal Growth*, 38; Alexander, *The Alexander Technique: The Essential Writings of F. Matthias Alexander. Selected and Introduced by Edward Maisel*, 41.

² For more information on Body Mapping see: Malde, Allen, and Zellen, *What Every Singer Needs to Know About the Body*.

³ Ohrenstein, ‘Physical Tension, Awareness Techniques and Singing’, 285.

By making tensions visible and conscious, as separate from singing, students experience the difference between tension and ease of movement, which they can then transfer to the singing process.⁴

When recommending bodywork to their students, singing teachers inevitably tend to suggest practices they know themselves or have heard of and know about. Only one in six teachers who were interviewed had done Feldenkrais before (one other teacher at least knew of it). This would unavoidably lead to teachers not recommending a practice, even if it might be a good fit for a particular student.⁵

In order to find/recommend the right practice for a student, teachers need to have had contact with different practices themselves. One of the interviewees specifically mentioned that if they had only read about Feldenkrais and how it works without experiencing it themselves, they might not have trusted the effects of the practice. It would therefore be invaluable for institutions to provide access to different bodywork practices, so that teachers are exposed to them and can find what works best for them. Another interviewee suggested that students could be introduced to the different practices in their first and second year, and could later choose the practice that suited them best for their third and fourth year. This would be an ideal situation in my opinion.

When finding a bodywork practice and teacher, it would certainly be even more beneficial to the student, if the bodywork teacher had some knowledge of what it means to be a singer, as suggested by some of the interviewees above. I believe this to be very important, as thus the bodywork practice can be tailored to the needs of singers in particular.

As several of the teachers mentioned in their interviews, being kinaesthetically aware is of paramount importance in singing. Evidently, bodywork practices such as Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, Yoga or Pilates increase a person's awareness of their own body. In a singing lesson, a variety of things need to be addressed and covered, ranging from vocal technique, languages, interpretation, characterisation and acting, to repertoire. Most often, there is not even enough time to cover half of these aspects, let alone spend time on increasing kinaesthetic awareness through bodywork.⁶

⁴ Ohrenstein, 286.

⁵ Analogously, an interviewee mentioned that people tend to like either Yoga or Pilates, but rarely both. This could be the same with Feldenkrais and some other practice such as Alexander Technique.

⁶ This is an issue that half of the interviewees specifically mentioned.

I strongly believe that doing bodywork alongside the singing practice is immensely beneficial and having spoken to the six teachers I find it only supports this claim. 'It's not always singing lessons that people need, it's the other stuff that people need', as an interviewee phrased it.

2. Prospects

In order to help students improve their kinaesthetic awareness, which in turn allows them to sing in a healthier, freer and more long-lasting way, bodywork needs to become an integral part of voice education. Dora Ohrenstein suggested that traditional vocal pedagogy must include insights from practices such as Alexander Technique or Feldenkrais Method, to deepen the connection of all the parts involved in the art of classical singing, and Elizabeth Blades-Zeller articulates that nowadays teachers need to develop their own kinaesthetic awareness to an extent that they can enable their students to become more kinaesthetically aware.⁷ Considering that at my conservatoire, bodywork is not part of the curriculum,⁸ it would be worth discussing the benefits bodywork practices can bring to classical singers, and integrate it into their training. As has become clear through the interviews and vocal literature, which bodywork practice works best for a student depends on many different factors, not least of all their personal taste. Therefore, it is not enough simply to introduce one bodywork practice – even though that would already be encouraging – but rather to give students a choice of several practices that they can try and find what works best for them at a certain point in time.⁹ This can naturally change as their voice develops. Furthermore, the earlier bodywork is introduced, the better, since it gives the students more time to enhance their kinaesthetic awareness and make the most of the time they are in training. At the very least – if bodywork practices cannot be integrated into the curriculum – students need to be made aware of their existence and of the benefits they bring to their vocal development.

⁷ Ohrenstein, 'Physical Tension, Awareness Techniques and Singing', 288; Nelson and Blades-Zeller, *Singing with Your Whole Self: The Feldenkrais Method and Voice*, 8.

⁸ As of the date of this thesis, Alexander Technique was only offered on the Foundation Certificate (pre-undergrad course) with 30 hours per year, divided into group and 1-1 sessions. On the BMus course, in their first year students have a module called 'Movement for Musicians'. In the description, it says 'through developing a greater kinesthetic awareness and bodily sensations within movement, you will investigate ways of developing the physicality of your performance'. It is taught in 10 hours across the year.

⁹ A similar idea has been expressed in two interviews.