

Alexander and Voice

The work of F.M. Alexander, if properly understood, can teach us most of what we need to know about the voice. By means of a re-educated use of the entire body, the Alexander

Technique establishes a state of dynamic balance and ease of total function which permits all parts of the entire physical system the ability to perform with unhampered freedom. The voice is but one part of the human organism, and its function is best understood

not as a mechanism to be dealt with in isolation but rather as a member whose quality and movement respond symptomatically and reflect most accurately the way in which the singer is employing his total being.

We must, however, in order to apply Alexander's knowledge, give up all preconceived expectations of how any individual voice will eventually sound. There is but one true sound to each human voice. The purpose of vocal study is to discover what the nature of that sound may be, to reveal slowly its unique character.

Alexander rediscovered for himself a philosophical concept long held over many centuries but scorned in more recent times: only a true understanding of uninterrupted process will bring about a worthwhile end. An undue concern with the final result brings about a breakdown of the delicate coordination which is essential to achieving the very end we hope to discover. In Alexander's terms, the "means whereby" must prevail over the strong

temptation of "end-gaining." For the student to exchange the priority of the latter for that of the former is the most difficult and most basic task of vocal education.



Alexander Farkas

We live in an age of disguises.

Despite a great amount of verbiage emitted in the name of personal liberation, our modern environment encourages us to choose a type-model upon which to construct our image, a word which in itself describes a surface quality. We apply

cosmetics and submit to cosmetic surgery in order to change our appearance radically. How we appear to others has priority over who we are. On a more subtle and often subconscious level, we may even alter our posture, our characteristic manner of walking, and the pitch and timbre of our speaking voices.

In a similar way we have established a fashion in singing with very clearly delineated norms, and we have also created a "cottage industry" of voice teachers each seeking to turn out the most acceptable model in the shortest possible time. Unfortunately, once we begin to fashion a voice after a particular model, once we ask the voice to conform to a preconceived sound, we sacrifice the inherent uniqueness of timbre, and we also begin to follow a rigid and mechanistic technical regimen.

The simplest of discoveries is often the most significant. Alexander, in the course of discovering the cause of his own vocal dysfunction (he began his career as an actor), quickly realized that the use of the entire body had to be

examined in order to achieve a better use of the voice. In contrast to the long prevailing practice of training the voice as an isolated entity, Alexander came to understand that the entire organism is involved in a process that determines how the voice will function and what its sound will be like. While many vocal pedagogues would agree in principle, very few will understand the far-reaching implications of Alexander's discovery.

To begin with, we must call into question the premise that the sound of the human voice is produced by compressing the body in order to force a flow of air through the vocal mechanism. The human body does not in fact function in the manner of a rubber squeeze doll. Its workings are far more sophisticated and subtle. Indeed, Alexander came to understand that there exists a balance of opposing directional movement so that the control of air flow is achieved by a widening of the back and an upward supportive movement which extends the spine even while the breath is permitted exhalation. The significance of his work lies in a concept of unimpeded, constant movement. Too often the singer is trying to block the flow of air when in fact it needs to be set free. In this regard we may begin to understand that shortness of breath is not due to a lack of air, but rather to a retention of the air. Any attempt to save breath only achieves an immediate increase of total muscular overcontraction in the entire body and sets up a serious roadblock to the very ease of vocal function that the singer hopes to achieve. Air that does not

move is of no use to the singer. Why should we then attempt to prevent its movement?

The commonly-held view of the Alexander Technique as a means of relaxation is simply erroneous. Equally erroneous is the concept of measuring strength in terms of contraction and resistance. Needless to say, a flaccid, limp muscular condition will not enable the body to perform any activity well, let alone singing. However, to strengthen the muscular system by inducing greater contraction will stifle the alert, active responses which the singer needs. There is, in fact, another way, one which we find difficult to imagine and which cannot be clearly described in writing. It is a concept of strength arrived at through a lengthening movement along the clearly directed lines through which we desire energy to flow. If we choose to base our vocal learning on this principle, we will begin to discover an increased length and ease of breath which will in turn produce a sound of balanced elegance and a poised shaping of every musical phrase.

We may then come to understand that what Alexander offers us is in fact no less than a sure and concrete means of fashioning an approach to singing based upon his understanding of how the body needs to function in order to be free of unnecessary tension and its damaging consequences. In Alexander's view, the use of the entire body is primary; the attempt at a particular activity, in our case singing, is secondary. If the primary use is good, then the secondary, particular task will be more easily, more successfully executed. However, if we choose to accept Alexander's concept of primary function, we will find several cherished

ideals of common practice to be faulty. Giving up a long-held belief is most difficult but often necessary if we wish to attain a more satisfying end. Some courage may be called for on our part, but let us not demur as the rewards may be most beneficial.

Of the two most erroneous but unfortunately commonly-held and widely-taught concepts of accepted voice pedagogy, the most misleading concerns the area of "support" or "breath control." The terms alone invariably induce an instantaneously tightened grip of the entire torso and are best not used until the student has experienced and recognized the balancing movement of Alexander's "back widening." In place of abdominal tightening and locking of the rib-cage, the student learns to allow the back to actually *widen* while the air is being exhaled.

Alexander's practice of the whispered "Ah" is undoubtedly one of the most important means of conveying this concept: while the student allows the air to flow outward on a whispered "Ah" vowel, the teacher's hands encourage his back to widen and spine to lengthen and stretch upward. Rather than create a resistance and an increased pressure working against the breath flow, we can learn to "control" the exhalation by achieving a balance of two opposing movements. Namely, the movement of "back widening" creates space for continuous "inhalation" during the escape of the exhalation. As contradictory as this practice may appear, it enables the singer to maintain a lengthened breath supply and an ease of uninterrupted air flow while maintaining all the while an upward lengthening of the spine which in turn produces a feeling of buoyancy and

physical lightness. It is precisely this feeling of lightness created by the upwardly extending spine which we may then identify, in a redefined sense, as "support."

The other most erroneous teaching is the mechanical lifting of the soft palate. (This practice is surely one of the most blatant examples of "end-gaining" as Alexander understood the term.) By pressuring the soft palate into a fixed position, we are depriving it of the very subtle but essential movement it must be permitted at all times. As the shape of the palate needs to vary according to the pitch and vowel of the moment, and as the number of possible pitch-vowel combinations is nearly infinite, we must always permit and never interfere with the palate's freedom of movement. Alexander correctly recognized that positioning ("end-gaining") prevents movement (the "means whereby"). In fact, any pre-set positioning of the voice is in itself a grip which must then be broken for change of pitch or vowel. The singer is burdened with the handicap of having to "move" the voice from pitch to pitch when the ear can otherwise easily effect the needed changes. It is indeed within the proper province of the ear to guide all movement of the soft palate for singing and speech. We had best learn not to sabotage this most efficient and precise path of function.

Furthermore, by pressuring the soft palate into a held position, we are forcing the neck to tighten and the head to press downward, thereby shortening the spine, narrowing the back, and creating a tight, hollowed-out position of the entire torso. (Cramping of the lower back and legs is an additional result of such poor usage.) At this point it becomes clear that the artificially fixed position of the palate is also directly

responsible for the heavy, labored functioning of breath which is so commonly heard from singers in performance.

And lastly, as the properly free movement of the palate is necessary for permitting true intonation, quick change of pitch, and clarity of speech vowel, it becomes obvious that a fixed position of the palate produces faulty intonation, lack of vocal flexibility, and largely unintelligible speech. An attempt to correct these undesired results by means of diction exercises and vowel modification is merely a further burdensome cosmetic procedure (end-gaining) and is truly undertaken in vain. By not addressing the problem at its source (examining the means whereby), we are adding additional layers of artifice which only mask further the true sound of the voice and stifle the singer's musical and dramatic spontaneity.

In contrast to the prevalent faulty voice pedagogy based upon seemingly clever short-cuts—however well-intended they may be—let us posit the ideas of F.M. Alexander. While not originally derived for the specific purpose of good singing, they in fact will set us in a direction which does lead to the practice of a most healthy and aesthetically satisfying vocal art.

In the hands of a good teacher, a student of the Alexander Technique learns through direct experience a new way of allowing the entire body to lengthen and widen in response to the demands of all physical activity. An upward, flowing impulse through the spine becomes a well-directed, gently stretching movement which takes the rib-cage to a buoyant, floating, state and leaves the neck free to permit an upward release of the head. This entire dynamic system produces a measure of support

based not upon a tightened, held position, but rather on movement, sustained and uninterrupted. When this is achieved, the back (rib-cage) is permitted to widen freely even during exhalation when the voice is engaged. Once these conditions are established, the vocal mechanism is no longer in a state of stress. It is free to respond, in a most pliable manner, to all movement from pitch to pitch and vowel to vowel. Furthermore, all desired and observable ends, of subtly heightened but flexible palate, flattened and elongated abdominal area, are thus arrived at through a process of uninterrupted movement, a means whereby, rather than a static, unyielding rigidity. The singer is at once both free and in control. But it is a different means of control which feels not like any control at all. We no longer prevent movement; we learn to permit our will, newly informed, to guide our activity smoothly and with only the least necessary effort.

We are, only too often, taught to do by way of imitating someone else's end result. We need rather to find within

ourselves a way of experience which, takes us upward to a fresh plane of movement. The way of self-discovery is long in time, but the exhilaration of a musical phrase as put forth by the movement of the human voice is undeniably consoling and encouraging of life itself.

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