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A NEW DISCOVERY OF MY CREATIVE PROCESS

Dale Schriemer

The goals I set for my sabbatical last year were clear and well thought out, but I did not understand where those goals might take my spirit or how the experiences I planned would change the context of my performing art. I planned to re-engage as an artist and to be stimulated by other teachers and artists, but I did not know how that would feel or how it would change the way I approach my own singing.

The beginning was bumpy. I arranged to work with a highly regarded voice teacher in the midwest to whom I was recommended, a brilliant teacher, but whose pedagogical approach was not what I was looking for. And then a long term relationship with another vocal coach ended. Meanwhile I would continue my work with Barbara and William Conable in Columbus, Ohio, in the Alexander Technique, a theory of body coordination based on the natural balance in the bony architecture of the body. If balance is gained in the architecture, stress to the muscles and joints is reduced, and the body becomes a more efficient mechanism. The theory is that, through becoming proficient in this technique, I become a more coordinated singer, performing with more ease and grace.

Barbara has been my teacher since 1989, but what we worked with last year was my image of my body and how that differed from the facts of my structure. It seems that however one believes one's body to be constructed actually overrides the actual facts of construction. This overriding message to the body causes pain, tension, and reduced function. This overriding message asks the body to function in ways that are not in harmony with its construction. Barbara and I looked at several pictures of the human skeletal structure. As we discussed it and its functions, it was evident that my mental map of my body and the facts of my physical structure were not consonant. This dissonance was startling to me, because of all the previous work I had done in Alexander. I learned that messages I had received as a child about the nature and value of my body from the surrounding culture helped to form this confusing map. So I began consciously to remap my body image in a way that was more consonant with its facts.

It was mainly my arm structure and pelvis that needed redefinition. As I began to change myself, there was a kind of emotional fallout or release in my personality. I no longer had to act in ways that stopped and hurt me. Regret poured out of me as I began to embody these changes. Why had I wasted all this time doing things that had prevented me from the very thing I wanted from the artistic experience—the ability to express myself fluently with freedom and knowledge and joy? At the same time, hope flooded into me, as I realized I didn't have to act in the old way anymore.

Now I could know and plan and express myself as an artist with greater power and freedom.

Bill is a 'cello professor at Ohio State University and teaches three Alexander Classes as part of the University offering. I sat in on a number of classes and observed and also studied with him tutorially. Watching students who were new to Alexander begin to learn and open themselves to new physical possibilities illustrated for me how dynamic such a beginning is.

My tutorials with Bill took a slightly different tack. Whereas Barbara had exposed the specific areas of redefinition, Bill pointed me to the whole, where everything is in a unified field of attention. My tendency was to focus on and eradicate problems while altogether ignoring other parts of the artistic process. Closing my eyes as I sang illustrated this division. So Bill kept saying, "Open your eyes." He helped me open my eyes in many other ways. I tried to be a serious student, as I set about to learn ways to become consonant with my structure and to open paths of energy that had been blocked by tension. Bill helped me find that this was a pleasant process. Not only did I have to open my eyes, but I had to revel in the pleasure of things that are working well. I had to smile. As I allowed myself this enjoyment, I let my spirit go and amazing energy poured through me. I felt ecstatic.

What followed can only be described as a profound religious experience. My relationship to God, which runs deep, became a fountain of energy. I felt connected to God in my body, as if His Spirit was flowing through me physically. I had not expected this from studying the Alexander Technique, and I was unsure of how to understand it. I now think that my spiritual life has been magnified by better understanding my body, and the way I view my own body has been transformed.

Barbara helped me find a new vocal coach, Dale Beaver, also a certified Alexander teacher. Dale focused on the "nuts and bolts" of the experience of singing a specific repertoire. We worked on Brahms' Opus 103, a set of eight short pieces, totaling twelve minutes in length. They are called the *Zigeunerlieder* (Gypsy Songs) and describe the social structure and philosophy of gypsy life from a text by H. Conrat. While I sang those German songs, Dale patiently insisted that I be completely aware of my body. After my singing part of a song, he would ask, "How does that feel?" And he would say, "Good, but a little more ease in the breath." He guided my body each time so to help me feel a release and to relax my breathing. This process would go on for an hour and a half or more. The demand that I be completely physically present and completely vocally present, while paying attention to the emotional content of the Gypsy Songs was overwhelming and exhausting. But it was also exhilarating: at times I wasn't sure if I was going to explode or rise into the air and fly away.

It was heaven, this opportunity to work on my singing. It was a joy to connect my body and my spirit. But it did not end in Columbus or with my gurus of the Alexander Technique.

A friend connected me with Giulio Favario, a first generation Italian-American, who had retired from coaching at the Chicago Lyric Opera, where he had worked as a vocal coach for the last thirty years. He gave me directions on the phone to his

home in Evanston, directions which included a description of greater Chicago and its traffic patterns. By the end of our first meeting, I was overwhelmed by his knowledge and experience as well as by his genuine desire that I sing beautifully. I saw him every other week (the off weeks I would be in Columbus). Giulio and I worked on Italian operatic repertoire, never my strong area, because it had seemed too broad and extroverted for someone like me. German Lied or French melodie had always seemed to fit my personality. Giulio politely accepted my natural hesitancy in this area, but began to show me the soul of Italian music, until I was able to embrace it enthusiastically. I opened my heart and let my feelings flow through the emphatic expression of arias by Bellini, Puccini, and Donizetti. I reveled in the larger than life emotional character of the music. His response was a friendly slap on the shoulder or an exuberant "That's it!" My attitude about what I could do had been transformed.

And so my journey went back and forth between Columbus and Evanston, from peak to peak, a joyous ride. I became more and more in touch with my body, voice, feelings, and energy in ways that I had never conceived. The clarity with which I understand my talent is more and more thrilling to me. I perceive the process of my own development more clearly. I now sing with more ease, confidence, commitment, and joy. And I sense that my audiences see, feel, and hear more of me than was possible a few short months ago. The sense of my continuing artistic growth is a gift to me, as are the songs I sing.