

Voice work in the Alexander technique by Geórgia Dias

Quem canta os males espanta'
(‘those who sing send their worries away’ - Brazilian popular saying)

For me the whole of the Alexander technique is voice work, after all it was the starting point of F.M. Alexander for his discoveries and the development of the technique.

‘The voice is indeed an unique instrument, it comes to life when having the urge to communicate and express ideas’⁽¹⁾.

Every time one speaks or sings a very complex mechanism is brought into action, the vocal apparatus. When having the idea of speaking, the body mechanisms will be prepared for action, they won’t be activated unless the idea of speaking or singing becomes concrete, but never the less the body patterns will be awakened.

We also have something that not so many people take into consideration, an internal voice. The internal voice is silent and yet verbal. It exists only in one’s head. It comes when talking to yourself, it can be a writing voice for instance, when writing or thinking about what to write next, the internal voice is activated. Even when one’s intention is not the actual speaking of the written text, the internal voice is bound to bring about one’s habitual patterns.

F.M. Alexander found out that just the idea of speaking would be enough to bring his old patterns back, therefore he had no control over what he did with his body once the idea of speaking had come into his head. He decided that he had to inhibit the idea of speaking and yet speak! That seems to be almost an impossible task, but by staying with the principles of the Alexander technique one is able to have a better use, therefore a better functioning of the vocal apparatus and the whole system. Once that is there one can start the training of the voice for singing. The Alexander technique is a preparation for singing (or for anything else one can think of doing) and not a singing technique.

One should be aware of the strong identification one has with the sound of the voice. When it changes there is the risk of not recognising yourself and feeling lost. The temptation to go back to what the debauched sensorial mechanism considers as right will be very much present.

One has to be able to inhibit ones old patterns. In that way one will be able to stop interfering with the system, so being able to freely use his voice.

When talking about voice production it is very helpful to understand the functioning of its different elements. Never the less one should never lose sight of the whole.

All people are born with the ability of producing sounds with the voice, providing there is no damage in the hearing or vocal apparatus. According to F. Husler we are all natural born singers: “Man was gifted primevally and throughout an endless span of time with a singing voice (it had as yet no connection with even the simplest form of music) which he possessed long before he was able to speak”⁽¹⁾.

Since we are all born with a singing instrument, what keeps us from singing then? “Most of us develop a ‘good’ or ‘bad voice’ according to whether we were encouraged in childhood to sing or not. If a child is told she can not sing, the child will tend to believe it”⁽²⁾. The child will grow up and not make use of the singing apparatus and the musculature concerned will become weak or even atrophied. It is possible though to reawaken the singing voice by restoring the organ to the condition intended by nature. You need to allow yourself to make mistakes though, otherwise you’ll never be able to refine your vocal musculature. You have to be careful in not going for the end, which in this case is the beautiful sound you want. We have to stay with the means whereby, observe ourselves and stay in the process.

Our emotional state plays as much a part in voice production as our physical mechanisms. Most of us can openly sing under the shower even if we believe we can not sing. Maybe because that’s a place where the acoustics help the sound to come out more ‘beautifully’ and there will be no outside judgement in there.

How can people judge what makes a ‘good’ or a ‘bad voice’? Can anybody say that Louis Armstrong had a bad voice? How can one not feel happy when listening to his recording of ‘What a wonderful world’? And what about those who have a so called ‘good technique’ and are able to sing beautifully and so perfectly boringly? No matter how perfect the vocal technique is, if the emotions are not involved it will be terribly boring.

Another requirement for singing or good speech is a strong desire to communicate, that desire should be accompanied by *impulse*. “In human life the first manifestation of impulse is the cry of a new born baby as he takes his first breath. If you watch the baby’s body you will see the abdominal muscles contracting. This is the sign that the diaphragm is working, pushing the air from the lungs toward the vocal cords and making the first natural, rooted sound.”⁽³⁾

Impulse or vital energy, is omnipresent, therefore we tend to take it for granted. If one is aware of this flow of energy it is possible to channel it by giving it direction.

By applying the principles of the Alexander technique one becomes aware of one's own use, habits, preconceived ideas, old patterns... One becomes aware of being a psychophysical unity.

It is a long process, after years of mal-use and bad habits the muscle memory forgets how wonderfully it has been able to co-ordinate itself and leaves one with a debauched sensorial awareness.

The Alexander technique helps one to gain a conscious control of the self, one learns how to stop doing all the unnecessary patterns that body and mind believe it is necessary to accomplish a task.

In the 'business' of non-doing there is a thin line between the doing, which can be an interference and the constructive doing. Walking, dancing, playing an instrument, singing, etc. is all doing. We should never lose the vitality, the impulse, when '*doing* the constructive doing'. By inhibiting and directing, using the primary control and staying with the means-whereby 'the right thing will do itself' and so we'll stop interfering with our system and yet be able to freely DO whatever we intend to do.

When we stop interfering with our system our natural rate of breathing will be restored.

The 'professional breathers'(mostly singers and wind instrumentalists) are proven to have unstable breathing patterns due to interference and habit, most of them have no idea that by being 'professional breathers' they are a great danger to themselves and to others. An unstable breathing rhythm can cause anxiety, fear, a feeling of being 'unreal' or 'outside yourself' and can even cause hallucination. The basic requirements for breathing are simply having clear passage ways and let the moving parts move. The breathing itself is a 'demand led system', if the demand is there, the mechanism will respond.

Breathing changes all the time. It becomes an issue in singing, speaking, playing an instrument, because breathing is the mother of all rhythm. The effects of poor breathing affects everybody's movement, poise, balance. If legs or knees, ankles or any other part of the body is blocked, the breathing will be restrained.

Thinking of the primary control, giving directions, using inhibition, the body musculature will naturally be more and more free of interference. By staying in the process the natural rate of breathing will be allowed to happen. There is still a risk of one trying to impose the old way of breathing though.

One should be aware of the strong human tendency of unconsciously trying to control everything. That is deep rooted in us all. Some things are perfect in themselves, they don't need our help at all. One only

needs to learn how to keep out of the way.

The whispered ah

The whispered “ah” is one of the subjects that should not be forgotten when talking about voice work in the Alexander technique.

“The whispered “ah” makes the room to give attention to the directions without the stimulus of listening to the sound. It is possible to establish new patterns every time and teach oneself to give attention to what one’s doing without having the complication of listening to the sound. The whispered “ah” is the most neutral stimulus for singing that you can get, it is a great vocal exercise when done properly⁽⁵⁾ .

The whispered “ah” is very good inhibitory work and the more you do it the more accessible it gets. It helps release the jaw and tongue, it ensures a good opening of the mouth and pharynx.

If when doing the whispered “ah” one forgets to include the smile, which I would call impulse or vital flow, it simply won’t come through as floating and as freely as it should. Without the smile it can even come out as a different vowel, more like a ‘whispered oh’, which is a different opening of the mouth.

Another important reminder is not to take a breath in order to do it, but let it begin at the culmination of the natural resting in-breath.

“The practice of the whispered “ah” serves to improve the ability to apply the Alexander technique to any activity. Alexander supposedly claimed that if you could do the whispered “ah” properly you understood the application of the technique⁽⁴⁾

The whispered “ah” gives one the opportunity to observe the body patterns, making it possible to keep the mind away from the desired end, of course one should have a clear picture of what the wish is, and help one stay in the process of whatever the activity is, whether it is sitting on a chair, standing up, walking, picking up an instrument... or vocal work.

There is so much that plays an important role in voice work, the perceptivity of the ear, the eye, the thoughts and imagination...

Like the Alexander technique, voice work is a vast subject and impossible to put it into words alone.

By re-education the whole of the singing instrument, which goes from the crown

of your head to the sole of your feet, one is brought back to its balance, poise and co-ordination. Then the voice can come out freely and with it's full potential and finest nuances.

My conclusion is that the voice is no more than all the parts of our psychophysical unity working together.

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credits

1. 'SINGING - The physical nature of the vocal organ' by Frederick Husler & Yvonne Rodd-Marling
2. 'Born to sing' by Ron Murdock
3. 'Principles and art of singing' by Olga Averino
4. 'Directing and ordering: a discussion of working on yourself' by Joe Armstrong
5. Ron Murdock



