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Energized body, imagery, can change the life of a singer

By Solveig Holmquist



Here is a recommendation I'd like to make to you, dear fellow directors of community choirs, but I don't know how to couch it in strong enough terms.

You know how you and your friends exchange book titles with each other, and one of you always says, "You've just got to read this! It's incredible! Really, it will change your life!" And if you're the one hearing such ravings, you write down the title on some little slip of paper, with good intentions, and maybe you act on the tip -- but probably not. You mean to, but there's only so much time.

How about this scenario: You and your singers come rushing to the evening rehearsal, full of the day's concerns, and as tired as you are you do your best to help them sound good. You see tense jaws, curved backs, and crossed legs. Without reminders, their tone can vary from strident to unsupported, and you often wonder why basic concepts of breath management and diction aren't automatic by now.

Well, now along comes a miracle of a book that can indeed change your life, because you and your singers will at last be able to understand the concept of singing from an energized body. Stay with me, here. I know it sounds as if I'm hawking the *Amazing Ginsu Knife*, but the wonder book in question is "**The Structures and Movement of Breathing, A Primer for Choirs and Choruses**", by Barbara Conable, a respected Alexander Technique coach, and published by GIA, Chicago.

Here's the deal: all the concepts we learned in our own voice lessons, if indeed we were lucky enough to be given correct information, sound pretty technical when we try to convey quick messages to our community choirs, many of whose members have not studied privately. They really don't know where and

how the whole body is involved in singing. Worse still, they may be completely off base! But the bad part is, we may not fully understand these things ourselves.

The beauty of this new publication is that within its manageable, affordable size (equivalent to a Bach cantata in size and a bit cheaper) are really clear drawings and even clearer language. In his preface, James Jordan of Westminster Choir College says “Barbara Conable advocates Body Mapping as a way into the perceptions of the singer. The most startling statement I heard her say in my first workshop with her was that ‘if a singer has the body mis-mapped, the singer will use the body improperly.’ That statement made some immediate sense. But, like all teachers, I thought it was directed at my students, and certainly not me. In the short time of thirty minutes, I discovered I had more misconceptions about my body and its structure than I could ever have imagined.” He suggests that “this book should reside in each choral folder. The choral conductor should refer the choir to one illustration during the warm-up period of each rehearsal, beginning always with information concerning alignment, cycling through the book again and again. this repetition allows anatomical clarity to accumulate over the months and years, resulting in better singing.”

I don't know about you, but I hated the anatomy lessons in my vocal pedagogy classes and voice lessons. The illustrations weren't helpful and the text was dry and verbose.

Well, Barbara Conable cuts to the chase and somehow makes the subject seem exciting, a feat that left me asking, “how'd she do that?” And not only is there a wealth of factual information, there are many examples of imagery that are useful for many learners.

One of the best, most practical features of the book is the section listing ways to give constant, positive reminders to singers about the lessons they've learned: “When you look down at your music, just tilt your head. Don't drag your neck forward.” “How is the joint of your head to your spine? Is it free? Can you sense it?” “Breathe leaving your swallowing muscles alone.” It is one of the strengths of the Alexander Technique to never be critical; the language encourages you to keep checking yourself. That's excellent educational theory.

Because they are adult volunteers, community and church choirs are undoubtedly the singing population most in need of this godsend of a publication. Our rehearsal times are so short that we often fall prey to the need to just learn the notes and rhythms. But frankly, what good is all that effort if the tone isn't free and pleasing? Adults have long years to accumulate incorrect habits, but I know of few more rewarding sights and sounds than avocational singers who begin to take ownership of their own improvement, and pride in the beauty they are creating. This book literally does the work of planning solid and interesting awareness: all we have to do as conductors is connect the dots.

One big lesson from this book is the comforting one that, yes, we all need to keep teaching and reminding about alignment -- it's never going to be completely automatic. But correct singing is so invigorating that it's the best tonic we know for the stresses and concerns of daily life. Again, James Jordan: "Singers come into rehearsal breathing for their daily life. Breathing for singing requires a different container that is free of muscular tension."

If you're going to write the title of this book down on a little slip of paper, tape the paper to your computer until you've placed the order. It'll change your life. What's more, it'll change your singers!

Editor's note: Solveig Holmquist is R&S Chair for Community Choirs, NW-Division. Dr. Holmquist is the Director of Choral Activities at Western Oregon University at Monmouth, Oregon.