

Beyond Posture: The Alexander Technique for Singers

You know what? I have really good posture.

If you met me — or virtually any other Alexander Technique (AT) teacher — you would probably be impressed with the uprightness on display. Lots of educators have been similarly impressed with Alexander teachers' carriage throughout the past century: as a result, entire AT programs in performing arts schools have been developed around concepts like “Posture and Alignment.”

I'll admit to being pleased with my ability to assume a regal bearing at will. At the same time, I regret that this most visible effect of AT study has eclipsed, in both pedagogical programming and people's perceptions, what I think are actually its more important contributions to life and education. I fear that people, in their great admiration for perfect posture, overlook the more significant benefits to be gained from AT study. In other words, they may not be seeing the forest for the majestically upright trees.

Like singing, the Alexander Technique is a mind-body practice — with equal emphasis on “mind” and “body.” Its potential value is diminished when we over-focus on physical benefits like posture. To discover the real treasure of AT study, singers must look beyond posture (the arena in which Alexander instruction unfolds) to the less easily observed benefits that accrue with diligent practice.

Your AT instruction is likely to begin in the traditional way, with an exploration of postural issues: your relationship with gravity as you sit, stand, and walk. Even though I want you to eventually look beyond these issues in assessing the AT, let's take a moment to acknowledge that there are benefits for singers even at this basic level: efficient posture leaves more energy for performing. But don't let enthusiasm for improved posture blind you to the other, subtler changes going on.

As your lessons progress, you will notice how having more efficient posture frees up the functioning of the other systems of your body, like digestion and breathing. Freer breathing is another obvious advantage to you as a singer. . .but don't stop looking for benefits yet! We still haven't encountered the real treasure to be gained from AT study: the rewiring of your brain.

Now that I see that phrase on the page, I'm realizing that it's fortunate that the desire for better posture brings singers to the AT. The promise of a “rewiring of your brain” might be a tough sell. The skills involved are not on most people's wish lists for the simple reason that most people don't even know these skills exist. In this article, I'm going to introduce you to three such skills, all of which arise out of AT study, and all of which I'm hoping you'll recognize as crucial to your development as a singer:

- Refinement of the kinesthetic sense
- The ability to allow coordination to emerge reflexively
- Comfort with feeling wrong

Refinement of the kinesthetic sense

The muscular actions that make up vocal technique are subtle and minute. If you are not used to perceiving such fine movements, you might have trouble analyzing and tweaking what is going on in your larynx when you sing. AT lessons will prepare you for this kind of refined noticing by honing

your kinesthetic sense, that often-unmentioned sixth sense which tells you where your body parts are in space and how they are moving in relation to one another. The AT trains you to perceive not only the movements of your body, but also the potential for movement, which involves a fine-scale muscular unlocking far more subtle than the relatively gross movements we make and observe in our normal daily activities.

AT lessons will also help to purge your neuromuscular system of extraneous “noise” in the form of excessive tension, so that you will more readily perceive the intricacies of laryngeal muscle response in your singing. You are more likely to accurately assess the state of muscular coordination in your larynx against a “quiet” neuromuscular background, just as you are more likely to appreciate the complexity of a Bach fugue in a quiet room with no extraneous noise.

The ability to allow coordination to emerge reflexively

Singing, like any other skilled activity, works best when you can get out of your own way and allow your body to coordinate reflexively. Singing is accomplished almost entirely through the action of muscles which are not accessible via conscious control. When we ignore this reality — when we resort to manipulating muscles we can control instead of finding an indirect means of activating a reflexive response of our autonomic laryngeal muscles — we risk throwing off the delicate balance of the system and creating unwanted tension.

This challenging situation, calling for an indirect pedagogical approach, mirrors that of our postural system as addressed in Alexander lessons. Like singing, posture is accomplished by the reflexive interaction of a network of muscles, most of them outside our direct control. And, as with singing, many students initially try to improve their posture not by stimulating their natural muscular reflexes, but by contracting muscles they are able to control at will (the pull-your-shoulders-back-and-stick-out-your-chest approach), thereby throwing off their natural muscular balance.

In our “Just do it” world, in which we are continually urged to solve problems by trying harder, the Alexander Technique provides a rare opportunity to explore a non-doing, but paradoxically more productive option: learning how to indirectly stimulate your muscles into coordinated action. As you practice this unfamiliar option in your Alexander lessons as it relates to your posture, you will become more confident with allowing a reflexive response of all of your physiological movement patterns that operate through the action of involuntary muscles, such as your walking, your breathing, and, of course, your singing.

Comfort with feeling wrong

Another unfamiliar experience that goes largely unacknowledged outside the practice of AT is the feeling of wrongness that often accompanies change, even when it's change for the better. This powerful, disconcerting effect makes altering our habits difficult because of our strong, very human aversion to being wrong. Unless you've had Alexander lessons to increase your comfort level with what Alexander himself called “unreliable sensory appreciation,” you will more likely choose the familiar, which feels right to you, over the new, which usually feels wrong at first. This goes for singing perhaps even more than for any other activity. Before I became aware that what feels wrong may in fact be exactly what I have been striving for, I would often (to the chagrin of my voice teacher) suddenly abandon singing right in the middle of a well-executed exercise because my brain had interpreted a strange new muscular coordination as incorrect.

My unreliable sensory appreciation remains intact after more than 15 years of AT study — new experiences still feel wrong to me — but I have learned to recognize this phenomenon and not let it rule my behavioral choices. I have actually grown more than just comfortable with the feeling of being wrong; now I even welcome it as a sign that things are changing. Also, it feels thrillingly rebellious to choose “wrong”! Even more important than this amusement, I am no longer enslaved to my vocal habits through the need to feel right.

Conclusion

We’ve expanded our view of the AT beyond posture, even beyond breathing, to include some mind-body skills perhaps previously unfamiliar to you. Now you can more fully appreciate the wide range of benefits the AT affords singers. I know of no other practice which hones the particular mind-body skills I’ve discussed, which is why I include AT in my 3-in-1 voice instruction program (along with voice lessons and Voice-Enhancing Bodywork).

I realize that the benefits I’ve called “the rewiring of your brain” don’t come across as vividly in words as they would if you were to experience them first-hand, but I hope that I have piqued your curiosity sufficiently to encourage you to seek out an Alexander teacher and begin a course of lessons. Perhaps, like me, you will feel as though you have discovered a previously hidden dimension to reality.

By the way, the Alexander Technique will definitely improve your posture and breathing. If those were its only benefits, that in itself would be enough reason for you to practice it. But if you’re interested in unleashing your full potential as a singer, stick with your Alexander lessons long enough to discover for yourself the transformative power of a rewired brain.

New York City voice teacher Michael Hanco majored in Music at Princeton University and studied vocal pedagogy with the late Cornelius Reid. Also an AmSAT-certified Alexander Technique teacher and a craniosacral practitioner, Michael has developed a 3-in-1 approach to voice training, called the Art & Science of Singing, in which he combines voice lessons with Alexander lessons and Voice-Enhancing Bodywork. He welcomes visitors to his blog at ArtandScienceofSinging.blogspot.com.

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