

A Singer's Experience

By Allison

In November 1990 I was in a performance of Faure's Requiem in St. John Smith's Square in London. The performance was by candlelight, which was a good thing for me as I spent a great deal of the performance fighting back tears. I had been experiencing severe problems with my voice for some time, and on this occasion I realised that I was now only able to sing three notes with relatively little discomfort. Otherwise my voice was a rasp and I was in some pain when trying to pitch higher or lower tones or when trying to produce any dynamic contrasts in my singing. I was upset because I suddenly realised that if things didn't improve then I wouldn't be able to carry on with my teaching career and this was a frightening prospect.

Back at work I continued to struggle on but my problems were seriously affecting my work. Imagine being a music teacher who can't speak or sing! Eventually someone suggested that I might have a vocal nodule and so I went to the doctor who referred me to the Speech Therapy unit in the Heath Hospital. Having had the obligatory tubes down my nose and throat, it was indeed confirmed that I did have a nodule and that this was the direct cause of my vocal discomfort. I was then recommended for speech therapy, which became a great revelation to me. I was subsequently able to improve my habits sufficiently to allow the nodule to heal without the need for laser treatment or any other invasive type of surgery and was discharged from the Heath in May 1992.

I then took some singing lessons for a while in an effort to improve my breathing, but my singing teacher, who was a great advocate of the Alexander Technique, suggested that I started Alexander lessons and recommended a local teacher. Eventually I gave the Alexander Technique teacher a call and started lessons with her in May 1993. This became something of a turning point in my life and now, almost seven years later, I am still having a weekly lesson and reaping the benefits of this extraordinary technique. I rarely ever have any but the mildest of vocal problems, except for perhaps a slightly tired throat after a Parents' Evening following a full day's teaching. I have not suffered from sore throats, colds or flu for many years. I have also been able, through the work, to gradually improve upon the bad habits which brought about my distressing vocal condition in the first place.

The symptoms from which I was suffering in the early nineties were:

- Constantly dry, sore throat
- Painful vocal tract
- No power in the voice
- Voice becoming easily hoarse
- Inability to sing
- Fear of having to teach and use the voice

The Speech Therapy course raised my awareness of the following habits:

- Shallow breathing
- Speaking on residual air
- Squeaking, especially when laughing
- Speaking in accents
- Clearing my throat
- Clenching my teeth

- Talking out loud to myself, especially when driving
- Shouting in the classroom
- Talking over or interrupting other people in conversation
- Tension in the neck and shoulder areas
- Posture

The Alexander Technique has helped me to understand how and why these bad habits developed over the thirty years before my vocal problems became severe. The lessons help to address the causes and effects of the habits and gradually help to replace bad habits of use with an improved use of the self in everyday life. This has had a transforming effect on my life and my own teaching for many reasons.

Some of these are:

- Ability to cope far better with stress
- Far less tension
- Positive attitudes
- Feeling more mentally and physically relaxed
- Rarely becoming ill
- Improved relationships with family, friends and students
- Learning to inhibit the immediate response in any given situation
- Improved vocal confidence
- Ability to manage workloads
- More energy
- Learning to say no

Some of my new habits include:

- Breathing more consciously
- Inhibiting
- Drinking water frequently during the day
- Managing my life better by realising that I create my own stress due to the manner of my reaction to situations
- Taking more time to relax
- Continuing to raise my awareness of the self as a psycho-physical whole
- Trying not to end-gain

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