

The Singer's Library

Singing with Your Whole Self

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH



The Feldenkrais Method has been aiding singers for decades but has only recently become more accepted with scientific backing. Discover more about this method in a second edition publication.

The temperamental nature of the vocal folds can sometimes induce a level of paranoia that causes singers to do strange things. If you have ever brewed a hot mug of herbal tea and wrapped your neck in a cozy scarf, even when it's 90 degrees outside, you probably know what I'm talking about. Or, if a lingering cough has ever caused you to think, "I'll never sing again!" then you are in good company. Young singers especially may be excused if their occasional ridiculous behavior gives the impression that high-quality singing is based entirely on what happens inside the throat.

An apt comparison can be made between singers and baseball pitchers. Each year, major league pitchers (and catchers) report to spring training a couple of days earlier than the rest of the team so they can get a jump-start on the running, weight training, and conditioning necessary to compete at the highest level. Of course, they also spend plenty of time on the mound perfecting their arm motion and practicing the fastballs, curveballs, and sliders they will need for the season. But those who believe that all it takes to be a great pitcher is to have a strong arm are in for a rude awakening

when confronted with the all-around physical demands of an entire season. In the same way, it would be foolhardy for singers to believe that high-quality singing depends solely on a finely tuned larynx.

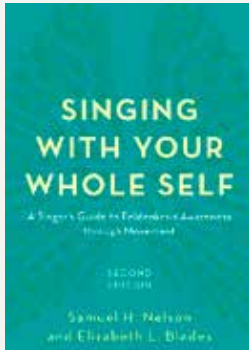
Therefore, an all-encompassing, full-body approach is at the heart of the newly released second edition of *Singing with Your Whole Self: A Singer's Guide to Feldenkrais Awareness through Movement*.



Brian Manternach

Book Review

Times have changed since the first edition of *Singing with Your Whole Self: A Singer's Guide to Feldenkrais Awareness through*



Movement was released 20 years ago. At the time, a well-meaning colleague of co-author Elizabeth L. Blades was concerned that the Feldenkrais Method lacked scientific backing. This colleague thus warned Blades that her reputation could suffer if she became too associated with "that woo-woo stuff." Almost as a response, the additions to the

second edition highlight the scientific basis that led to the practices advocated throughout the book.

For instance, a new chapter on neuroplasticity allows the authors to incorporate information

from recent advances in brain research. New anatomical drawings from medical illustrator Amy Walt help reflect accurate physiological understanding. And a new appendix summarizes a study that tested the efficacy of Feldenkrais practices. This study used spectrographic analysis to compare the singing of subjects before and after Awareness Through Movement lessons. This research was presented at the Second International Physiology and Acoustics of Singing Conference.

The authors' specialized backgrounds allow them to masterfully apply the Feldenkrais Method to the physical needs of singers. *Singing with Your Whole Self*, therefore, acts as both textbook and workbook, providing information alongside exercises. It demonstrates that when science and practice merge, and when dedicated practitioners continue to explore, old practices can be enhanced by modern understandings.

—Brian Manternach



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Authors Samuel H. Nelson and Elizabeth L. Blades updated their book 20 years after the first edition because of the additional experience and knowledge they had gained during the intervening time. The revised and expanded volume explores the Feldenkrais Method to guide singers toward maximum vocal efficiency with minimum effort.

In our conversation, the authors discuss the Feldenkrais Method and its impacts on the voice, as well as how their approach has changed over the last two decades.

Singers are often encouraged to explore how the body relates to singing through methodologies and practices like the Alexander Technique, Body Mapping, and yoga. In what ways is the Feldenkrais Method similar to other practices, and in what ways does it most differ?

Samuel H. Nelson: Both the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method are somatic learning approaches. There are two central differences. Feldenkrais created Awareness Through Movement lessons, which allow a practitioner to work with multiple students (or a single student) who take a more

active role in the learning than a recipient of the hands-on work, the only modality that Alexander uses. The second difference is that there is a particular way to aspire to be in the Alexander method.

The Feldenkrais Method is dynamic; there is no one right way to be. Instead, one is led to figure out the most useful adaptations to a situation. And there is a useful approach to function, which is usually as gently as possible.

By yoga, I assume you mean Hatha Yoga, as practiced in the West. As such, yoga becomes a series of learned postures to be aspired to and held. The learning, therefore, has a more muscular basis than the neuroplastic brain reprogramming of somatic learning.

Elizabeth L. Blades: Body Mapping is an offshoot of Alexander Technique. According to the website poisedforlife.com, it is "the conscious correcting and refining of one's body map" or anatomy. As such, it is more literal and direct, rather than exploratory.



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You mention that since you began working on the first edition of the book (more than 20 years ago!), the body-mind (somatic) connection has become more widely accepted by those in music performance. Why do you think it was not as accepted earlier? What has changed that has encouraged its acceptance now?

SHN: Twenty years ago the integrity of body-mind and neuroplasticity were just beginning to be accepted in the medical world.

ELB: Much of what we in the singing world now accept as “body-mind-somatic” awareness evolved from sports psychology and medicine, a field ahead of the game (especially those elite athletes at the top of their sport, such as [those in] the Olympics). It was only a matter of time before vocal performance pedagogy accepted and adopted that as a valid component for singers (elite athletes in their own sport).

You write that the book embodies the scientific work of Moshé Feldenkrais, creator of the Feldenkrais Method, but that the book is not a scientific treatise or a report on quantified scientific research. What does this mean for readers?

SHN: Hopefully, this reinforces the idea that this is a book to be *used*, not just read.

ELB: I like to compare our book to a cookbook—you follow the “recipe” (the “steps” through the Awareness Through Movement lessons), and you’ll make a “cake” (the kinesthetic discoveries elicited).

Part of the impetus for the second edition, as described in the preface, is to share what you have learned over the years and to incorporate information gained from more recent scientific research. What were some of the most crucial discoveries that necessitated this new edition?

SHN: The two biggest discoveries were our realization of how vital kinesthetic imagination is, meriting its own chapter, and the developments that have brought neuroplasticity into mainstream consciousness. For kinesthetic imagination, it also became clear that there is a need to distinguish it from visualization. These are two separate neurological channels.

Were some of your previous practices challenged by new discoveries? Besides adding new information to the second edition, did you have to adjust or retract anything from the first edition?

SHN: None of our previous practices were challenged by discoveries over the last 20 years. All the lessons were reworked to clarify the presentation and to keep pace with changes in the language over

the past 20 years. There were only two adjustments of note. The warning to not use Magic Hands when having wrist difficulties was repeated at the beginning of the lesson as well as in the body of the text, and the ending of Feet Connect to Head was altered slightly to make it easier and more effective. We did not have to retract anything.

Of the two main aspects of the Feldenkrais Method—Awareness Through Movement (ATM) and Functional Integration (FI)—the book focuses mostly on ATM since FI requires a practitioner for a hands-on session. Is the book best used, then, as a supplement to working with a Feldenkrais practitioner or is it just as effective for use by an individual with no previous Feldenkrais exposure?

SHN: The book is designed [so] that it can be used on its own by someone who has no previous Feldenkrais experience. It also is an excellent supplement for someone who has access to, and is working with, a Feldenkrais practitioner.

Brian Manternach’s bio can be found on page 41.

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