Passionate About Singing: A First Lesson in the Feldenkrais Method With Master Teacher Maxine Davis

by Jill Anna Ponasik

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When I accepted the assignment [from Classical Singer Magazine] to interview Maxine Davis and write a series of articles on the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education, I knew next to nothing about Feldenkrais. It occurred to me that one way to introduce the method to Classical Singer readers might be to take a lesson myself and describe it step by step, so I signed myself right up.

I arrived for my private lesson a few minutes early and opened the door to find several people lying prone on the floor. I tiptoed around them and took a seat in the adjacent room. Phrases such as, “It feels to me like you lost the clarity of what

you're doing," and, "Notice, does the contact with the floor send its force up to the top of your head?" floated through the space between rooms.

When it was my turn, Davis began by asking if there was anything in my performing life that had consistently proven to be an issue.

I confessed that I have a seemingly incurable fear of high notes, especially in my operatic repertoire, and that I miss the freedom and comfort I once felt when I was very proud of my voice and loved singing above the staff.

Davis asked me about the activities of my daily life. I told her I usually exercise by taking dance classes and walking a lot.

"So walk for me a bit, just your normal walk," she said. "What I'm looking for is just something that catches my attention, not so much a problem as [it is] a place to start."

I walked about the room.

"The place that catches my attention now also relates to the fear that you sense when singing up high," said Davis. "It has to do with what goes on from, say, your waist to your chin. How much ballet did you take?"

“I took weekly classes for about nine years and was en point for the last five.”

“One thing that I’ve observed in people with a lot of ballet in their background is a kind of separation of chest and pelvis,” Davis explained. “On a mechanical level they’re not separate at all. The spine goes from the pelvis up through the ribs all the way to your head. “

Davis asked me to lie on my back on the worktable. She seated herself on a stool near my head. “I often start by checking out the readiness of the head to roll,” she said, and began rocking my head back and forth slowly and gently.

“There’s a little resistance in your readiness to move,” she continued. “If you cut off the connection between your head and your tail, you have to do something active.”

I thought about this.

“Already, as you get used to that idea, something is starting to change,” Davis continued. “In a way, the fact that everything is connected is a pain, because if you’re holding in your ankles, you can hear it in your voice. But the good thing

about everything being connected is that you can access the topic from many 'handles.'"

Davis moved to my feet and began to flip-flop my legs. "What do you feel? What's happening to your head?" she asked.

"It's moving. I can feel it all the way through me, in a line."

"What you feel is your skeleton," Davis explained. "Now, as you stand, think of the lift and separation that you sustain. Try it and feel what goes on in your lower belly and in your ability to breathe."

"It tightens," I said.

For a short while Davis had me practice moving back and forth between my "lifted posture" and the relaxed, easy position she had helped me find. Then she moved back to my head and rolled it gently, as before.

"How's that, compared to the beginning?" she asked.

"It rolls easily now," I said.

"I'm not using any more force than before," said Davis. "What's interesting to me is that, as a whole person, you have all of these talents and interests, but your

belief about the organization of this part of your body is for a single state of being. We're born with a nervous system that is designed to reinvent itself all the time, yet most of us subvert it at some level because we want things to stay the same—but we're not designed for stability, we're designed to move.

"Now, try rolling to your side, bringing your arm with you, tilting your leg, rolling your head and—stop! There's your ballet. Can you feel it? Your chest was in a separate world. So come back, and let's put it together. Now the chest is part of the picture."

I rose to a sitting position.

"For a moment, can you be where you are without pulling yourself up into that dance posture?" Davis asked. "It can be a scary experience, because there is a sense of self associated with that other posture. Is there anything that feels lazy about this one?"

"I feel an easing in my shoulders and my neck that I don't usually feel," I said.

"Can you breathe down into your lower belly?"

"Yes!"

“Try it your old way. Can you breathe into your belly?”

“Yes . . . with effort.”

“What are you constantly told to do in singing?”

“Breathe into the belly.”

“You’ve created a posture whereby it’s hard to do what you want to do. So you try harder. You put more effort in there.”

We moved over to the piano—Davis also teaches voice from a Feldenkrais perspective. We started with a very simple exercise.

“How does that feel?” she asked.

“OK.”

“Now, go over to the table. Put one foot up on the table. Place an elbow on your knee, and lean your cheek on your fist. Just kind of get interested in your sensations and notice whether the weight of your head disappears at any point.”

I followed her instructions, sang the exercise again, and noticed immediately that the sound was richer, fuller, and more connected.

“How does it feel to sing in that cockamamie position?” Davis asked.

“I love it!”

“What must you do to be in that position and let your hand hold your head? What must you give up?”

“I have to give up any rigidity in my ribcage.”

“Now look for a way to change legs and put your right elbow on your left knee. This is more demanding.”

I gave it a try, struggling a bit, but every time I remembered to drop the weight of my head into my hand, my singing improved.

“Now you’re releasing the sound rather than containing and controlling it. When I put you into these positions I’m making it impossible, or at least really noticeable, to go back to your old habits.”

I came closer to the piano and we continued with a few more exercises.

“Stand however you like. Protrude your tongue and bite on it, keeping it relaxed. See if you can do an ‘ng’ in the back [of your mouth].”

I tried.

“I see a little fight going on,” said Davis. “Reduce the effort. Give up any ideas you have about what may be right and just do the ‘ng.’ While you’re doing that, imagine an ‘ah’ in that space.

“The ‘ngs’ work with the palate. It’s like you’re saying, ‘Look palate—you can do something a little different.’ The position of your usual posture means that the palate gets less flexible, less ready to lift the way that it needs to for high notes.

“What you’re looking for is the same thing that I talked about with the chest, which is responsiveness. You don’t want the palate to be high all the time because different notes require different kinds of lift. When the palate is ready to respond, all of the vowels just slide into their spaces.”

Davis asked me to return to putting a foot up on the table. We repeated the exercises several more times. As we tinkered with this and that, my sound became more resonant, more present, and took less air to produce. I was beginning to understand what it means to apply too much effort to a problem.

“Obviously, to sing professionally, we need our voices to be reliable,” said Davis. “We can either try to be reliable by holding things in place or by developing the ability to feel when our bodies are doing what’s necessary. Your body is so responsive because of all the movement you’ve done.

“Tune into your body almost more than your voice. The voice will be there. You’ll sense it because it’s part of all the things you’re feeling.”

At the end of our lesson, I thanked Davis for her time, slung my bag over my shoulder, and began the walk through Central Park to my apartment.

I wonder what will happen if I “try less hard.” I’m about to go find out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jill Anna Ponasik wrote the article above for Classical Singer Magazine in 2008. She is currently the Producing Artistic Director of the Milwaukee Opera Theatre.