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Introduction

I still remember the feeling while playing my trombone after the very first lesson. The others in the room noticed too. My sound was much bigger, clearer and easier to produce than before. And standing felt so pleasant and comfortable. “Wow, could lying on the floor and doing those tiny little movements really improve my sound that much?” During the lesson I had thought I was wasting my time, because the movements were so small and slow, and we kept taking pauses even when I could have done much more. After that experience, my mind was made up. I wanted to know more.

This pivotal experience took place in a Feldenkrais Method® (FM) workshop for musicians. While working as a freelance musician, I knew many friends and colleagues who were suffering from pain and injuries as a result of the long and stressful hours of practicing and performing. Most people accepted the discomfort as just part of being a musician. This didn't seem quite right to me, so I began to look for answers outside of the music profession. Of the many methods I investigated, the one that impressed me the most was the FM, partly because of my own personal experience and also that the FM is based on learning and experience rather than having to buy into a belief system or theory. I found out that there was a Feldenkrais® Professional Teachers' Training Program starting soon and promptly enrolled.

However, as I learned more and more about the FM, I began to realize that it has as much to offer in the realm of performance enhancement as it does in the prevention and alleviation of performance related maladies. After finishing the Training, I began using the FM in my private practice. I also started using the FM with my trombone students and found that having a student do a few little movements often corrected a problem much faster than when using verbal explanations or demonstrations. Students could feel for themselves what I was talking about. As more and more professional musicians began coming to my practice, I developed a series of lessons that I named the Dynamic Musician Series (DMS). The first part entitled “Dynamic Stability and Breath,” contains lessons that have proved to be very effective in increasing breath control and capacity while also improving posture, making practicing and performing more comfortable. After using these lessons with many clients and giving workshops, I decided to record the lessons so that other musicians could benefit from “Dynamic Stability and Breath.” Other forthcoming series are: “Dynamic Neck, Shoulders and Back,” “Dynamic Lips, Jaw and Tongue” and “Dynamic Arms and Hands.”

What is Dynamic Stability and Breath?

Dynamic Stability and Breath focuses on the two most fundamental aspects of singing and wind instrument playing: posture and breath. These two aspects are often thought of as separate functions, but in order to breathe well you must have a stable and free base of support while standing or sitting. If you improve your ability to sit or stand more freely and easily, your ability to breathe will also improve. My experience in working with myself, students and performers is that the most effective way to improve breathing is to include posture as well. The lessons are not a breathing method or even lessons on how to breathe correctly. Nevertheless, they will teach you how you can refine, deepen and improve your breathing which, will enhance your singing or playing and performing.

How do you define “good posture?”

A tricky question: “Good posture” is often associated with admonishments like “sit up straight” or “don’t slouch while you’re playing.” This kind of well meant advice is rarely helpful over the long term; because such advice does not help the person to whom it’s addressed find a way to be more comfortably upright. For others, “good posture” may mean holding one’s self up or being rigid and stiff, which is certainly not beneficial in learning to breathe more easily and effectively.

I would like to propose an alternative to the term “good posture.” When sitting or standing feels comfortable and breathing feels free and easy, we can say we have “Dynamic Stability.” For the remainder of this book, I will use the term “Dynamic Stability” rather than “good posture.”

Dynamic Stability means being stable and comfortable in an upright position and having the freedom to move in all directions as well.

You may not even feel that you are moving and adjusting when standing or sitting, but if you take a moment and just sit without leaning back on your chair, and paying attention to the position of your head, your breathing and the contact you have with the chair, you will begin to notice that you are making tiny little adjustments all of the time. This becomes even more obvious while standing. The mere fact that you are breathing also means you are in motion. Now try holding yourself “still” for a moment. You may notice that you begin to restrict your breathing, and actually tighten the muscles in your belly, back and chest just to keep from moving. If you do this for very long, it begins to get tiring.

At any stage in our development, regardless of age, we can refine and improve our nervous system’s ability to keep us balanced and upright. This in turn will enhance our breathing and hence benefit our singing/playing.

Next, we come to the question, “what does it mean to breathe well?”

There are as many opinions about breathing as there are teachers and performers. Some breathe the way they were taught; others have found ways that work well for them through experimentation and exploration. Is there one right way to breathe while making music? No. Do singers need to breathe differently than oboists? Absolutely. And of course, an oboist breathes differently than a flutist or tuba player. Because each person has his/her own body, habits and ideas about breathing, no two persons will ever breathe alike. Breathing is individual and changes from moment to moment. Breathing can be affected by mood, the time of day and most importantly, what you are doing. You breathe differently when you are walking than when sleeping. When hurrying, you breathe differently than when having a cup of coffee or tea. Different styles of music require various nuances in air pressure, rate of flow and breath control.

So how can you know when you are breathing well while playing or singing?

Now that is an interesting question!

At this point, I'd like to suggest an answer to the question above: You can say you are “Breathing Dynamically” when sitting or standing feels comfortable, breathing feels free and easy and you are able to produce a tone quality which is appropriate to the musical expression as well as pleasing to the ear. I use the term “Breathing Dynamically” because breathing, like stability in sitting or standing, is always changing to fit and support your actions according to the situation in which you are performing or practicing.

This of course is a simple answer to a very complex question, but the feeling of freedom and ease and tone quality are important and reliable indicators in guiding us to finding our way along the complex and sometimes confusing road to Dynamic Breathing.

Because this series is based upon awareness and experience, the best way to understand what I'm talking about is to do the audio lessons.