



Learning To Let Go

A Discussion about the Inner Game of Singing with Feldenkrais Teacher Maxine Davis

by Jill Anna Ponasik

Last month Jill Anna Ponasik shared the experience of her first lesson with Feldenkrais teacher Maxine Davis. Ponasik left having discovered new-found feelings of freedom in her singing, and wondering if she could make them last. This month, find out how she's doing as the Feldenkrais method continues to inform her singing.

When I accepted the assignment to interview Maxine Davis and write four articles about the Feldenkrais Method, I had no idea what a vast and interconnected topic I was about to explore. The Feldenkrais Method is many layered, addressing both our inner and outer lives. In last month's article, I described what went on during a private lesson with Davis. This month, our conversation focuses more on the inner game of singing, specifically, how our intellect both helps and hinders us as we prepare to sing.

I called Davis to conduct our third interview and as soon as she picked up the phone, I began telling her about the unexpected impact my Feldenkrais lesson had on a voice lesson I took several days later. In my voice lesson, portions of arias

that had long been problematic for me began to flow freely, with very little effort. Both my teacher and I were delightfully surprised.

"If you think about it, what shift made

"The aim is a body that is organized to move with minimum effort and maximum efficiency, not through muscular strength, but increased consciousness of how it works."

—Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais
(1904-1984)

that voice lesson so effective for you?" Davis asked me. "Do you know?"

I did. In our Feldenkrais lesson, after

listening to me sing a little bit, Davis demonstrated for me how the nostrils are related to the soft palate. One of the ways she did this was to gently place her fingers on either side of my nose and pull them just slightly toward my cheeks—I could immediately feel a lift and stretch of the tissues inside. Then we did some exercises to help me move my nostrils in different ways, this time without touching them.

Davis encouraged me to slow down and really feel the differences between each movement. She also talked about the eyebrows and how they too connect to the palate. We did a few exercises that helped me learn how to move my nostrils and eyebrows both with and independently from my scalp. Again, Davis encouraged me to carefully feel the difference between each movement.



Here's what I discovered in my voice lesson later: If I let my nostrils flare slightly to lift the soft palate and encouraged my eyebrows *not* to knit together, the way they so often do when I'm concentrating, several nitpicky, technical problems just disappeared. These issues, such as uneven vibrato at the ends of phrases, had been bothering me for months, and suddenly they were gone, without my even "trying" to fix them.

"That's exactly what Feldenkrais meant when he talked about acting with one clear intention," Davis explained. "In this case, you might be flaring your nostrils to lift your soft palate, but if in the rest of your face, you're doing something that is in effect the opposite, such as scrunching your eyebrows, you have a contradiction. In your lesson, when you took away the part that was working against your intention, then the other things, which were just compensation, went away. You moved closer to acting with a single intention as opposed to a number of cross-intentions. So, what happened to the emotional experience of singing the aria?"

"It was just so much more fun," I told her. "I felt like I was connecting to some part of myself that had been gone for a while."

"You didn't have to 'try' to do that did you?"

"Actually, I wasn't trying to do *that* at all," I answered. "I wasn't thinking my usual thoughts or focusing on my usual problems, I was simply concentrating on not letting my eyebrows knit together while I sang. The problems that disappeared seemed to do so by accident."

"Except that it wasn't really an accident. We were just approaching the issue from a different angle," Davis said. "Often, when we're practicing, we focus only on our problems, and that

"If you can give up using what you know, or think you know, to make something happen, you might be able to find something that will make you say, 'I never knew it could be so easy.'"

can be discouraging. I gave you an assignment—your eyebrows—that you were able to accomplish. I remember telling you, "This is the real playing field. This is what really matters. If the nostrils and the eyebrows stop contradicting each other, things are going to get much easier." The learning process is enhanced by addressing the problem from several different directions."

I remembered Davis saying that, and I also remember not really believing her—but then this weird little miracle occurred. I made some changes in the way I moved my eyebrows and my nose, and suddenly these problems that I had been trying to address directly for a long time just cleared up. I didn't have to try to make my vibrato even, because suddenly it just *was* even.

"In order to believe it," Davis explained, "you had to, for a moment, suspend your old belief and try the new one on for size. There may be resistance, but when the new belief is so much fun, it's not too painful to give up the old belief."

Davis then caught me off guard by asking, "Was it a little scary?"

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Maxine Davis

I had to think about it. Mostly it felt great, but yes, in a way it was scary because I kept expecting it to stop, and because it felt different than what I was used to doing. I didn't feel my muscles working quite as hard as they usually do. Two or three times in the voice lesson I felt my body try to shift back to the other, more familiar way of doing things.

"One of the challenges we face when trying to learn something new is that we have to be willing to take a little leap of faith," Davis agreed. "If you can give up using what you know, or think you know, to make something happen, you might be able to find something that will make you say, 'I never knew it could be so easy.' But, you can't get there without giving up the comfort of the familiar, and that can feel scary."

Maybe the scariest part was getting used to a new kind of control, one that had more to do with letting go than with holding on.

"I think that part of what you're talking about is an emotional

attachment to the feeling of 'trying.' If you can feel your muscles work, you know that you're trying. In reality, that's not ever what produces the best result because all you hear or see is that extra effort. You have to let go of the need to perceive what feels like control, but isn't really control.

"It's ironic that by becoming at ease with the sense of letting go, we actually end up with more control. You could say it's like driving a finely tuned car, where the slightest movement of your hand results in the car clearly turning and responding to your intentions—or think of Nastia Liukin's performance in the Summer Olympics. If you watched her on the uneven bars, there was a visceral sense of fluidity, of freedom in every possible area of the body in order for her to make the moment by moment adjustments necessary to rebalance herself."

I'm not comfortable comparing myself to either a Ferrari or an Olympic gymnast, but I can say that this other, more fluid and easy sense of control allowed me to sing through "Non so più cosa son" with more joy and spontaneity than it has had for me in a long time. And since my mind wasn't occupied in obsessing about my perceived problems, my body was free to experience the aria in a new way.

"I was recently at a lecture by my own trainer, Anat Baniel, and she spoke about how the main function of the brain is to make order from disorder," Davis continued, "and that in order to change a habit and replace it with a new, more useful habit the brain needs to refine its ability to feel differences. The way you develop that skill is movement with attention—for example, working on variations that make it possible to feel the difference between, say, doing a tongue trill a little to the right in your mouth or to the left. So, all of the variations that we've been talking about are really one big way to refine our ability to feel differences."

I'm beginning to understand this. As we refine our ability to feel differences, we are better able to observe with accuracy just what we're doing. And once we know *how* we're doing *what* we're doing, we can do more of what we *want*, whether it's dancing a tango, performing a somersault, or singing a high C.

Maxine Davis has degrees in both music education and performance. She is the recipient of a Fulbright-Hayes Fellowship and a 1991 graduate of the NY Feldenkrais Professional Training Program. She has introduced the Feldenkrais Method to people at NYU, the New School, the 92nd St. Y, and The Chautauqua Institution. She currently offers private Feldenkrais lessons and classes, as well as voice lessons informed by the Feldenkrais approach to learning, from her studio in New York City. Visit her online at www.maxinedavis.net.

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