

The Voice & Body Centre

Angela Caine gave a fascinating talk and workshop at the RCM last January. Sue Dent, who continues to follow a programme with her, describes The Voice and Body Centre, Southampton.

Your first visit to The Voice and Body Centre will be for an initial assessment. This will be shaped to your apparent needs and will give an insight into areas to be worked on together. It is likely that Angela will suggest you follow a seven part, individually tailored programme in which the voice and body are treated as one.

Each part will contain elements of Angela's knowledge and continuing research. The latter involves Chiropractic, Dentists, Orthodontists and Sports Scientists. Her findings are always based on the rigorous scrutiny of anatomical and physiological processes which are explained during sessions. She refers to the numerous charts that litter her studio wall, as well as to a skeleton, a skull, a climbing frame, different sized balls, for balancing and reclining on and other paraphernalia. Many of the problems that she encounters she puts down to poor, incomplete or interrupted structural development from birth into late childhood. Within this developmental framework, she draws parallels with the evolutionary processes of homo-sapiens away from its ancestral counterparts, capable of sophisticated means of communication in precise articulated speech.

Before standing upright, and whilst suckling, a baby has a well developed sucking reflex action with the tongue working against the palate at the top of the mouth. The child at the suckling stage has the ability to make only those sounds that attract the attention necessary for its survival. And these sounds, which are the sounds for singing, are akin to those of other similarly motivated quadrupeds. On becoming upright the child begins to learn complex speech patterns. This is because the tongue has gone through a 90degree shift and retracted down the pharynx, along with a horseshoe shaped 'floating' bone called the 'hyoid'. This normal development, when complete, allows the full cobra like backspring of the tongue. It is the backspring of the tongue that gives us the means of good articulation. It is unique to us as humans.

In incomplete development, a condition called 'tongue thrust' occurs in situations when the tongue has not retracted the full 90 degrees and this results in a too forward resting position of the tongue, putting pressure on the front teeth which may in fact protrude as a result. This condition is fully treatable but often not recognised by music teachers of wind players as a cause of poor articulation. Many of us wind players may also not be aware that the upper surface of the tongue forms the front wall of the pharynx and further, that the larynx, containing the vocal folds [and therefore an area of potential resonance] is suspended by attachments to 1) the skull, 2) the front of the chest and 3) the shoulder/arm complex. The suspension is 360 degrees so that we can breathe and sing in any position.

This is hard to imagine but easy to prove. Angela will have you singing nursery rhymes and well-known songs, both straight and with carefree improvised embellishment, whilst rolling you into any position on the floor. Angela rolls people on the floor to establish an active state of balancing where muscles are working in opposition. (In this way, the balanced 'puckered smile' embouchure of a brass player produces the required support in opposing muscles working against each other, smile versus pucker.) In her opinion, a static relaxed position, ie lying motionless on the floor, is not good working practice. The word 'relax' is therefore both over-used and ill conceived.

When singing in this active state of balancing, a perhaps surprising freedom is experienced along with a facility over an extended pitch range. Freer and more natural breathing, allows greater expansion of the upper chest into the back, on inhalation. Thus, the expanded chest creates a larger resonating space whereby the back will be fulfilling the same function as, say, the back of a cello. Having experienced this, we become aware of our postural inefficiencies if we cannot reproduce this when standing up. If this is the case, Angela will have you working on a balance board. Initially, in attempting to stay upright on the balance board we over compensate in correcting imbalances. Then in balancing, we are able to locate both our centre of gravity (roughly positioned at the navel) and our primary means of balance, the legs. It is then easy to free up the upper torso, creating space in the abdomen, the area of core strength, stretching upwards, defying gravity, whilst the legs are fully grounded and 'doing' all the balancing.

The effect of playing our instrument on a balance board in an improved state of balance can be startling and shows two things; the majority of us are structurally misaligned in some way which may be the outcome of inherent difficulties in holding and playing our particular instrument; that our body is and must be an integral part of the instrument that we play.

The crux of Angela's argument is aimed at developing and maintaining a problem free musical life for individuals. This depends on the maintenance and continued development of interdependent areas which includes development and stability in voice, structural alignment and correctly occluded dental arches.

The findings in Angela's research suggest that these physical attributes appear to be also necessary for the development of a feel for rhythm, as only Homo sapiens, who has these attributes, has developed dance (as opposed to random movement), and music, (as opposed to the cacophony of vocal sound produced by all creatures before Homo sapiens.) It may therefore be true that there is interdependence between early language skills, upright posture and musical abilities in children (as that term is generally understood). Angela's invaluable work points to insufficient awareness within the core of our music education of the necessity of a more interdisciplinary approach. Music cannot be 'learned' or taught in isolation.

For further details visit the website at www.voicetraining.co.uk