

Contact Instead Of Control

Somatic work with musicians, inspired by Body-Mind Centering

by Galabina Ivanova



About 7 years ago, after a long orchestral performance, I was lying in the bathtub with back pain, browsing through a Yoga magazine. In it, a well-known Yoga teacher described her experiences with Body-Mind Centering and Yoga. The next day I told a friend about it, enthusiastic about how enriching it would be if musicians had access to this kind of teaching. As a professional dancer he knew BMC and exclaimed, “Yes, everyone should do that every day!” By that evening he had forwarded me the link to the one-year advanced training at the *Tanzfabrik Berlin*.

As a musician I have always strived for a creative approach to my physical and psychological obstacles. A purely mechanical practice was never enough for me. First, because after taking a break for more than 10 years (age 24-34), I needed something that would help me achieve the desired results more effectively. Second, because my mind and self-perception did not follow at the same speed. I struggled with my trembling right arm: at almost every audition I lost control of the bow. I knew it was not due to normal stage fright but did not understand the cause or the pattern. No meditation, no coach, no exercise seemed to help. So I started searching through my own combination of Yoga, meditation, analysis, and subtle body awareness. Since then, beginning with my training in 2014, Body-Mind Centering gave me a framework and a research tool. And, in 2020 I began training to become a Somatic Movement Educator.

The desire to share my work with musicians arose when I helped a cellist prepare for his auditions in 2014. Initially he asked me simply to pretend to be the jury, but then I asked him a few questions and we ended up exploring his sound, his idea of music, and a blockage of his right shoulder. We then began to work frequently together, but I could seldom put my finger on why I was trying a particular approach or the reasons why it worked. My experience with coaching myself and my ability to observe and analyze at close range enabled me to help my friend refine his technique.

The focus in music education is usually on perfect mastery of the instrument. The body-mind response to the consequent stress of this demand can be stiffness, poor posture, pain, and stage fright. There are some music universities that provide Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, and Yoga, but missing is the idea that movement awareness is fundamental to both artistic development and general sense of well-being. This omission is reinforced by the fact that body work is treated as a separate subject from instrumental lessons. In my view, instrumental and somatic training should form a unit from the very beginning. For dancers, actors, and singers, it seems self-evident that body and voice are the intrinsic instrument, and that mastery can only be achieved through a skilled use (*i.e.*, knowledge) of the body. With instrumentalists, the practice is more cerebral, reduced to rote, repetitive movements—perhaps because we hold an instrument that is

separate from us and only in rare moments seems to merge with us as part of our body. But it is the musician who plays, not the instrument! The instrument is simply an appropriate object that is brought into vibration by the inner and outer, mental and physical movements of the musician, and thus also shows in what individual way the body, instrument, and psyche form a unity. I work with musicians to explore when this unity is out of balance and how it can be brought back into balance.

Excerpts From a Coaching Session

An oboist wanted to play again after not having touched the oboe for years. During her studies, she began to experience fears that affected every aspect of her life and eventually made playing impossible. She constantly inhaled far too much air and then experienced a choking sensation as if being strangled. She also experienced her soft palate as unable to contain the air pressure needed to direct wind through the reed. Instead, air was diverted down her throat and up into the nasal canal, causing a hissing sound.

When I asked her if she could also remember relaxed moments during this phase of her life, independently from playing the oboe, she replied: “Only when eating. Mostly alone or with a very few special people.” Given that eating involves enjoyable movements of chewing and swallowing followed by ingesting, while playing the oboe is rather static in comparison and is “projecting” her inner world to the outside, I asked myself a few questions to explore during the coaching session.

- How are her muscles disposed—for enjoyment or for playing the oboe?
- Which way does she channel the air? Can it emerge completely and freely?
- Is the choking feeling more likely to occur when breathing in or out?
- Is the nervous system subjected to physiological stress because she over-compresses the breath in her chest and thus triggers the sympathetic nerves?

I proposed that we have lunch and that way, I can share in an activity she expressed as relaxing to do. I observe that she has a strong sense of control and is possibly even “postured” in manner. Her upper lip seems firm, held, which only relaxes a little on the second day. When in dialogue, she offers frequent exclamations such as, “True!” “You’re right.” “Exactly!” She is polite and supportive of my opinions, but reveals nothing about herself.

GI: Can you play just one or two notes?

She plays and immediately comments, judges, and belittles her performance.

GI: When did you adjust your muscles to play?

Client: Even before I took the oboe into my hands, about two steps in front of the case.

GI: Okay, go back a few steps, approach the oboe, and observe at what point your muscles tense up in anticipation of playing.

The awareness of the process already seems to make a difference.

GI: Now walk away from the oboe until you are completely comfortable.

She goes to the other end of the room and looks in the opposite direction.

GI: Take very slow steps towards the oboe and tell me what you feel?

Client: Tension, not being good enough, uncertainty, pressure.

I interrupt and let her move freely, tell her to just follow her impulses. The first thing she does is to sit down and give in to what is weighing her down.

Client: Yes, I’ll just let it all happen.

I let her remain lying down and give her an organ touch on her lungs. I’d like to give her the chance to feel that there may be other sensations in her chest and that she can access various feelings and thus doesn’t have to be overwhelmed by the pressure. Afterwards I let her do a little ‘lung dance’ to the sound of the sea, still unsure if all this is not too direct and too fast. But she is already moving in a lighter and livelier fashion.

I notice that she holds her shoulders very rigidly and explain the anatomy of her shoulder girdle through pictures and a bone tracing session. Then I let her visualize her breathing within her shoulder blades. For the first time I see her breathe with her chest moving freely. Amazed by this experience, she wants to play again and a natural, liberated sound comes out.

Client: This is the first time in years that my sound could flow without faltering.

On the second day we undertake some experiments with the breath. What is it like when she breathes into her chest, which is where she usually breathes under stress? How does she feel when she breathes into the lower abdomen, as her teacher wanted her to? Breathing in the lower abdomen seems too far down, so I get her to try and focus on breathing into the solar plexus: now she feels calm and in good contact with herself.

Posture and Fine Tuning

How to manage physical posture as well as inner attitude? This question determines all other aspects of music-making: sound, breath, technique, pain prevention, and stage fright are related to it. Often musicians are looking for the perfect technique and insist upon conforming to “a” one and only correct posture. Professionals begin their training as children, so their posture is copied, often even imposed on them by teachers and other role models. It is hardly

ever organically formed through playful engagement with one's own anatomy. In addition, there is a tension due to the aspiration to reach perfection. So already, at a young age, musicians complain about pain and suffer injuries.

When working with musicians it therefore is fundamental for them to have concrete experience that posture and alignment are never static, and what was good yesterday may no longer serve today. This is achieved more quickly without the instrument as it is important to connect with one's own body in relation to earth and space, before connecting with the instrument. As with tuning the instrument, the task of keeping one's body perception fresh is key to fine tuning before each concert and practice session.

WEIGHT: While holding their instrument musicians tend to keep more weight off the ground than necessary. Simply lying down, without having to do anything, and feeling the contact of the body with the ground works miracles in one's self-perception with the instrument. At the start I like to make a journey along the skeleton while lying down and gradually let the bones sink to the earth through all the soft tissue. The next step is for the client to pick up her instrument while lying down and perhaps even play a few notes. Playing at a horizontal position is an unfamiliar but relaxing feeling for most musicians. Then we might move on to soft movements initiated in the spine and visualizing the arms and legs hanging as if suspended from it. There are plenty of things to try out with the spine and thus become aware of one's center: palpating while lying down, wriggling to feel the vertebrae, curling up and uncurling.

SUPPORT: After increasing the feeling of weight a little more, the question often arises as to how weight is distributed in the body, *i.e.*, how will it 'fall' from top to bottom as freely as possible, regardless of our position and whether we are holding an instrument. The question "How do I hold myself?" then changes into "What gives me support?" And, connected with this: "How do I hold the instrument." The feeling of being supported is strongly linked to the feeling of connection. By exploring various inner connections, musicians become aware that supporting themselves too actively by muscle power and according to right-wrong concepts is more like cramping, and results into hypertonicity, stiff movements, smothered sound, unfree breath, and pain.

CONNECTION: One of my favorite exercises from Andrea Olsen¹ illustrates three sets of bones (calcaneus, sit bones, and occipital bone) that determine areas of feeling in our backs. I like to add the shoulder blades. Working with this exercise, musicians begin to feel the weight of the pelvis and the way in which it gives support. As a result the belly feels softer and the breath flows more freely.

String players feel 'closer to the string' and better in contact. Awareness of the back of the skull makes gripping the instrument easier and yet stable. This all results in a fuller, more three-dimensional feeling in the body, which can deepen and enrich the instrumental sound.

EXPLORING SUPPORT THROUGH CONNECTIONS: We often play "In how many ways can I stand up?" This is about observing and gaining fresh experiences of movement in the body. Here is an example: "Lying on your back, turn onto your side, one arm under your head, the other supported in front of your chest. Exert pressure with your upper hand and observe what happens. [The upper body rolls backwards, legs follow.] Repeat the movement, but brace your back against it. Can you initiate movement by putting pressure on the edge of the foot resting on the floor? This gives a jerk to the hand, which can then support you." Experimenting with various ways of making a movement lets in a breath of fresh air and enriches the range of movement by drawing attention to unfamiliar body parts and movements. This approach trains openness and flexibility, and practicing an instrument becomes constant research into ways of meeting various requirements. The exercises are only stepping stones, not general principles or an invariably valid technique.

EFFORTLESSNESS: String and wind players use too much muscle power in the way they hold their instruments and are rarely aware of their inner architecture. With them, I constantly explore how much effort is really needed, and it is very helpful to work with the skeletal system. Holding the instrument from the bones is almost effortless, the posture becomes relaxed and fine motor skills are set free. It is a significant discovery for musicians that more permeability in the inner structures will not lead to a collapse at all, and that they do not need force to hold themselves together. Instead, the support that comes from an awareness of the vessel frees up movement and breath, which can be used efficiently to meet challenges and foster creativity.

LUNGS: With high string players the instrument rests on the chest, and so I like working with the lungs. We explore the following questions: Does the instrument sink into the lungs so that it is compressed, does it simply float above them without making contact, or can it even be "received" while the lungs remain alive and serve as a supple support? Which combinations are possible? Awareness of the lungs and heart is directly reflected in posture and sound: relaxed tone, graceful posture, and a warm sound are the result. This has an effect on charisma, self-awareness, and presence.

HANDS: Connections also play an immense role in fine motor skills. Thus I discovered that the visualization of the extensor digitorum hoods, which connect the fin-

1 Olsen, Andrea: *The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making* p. 27. Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014.

gers with the metacarpus, leads to a rich yet precise contact with the string without the musician gripping too tightly, which otherwise often happens in challenging or emotionally intense musical passages. The awareness of the unity between thumb, index, and middle finger and their connection to the inner edge of the shoulder blade, as well as the unity between ring and little finger and their connection to the outer edge of the shoulder blade, supports movements that are focused and yet swing freely. For example, in passages where overstretching of the little finger of the left hand is necessary, it is supportive to activate the outer lower edge of the shoulder blade.

THE BASIC NEUROCELLULAR PATTERNS: The BMC principles of movement are relevant not only for bigger movements but also for fine motor skills. In terms of grip and technical stability, yield before reach and push is essential. It makes a huge difference to be conscious of where pressure can be eased from the hand, the arm or the whole body prior to difficult position changes and runs. This can be done in various ways, but still has to do with accepting weight. For example, string players can allow the non-playing fingers of the left hand to relax towards the fingerboard, releasing the rest of the hand and allowing the playing fingers to move faster and more efficiently.

ENERGY AND FLOW: It is also of great value to explore the place where movements originate, how the impulses travel further and which part of the body defines the direction. During the stroking movement of a string player's right arm, the source of the motor may be in the shoulder blade and the direction of the movement is marked by the lines of the arm bones. A very different option is to let the impulse arise from the contact with the bow, *i.e.*, in the fingers. It is a cycle: the player produces a sound, the instrument reacts to it and, feeling its vibrations, she responds to them. It frees the movement to imagine that the bow moves by itself and the arm merely guides it a little. Fingers, wrist, arm, shoulder, and spine then follow as a natural reaction.

SPACE: You often hear teachers say: "You need to relax here!" But a fake or imposed relaxation only leads to further imbalances. What we can do is to actively foster openness, space, and a feeling of safety, which are an essential basis for relaxation. That is why I often work with space. Usually, mental stress during difficult technical passages is reflected in the body; it contracts and tightens. While practicing these passages musicians can find ways to allow themselves more inner and outer space. When body and mind feel at ease with the demands, relaxation follows. We can consider options for creating space in the joints, length in the bones and muscles, and flow in the movements already during warm-up, before the mind is exposed to technical challenges.

Inner images are very helpful in supporting inner space. Visualizing the weight being transmitted to the earth through the center of the joints is one of them. We first explore everyday movements with the large bones of the body before



transferring the sensation into the fine motor movements. In the same way, visualizing the length of the metacarpals relaxes the hand. (Most people are not aware of the actual length and estimate it to be much shorter). Another way to open up space is to focus on the middle or outside contours or imagined inner lines of the body and limbs. But there are also external spaces that we can expand: for example, between the palms of the hands and the instrument or between the individual fingers.

BODY SYSTEMS: Working with the various body systems is of great interest for musicians in terms of mastering technical difficulties, freeing the movements and shaping the sound and movements according to the artistic intention. For example, initiating playing movements in the bones mostly results in lightness and clear sound; the overall feeling is one of openness, compactness, and focus. To make the sound fuller, it is helpful to add the visualization of the blood-filled living bones and the flesh around them. If string players perceive the bow as an extension of their forearm bone, movement becomes fluent and quick string changes are achieved technically smoother through the visualization of the ulna and the radius articulating against each other.

CONCLUSION: In my work with musicians, we realize time and again that there is no technique that always carries. The work is therefore a mutual search for released movement, easier and at the same time more stable technique, and the desired sensations. The focus is open and process-oriented. Body-Mind Centering has often been a deep source of inspiration for me. The exploration of one's own anatomical structures and the understanding of posture and playing movements have a positive influence on musicians' sound, self-confidence, well-being, and stage presence.

It is always a matter of evaluating closeness and distance, adjusting the focus, finding space(s) and new options, and above all, addressing the questions: how do we best take care of ourselves, where do we feel safe, and how do we access that space and stay there? These are the main issues that guide my work with musicians. ♪