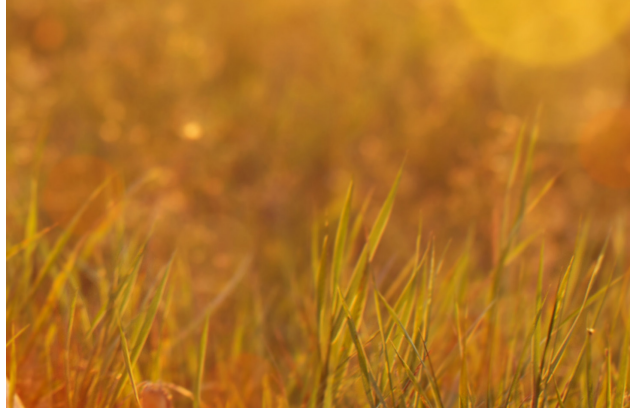
BARBARA
conable



Musicians Move!

Top Ten Ways *to* Train Their Moving

IF YOU HAD TAKEN MY SIX-HOUR BODY MAPPING class sometime before I retired, you would have settled into a room with video running on a big screen. On the screen you would see musicians in performance—with the sound off. You would see a scene from an opera, then a choral conductor and choir at work who do not stop moving for six and half minutes, for singing is movement. You would see a string quartet, then the Elvin Jones Jazz Machine. Esperanza Spaulding with her string bass. An orchestra conductor. A rock star. To end the day, Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys. Finally, I turn on the sound to waft the students home.

All these images, all day long, shown while other content is being presented, are meant to bring home the idea that musicians move for a living. What we see on the screen is movement without the distraction of sound. This is movement as demanding as an athlete's, as intricate as a dancer's. But look here: dancers know they move for a living. It's the core of their self-concept. Athletes too. Their coaches spend hours with them watching images of movement with improvement in mind.

By contrast, during the thousands of hours I watched music lessons and rehearsals in the early decades of my career, I had rarely seen movement addressed directly even when a problem was glaringly a movement issue. When movement was addressed, it was often by inference or imagery or abstraction or some other misdirection that failed to improve the movement, frustrating teachers and students.

Agreeing that musicians move for a living, let's follow the premise to its logical conclusion. If musicians move for living, then the movement should be trained. It should be trained as systematically and purposefully as are hearing and seeing. It is that recognition that inspired GIA Publications to bring forth their pioneering works on musicians' movement, for which I have abiding gratitude. One such book is *Body Mapping for Music Ministers* by Bridget Jankowski.

You know you must train hearing. You know you must train vision, especially when notation is involved. My eight-year-old grandson Michael, for more than a year, has been learning to read music in a 45 minute class each week with his choral conductor daddy, John Abdenour, in preparation for Michael's fully joining the choir when he is nine. This is a choir in which all the treble voices are boys and girls, so Michael's responsibility will be significant.

Michael is fortunate that his movement sense is being trained right along with seeing and hearing, for John has given long thought to the training of movement in the making of choral music. I have used my lofty position as his mother-in-law to gain his help with our subject today. Much that you will hear has been shaped by his wise example.

Here are ten steps for training movement in music making.

1. Remain mindful of the body map.
2. Give movement problems movement solutions.
3. Use visual aids.
4. Analyze movement using video.
5. Harness gesture.
6. Include effective movements in your warm-ups.
7. Model what you want.
8. Ask questions. You need the answers.

9. Create your movement lexicon.
10. Minister to movement.

Remain mindful of the body map

Every chorister has a body map, as do you. From before birth, you developed it reciprocally. That is, you created pathways in your nervous system by moving that you then used to do the moving, which in turn created more complex systems. Your crawling built the neural network that allowed you to walk, and your walking, in turn, made it possible to learn to skip, and so forth. Imitation came into it, of course, and, eventually, information was involved.

People do not know they have a diaphragm until they are informed. Unlike your hand, your diaphragm can't be seen. Unlike your hand, but like your heart, your diaphragm can't be felt. But if someone with enough authority tells you that you have a diaphragm, that person may prompt you to include a diaphragm in your body map. This envisioned diaphragm may resemble the real one to a lesser or greater degree.

If the diaphragm you have mapped resembles the real one, putting it in your body map may be useful to you—perhaps very useful. If it differs from reality, however, it may cause you to breathe in some very strange ways that some choral conductor later in life is going to have to correct.

When a conductor who has the body map in mind observes strange breathing, that conductor will understand that the body map that created it will need to be addressed. The reason is that the body map governs movement. When the body map is accurate and adequate, movement is good. When the body map is a little off, movement is a little off. When the body map is egregiously wrong, the resulting movement can be very harmful indeed. To correct harmful movement, go right to the body map. If you correct the map, you will correct the movement. It's the most efficient thing to do.

Suppose, for example, that a new member of your choir is working way too hard to sing. Something more suited to the workout gym is happening in his belly muscles. You suspect his body map is somehow wrong. Your educated guess is that he imagines himself to be using his diaphragm as he exhales and that he confuses it with his abdominal muscles, a common and particularly ruinous mis-mapping.

In the coming weeks, you will use your resources to correct his body map. You are skillful enough to do this without ever calling attention to his problem. You will find an opportunity to celebrate the truth that the diaphragm is an agent of inhalation, not exhalation as he imagines. You will use gesture to indicate the diaphragm is parallel to the floor, not perpendicular as your singer supposes. You will encourage the dynamic rebound or recoil of the entire abdominal cylinder on exhalation, something that cannot happen if your singer is tensing his tummy. Gradually, the truth sets free his breathing, with you as an agent of that truth.

BARBARA CONABLE
is the author of *How to Learn the Alexander Technique: A Manual for Students, What Every Musician Needs to Know about the Body,* and *The Structures and Movement of Breathing.*

Identify what is a movement issue and address it as such

Our movement sense has the scientific name *kinesthesia.* It tells us if we are moving and, if so, where and with what quality. It's our real sixth sense, but you don't need the word *kinesthesia* to train it. Just use the more common words *feel* or *sense*.

Suppose you are conducting a rehearsal. The piece the choir is learning features unusually long phrases that lose their musical and liturgical meaning when broken up. You ask for the phrases to be sung on one breath, but some in the choir are struggling to do it, and others simply can't. That is a movement issue, and it needs a movement solution. How much air comes into your lungs on any given inhalation depends on how far your ribs move. Rib movement is where your solution lies.

Most of the members of your choir are not moving their ribs far enough to allow enough air to flow into their lungs to sing the very long phrases. You say, "That's a long phrase. You are going to have to really move your ribs." Others are moving their ribs too fast on exhalation. You say, "You're going to have to control that descent to finish the phrase beautifully."

Giving a movement problem a movement solution, you may ask your choir to raise their arms and bring them down slowly. You tell them that's what they will do with their ribs; that's what it will feel like as their ribs descend. It's a movement analogy that works quite well, going from the familiar to the perhaps unfamiliar.

Here's a truth about singers. Like some young players of wind instruments, some young singers just catch on from the very first that they must match their air to the phrase. It's self-evident to them, and they naturally begin to do it. Those who don't catch on, however, will need instruction. You may say, "Ask yourselves how much air you need. Inhale too little, and you won't have enough. Inhale too much, and you'll get dizzy. I don't want you dizzy."

There's an analogy to be made between sensing movement and hearing. When you train the hearing of pitch, you want your youngsters to know when they are flat or sharp, but the far more important goal is for them to know when they are on pitch. It's their being in tune they need to discern. In like manner, you want your learners to know when they are tense in their muscles, but the far more important goal is to know when they are free. Just as they learn the constant return to true pitch, they can learn the constant return to muscle freedom.

Use visual aids

If your rehearsal room displays a good big picture of the joints of the ribs with the spine, it will provide a great resource in helping your choir to sing those long phrases. After all, they inhale and exhale at joints.

If your rehearsal room features a picture of the ribs in front, it will help your choristers know just what they must be monitoring to get the job done.

If your rehearsal room has an appealing picture of lungs, it will teach your singers where their air goes. They won't be contorting themselves trying to get air into their bellies, as so many do.

Or, you can just tuck the truth into the choral folders, as I hope you will do with my booklet *The Structures and Movement of Breathing: A Primer for Choirs and Choruses*. Briefly visit a different page during each warm-up so that you can build a common understanding. You'll be on the same page, as it were.

Like athletes, record and analyze movement

Recording movement is so much easier now than it used to be. In the old days, musicians who wanted to see how they were really moving had to hire a videographer or rent a camera and a tripod. To look at the recorded movement, we had to insert a bulky contraption into a big machine and then figure how to use the machine. Now you just set up your cell phone and catch snatches of your movement to analyze later. You can do your analyzing on the train or subway. Recruit members of your choir to text you videos of your moving from their phones.

How will you analyze what you see? Start by just asking yourself what you notice. What strikes you? What is your first impression? I remember a choral conductor who came to me for private lessons because he was unhappy with how his choir sounded. He taped a rehearsal, and we sat down to watch it. I asked him—let's call him Jake—what he saw. "I see the sound I don't like," he said.

This turned out to be an astute first response. He had described the sound as weirdly weighted, heavy. Now he was seeing in his weirdly weighted and heavy movement the source of that weighted and heavy sound. Jake noticed that while his upper body was moving to conduct, his lower body was not. His legs were stiff, and his pelvis was dropped down onto his legs so that it didn't even seem like a part of his upper body.

You need to know what the thinking is behind a phenomenon like that. Why would somebody do that? It turned out the downward drag of Jake's pelvis was kind of on purpose. He had heard the word *grounded*. Someone he respected had said that a conductor should be grounded. Pressure on his legs had been his response. This is an example of addressing movement by imagery or abstraction. *Grounded* is both a blurry image and an abstraction, easily misunderstood. Some lucky students link good movement to the word *grounded*; some, mediocre movement; and others, like Jake, deeply problematic movement.

I suggested to Jake that he could forget about the term *grounded* and replace the notion with a more constructive consideration: as a conductor, how does one use the floor? Successful conductors use the floor for both stability and mobility. Both. They feel the floor.

They relate to the floor. They move in relationship to the floor. I gave Jake the homework of watching video of conductors who know how to use the floor so that he could imitate them. Again, it is easier now than it used to be, since we have YouTube.

Jake remapped his pelvis, integrating it into his torso so that the upper half of him was poised over legs, allowing hip joints, knees, and ankles to move in a coordinated manner in relation to the floor. Sure enough, the sound he did not like disappeared, to be replaced with sounds pleasing and varied.

Analyzing movement, using video, you will incorporate benevolent movements, as Jake learned to do, but you will also weed out extraneous or discordant movements, which are the crabgrass of conducting. You've got to weed them out, or they will seriously stunt what you are trying to do.

Consider that you can gesture with any part of your body or with the whole of it. My son-in-law John puzzled why he so often found himself going up on his toes as he conducted, sometimes slightly, sometimes more fully. He concluded it was the perfect gesture to encourage a certain buoyancy he wants to hear in the sound.

When you see a new conductor, watch for gestures you may want to adopt. A few weeks back I sat with John in the balcony of Trinity Church on the Green in New Haven to watch Stephen Layton conduct the choir of Trinity College Cambridge. I saw some gestures I had never seen before. When Layton wanted a long, sustained finish to a stanza, he used common arm gestures, but he accompanied them with a rapid nodding of his head, a kind of fluttering of his head. This gesture worked really well. If I were a conductor, I would learn to flutter my head.

If musicians move for living, then the movement should be trained. It should be trained as systematically and purposefully as are hearing and seeing.

Harness gesture

Let's go back to your rehearsing long phrases. You can make your fingers move like ribs. You can match verbal instruction with gesture that mimics the movement of ribs, letting your thumb tips indicate where ribs meet vertebrae in back and fingertips, the attachments to springy cartilage in front.

You swing your fingers up and out to imitate inhalation, then down and in to mimic exhalation, being sure to indicate when the movement has finished. This is important because some of your choristers are not finishing their exhalations.

Later, just before performance of the piece with the long phrases, you can remind the choir with just the gesture.

Include effective movements in your warm-ups

Suppose you are using *The Structures and Movement of Breathing* in a warm-up. You have arrived at a page that shows the suspension of the arm structure over the ribs. You are asking your choir to appreciate that crucial space above the ribs that allows for rib movement. You tell your singers they are looking for a perfect balance of collarbones and shoulder blades over ribs so there is no interference with breathing. After all, the tops of the lungs lie above the collarbones. More than half your breathing joints in back lie between or above your shoulder blades.

You ask your choristers to raise their collarbones and shoulder blades high and notice what that effort feels like and how it prevents a full breath, then slowly descend until they find that place of effortless balance

over ribs. No discernible work.

Next ask them to bring the collarbones and shoulder blades downward toward the upper ribs. This is an effective and necessary movement—it's how cellists and bass players get to the bridge and to the tip of a bow on the string—but many people make it chronic. Help your choir to come back up to neutral.

They have now come down to neutral. They have come up to neutral. Next you will ask them to come forward to neutral and back to neutral.

Ask the choir to pull their collarbones backward, shoulder blades moving closer together. A fine gesture—we do it when stretching—though a damaging place to go and stay. Ask your choir to notice the strain involved and then release to allow their arms to come back along their sides. For some posture-focused people, this will feel naughty, like they are slumping. Ask them then to go ahead and really slump, dragging the collarbones and shoulder blades forward. Some slouchy people are there chronically. They can't take a full breath, but they can learn to release out of their slump back to balance.

The time will come when all it requires to bring your choir to neutral is simple gesture, just an easy sweep of your hands across your collarbones and they will all know what you mean.

This is just one example of many in which a little movement early in the rehearsal results in much improvement later. Training movement and perfecting body maps fit right in with the other goals of warming up: to bring vocal mechanisms to a condition of readiness; to wake singers up kinesthetically; to make them keenly aware of each other to achieve ensemble; to help them draw courage from their surroundings; to prepare them, in a worship setting, to fulfill their liturgical function. My son-in-law asks his choir to regard their use of breath in liturgy as a kind of stewardship.

Model what you want

Prepare yourself to model these four qualities: kinesthetic awareness, inclusive awareness, movement free of tension, and movement as complex as the music.

You will model *kinesthetic awareness* by being aware of your own moving and ensuring its quality.

You will model *inclusive awareness* by putting your sense of your body in context as just one part of a flexible aggregate of awareness.

You will model *movement free of tension*.

You will model *movement as complex as the music*. Just as you are not surprised by how many melodies and harmonies can be made out of the notes of your scales, you should not be surprised by how many corresponding movements can be made with all the joints in your body and the many muscles of your face. There are movements to match anything a composer can throw at you.

Your kinesthesia is vital in your making those crucial decisions about what aspects of the music you will indicate directly and which more subtly. I mentioned Stephen Layton. He was conducting a choir so skillful and so attuned to each other that he could rely on them to collectively realize the rhythmic core of the music, which was evident but subtle in his moving. He could focus larger movements on meaning and on musical nuance. Certainly, there were no beat patterns in evidence. With that group, there didn't need to be.

Ask questions

Sometimes one question leads to another. Early in my work with Jake, I asked him what some part of him was communicating. I saw a puzzled look on his face, which prompted another question. "Well, okay, Jake, do you even think of conducting as communicating?" "No, not really." "What is it then?" "Directing."

He'd thought of conducting as directing. I direct you with my arms to do something and you do it, was the thinking. I said "Oh, no, no, no, no: directing is for that other kind of conductor."

I direct the big engine to come out of the wheelhouse, and it does. I direct the train to slow to 40 miles an hour around curves, and it does. That's the directing kind of conductor. A conductor of musicians has to communicate. You communicate to get what you want. Jake learned to really communicate because I had by some grace asked the crucial question. The moral of the story is: ask the question.

Do not worry that you will lose authority if you ask the questions. You will not. You are, after all, the Socrates in your employment of the Socratic method, and here's the wonder of it. What starts as Q&A deepens over time into genuine conversation that carries beyond rehearsal into performance. Your audiences will hear your discourse with your choir, and they will be moved by it.

Create a useful movement lexicon

A lexicon is "the language of a branch of knowledge." We need a language for the branch of

knowledge called movement in music. You have a useful, shared lexicon for pitch: *do re mi*. You have language for volume—crescendo and all the rest—and for rhythm. "Look, it's a waltz," you say, and you get the lilt you want. For harmony, you know what to say, and they know what to do.

For movement, you must build a lexicon on the foundation of various forms of the word *move*. Use the terms *move*, *moving*, and *movement* in rehearsal and see what happens.

The excellent singer and opera director Kurt Zeller at Spivey Hall in Atlanta, Georgia, advocates addressing diction as movement, helping singers to really grasp that vocal articulation is movement. He points out that the chart of vowels and consonants in the International Phonetic Alphabet is *entirely* organized by movement! It is the movement singers make with tongue, lips, teeth, and velum that ultimately determines the identity and integrity of the phoneme. So, teach it that way, says Zeller. If you want your choir to produce more truly Latinate consonants, teach them just how their tongue tips should be moving to contact the back of their upper teeth in creating those unfamiliar sounds. Zeller says singers feel empowered by this approach because they will know not merely what is wanted but also how to achieve it.

Here are some terms to consider for your movement lexicon and examples for how to use them.

Sense. *Feel*. "If you're *sensing* freedom, you're ready to sing."

Balance. We have keen sense receptors for balance, so it makes sense that people respond well to the noun, the verb, and the adjective. "How's your balance?" "Balancing beautifully now, let's . . ." "I'm really liking the balanced carriage I'm seeing. Thank you."

Centered. John says the word *centered* works well with young singers. They can learn early to feel that their weight is evenly distributed.

Joints. Ask conducting students to think of themselves as an ever-changing constellation of joints, each star contributing to the message of the moment. Can you feel all those stars?

Ask singers, too, to consider how much of singing happens at joints. The joints of the jaw with the skull. The joint of the skull with the top vertebra. The joints of the spine, which gather and spring back in coordination with the breath. The 24 joints of the ribs with the spine in back and the 14 cartilaginous connections of ribs in front at the sternum. Hip joints. Knees and ankles, which must stay fluid. You help singers to secure joints in their body maps when you secure *joints* in your lexicon.

Conducting is a feat of *coordination*. You *coordinate* all those stars in your constellations, so use the word.

Poise. Poise is not a word we hear very much, but it's a good one. It is also another of John's favorites, which he defines as "the state of being prepared to move." You want choruses prepared to move.

Ease. *Easy*. *Easily*. These are reassuring words. "How easily can you sing these high notes now?" John reports that the word *easy* works well as feedback. If you inform a very knowledgeable choir, "It's not sounding easy," they will use the feedback to change what they're doing. This puts the responsibility where it belongs. The conductor can't make it sound easy, but singers can. "Good job getting it easy."

Comfortable. At a convention of choral folks in Oklahoma, I met one who told me he had found his magic word: comfortable. "Stand please, comfortably." "How comfortable can you get singing this bombastic music?" He told me some in his choir started calling him Mr. Comfortable.

Consider using musical metaphors in lexicon. "Standing in tune with yourselves, please . . ." "Harmoniously, now . . ." "Can you attune your breathing to the serenity of this psalm?" That sort of thing. Musical metaphor may be a gold mine for lexicon.

Especially in a worship setting, minister to movement

If you do not already actually minister to movement, please expand your sense of vocation to include it. You all know what I mean by minister, but it never hurts to consult a dictionary. To minister is "to give service, care, or aid; to attend, as to wants, necessities . . . to contribute, as to comfort, happiness." To minister to movement is to give service to it, care about it, give aid to it, attend to it, as you attend to hearing. You know that hearing responds to loving attention. So does movement. If as a conductor you truly give aid to rib movement, if you care about rib movement, if you attend to rib movement as to necessities, you will be rewarded, for excellent rib movement in singing is a necessity that leads to comfort and to happiness.

That said, ministering by the dictionary's definition, demanding as it is, pales in comparison to what is required of a music minister within a congregation. To minister to movement in a church, synagogue, temple, tabernacle, mosque, longhouse, and the like is to give it priestly service, to attend with devotion to necessities, to contribute to comfort of spirit. It's not a stretch to regard rib movement in liturgy as sacred movement.

In closing, let's embed our understanding of ministering to movement within those other two movements you hold dear: the movement forward of text from beginning to end and the movement of the music that carries the text. You know to minister to both. You know how to minister to both. When you likewise commit to minister to movement in those physical bodies that realize text and music, including your own, you arrive at a definitive trinity: text, music, movement, all aligned, creating together the divine moment.

Text, music, movement. Consider it an instance of incarnation.