

Appendix I Continued

Full Interview Transcripts

Interview Transcript

Amanda McTigue, Acting Coach, Writer, amandamctigue.com
Cotati, California, Friday, June 6, 2025

Christa Before we begin, I'd like to confirm that I'll be audio recording this interview so that I can accurately reflect on your responses later. Your name and insights may be included in my final master's project unless you tell me otherwise. You're welcome to skip any questions or stop the interview at any time or tell me that part's redacted. Do I have your permission to record this conversation and include your name and professional role in the final project.

Amanda: Yes.

Christa Great. This is Christa Durand speaking with Amanda McTigue on June 6, 2025. And they have given their consent to be recorded and identified in this research.

So as I said in the email, I had the idea to ask you because I was talking to Melinda about things she does for her students. And she was like, oh, it's working with Amanda. And she gets them outside of themselves, and then they forget all the things that they were worrying about, and they just are the other thing, and then we move on with life. So could you tell me a little bit about your background in acting, coaching, anything else that led you to working with actors and singers and doing coaching?

Amanda [00:01:52] Absolutely. I, like most people who sing, was just singing as a little girl. My mother tells me that my kindergarten teacher had to do music during the day and couldn't, and so I would stand up and lead everybody singing because I have a good, phonographic memory. If I hear it I can repeat it, I can mimic, right? I was in an Episcopal school, so I was singing in a choir. And by high school I was in musicals and I was taking some lessons, not many. And then I applied to college and I thought maybe singing was it, but I wasn't sure. So I applied for Oberlin and I applied to Yale, among others.

They both said yes. I was immediately drawn to Oberlin, and my darling father, who was the child of Irish immigrants, sat me down at a table and said, I know he must have been panicking. He was like, he said, honey, you... If you go to Yale and you hate it, you can swing right over to Oberlin. But if you go to Oberlin and you hate it, you're gonna have a hard time going the other way, which made a lot of sense to me. So it was Yale.

But I was exhausted by all of this, so I decided to take a year off and study singing in France. I was 17 and this was 1972. So yay me! With not much of a plan, I went abroad, I auditioned in various places, some of which required learning new languages. I was good in French, I was okay in German, I learned enough Italian to audition, I auditioned at a bunch of places. I end up studying classical singing in Aix-en-Provence in France, which was great. Came back to Yale. Yale is not a performing arts college at an undergraduate level. That is to say there's lots of performing arts going on, but its teaching wasn't embraced that much at that time. But let me just also hasten to say, so I'm there 73 to 77, so the grad students who are there, people like Meryl Streep. That whole set of people is there. In the music department, I was always an introvert.

So, it was a very musical, Yale was a musical environment. I got into choirs right away. I thought it was singing. I signed up with Marga Muller, who was Oscar Werner Muller's wife who he, right, so she taught singing, so I'm studying with her in the choirs. I have this tiny, reedy kind of lyric soprano voice, but in that era nobody even talked about a lyric soprano. Nobody cared. So I just bumbled along and then I swung over, I auditioned in musicals, and I swung over into musicals

and I found my people. Right away I found my people, just the smartest theater people you will ever meet.

So now I'm over in the world of acting. They happen to be doing musicals and those are still my friends and they changed my life because they had come up through among other things prep schools in New England who are very New York, that's the best training you can get. So they were just miles ahead of anything I'd ever seen. I fell in love. I worked with them. I finished at Yale. I didn't study either drama or music. I, at that time, Yale had something called the Blue Book, which was a book that said, if you're here this year, here are the great professors. Well, the great professors were in philosophy. So that was my major. My minor was all of this theater. And I was seeing amazing stuff, because again, the grad students were seriously Meryl Streep doing work at the Yale Rep.

So I graduated and it looked like my gift was actually academics, and I really didn't want to do it. I didn't wanna think, I didn't wanna be people I still don't particularly enjoy, that sort of calcified, rigid, scary kind of neck-up person. So I told my long-suffering and darling parents, I'm gonna go to New York, I wanna live, I told them, in my body. And I want to study now. I have been doing theater, but I don't understand what I'm doing. So I'm going to go and study.

And so I was in New York from 77 to 91. Auditioning, sometimes getting into things, that's a whole story, but studying singing and studying acting with, again, some of the best people ever. So 77 and 91, there are all kinds of people around. And I hooked up with, for anybody who might understand these kinds of threads or schools of thought, I don't care about them, but I found myself in the school where various people I admired worked, which was the Herbert Berkhoff Studio, so that is Udahagen. I studied them in lots of ways, but that would be something that would tell anybody about me. And one of my teachers was Martha Schlama. So she was in those Kurt Weils, like Three Pennies, the originals. She was a Jew out of Austria who had to come through China to get to New York and was famously an interpreter of that kind of material. So she was what we would call an acting singing teacher.

You're in New York, you're just stumbling into a class and then you're doing whatever they're doing. And they're not so interested in defining themselves that way. I was always more attracted to the, what you might call applied artistry of singing. In other words, let's just work on a song and much less the gymnastics side of it. Yes, I had some voice. You know trainers with me but this was not a big voice so no a certain kind of singing teacher wasn't going to get excited about me whereas a certain kind of acting singing teacher was going to get excited. So I studied and I had trouble getting my actors equity card so I was with a group of actors the whole thing was you just write your and stuff. So I decided to write my own play.

I did, that's a long story. It's a good story. I lied and said I didn't write it. I found a producer. I put it up. I put me in it. That meant I was an equity person because I was on an equity stage Da da da by the time I finished all of that. I said well, "I don't like auditioning and I'm not likely to be cast in ways that I think would be exciting for me". There are all kinds of stories now in the theater that you see that just weren't the case back then.

So I said, it's writing and directing, and just swung right over. And I would say that, and swung over into this expertise that I've been accumulating over my life would just come forward in the projects that came to me.

I ended up writing with a composer out of Julliard for 46 years, Jeff Langley. So I was writing for singing. I was directing those works in various formats. After a while, I got really tired of having a day job and being exhausted in New York... And, let me think how this happened... But I was an East Coast gal. Jeff Langley, who was the composer I worked with, was a West Coast guy. He got a job, I don't remember how actually, I probably couldn't remember, but he got a job at Knott's Berry Farm running the entertainment there because he had been told, and this is a quote, "we wanna make opera in theme parks". Well, that hooked him. And he called me from the West Coast and said, you wanna come out and make opera in a theme park. I had never been to a theme park. Literally not even Disney. I said, no. He said, well, let me just say one

thing to you, "We have 20,000 people a day coming in that you don't have to go find. You have an automatic audience".

I said, "sign me up".

So, I went and worked in commercial entertainment, writing and directing, and that's a completely... Is it different? Is it not? Who knows? And then that took me over, eventually I was working for Paramount in their live entertainment group.

So, these are two big sort of players in the commercial entertainment world, in and out of these things. They were personal issues. My mom got sick and so forth. And when I was between, after Paramount I ended up out here in California actually out here where you and I are sitting in Sonoma County because the composer I worked with Jeff Langley was now at Sonoma State University. He hired me to do musicals there, to direct a musical there. They had already done a musical that we had written that was in '99 so he hired me for Carousel in I think in 2000. And so I flew out to do that, met the man who's now my husband, and moved, and ended up the same gal and the same person. I'm doing the same things, but not in commercial, but now I'm back over in, quote, art, entertainment, with this basic specialty, and how do we put up theater, which has music in it. And how do we write and direct for that? So some shows went off that I wrote, but many more than I directed, as you know, because you were in that. And that led to some teaching, which I love to do. So that sort of brings us up to date, yeah? Yeah.

Christa [00:13:49] Yeah, and you currently do private acting coaching for actors and singers?

Amanda [00:13:53] I do, I do. Yep, from time to time. I don't look for it because I just have other things I'm doing, mostly writing, but with a person like Melinda Moreau, she just calls me up and says, can you do a thing? And I just plug in. We just know how to work with each other. So that's a great joy. But yeah, I've had some acting or singing or sometimes even the performing aspect for writers, those kinds of people I've coached over the years.

Christa [00:14:23] So in relation to this project, I mean the overall project is that we're looking for solutions for studio teachers to use to help their students overcome big emotions and past traumas and just feelings in general that inhibit their freedom of singing. And so some of the other people I've been interviewing are like teachers that have secondary certifications in Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, things like that, and I've also been interviewing singers who also have their other job is like they're a trauma-informed therapist, but they're also a singer, so that they've had that experience in this art. So what are some of the ways that you take acting and have it help singers get out of themselves and move through emotions?

Amanda [00:15:26] Well let's go to, we'll probably wander around this topic, but to go to a first principle for me, first of all, you and I are talking about something that you and I have done together, But I never talk about what I'm doing, ever, with the performer. Sometimes if I've got the right set of, I like to train the trainer, I like to talk to the director, I'd like to talk to a teacher, but very much offline. This is not stuff to be saying to a student. This is stuff to change what I'm doing as a teacher so I can better help them. Having said that, this is just true. And it's reflected a little bit in how I came to what I do.

Let me go back to, stories are always helpful, I really loved ballet when I was a really, really fat little girl and I wanted to be a ballerina. Mom, God love her, just took me to the classes. And I could sense how the teachers didn't like me in the outfit. But one thing they loved, and I remember, I remember if the dance was about the butterfly, catching the butterfly that they would put me first, because I pictured that butterfly. I didn't know what, I thought that was, that's what we were doing, is imagining the butterfly. Forget the rest of it. That is still true. What we are doing is imagining in such a way, by we, I mean everybody, including teachers, that we transport people. So we're done now. That's just true. That's the task. And my experience is twofold for teachers.

One is, first of all, teacher, understand whatever you're putting in the mind of the performer is what they will focus on. Ask yourself, teacher. Why would it ever be helpful to focus them on what you don't want ever? It's incredibly powerful you teachers who understand that all of that

negative stuff that has occurred to that child sticks You're not operating in that principle You're gonna my what I do is get people busy thinking about things that lift the spirit up naturally and it is natural people respond in different ways, their imaginations work in different ways, you know, and I think of myself as a coach, not a teacher, so there's a place for teaching, but yeah, that's a good corrective. I'm a coach. A coach is somebody who's looking at this particular person and saying, how are we going to take them forward in whatever direction they're hoping to go. This instrument that we voice teachers and acting teachers and so forth. We understand that this is an unbelievably resonant instrument. It just is. We are wired, when safe, to completely resonate with whatever's going on in the imagination. By imagination I mean mind, heart. You know, you don't even know, as we know. So one thing I know is I bring a huge sense of humor into the room. All we have to do is get somebody busy, first of all. That's just number one. There is nothing like getting busy to get your mind off something. Again, teachers, I invite you to think about things that we know about theater. We can be in the middle of a play and the second a dog trots onto the stage and the light falls down. We are all completely focused on that. Well, that's how the imagination works, you know?

If I've got a very nervous performer in front of me, maybe the first thing I can do is just get them to tie their shoe. There's nothing more healing. Or why don't you get everything out of your purse and let's lay them out by size. While we do that, we might hop or something. So a slice and that's an example of and it's a subset of where are we placing the mind? We really sensitive teachers, we can sense their pain and that's incredibly important. And I am immediately going to lead us out of there. I can sense, of course immediately, because usually when I work, especially with someone I don't know, let's just have them sing for a second. Well, I've got the whole story. I mean, I see we can't hit the high C. I don't care. I know immediately for 40% of these people, if they're enjoying playing with the right image, the high c is going to solve itself. It's really, really fast. The imagination is really fast and when they get busy, whether they're physically busy or creatively imaginatively busy, they stop trying to sing. Most of the training can get in the way of now letting that voice go. The point of the train is to be free, but it usually turns into a bunch of like, I have to do it. They're busy trying to sing, right? So, my expertise, I'm working in partnership with that, for sure. You know, my controlling metaphor is always... If we're talking about, for instance, a song, our goal is what? Our goal is we're going to make an experience for a listener that it will transport in some way. And to do that, there's some transporting that probably that singer wants to experience too.

Now, we come back, and there's an athletic physical side to singing. And that requires training. And that's different from coaching. We're not working on the song. We're working on things like, it's gymnastics. I mean, I'm sorry, not gymnastics, but we're going to the gym, and we're working out to get all those muscles right, to learn how to do things in alignment. And my recommendation to everybody is do that work in relationship to exercise. Once you come over in a song, crossing those things over is not so helpful. Let's do our workout and our squats, and then for me, it's downhill racing. I mean, my God, a song is a downhill race. I start and then, holy crap, here we go! Every single time. We're going super fast and we're going to see what of our training is going to lock in to help us make each of those turns. We are going to discover as we do that oh you know what always on that fifth turn I have a little bit of a trick and that technical teacher can come in and say right there let's try something technical but before we even do that why don't you just for a second about what's the happiest moment when your dog runs to you and Let's just think about that right there in the music and let's see what happens. Because again, the body-mind-spirit solves the problem much more quickly than you can technically and you're not lifted out of the world of the song. But sometimes we want to know, okay here it comes, here's that minor seventh or whatever and I remember that this is the place where I have to breathe extra. And so we go in and out of the technical training too. I find... But this is turning into the conversation I thought it would.

Let me just think about this, so there's a difference in my experience of acting training and my experience of vocal training that looks to me like it's endemic. I might be wrong, but I think it's endemic because in acting there's no accuracy. There are issues, like we have to be able to spit the words out, there are a lot that's technical, but when we're doing that work and we're doing that scene, the acting teacher is mostly doing something having to do with getting you free enough to live it, because we're clear that that's the goal. The goal is to live in such a way that the listener lives it. So come over here, and that has never... Somebody who identifies as a voice teacher, that's not really the goal, and that's not the style. The acting teacher does a lot of what a good director does, there's so many bad ones, but what a good director does is set up conditions that make it more likely you're going to go where the song wants to go, you're gonna go where you the artist want to go. You're gonna where let's say there's a birthday party so where you think that audience wants to hear this particular song done a certain way, they're setting up conditions. I'm not just spitballing when I'm working with somebody and they're singing an incredibly sad song, I'm reaching around for what are some things that a person might imagine as they sing that are more likely to take the song where we want to go. Alright, there's another big principle, so another difference here, there are all kinds of schools of thought in acting, let's come over here for a second. And that's a good thing, and most actors do a circuit, because one of the conversations is do you like to work from the outside in or the inside out? And anybody who's... Been around the block, noticed there's no right or wrong here, in fact all of that is helpful. Some people more naturally come from the outside in, so famously Laurence Olivier built that character or anybody who's, you know, built it from the physicality into the internal and other people have to feel it and that gradually comes up into the physical expression. You're going to need both. And it's just, it's great to go around that circle, right? What it suggests is, to a good coach, is we're gonna be working with various actors and some are just gonna, they're gonna just go crazy. This is exactly the point of view. This is an inside out person and they're going to love this. But others are going to take that tool away and use it in other ways later. The acting teacher often says that acting is reacting.

Speaker 5 [00:26:56] So what do you mean by that?

Amanda [00:26:57] They mean, first of all, everything I'm about to say is also not true. So they mean, though, that when an actor is really cooking, there's nothing calculating about it. They're experiencing this for the first time as you are. And even if they're hearing Barbra Streisand sing that song for the 400th time because they've bought that front row seat, it's still the first-time every time. What does that mean? It means, in part, that that's what's happening to the performer. How do we know? I just looked at, Instagram has a great little post about Christopher Walken in film, where you're looking at him do different takes. And this was with Spielberg, this is in that wonderful movie about faking, oh god I can't see all of it but I'm getting sold, something, count something, you can count on me some art, anyway. So you see all the takes and there are takes where he's laughing, there are takes where his bombastic and there's a take where he goes to pieces, he starts to cry.

What happens when an actor's actually reacting, the body tells you, his body tells us, what does it tell us? He starts, his voice gets funny before he knows what's going on. And then the face rhythms, and you, the viewer, are getting upset because you can see he's upset, way before the tears. It comes and gets him, and that gets us. And that's gold. It's just wonderful. And so coming to your question about what can be healing about the imagination, well that's one thing that can be healing. Whatever we might imagine is so compelling that we get lost in that to the point that our body starts to cry. So we can, people who are really rigid and you know they've got that voice going, it's partly a function of, can I invite them to play around to see where they're comfortable. But when I, can I invite them into an experience, an internal experience that's so compelling that The last thing they're thinking about is, "I'm embarrassed to be, you know, standing here singing", "I'm lost", or did I get that note right?". All of that. And it, by God, it has to be compelling. And some people have very rigid definitions about what they're willing to do.

So the coach, I mean I've had many clients whose nature isn't to be imaginative. In fact, they don't like that. They don't like imagining being somewhere else, for instance. Other people love imagining being somewhere. Fine, but we can imagine, but I can see that a certain kind of mental activity is incredibly calming. While you're singing, can you walk around there? Can you just count all of the pencils in the room? Whatever. And here comes, here, that's, that is a form of imagination. It's that the person begins to live a circumstance that is so compelling that they cannot, you can't do it all at once. They're, oh, I'm gonna count pencils. And they're not holding the other thought.

There are other things to say about that. That's only going to work in a setting where they feel, they start by feeling safe, and that has to be earned by the teacher if you ever ever for one second in the presence of that student said something negative about another you're dead. And even then, when I come in and I'm working with people, I don't know. There are lots of things I do to take that temperature down, including enlisting "the other", you know, I usually have, we're talking about young students, I have them watching. But that's a strategy I've used a lot in my life, so subset here. When I was at Knott's Berry Farm, I had to audition, I had to hire, what, 600 to 1,000 people every... I guess it would have been August for their Halloween event, and these were short-term amateur performers who were going to be monsters, and all of Southern California wanted this job, so how to do it? Well, they didn't used to audition, but I would run these auditions in a theater that was about as big as... Person, so that theater held 1,200 people, so we'd bring them in in groups of 600, the audience would sit, we had to rotate them up on stage, a very, very complicated way, a system, they actually had to perform, though we didn't call it that. We called it a game. And I enlisted that audience. I had to have them in the room because I had to get them up on that stage super quickly, right? So we had this whole system, but inside the system we made it safe. Why? Because the people watching, their job was to applaud. They very much, the second they saw that they were going to be supported, all went well. So there are lots of ways to work the studio in such a way that people feel safe enough to try a thing like count the pencils.

Christa [00:32:32] Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Amanda [00:32:33] And even then, you're going to try some things that they're uncomfortable, great, that's a gear shift for me. It's like, okay, good. And we say that to everybody, you know, we're just trying things. We're not, we are playing. I say that's all I ever say, because that's true. It's not because it's a strategy, it's because that is what performing is. Everything that I've just described is actually the easy part, not so easy for teachers, but easy for the student. What's going to happen though, in any successful coaching, is something's going happen that unlocks a student. They're going to know it because they hear it like, oh, well there's my voice, or well that was funny, or that was kind of fun, or whatever it is, you know. Then teaching, well how do we get to that again? Is where most students and most professionals screw up, just play and screw up. In acting it's called "playing the results". So the second you have hit it, you've done that scene with Hamlet and there it is. You immediately want to try to recreate it and that doesn't work. We're back to play. Every time you come back to that song, you have to come in with that humble mind that says, I'm just counting pencils. Let's see what happens this time. And sometimes it will be amazing and sometimes it would be pretty damn good. If it's something that's going to be in the repertoire over time, the discipline is coming back around to trust. Placing the mind and relaxing and not asking it to be any particular thing is the way to go. And here's where technique is super helpful. Because if the body, you know, you just cannot aim to do the slalom down the snow and not be well trained. But if the body is ready to take those turns, you don't have to exactly know. You know, in many, many races. Either the skier, or this is true for horses too, they haven't gotten to do it on that particular track that time. So there's this piece of improvisation that goes there. So that's the relaxation about, I'm going to see what happens when I get there, and I'm trained, I can handle this. I can even handle it if I can't make a noise.

I know another subset of teachers who are feeling the pain of the students. So again, let's let the split here. There are students who are in so much pain that a lot of emotion is going to come up when they work, no matter what they work on. And then there's the other issue, which is sometimes you're working on really emotional material and stuff comes up. And what happens when stuff comes? We can't make noise. We cry. The throat tightens up. We go to pieces in a scene, like forget singing for a second, you lose your lines. You just go, the body is going to have the reaction it does. Fine. So what I encourage is, yeah, let's, we're going to do this, but I think the goal is finding that. Go ahead and not be able to sing it. Let the piano keep playing and you come back to it when you can because you're going to want that. You're going to want to know what that song means to you. After a while, it's very interesting that most people... First just surge of pain, which means I, the singer, have to cry, begins to drop down because I've let, I've loosened that valve and that's come through. And after a while, that sense of it coming to get me and that it means that much to me is there, but I can now make noise. And then I also want to say to everybody, well, and then why not make noise? I was so left that we can't sing right here. Thank you very much. It makes a difference if it's the first time the work is heard at the Met. Okay, I get it. The composer really wants you to sing it. But once we're in, you know, Mozart for the main eight millionth time, maybe it's okay that in that section, that performer has a moment. I mean, maybe the audience would really love that.

Christa [00:37:04] Maybe something new.

Amanda [00:37:05] New everybody ease up let let what happens happen don't be so afraid of feelings mm-hmm so would suggest to the teacher it's it's really complicated because you want to be sensitive to their pain but you don't want to say that there's it so okay pain we're in the business of pain Another thing yeah and everybody in an audience wants a good cry so just bringing that into the room to never ever pushing somebody, when a performer says no, I've stopped. We're not, but I'm immediately turning. So I'm not saying, oh my gosh, what do we do? No, I'm like, okay, it's not pencils, how about, you've seen me do this a million times because one of the big places is anything that has to do with sex and love and blah, blah, it's up, because it's so in there. Right, you see me swivel like. You know, what's your favorite sport? Okay, we just immediately think about something else, invite them into something that they enjoy.

Christa [00:38:21] Right, or something that I love that you did once was you were like, just don't even think about love or being sexy, just think about what's your favorite material to feel. Just feel a piece of velvet.

Amanda [00:38:32] And see, for you, it was velvet, and for others, it's something to eat. And I just had somebody lately who really wants to drive race cars. I so don't want to drive. So I'm like, yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, yeah so. And pretty soon that sun was cracking open because I think I think this was a man singing about a man, but he the beloved. And then pretty soon the tempo was changing, too, which was really nice, because this is one of these turgid sort of things. So we had a lot of fun, because we just kept playing, and I didn't get stuck with, oh gosh, that didn't work. And really really important for a coach is who have I got here because okay well you and I so we can share some stories that you and I have experienced together without any names but of course I've had plenty of people that I'm staging in a work who have phobias about being touched in love story this is very very complicated but that's true we have to be we have honor that. So good, how are we going to do that person doing that? Or Carousel, when we are Aunt Eller, she had no human legs. And she did not, this was way before you had beautiful bionic legs. She had these very, very odd, stiff, she could hardly walk. And when she walked, it was very complicated. We had her dancing, we were just like, okay, we've got whole numbers to do here, how should we do this? That was amazing, wasn't it? You know, you and I are nodding because the second we think of it as a physical body thing, we think, well, of course, well it's time to do the same with that singer, that singer's soul, right? We want to stretch. Stretching for

me is inviting in. It's inviting. We want them to go in. I'm not pulling them in anywhere. It'll look like that. I'm gonna do that.

Amanda [00:40:56] Seen me do it in directing, it depends on what my circumstance is, but I've done so much commercial directing. And commercial directing, the thing that defines it is you've got two seconds of rehearsal time. It's money, it's all about money. And that's not always a high functioning, really well-trained person. But you've gotten an audience, a paying audience by God, So you've got to deliver.

So when I'm directing sometimes, I'm not inviting any, I am simply laying some staging on some people. I'm doing two things at once. I'm coaching, but I'm also laying staging on. And it doesn't matter how they, literally I'm keeping them busy. Why? Because I need to be sure that I'm telling a story physically, that no matter where that performer is in any other way, an audience is receiving something meaningful. But, meanwhile, especially for amateurs, most amateurs... Have done very little observation out there. It doesn't occur to an amateur, if I'm, that, okay, this is so important for singers. It is never the case in life that anybody is standing stock still. It doesn't happen. If you're standing at the damn bus stop, oh my gosh, take the silent movie. They're shifting, they're whatever, they remember. And we need that information. Staging can help an amateur understand, just by having somebody move around, they can begin to grok, oh, oh, people are really physically expressive in the middle of moments that don't, where nobody's telling you that anything's happening. Any love story, any scene. Most bodies are, look at mine, I'm like, I'm moving all over the place as I talk and my eye is moving all the place. And so we want to unlock bodies. One way to do it is staging. So I'm a big fan of that too, it's both. What it's not, everything I'm describing does not require self-consciousness. It requires consciousness. So, I'm going to think about a particular boyfriend who's mean to me. I'm gonna think about, where are the pencils in the room? I'm very, very present to something. What I'm not focusing on is me, how my, you know... And the tape that we all learn about, whatever we're doing wrong. And some people, many people, are in performing because they're on a spiritual journey that has to do with I need to be out in front of people in some way. It's anathema in me. I hate it, but I'm here learning a thing that I actually hate because they are, because, we don't even know the answer.

Christa [00:44:06] Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Amanda [00:44:11] So we're just inviting them forward. I think that a gift that I might have that I could just, if I could give it to everybody, I didn't start as an expert at anything. So I'm not burdened with the, wow, that was a really bad version of whatever the song is. And I came up in the 70s and 80s in New York where it was all about, well, what's your way of doing this? It wasn't about perfection. Um, even, you know, God bless her, like, Krista, can you just imagine me, 17, in France, my- I sign up at the conservatoire Derrius Milot. I can't, I can hardly play piano and they assign me to Christy Castelli who was a dramatics, operano, Italian, enormous woman. Big fantastic chair she sat in and her hour accompanist was Monsieur Renaud which means fox and he looked like one he was this little guy who's fantastic and there's me She's a real, really American with her tiny little voice and, um... And god bless her and she didn't she know she handed me the right material never once from that woman i mean when she would try a demonstration she would say try this and this gigantic voice but it was in this just sort of joyful i i got very lucky that i had a few people who were who just let me be me and brought me along so that later when I had teachers who weren't like that I could sort of say I don't do well in those settings. Some people do well. Some people thrive proving the negative wrong, that's true too, but I'm not that kind of person.

Christa [00:46:28] And I also don't think most people don't. The neuroscientist that I interviewed, her favorite saying is that we select for resiliency not talent in singers because it's whoever can stand being abused the longest usually stays with it.

Amanda [00:46:48] Well, I, I mean, I'm pulling my punches with you. I have a big problem with the way my voice is taught. That's why I don't want to even get over there. Because I can't deal with that.

Christa [00:46:58] I should refer you to her website. I think you'll love it because the things that you're talking about in acting are the things that she as a voice teacher and a neuroscientist like it's her mission to prove to scientifically this is what happens to people's brains when you do these kinds of things when you make the safety when you do the distraction when you play these are the actual things that go on between the brain and the laryngeal cortex and the body that scientifically proven make people better, right?

Amanda [00:47:41] There it is. That's why.

Christa [00:47:41] Or you can just get along so great. But like, Academia needs it. And so I'm like, so grateful for her work because she's proving it. And it's like things that other people, like you already know, or like you can, you can't just say it works. Yep, yep, yep.

Amanda [00:48:04] Yeah, I. And it's obvious to me that it's anchored in First Principle. I'm saying what she's saying which is this weird psychosomatic being that we are which is our body and so much more is so unbelievably responsive and resonant and also retentive and it matters a hundred percent what you put in. You must never ever stop directing their attention to what you don't want. Stop it. I don't even think it's particularly helpful technically. I wouldn't do it that way technically.

Christa [00:48:42] In the technical world, my mentors that I base my teaching off of are the types of people that they find something that the student is doing so right. Is there just one vowel that is so right, or one note? How does that feel? Now we're going to do the one next to it and make it sound like that one.

Amanda [00:49:06] That's it, and we can look at it I mean that's fun too is like see the tongue do this you know that's all great I mean it's Right, that's steering toward, where can I place my mind in such a way that I'm opening into, because my feeling is genius is a thing we share, it's something that we channel, and so the teacher's job is to get that channel as open as we can for each person. So I need it nice and open, and then I need just a body that's... Not tighten down in such a way that it can't receive and channel that through to the listener. That's what we want. Right. But then the it-ness, you see, when we've got a teacher who says, yes, but what we're channeling, but, what we are channeling through is some kind of regimented weird, it has to sound this way. No. This is an interpretive art. If we're working with the right material, you've heard me say this all the time. That will be clear and it will come through and it's it will be it will support interpretation. Sometimes we need interpretation because we're working on material it's not so good too.

Christa [00:50:19] I've done lots of new works that I'm like, hmmm.

Amanda [00:50:23] Or even the old ones, you know? They're just a little like, you know, whatever. If you're if you're having to sing some 14th century French dance song, whoo, it's a dance song. So we're just gonna repeat repeat. So yeah, there's lots of flawed. Listening to today, Les Mis. I'm sorry, I'm not crazy about those lyrics. They're doing a job, but y'all. You know, I think, whoa, wow. All the times I've coached those songs, because they're so vague. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let's get down to the dream.

Christa [00:51:01] Yeah people have been interpreting them well and that's why they they are successful yep I agree there's several like popular musicals I feel that way about where the lyrics are like

Amanda [00:51:10] Yeah, and that's But it's such a great experience while most musicals are like that actually so Actor singer we're going to dig down there and give it some we're not just singing a song here. We're in a musical What's that story all of that? That whole business of saying the song is another way to help that singer out of self-consciousness So directing us all to think about what are we saying? Right away, I see, you know, once I'm working like that with somebody, the self-consciousness is going away. Because we're like, yeah, what is this? What

are you saying? What would you say? Who would you that to? We're not having a problem with self-consciousness. Right. Alright, alright, alright. Yeah, is that your deletion?

Christa [00:51:58] Alright, no they actually had to keep my office manager key with them and they all said I didn't have to stop. You're going to go back down to the beginning, but you're so heavy. You're so HEAVY.

Amanda [00:52:13] What am I not saying?

Christa [00:52:16] Well, I was just going to kind of string some things together, too, so, you know, things that I, you're my last interview, so it's like reoccurring themes throughout all these disciplines is people mentioning these different ways for a teacher to create a safe space first and then in different ways for teachers to introduce distraction. So like the Feldenkrais person was like, you know, someone, the first time she experienced a director that was also a Feldenkrais person, she was having like massive problems and he was like can you just sing that phrase and think about your right foot? And then the phrase came out, because she was distracted. Um, and then also a way is to distract us from the inner voice. So a lot of people have talked about like the inner critic that, that has that like bad self-talk and it's just going on and on and like these ways to bring a student out of being able to pay attention to it. And then also noticing that it's there because a lot of people mentioned that they didn't notice that that was happening until they were distracted long enough to feel the difference between being in those two states and being like oh i don't want to be in that state anymore with this voice and then after that like the element of play and discovery where you know Feldenkrais and Alexander technique, there's play and discovery in the body. Like, what does happen if I think about my right foot and sing this phrase? It's also, it's playful and it's a distraction. And then the people that are, like the neuroscientist, she has a bunch of silly things she has people do that activate things that are playful. And then she's like, I don't even care about like, we don't talk about like you should sing this E like that, or just like sing this phase and pluck chickens from the sky. It's so much faster.

Amanda [00:54:24] Technical singer. I think some teachers have a crisis of identity. Oh wait a minute, all the stuff I learned I don't need. I I get them thinking about their right foot and they're there.

Christa [00:54:34] You

Christa [00:54:37] sometimes and also the the element of guidance and collaboration like not that the person is like a vessel to be filled but like that we are discovering together and also being with each individual and noticing who they are instead of getting caught up in a modality like this is the system and I apply it to everyone you have to learn about each person

Amanda [00:55:05] no question. If you... I'm making notes here. I'm just telling myself conditions and safety. But that... Yeah, teacher, you're wedded to information instead of you're acting like a teacher instead of an improviser. All coaching is improvising and all teaching is improvising, full stop. That person is not like, you are going to use some things and after a while they're going to be some things you use more than once, but ... Each person coming in, in this moment, something else is up, you know. They were like that last week and suddenly dad died and we've got a whole other person in front of us. You know. Right. It's non-stop improvisation toward a way of play that they can take out with themselves so they continue to relive work that they've learned how to bring to life for themselves and others. So in general, the task for me is we're establishing conditions through which the best work will come. And these conditions have to do with where we're placing the mind and soul and body. And those conditions, without saying I want to sing a sad song, if I'm sitting, for some people, in my bedroom, just the sitting alone is going to take me to a place. So we don't know what those conditions are. Really good teachers have a really good library they're pulling from. I'm like, let's try this, this, and this. So we're setting conditions in the performer that make it more likely to bring something to life for a listener. And it's going to be brought to life because of that process in the singer. Safety in the room, by the way, I have lots of teachers, Melinda's one, she gets her students busy, so she has

the students sit in the workshop, but they each have a task, so they're not just sitting there, one's taking notes, the room is very active, you get the, she she gets them all doing tasks, it's very smart. So that nobody's too locked into evaluation because they've learned to do nothing but evaluate That's all we learn in school, right? Why am I an effective teacher among other things because we all got the same bad training Yes, the second we had school to now and I learned to evaluate and judge. So that's what we're setting down here. I Think of it as I can say the word distraction, but what I am is I'm not distracting. I'm giving you a focus forward into meaning. We're building meaning into an experience. The experience of singing it and the experience of listening to it. We're beginning a journey where we're going to find those sources and focuses that take us into meaning, so we don't even remember what we're distracting from. There's no distraction at all. We're suddenly like, wow, this is the only thing that matters to me. To whatever I'm thinking or doing here in such a way that it's compelling and takes us somewhere.

Speaker 5 [00:58:26] And that led me to another part of my family still actually thinking about

Christa [00:58:40] Safety, distraction, play, eliminating the negative self-talk.

Speaker 5 [00:58:53] Yeah, uh, experience. Yeah, let's go with that.

Amanda [00:58:59] You know and then it sounds like you're collecting some approaches and tools which is good and one wants to always say these are just examples. Right.

Christa [00:59:10] Right, I mean that's what everyone says. I'm like, because I'm asking, you know, part of this is collecting tools for teachers who don't have secondary disciplines that they could use, and of course everyone's just like, well you have to get to know each individual.

Amanda [00:59:53] But, um. I mean, just to suggest to, again, singing teachers, somebody who's crushed with a sense of pain and self, too self-conscious, can't even make the sound, take the sound out, guys. Have somebody play the song while they do a thing, while they cull them. Let's get them used to the notion that they can be with the music they want. And then you've got to keep playing and inviting. Like, how does it feel when you're just singing by yourself? Is there anywhere where you like to do that? You just keep pulling away the pain and inviting in and letting go of what you think the result is. For instance, I'm going to have somebody good saying, that may not be where that student is going. Right. The best that might happen is that they've been invited to simply enjoy music. What a concept. Right? Yes. I mean, take what you think success is, gotta go out. It's gotta go

Christa [01:01:08] Right? And also the, you know, like the teacher's ego of a result. I feel like there's a lot of, can be a lot of ego in the result of what is going to happen with your student.

Amanda [01:01:19] Teacher, heal thyself. I swear to God, the conversation that you were stuck in, which all experts are stuck in is the same with writers, where those teachers or whoever it is get in the back room and then it's non-stop evaluation, so you get steeped in the, you know, we're parsing this soprano at the Met, you've got to be careful, that's poison. Don't spend time there, because you will absorb it. Because it's the enemy. It's got to go. It has got to go.

Christa [01:01:50] And that's another common thread, which everyone is like, you need to work on yourself if you want to be a good guide.

Amanda [01:01:56] Right and get the mind opened to other ways of making sound or making performed experience which aren't exactly like what you think it has to be. Go listen to that flamenco singer. Just you got to shake it out of yourself because you've got to be encouraging your student to find their way to a meaningful experience. That's what we're doing. That's all we're making a meaningful experience. Here's a great example. Ilya Kaminsky is a deaf poet. Deaf, deaf, deaf. Profoundly deaf. What a poet. I heard him speak his poem at a thing. It's a terrifying sound. He doesn't know what sound he's making. I won't do it here, but it's a kind of screaming that is super alarming to anybody who hears. He's just talking. It was such a good lesson in what do we think reading out loud is. And it was really meaningful. I'm telling you the story now. Another great, I went and saw Anita O'Day right before she left this planet. Jazz singer, nuts, white. She was at, I think it was Avery Fisher. Sold out, it was a big deal. I don't

know how the hell I got in there. And she starts a song. Goes out of her head, and she's just like lost and can't sing it and then pretty soon She's laughing and I'm telling you that story It's partly because the song was upsetting her Or a show I directed I won't say who it was but at Carnegie Hall God loved this person. It was singing. No, I can't go that far, but We've got to welcome that in and that person that you're working with has to be free to make mistakes, non-stop. You've got get the word mistake out. How interesting that is. Wow, look at that. It's completely, you know, it's not like I don't know. It's a completely flat. Wow. It is a little bit hard to listen to. Isn't that interesting that when we were thinking about that, the whole thing dropped? And then I, the teacher, I'm not going to say a word about that. Think that's really interesting I bet we need to get out in the sunshine but I mean we're now we're gonna try some things right and let me so they're categories we're inviting spirits minds imaginations bodies to focus on something or imagine something or even do something and they're all there's the world you're in there's you know one is invited out of the self and into The world, some people really respond beautifully to that. Where are you? Playing with that in all kinds of ways. Some people hate imagining where they are, in which case let's be in the room we're in, but let's BE in it, like all the way. Let's walk around the piano, you know, do we have a little dust cloth? Can you dust? Well, you, know, is there a place, nest? There's of course situations, some people love to imagine a situation. People absolutely love, of course, who are you singing to? Some people, that's an endowment, so some people just... Let's imagine you... Now, here the trick for teachers, by the way, is not the obvious thing. Oh, I know, sources. This is what I wanted to say. This is really important about safety. And you've seen me do this. You're gonna invite, in coaching, we're gonna be in a safe space and there's no audience here yet and you're gonna invite certain things. I actually ask that person usually, I don't want you to tell me what you're thinking because it needs to feel really safe. And I don't, I don't t violate that. And in fact, sometimes I say, I don't know, but don't. Okay, and then I and then they're thinking whatever they're making and I can see or opening or work Yeah, you can try different say let's you know and sometimes sources are too hot and That's when you really shut down or like I have to know going to therapy for three years because that was my father Who whatevered me in which case we have to you know, we're like wow that looks hot. That's good. Let's place hold that You know, what if, and then we'll go to the opposite state, so, and this happens a lot with singers, the singer who has been self-protective by hamming, this is true for lots and lots of performers who are kitschy, and there's a lot of taste for this right now, because it's rewarding when you're on that high school stage, right? Well, it's a very helpful tool. It's good to know how to be funny in that way, but then we want to invite them over to something where that's not going to work. Or I'm over here with someone who's just, God bless them, they've gone to the core issue for them and they're just locked down and in too much pain. Good, we're gonna come over here to something a little lighter. You've seen me do it like talk to your dog. What about your sister who's annoying you because you're trying to make ice cream and she's not pumping with you know, yeah so And they'll come right with you if you're the teacher Playing and not trying to get it, right? And after a while in work, and for some students of course it takes a while, like I would say generally I can come in, 80% of the people I'm going to work with, they'll just relax and have fun. But they're going to be solid, they need to do that a couple of times, they're not sure. Great, no problem. Truly no problem, but I had to learn that too. I had to let go of results. We're inviting away a process. Of work, which maximizes great work and invites meaning, channels meaning, builds meaning. From there, so, of course, even I know, and for another thing that's true of many, many singing teachers, that you're often working on material which stands alone or it's in work. And then of course, so of course we want to remind the teacher, well, it always stands along. First of all, everybody who sings it is singing it differently, and every time they sing it's different. So let go. Right. Yes, if the person is going to be in a particular approach to the magic flute, we're going to have to look and say, okay, how might we think about the meaning that we're channeling over here in that situation might be a little tighter. That's what the teacher's thinking. I'm not saying that to the

person. Right. But I'm going to adjust the conditions I'm creating in such a way that will maximize that. Like somebody wants to do a magic flute where everybody's in an insane asylum, we We're going to work on that a little bit differently. Whatever might come up as we're doing our performance. But again, I'm not going to say that, I just know I've got to get it over. And that's what directing is like, is I've gotta marry this performer to this production, to this audience, at this date. It's not the same as coaching. Yeah, so there are these categories of thought for teachers of exploration and of imagination, maybe least interesting. So now we're, first of all, there's this really important topic that we're not talking about, which is once you've discovered and unlocked a student, then taking that away and doing it again is a whole other technique. And it is a technique, and so there's just enormous disappointment usually when people have breakthroughs and then they don't have a breakthrough again. So let's park that, because it sounds like most of the people who are going to be reading this are over here, and let's just get the discovery piece unlocked and get your head in the right spot here. Interestingly, one of the least useful things most acting teachers will say this is biography or what people call character. So who is this person while she's a, you know, it's meaningless for me to say about Maria that she works in a, might be interesting, but that's a weird kind of outside in because it's abstract. Outside in where we're going to give Maria a broken ankle is incredibly effective. Incredibly effective. Outside in that's like her mother used to do X and now her mother's... There's a kind of abstraction there that usually means it's not coming through in the work. Many many many many actors do a lot of biography work, and then they're not doing character work. Character work has to do with in this situation in this scene. What is up and how am I going to solve it? So when I'm coaching I always bring this up like so Ophelia and Hamlet we don't know anything about I mean it's so nuts what the hell's going on there You can make up all kinds of things about her life, but actually what's gonna affect those scenes are things like, did she just have breakfast? What did he have? What did you have? What just happened? What did Dad just say to you? How embarrassed are you about your hair when you're showing up to the guy that you wanna look great for? All of those kinds of conditions are infinitely more effective in performing. Because they're in the moment. And performing happens in the moments. So we're bringing conditions into a moment. Those are the kinds of conditions that unlock performance. So simply understanding a character isn't so much it. Like we can do text analysis all day long and we can say, okay, well, I think I understand what we're saying. Why are we saying it? Right. And so here's another. Why are we saying it? When I'm working with a student on that, especially a young student, the first answer they're going to give me is like a high school answer. She wants to sell a dress. That's true. That's what's going on in the scene. Great. Now let's get underneath that. She's going to sell the dress to who? What's he like? How do you think that might happen? Are you going to fool him that it's good? Are you going to put it on and make him want to see somebody in that direction? You know, now we're talking. Now a scene's going to cook. And acting teachers and some directors are really good at that, because they're just already way under the hood of the car thinking, that's cool, that's cold, and they just come back up and say, Okay, well, why don't you? Imagine that you're selling a dress that he can't see let's just try it that way But you know already you've got a thing that person's gonna have to work on it's gonna affect the way that the lyrics come through So then that's specificity so these specificity is everybody's best friend We want deep specificity with actors. Some actors work out of memory and some hate that. This is a big split. Some immediately open when they're imagining something they already know and some hate that and they, as soon as they're in Fairyland, here we go. They're, they're crapped open. So, but specific. And that business of distraction, whether it's physical or imagined, the more specific it gets, it's pencils, it's not post-its or whatever. And the more so when I did Carousel in the famous song, I had him take her shoes off and put them back on again. But let's make that more and more complicated. Now we've got objectives and obstacles. Great. So I invite a singer to imagine doing X. And then I'm going to add a little problem for them. That's great, but now you can't look in the eye.

Christa [01:14:26] Yeah

Amanda [01:14:27] So you're layering conditions without telling them why. If you tell them why, they will play the result. Because we learn two things in school. We absorb evaluation and judgment, and we learn how to guess what they want.

Christa [01:14:42] Yeah.

Amanda [01:14:44] We don't want, we are in fact faking it when we perform. But there's a way of faking that isn't about calculating how to seem like I feel this way. And audiences can feel it, we can all feel it. It's really hard to do. Because that, God will let that performer, every time, they've gotta let go of that result and they've got to start at the beginning of the song again and hope to God it comes to them. And sometimes it doesn't. If the work's done well, and if the sources are right, so I tell this, I mean, a source that has always been hot for me, I were way back there in the 70s, I'm performing in New York, and I used to sing Michael and Valentine. And it's still the case. All I have to do, I had a friend, at Yale who was brilliant and is brilliant is now like a megastar and makes a lot of money and then all they do is picture him in a bunny rabbit suit as if it's Easter. He's the least Eastery person in the world. All I have to do is see him in the Easter bunny suit and I'm singing my Pony Valentine. That source. I don't have to know how to sing a song, I just place myself in that tragic bunny suit and we're going. That's what singers love to find, right, so that they can just begin with that, pleurably knowing, oh, where are you gonna take me this time, bunny-suit person? And not know. Voice teachers get invested in, you need to know. You need to know how to do it. It's antithetical to performing arts. You need to know how to place your fingers, and you need to have worked your fingers on that violin neck so that you have the agility to be responsive to a tempo you're getting or an impulse you're getting, but not to lock it in. That isn't the song. Right. That's calisthenics and they're really important, but they're not the same. Right and the race coming back to the slalom, there are all kinds of things one needs to think about at the top of a race. The last thing you want to think is, is my body ready to do this? Because you have a whole other set of things to think, about which a voice teacher probably is not That's the acting teacher. Oh you're coming around that you know what's going on in the song right here and so that you kind of get the layout of where the big turns are or what part of it you hate or there's a mobile you know all the things that that acting Jesus you know about the journey of the song not what the bodies, but what are we doing here in this song? Not to lock it in, but so that you're on a journey that you feel pretty confident you can improvise.

Christa [01:18:10] Yeah, exactly. That's what I was gonna say. It's not even just the overall performance, because if you're too locked in, then weird things will throw at you if something goes wrong. You just have to know where we're generally going. Hold on, I want to just check my... I think we answered most of everything. Are so good good we answered all those answered all of those We've answered all my general questions that I wrote here. I think the only ones, if you wanted to share something about like a specific story where working with a singer led to a really great breakthrough or if you want to tell a story about like collaborating with a voice teacher on like a specifically case.

Amanda [01:19:17] I feel like right now, the stories I'm hitting about students, I think, that's not my story to tell. Right. And it's okay if you don't have any, too. But let me just think for a second, I could certainly think about me, oh, I can tell stories about me all day long, about this kind of thing, so I remember in New York working on a Shakespearean monolog, which was... Miranda in the Tempest, having no particular sense of, I knew I liked it, that's about all I knew. This was a studio which was both for singing actors and actors who didn't sing. And I got up to do that monolog, which I'd prepared, and I had this kind of training where we just opened ourselves. And I really lost it. Like, I couldn't function. I was drooling. It unlocked something about me and my father that I didn't even know I knew yet. That can happen. Thank God for all of it. I went on to be able to do that monolog, not in that state, but nobody was scared in that moment, including me, because I had the kind of teachers who weren't scared by that. They were like,

just let it be, let it and I'm like, okay, breathe, whatever, good, okay. Well, we see this is very rich for you, and then, you know, we just kept working. That's a good story out about that kind of thing. I had these moments. Yeah, I'll tell other people. It's interesting that these are acting. Well, no. So the first musical I did at Yale was a little light music. And these were the genius people who are still my friends. And I go in quivering because I've just been doing nothing but classical singing. Have I had a bit of been in a musical? I don't think so. So I had all been classical. And I don't know how to do this. There were no, you didn't have to prepare them on. They didn't like that. I'm with them on that. Let me just direct you quickly. So they would put you in an improvisation. And I didn't really know what a little night music was like. They obviously were thinking of me for Anne. So they sat me across from a woman who became, what's her name? Desiree. Uh-huh. And they gave me an objective and it was something like, tell her something. And I sat at this table, and this actor started talking, just talked over me, and I was horrified, and I didn't know what to do, and that was easily two minutes of me just paralyzed, and I went home crying, because I thought that I had been just mortified, and no, of course, I was real. I got the part. That's what they're testing for, you know, are you can you be in this moment where this you're being overridden by I and one thing about me is I Learned I immediately understood a principle right there. Oh That's it. It's about I Had another moment where I watched that director work with the guy who's playing Henrik And he was a very good musical theater performer, which is always a problem. So he's singing later, and he's kind of emoting. It's not very good. This guy's name is Graf Mellon, Graf said to the pianist go a tempo and he said I want you to not know what to say. I think that's all he said so he had permission to and then he said um and he kept directing him to get up and get mad sort of physically. They were, he was supposed to throw things. Well, after a while he had shaken this actor by doing everything but the song into the truth of the song, which is the pain that I'm such a loser. He got the loser piece into the body. He got all this behavior that you couldn't have staged for it, because the body has to find, like he would put the jello down, uh. And again, I looked at that and thought, oh. Just like that. I've got the whole principle there. Those were wonderful breakthroughs. I could tell a million stories about getting negative feedback and not being able to get that out of my head.

Christa [01:23:58] Hmm.

Amanda [01:24:00] Um... Let me go to some of this commercial stuff just to see. I wouldn't talk about it. I've had nothing but just the most beautiful moments with students, just beautiful. It's generally the case where there's a lovely breakthrough. And I'm so moved when I bump into students where it feels like, wow, I don't know if I can help here. Those are I could kiss all of those moments because I have to sort of keep playing and after a while, something might happen and sometimes it doesn't but that teacher will tell me, that voice teacher will say later, you know what, they came back in four weeks later in X. I would certainly recommend to everybody, and this is a big, heavy lift, but I think everything's done in the wrong order. I think there's calisthenics, which has to be done, but right away one should get to the song, not as a function of calisthenics. Let's look at that text right away, learn the music separately, what they call acting. It's ridiculous these things are separated. They're the same. Acting's the word for all of it, so get that right in there. You know, writing it out, get that in early and get the text away from performance anxiety. Get into the situation and then get that done early. I'm brought in last. As if that's the icing.

Christa [01:25:29] Oh, oh, right.

Amanda [01:25:32] It's not the acting isn't the icing, it's the ingredients, so any teacher who's willing to think about that, like if I were, as if I know, but most sessions are way too short and most sessions have to be calisthenics, but if I had enough time I'd divide, so there'd be that, there'd some exploration and there'd at least we'd sing one song where we're doing nothing but just enjoying some imagined condition, we're just trying certainly. There's a discipline in some writing teachers, which I very much like, which is you read the stuff and everybody applauds and that's it. There's no discussion of how it went. Let's get that evaluation thing out. Let's Get in the

habit of making a song and go home. Not analysis. Yeah analyze it today. We want all of it. We And definitely have that feel, you know, so we just invite a little bit of, what was that like? God, I hated that. Yeah! Can't wait to see you next time. We'll do it. You know? And out they go. We're not fixing. We're, um, and we get in the habit, and that could be named, like, these are, this is practice, and this part is preparation, and in this part it's performance. We're gonna do each one, and you'll just get used to enjoying each. And but we're not going to bring analysis over into performance where that's a gift we're going to give the gift. We're going to get used to hmm I had fun but I wonder how that went or just whatever happens in the mind after you finish doing something and somebody isn't telling you whether it's good or not. And I would say also instructing audiences for young performers, recitals, whatever. Oh, before anybody gets up there, let's all talk about what we're doing here. We, the audience. So we don't have any of that bullshit, you know? And we give them a task. Stupid. Like, well, I often get them doing scene work with the person, you now? Um, so just finding some dumb way in which everybody's smiling like, oh okay, I can do that. And the moms and dads are like, okay I can do that, you know, really loud. Really loud applause. Standing ovation for each one. Who cares?

Christa [01:28:03] Yeah, right? Right, does it matter?

Amanda [01:28:08] So we unlocked them too, because that room, they're used to performing for tense audiences that are either a panel of judges or the loved ones who are so terrified that their child is going to embarrass them. So we've got to help the room too. People don't know how to do this anymore. Why the hell not? I do a thing, I do the workshop with Melinda where we, so the song is a gift, and I actually come in with these dumb wrapped gifts and bags, and they have to stand up and say who they are, and then they have pull out the gift and say my song is, we have physicalized that it's a gift in the hand. It's stupid. That's the whole point. We've got to, we've got to shake everybody out of this tension around, quote, excellence.

Christa [01:29:05] Mm-hmm.

Amanda [01:29:08] Excellence is something that has to do with that deaf poet. Excellence is just a certain kind of authenticity and heart and meaning. What we teachers have done is help Create a little channel through which that can come to an audience because yeah, and a lot of so and Another channel so it can come through that performer and then out to that audience and they're receiving it for more over They're receiving in and then how it goes And everybody needs help on that I think everybody, including the fanciest people up on that dream, I'm sorry I just see too many people, I, you know, for me it's like this whole recital thing, what is wrong with you, talk to people! You know? Yes! Let's go! Repeating a thing you saw it's 17th century crap we were in a court we're not doing that there's no King here and they have no idea what you're talking get up there and be a person yeah or get up there and being like okay I can't talk to you I'm gonna sing I don't care just but don't pretend you're not there and we're not here right right Maybe in helping them, you're going to help yourself, performer, you know? Mm-hmm. How would you like to be welcomed? Because they're as nervous as you are, especially the classical performer, and nobody wants to be, and they don't know how to listen to that stuff. Or there are five of them who know everything, and they're complete assholes, and we're never making music for them. Right. Thanks. And we have to deal with them, but thank you so much. Right out the door with them people who say, wow, that was so weird. What was that thing? I really loved it when, or how do you do that? It doesn't matter, just real, right? Real. Which includes artificiality so you and I know performers around who whose gift is artificiality that's why there's some funny because you never for a minute believe them ever so great we're not gonna fight that we're gonna have so much fun with that then we're going to marry them through right material we've got to invite that forward we've got to find out what their goal is But if you know that this is Nathan Lane is there to perform. So yeah, just that's what their gift is No never in a million years. You're not gonna believe them. That's the point. Yeah so we find so we stretch that we apply it in new circumstances and Let that wind that guy up and send it out there. He's doing great. Mm-hmm. Mm. Hmm. So sometimes authenticity is artificiality And you and I have

worked with actors whose characters are artificial and so The roots into that which are going to feel authentic are very very interesting. They're not going to be soulful That's not what that character is But we're going to find a soulful way to get there coaching anybody to be funny, there are three people on the planet who are funny, and they can aim at funny and be funny. It's so cool that they have that gift. But most situational theater performance... Isn't like that. And most people don't feel funny. And so again, we're building conditions. We're going to use what we've got here, which is a profoundly unfunny person. Most people who are funny are really unfunny. You know, they're nebbishes to take themselves so seriously that we're having a really wonderful time out here. Meanwhile, that person, you know, it's Seymour. We just need suddenly Seymour. We need that guy. So all the rules that the voice teacher looks for, those hooks, the opposite is always true in the coaching world. Authenticity, yes. And what do we mean by that? It has something to do with authentic to the role, the performer I have in front of me, and what we might be hoping for for an audience, maybe. Though many many many people, we don't worry about an audience. Lots of singers don't, they're not audience focused. Let's have a really great relationship to the music for you and then let's see what else we want to do here.

Christa [01:34:18] I, um, just need to mention the time because I have to go to teach, but thank you so much. This was very rich. I'm like, can I just write a paper on this? I was like, how am I going to

Interview Transcript

Beth Freeman, Voice Teacher, Certified Hypnotherapist,
Guerneville, California, Tuesday, May 13, 2025

Christa [00:01:03] Before we begin, I'd like to confirm that I'll be audio recording this interview so I can accurately reflect on your responses later. Your name and insights may be included in my final master's project unless you tell me otherwise. You're welcome to skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. Do I have your permission to record this conversation and to include your name and professional role on the final project? Yes. This is Christa Durand speaking with Beth Freeman on May 13, 2025, and she has given consent to be recorded and identified in this research.

So the first question is really about, um, establishing who you are and what you've done in voice and then we'll kind of move into modalities that have to do with releasing tension and things like that.

Beth [00:02:16] I graduated from University of Pacific Conservatory of Music. I was actually a theory major. And then I have a second degree in theater arts. And singing I have taught privately starting when I was at Sacramento State. I've taught at Cal Poly. San Luis Obispo, I taught music, all the voice classes there. And then I taught at the University in Nevada, Reno. That was when Dolores Zajack was there as a student in Ted Puff Room, as I shared a studio for a while with Ted Puf. How was that? It was a trip. It was trip. Reno is a trip and yeah, it was really, it was a lot of fun. The commute, you know in the snow it usually took about 45 minutes to get there But when it was snowing it was three hours Oh my couple times I got snowed in where I couldn't get home or I could be which is why I never sang with Nevada Opera Guild I could never guarantee that I could get out of my yard Yeah, I would get snowed and so yeah roughing it so that's basically You know I started singing At UOP, my last semester, or my last year, my senior year, I didn't really get into solo singing until I moved to San Luis Obispo. And I did Gilbert and Sullivan with Interact Theater and then Pioneer Players. I did a lot of roles down there, opera, operetta, which I dearly love. Um, and, uh, Like I said, I did some concert work and recital work when I was in Reno, but there wasn't, because of the logistics. And when I moved down here with my, my late husband and I moved down here so that he could go to school, I

sang with Redwood Empire and Merrick Theater for many years in a North Bay Italian opera ensemble. And, and of course I've taught privately. Through the years that's been kind of my main bread and butter. So that's my singing.

Christa [00:04:45] Nice, and then in your private studio, is it kind of all ages, all abilities you work with?

Beth [00:04:53] It's different working in a small little community like this. People take lessons for different reasons. A lot of my students are, you know, several of my student are older, just doing, you know, for their main enjoyment, though I have one who is 83 and is getting ready for a jazz concert. She and another student are doing a jazz concert, so yeah, we're tough. But I also have people that travel from Vallejo and Marin and St. Alina, a couple of them are professionals, so I teach at all levels. Yeah.

Christa [00:05:34] What made you change majors?

Beth [00:05:37] Well, I didn't really. I just always incorporated those. When I was studying music at the conservatory, we shared the facility. At that time, we shared a facility with the theater group, the theater arts. And I'm a designer. I love theater. I loved, and I love acting, directing, and I'm... Was dabbling in both. We did a mall in the night visitors, the conservatory did a mall in night visitors and I didn't sing in it but I did the set and costumes for mall in a night visitors. I also did the sets and played Barberina in Marriage of Figaro. So those two things have always been interlocked. When I went to Sacramento State after I did a couple major singing roles, big singing roles It's like the theater department, everybody wanted to take voice lessons, and I hadn't taken voice pedagogy or anything, but you know, they just, oh come on, well you got to know more than I do, and well okay, and it really worked, and i found that I really, really loved it. So I had students from there, I had people coming from UC Davis that I was, you know to the teacher. And then I moved to San Luis Obispo, and then everything kind of... Progress from there and really evolve from there. Lovely.

Christa [00:07:11] Um, so what kinds of modalities have you explored besides just the basic voice pedagogy and the voice that would have to do with students moving through emotions that make them stuck or block them artistically or vocally in some way?

Beth [00:07:32] Right. The modalities that I've studied have not been specifically for singers or performers, but the first was when I was teaching at University of Nevada, Reno, I took a training called Alpha Awareness Training. Now, this is in the day of Est and Eris and Silva All of that, yes. But I had met the founder at, I was a soloist at Church of Religious Science and he was one of the speakers and I was just really intrigued because it was so practical. So I took Alpha awareness training and that's what I liked. There were so many tools. It wasn't just a bunch of airy fairy woo woo stuff, real tools and as I'm taking the class. I think, oh my god, this is geared to performers. This would be accelerated learning skills, goal setting, self-esteem issues, recovery from trauma. There's so many things that were so practical and Wally Mento, the founder of awareness said, well, go for it. Go for it, just. Do it, I don't have any investment here, go for it. So I started working with my students, just the ones that I felt were open to it, nothing real woo woo, and just having startling successes with it.

Christa [00:09:12] What's an example of some kind of exercise from that?

Beth [00:09:18] Well, there is, let's see.

Christa [00:09:25] And don't feel rushed since this is going to be written.

Beth [00:09:26] It's gonna be written down. There won't be like big pauses. Right. Okay, I think probably one of the most important things that I took away from Alpha Awareness is his empirical formula, I times V equals R. Imagination times vividness equals reality. There's been studies where they had people practicing, you know, free throws in basketball. They had trial groups, you, know, study groups. They had one that went out every day for x amount of time and practiced free throws. They have another group that did nothing. And then they had a third group that... Sat and very, very vividly got themselves in a very quiet, focused state and very vivid imagining themselves throwing perfect three throws and they spent that time imagining.

And the results were really amazing. The people who did nothing showed very little improvement, the people who practiced every day showed a certain amount of improvement, the people, who sat and simply imagined had the same amount of improvement, if not more improvement. If you have electrodes hooked up to the muscles that you would normally do, when you're very vividly imagining doing something physical. Your muscles are actually going through micromusculature movement. They're actually going at a microelectric level. They're going through that. They've done work with people who have been in a cast for months with serious injuries, but very vividly, after a certain point, imagine working those muscles, working those muscles. You're not actually working them, you don't think. But they found that they had much less atrophy, much quicker recovery. Well, if it works for that, certainly it would work for piano skills. Or I had a student who had just a real break between her, you know, the passaggio. And we did work and we used that. There were some psychological and emotional issues really tied to that. I used an alpha awareness technique to deal with the emotions and then I had her work with imagining, you know, every day, going through, what would it feel like if that wasn't there? What would it be like? Just imagine. Smooth as glass, smooth as glass. And within two weeks it was gone. That break was gone." And that's when the music department started sending me and I actually taught the alpha awareness training here for performers. Oh, nice. Yeah. So that's one of the exercises. I also went to Hypnotherapy Training Institute. And it was an offshoot of all of this. I mean, I've always been very, very interested because of my own personal experience. And so it was kind of a natural extension. And I went through level four clinical, I am a clinical hypnotherapist with the whole idea of specializing in the performing arts, the arts in general, because visual artists, dance. We all go through stuff and these things can only help. So I've used that a lot. One of the biggest things that I took, there were two things, but as continuing education for certification, several years ago, I took the phobias workshop put on by Dr. Liebgold. He was a surgeon and doctor at Venetia Kaiser. He was 90 years old. And it was about anxiety disorder and anxiety you know whether it's performance anxiety any kind of anxiety and that changed everything for me. I want to say we talk about emotional and psychological issues and we lump you know performance anxiety and stage fright in with that. They are two different things. Anxiety disorder is neurological, it is not psychological. Now, that doesn't mean that there aren't psychological things or emotional issues that can exacerbate it, but it is neurological. It has to do with the hard wiring in our brain. Um, people with anxiety disorder, like myself, we have a hair trigger, our fight or flight mechanism, which Dr. Lee Gold used to call our boo voice, that boo voice that likes to keep us scared, to keep us safe, I can't do that. You might die. Yeah. Yeah, exactly. And your brain, your brain believes everything you tell it. And... You have to treat it neurologically with neurological tools, not psychology. In fact, they found that psychotherapy can actually make that worse without awareness. Now, the emotional issues that may be contributing to it. Yeah, that's where you use psychology, counseling, whatever. the performance anxiety, the anxiety part, is it's a neurological thing. And that workshop changed, again, changed my life. It's one of those defining moments. Usually if people have one phobia, which performance anxiety is a phobia. They usually have several. It is genetic. And boy, I just, I fit that pattern. And some of the things that I learned there changed my And my response to those things that create anxiety for me, it just calmed my life down. And I've been able to pass those things on. Several years ago, I did my, I call it my Boo Connection workshop. And for Arnab's chapter, and I still have people coming up and saying, oh my God. Changed my life. That simple little thing of counting backwards by 13 or whatever technique it was that totally changed that whole thing. So that was the other thing. So Alpha Awareness Hypnotherapy, the Foley's Workshop, and then through our NAPS chapter, and this was several years ago, Susan Whitbutler brought Dr. Grace Johnson. To our chapter. We had a workshop out at a Melinda Morose studio.

Speaker 1 [00:16:51] Mm-hmm.

Beth [00:16:52] On the effect, and this is her specialty, the effects of childhood sexual abuse on the singing voice. And there again, this is one of those life-changing moments. It's something we don't talk about, and yet I think all of us as teachers occasionally run into that. We become aware, or we are made aware. And or like myself we are survivors of such and also as teachers if we're working with young people we are mandated reporters we are mandated reporters so if that gets revealed to us and it's an ongoing thing and we have to report it we have to know how to deal with those things and all of these modalities I've talked about. Have made it so much easier and effective to deal with those things, in order to recognize those things but also to deal, how do we deal with them? Voice teachers are not, we're not psychologists, some of us are therapists but not a lot of voice teachers are also therapists and schooling doesn't always equip us. You know, because singing, we are a living instrument, and emotions, upset, stress, anxiety, is going to affect that instrument.

Beth [00:18:32] Unlike a violin or a piano. I mean, it will affect the player, which can affect the outcome, but the instrument itself is not affected. *We have all known pianos that have been out of tune, but I've never met a piano that's been out-of-sorts.*

Christa [00:18:49] Yeah.

Christa [00:18:54] This is the quote of the century.

Beth [00:18:57] So it's important, these things are important, and yet I don't know that our schooling as voice teachers, as teachers of singing, that it always equips us to at least know how to deal with it.

Christa [00:19:15] Mm-hmm.

Beth [00:19:15] You know, what do you do when you become aware? What are you doing? So, yeah.

Christa [00:19:25] Wait, how do you spell the phobias?

Beth [00:19:28] It's P-H-O-B-E-A-S-E, phobias, how to ease your phobias. That was the funniest class I have ever taken. This man was 90 years old, and in my life I have not had that kind of energy. And he used so many fun props and it was it was a show but it was very serious about 200 psychologists psychiatrists people in in mental health nurses and how to deal with traumas and stuff on the scene and you know i've just always from a little girl been a kind of a natural teacher. I'd come home from school and line up my teddy bears and dollies and teach them everything I learned in school. And that's how I learned. And as soon as I learned something, it's like, oh, I got to teach this.

Christa [00:20:31] Well, I like teaching. There's a good way to cement that and learning.

Beth [00:20:35] Yeah, it's like Chinese cooking.

Christa [00:20:39] It's the same thing. That is so good, man. Thank you. You're welcome. So, um... What is an example of an exercise that you learned at the phobias?

Beth [00:21:04] One of the simplest. Is what's called the calmativ breath. That is taking in a very slow breath through your nose for like a slow count of four holding it for a slow counter four and then letting it out like through a drinking straw like so like that over a very low eight count. What that does when you get an adrenaline rush it changes the pH of your blood. And that pH change holds on to those red blood cells, those oxygenated red bloods cells, waiting for the brain to tell it to go to the legs to flee or the upper body to fight. Well, if you're singing, you're not gonna do either one. Right, right. And your brain is just going, a-b-d-e-b, b-d, b, b. You know, what do I do? And what that slow breathing and that holding it in and that slow breath. It actually changes the pH of your blood. It readjusts the pH. So that after about three or four of those, it starts letting go of the red blood cells to get the oxygen, because your brain starts feeling a lack of oxygen and starts to panic, which starts this vicious circle. It gets a hit of oxygen, and it starts calming down. It just had someone who went through a major, major surgery. And beforehand just use that calmativ breathing that just really kept her calm. One of the big things for me and for a lot of my students is Is it happening right now? In other words, the thing we fear, is it happening, right at this instant? And I'll have a student come in and we talk about a recital.

Immediately they get the deer in the headlight eyes and their body tenses and it's like, oh, wait, wait. Okay, did a big audience just walk in here? Or you're gonna have to perform right now, no? Okay, stand down. Take a deep breath, take a calm and a breath. Yeah, it's not happening right now. There's no need to stress. That's something you have to tell yourself. Is it happening now? Then just calm down. Just calm down of that helped me. I don't like electrical storms. And I used to be. Almost obsessive about watching the weather reports if I knew the weather was going to get dicey and I've changed channels to see what this one said and And I would just I would be a wreck. I don't do that anymore. It's like is it happening right now Forget it That has helped my students a lot that has helped students a while It's not happening right out. Don't put the energy in just do something else another another simple thing like I said about counting backwards from by a weird number because then your brain you really have to engage your left brain because it's your right brain over here that's freaking out, you engage your left brain and basically you bore your right brain. Calm down, go to sleep. And one of our NATS members has told me every time she sees me, she says, I'm counting, I'm counted, she has really changed that because it does change the hemispheres of your brain from what calms the right brain, engages the left brain, which is the rational, the logical. And that's the one thing about where it differs in anxiety disorder, those fears. A lot of times are not rational. They're not reasonable. So rationale and reason doesn't work. We know it's irrational. We know its irrational. We're not going to be shot in front of a firing squad. We're just going to sing, but your brain thinks otherwise. So we have to retrain. So a lot is retraining the brain. You know, the big thing is learning how to recognize these things in students, you know, how do you recognize these thing in students. A lot of practice. A lot. A lot years. And because I had terrible stage fright as a singer, never as a public speaker, never as an actor. But singing was a whole different thing. And also, well, and also I was a clarinetist and playing like in a solo and ensemble fest and playing a solo or whatever. Yeah, yeah, there, when it came to the music, yeah, I had real anxiety disorder. You had mentioned about a story, a success story, and you know certainly through the years I've had some real success stories with students overcoming these things. My recent student who just did the big performance down there and who did the Nats and won the scholarship. Oh my god, you talk about a success story in overcoming overwhelming overwhelming, emotional, neurological, etc. To me though, the most shining example is actually my own story and my own teacher. This was when I was going to the University of Pacific Conservatory of Music. And like I said, I had terrible anxiety disorder when it came to singing. It took me about four or five lessons to sing for my teacher. She had to sing with me or I would stop singing.

Christa [00:27:24] Mm-hmm.

Beth [00:27:26] God, that woman had patience. And she was a big German woman. No nonsense, take no prisoners. But she was so patient with me. She had an open door policy, which means when it was time for your lesson, you didn't knock on the door, somebody was there, you just quietly came in and sat. I have that same policy, because people need to get used to having somebody else there. Just for those few minutes. And she would not let me stop singing. I had loved, I never had aspirations of singing solo. I was in choirs, I loved doing that. I was a folk singing group, but I loved the alto solos of the Messiah and I've been working on those for three years with her. And the beginning of my senior year, we started back in and she was, well, I wanna bring out the Messiah solos. And she said, I want Dr. Bodley to hear you. I just want you to sing for Dr. Bodley. He said, why? She goes, just because. And so I sang for Dr. Bodley He was the choral director there and he was the one who directed every year The Messiah was broadcast from the conservatory in San Francisco the big radio stations and stuff. It was like a big deal. And so I sang for him. And about a week later, I was in marching band. So I was out on the football field and Dr. Bodley came out there and he pulled me out of marching band, he said, you know, I would like you to be the alto soloist this year. And I said, no. No, thank you. No, no, no. That's not something I can do. He goes, well, you'll have to talk to Ms.

Speltz about that. Well, I knew I'd been had. Everybody has to take voice juries, anybody who studies. They would not let me take voice jury because the faculty thought it would be too damaging to me. So at this point, I mean, I'm just raw. So my next lesson when I came in she said, well little one we got our work cut out for us and by the way two weeks from today Sharp's Army Depot is looking for a soloist and I took the liberty. So and I said well I'll tell my mom and she'll teach goes no I don't want your mom there. My mom was a lovely lady don't get me wrong but she said no. I'll pick you up. I'll take you out there. We get out there tiny little army chapel and there was like eight people including the chaplain, the organist, but it was some big brass that was there with all kinds of ribbons and stuff on his chest and I was nervous. I dropped my music but I got through it and she just had me do I think he shall feed his flock. So on the way home you know back to the dorms you know we talked about it and then she said oh by the way next week the Unitarian Church is looking for a soloist. She did that every week or every other week. Until the messiah and each church got a little bigger a little bigger a little bigger okay that's called a hierarchy process in desensitization when you're working with phobias it's a desensitization you take it you know you get through that first one and to survive.

Christa [00:31:07] Mm-hmm.

Beth [00:31:07] Okay, well, I know I can do that. And then it was the next time. Well, okay, now they want, oh, thou that tell us good time. And it was next one. And, well that one's a little less scary. And each church got bigger. And of course, with the conservatory music, the conductors in these church choirs are usually students at the conservator or the organist or whatever, which brings in conservatory students. So some of my peers are starting to hear me and that's scary. Until the last Sunday before the Messiah was at Central Methodist, which was this huge church right across from the conservatory there. And that's where all, at that time it was marginally a Methodist. Still a Methodists university. So that's why everybody, you know, all the conservative people were there. So you know that's the scariest. That was the scariest and by then I knew I could do it. You know, it's like, okay, you got through that, you will get through this. And she was right there every step. She was at every performance, debriefed everyone, and when I did something stupid, she let me know. But when I did something good, she let me know. And so the day by the time the Messiah came and she told me about rehearsal, she said, OK, there's a lot of sidewalk superintendents in this world. And, you know, nobody's really heard you sing. And don't be surprised if after the rehearsal, everybody's going to come and you know you should do this and you don't. And then, oh, boy, did that ever happen. And when she said you sing it the way you've been taught. And you just do it. I wouldn't have you up there if I didn't have total faith in you. And I did it. And it was a huge success. One of those defining moments.

Christa [00:33:07] Mm-hmm.

Beth [00:33:08] Um. Once I got bit by the bug, you couldn't hold me back. Now, I always had performance anxiety, but I knew better how to handle it. And that was a teacher who, she had the patience and the caring, and she must have seen something there that was worth, you know, she considered me worthwhile. Of her time and her patience to do that and I'm eternally grateful. And also it was an example to me as a teacher, as a future teacher.

Christa [00:33:57] Mm-hmm.

Beth [00:33:57] As to, you know, how to deal with this. We all have students that experience these emotions and the most important thing is Now I want to make the distinction, now there are students who, I have students who just rock solid, just rock-solid, but once in a while they'll come in and after about 10 minutes, you want to talk about it? And then I have other, you know, I've had other students who that's their mode of operation. Sometimes it's histrionics, sometimes it's wanting to be the drama diva, and You acknowledge it, but you go right on. You don't want to feed into that. And it's a little bit of a dance to know, is this something that needs to be pursued here a little, or is it something to always acknowledge? Always acknowledge. But then, well, you know, yeah, I can tell. Yeah, that's really an issue, but, you what? You pick today. What do you want to work on? Considering all of this, what's the best thing for you to work on today? And

that's what we do. Because a lot of times that come in, singing changes your brain chemistry. It gives you endorphins and all those feel good. After a little bit of singing, they're fine. I do have one thing. My students love it. There are other times when you can tell after about 10 or 15 minutes this is you know this isn't going to fly. Yeah. So we have tea day. Do you want me to put the kettle on? Yeah, could you? I'll go make tea and we sit and we spend their lesson talking. Now, that happens per student, maybe that happens once a year or not. You know, it's very rare, but we all know about Tea Day. Yeah. There's even been times when I have been under just tremendous stress as a caregiver or whatever, just huge, huge stress, where I have had a student come in and after about five or 10 minutes, they'll stop and say, Beth, I think you need a tea day. I'll go, take care of her. That's lovely. So, you know... Yeah, you have to acknowledge it, but you also have to know, it's a balancing act. Voice teachers shouldn't be expected to fix it, when it comes to, but one thing we do need to know is resources. If a student is struggling emotionally, and it's not something that we can deal is to be able to give them some tools and resources. You know, along the way, I have recommended getting some counseling, you know, a student, you know. I think you need some counseling. I think maybe this is a place where somebody could give you some real direction there, what you need is some real direction there. It's not something I can do, but you know, I think some counseling would really help. Sometimes, and sometimes we do hypnosis, sometimes a student, it's a separate function, but we'll do hypnosis for certain things. My two specialties in hypnosis are performing and performing anxiety, but the whole thing, goal setting, anything to do with performing. And the other thing is dealing with the trauma. Of sexual abuse, either as a child or as an adult. Recognizing that, recognizing as a voice teacher, either it's disclosed to us or we can recognize. Body language has so much to do with recognizing emotional things. People stand. You know, with those, their feet right together, or if you blew on them, they fall over. And the whole appagia, the whole thorax is just, you know your ribcages are caved in and the arms are just tied against. Yeah, it's just in a protected mode. You just put things, you just want to unzip them so they can breathe. Noticing shallow breathing, not breathing, or what I call truncated breathing. You say, okay, take a deep breath in the goal. They can't let that breath go all the way down. It's like, mm, something, yeah, that's too scary. Ooh, that too scary! The hands, oh, I'm a hand watcher with my students. I'm the real hand watchers. And I'll see them standing, and their hands are just, what I call the chicken claw, the chicken claws. And I won't stop them from singing. I'll just say, relax your hands. They relax their hands. Everything relaxes. Looking at the floor, not wanting to look up, always singing to the floor. Yeah, all of these things are our body posture. You can hear it in their voice. You can hear emotions, the tightness or the sound never gets to the front of the vocal track. It's just sitting back here and you just want to reach in like whoop. Yeah, out here, out here. Out here. Yeah. It gets trapped. Unwillingness to open their mouth, unwillingness to open your mouth either in front or the formant area. Now that was one of the things that Dr. Grace Johnson talked about in dealing with childhood sexual abuse. And that is if that abuse involved oral copulation, a forced oral copiation. They're going to be just closed off. And I actually had a student say to me once, and trying to, okay, it's like you're going to yawn, get back. And she would choke, and then she revealed to me that as a child, that she had been abused, and that was the form of abuse. It's like, ah, you got that. Now there's no way we can fix that, but we can guide them to resources that will help I've actually worked with, that's part of what I do, is I do work with people who are survivors of sexual abuse and help them overcome some of those things. This is a huge, I mean, it's a huge area, the whole psychology of singing. I mean, it's a huge

Christa [00:41:36] people are as varied as there are people. Oh yeah.

Beth [00:41:39] Oh yeah, and so many different things can affect it. One of my students in recent years, very, very successful, but going from a little a small town to a huge university or whatever, boy, it caused health problems. Just tremendous health problems for her first two years, serious health problems. And a lot of it was emotional and psychological, just the shock,

the culture shock. And this is a strong, tough little gal. I mean, just very together, but yeah, we're not indestructible, are we?

Christa [00:42:31] No!

Beth [00:42:37] I don't think I'm 76, but once in a while I get these reality checks as I go back.

Christa [00:42:54] Oh my gosh, I just didn't check my questions. You answered a lot of things already. Oh, do you, um, do have any? Processes that you go through when people come into your student like is there any like grounding or emotional clearing thing that you do every time everyone comes in or is it just different depending on the person?

Beth [00:43:23] It depends on the person, it depends on on this on the situation. Yeah, I do. One of the the grounding and that's that's a big thing because artistic people, creative people quite often are not in their body. Yes. You have to get in the body first before they can use the line. And, you know, so grounding, having them stand and imagine tap roots growing from their feet, the soles of their feet down through the floor, into the ground, going down through the soil, all the way down, finding a big rock and just kind of wrapping around that rock and then pulling that energy up is really grounding. A lot of times I'll have them do some somatic movement, you know, get them doing movement to get things loosened up, to sing a phrase if it's stilted or choppy or whatever, you movement to smooth it out. You know, singers have what I call vocal acrophobia. They're afraid of heights, they're afraid of high notes. And I will use, throw the tomahawk or whatever. And in my studio, in my living room there, I have that big rondelle of stained glass in the south window with that beautiful center. It's like, okay, there's your target. And when you go for that high note. Toss it right through there with your arm how they do this will be how they sing it You know how they move their arm. So a lot of them will wait till the last second and go

Christa [00:45:19] That's exactly what comes out.

Beth [00:45:23] And other time if they really get behind it that note just comes flying out and usually scares them and yeah so I use things like that breathing you know I have certain students we always start with some breathing because get them in their body get them oxygenated get them focused that's that's really really important. Really knowing your students is one of the things that I love about private teaching, especially in a small town, but you really get to know your students. You really get to know your student when you're at university level. There's that aloof professionalism. Of course you love your students, but there's that detachment.

Christa [00:46:18] And then also I feel like the pace creates more detachment too because you're like, oh, you need to learn 16 pieces this semester. If you were a private student in my studio where we were just going to go at your pace and figure out how you sing the best at your place, you know, we might work on these different things for six months. But we have. Two weeks, and I just want to get you to sing the best that you can with our limit, our time constraints.

Beth [00:46:50] Absolutely. I have different levels of performing in my studio. Every once in a while I have a master class, where it's just my students, they come, and each person gets up, or sometimes we'll just assign certain people, and they might not sing the whole song, but specifically they'll sing something that they're having problems with, and then we work on it, because it's important, number one, to get them up. I'm the only person who is allowed to make comments or give criticism or make suggestions, though positive, you know, positive comments are always welcome. It gets them in front of their peers, it gets them front of people, and it's very safe and it always fun. We just always have a lot, we laugh a lot. And then I'll have what I call a little studio recital where it's just my students, or maybe they can invite one person, each person can invite person, and it is small. And then get them out there, maybe three or four of them that share a recital, then two, then one. You know, getting people ready for the Nets, a lot of singing festival, that's a biggie, that's biggie. And like I said, knowing your students. You know, my current student that just performed and won the scholarship, you know, she deals with brain

damage, traumatic brain damage. And I think Singie has been the best, and she will say this has been, the best thing. She was told it would never get better, it would only get worse.

Christa [00:48:48] She

Beth [00:48:49] She would never be able to memorize things. She would never be able to do this. And all of these things that she had been told by the medical profession, and that she really took in and believed it. They became core beliefs. But she is also one of the most determined people I have ever met. Exacting persons I've ever met! Hard working person I've ever met, sometimes demanding. I adore her. But one really I really had to get to know her that the extent of her brain injury what that was How she reacts and you get to where you know, okay That's as much as we can do with this today because I can tell just by her eye I can, tell oops. We're we're right at that point where we're almost at shut down mode. So oops, let's change over here Let's do that and because we have a really good working relationship now, she can say, okay, I'm starting to, I said, yeah, I can see that. Can we do something else? Of course. So, you know, it is important to really, you know know our students. To me is the joy of private teaching. Though I did love teaching. I'm one of those weird teachers that love teaching the big class voice where you got 30 people in a class. And most of the voice teachers are like, no, I loved it, I just loved all that college kid energy and they're so receptive and everyone's wanting to get somebody who's like I dare you, I dare Yeah, teach me something.

Christa [00:50:46] Yes!

Beth [00:50:49] Honey, I may be a little, but you don't match your match.

Christa [00:50:58] Let's see, answered all of those.

Christa [00:51:04] Thanks for watching!

Christa [00:51:09] You have a good memory for all of the questions okay answered all those good job How about this one? When you start to see emotional interference showing up in a lesson, what is usually your first step?

Beth [00:51:33] Yeah, the first thing is acknowledge. You can't change what you don't acknowledge. Not that you can necessarily change it, but the elephant in the room is simply acknowledge it. And again, it's that little balancing act. Is this something you want to pursue or do you just acknowledge and go on? Most of the time it's just acknowledge and go along and that's sufficient. Sometimes it's a little bit more involved. Um, if it's just beyond the acknowledge, uh, well, let's sit and talk and I don't put like, you know, we'll let's talk about it for about 10 minutes. Let's take 10 minutes and tell me about that. Let's talk. And, uh. Particularly if it is something that directly has to do with singing and their songs are there, they're worried about, they are anxious about something in their of an upcoming performance or. Um sometimes it's dealing with other performers or whatever we have to deal with that too um so we'll take you know a given amount of time and it's like okay when that time is up it's like okay yeah so um so let's let's get to singing that usually makes you feel better And that's the first thing is acknowledge. When my student down at UCLA and she is so strong, and she's just emotionally just so stable. The day the war broke out in Ukraine, of course, that's her family. That is her family, and we had all been watching TV and being in touch, just waiting for this to happen. To her teacher's credit. She was out in the hall waiting for a lesson. Her teacher, and the kids were all kind of huddled around and talking about it without, you know, realizing, you know, oh my god. Yeah. And her teacher just came out in the hall and just put her arms around her and just held her. And then just took her into her studio and closed the door. Acknowledge.

Christa [00:54:00] This is it.

Beth [00:54:00] Yeah, you got to acknowledge and yeah.

Christa [00:54:08] In your opinion, how prepared are most voice teachers to address emotional or psychological challenges in their students?

Beth [00:54:15] Hmm. You know? I think it varies. I think some people have a more natural ability. I don't think there's a lot in training that prepares teachers.

Christa [00:54:35] No.

Beth [00:54:35] There's just not. It's how to treat the vocal tract, all the anatomy, the physiology, and everything right now is very science-based, which is not a bad thing, but we're more than that. And the attitude in the big schools is, hey, if you have emotional issues, deal with them or get another job, take up accounting or something, this is not for you, rather than... Having the patience to say you let's see what we can do about this. What can I do to help this situation resource? Or whatever I don't think that teachers, you know are Very well equipped to handle that or at least they're not giving a lot of training Like I said We shouldn't be expected to be psychologists. Yes, but the reality is when it comes to singing We kind of are. I mean, voice students tell their voice teachers things that they wouldn't tell their shrink or their hairdresser. They do right there's there's a safety about it or why that is i don't know but you have an opinion too

Christa [00:55:54] Thank you.

Beth [00:55:58] Yeah, that's just kind of my feeling that, you know, I mean, I was a comp major, so composition major, so I didn't go through all the vocal pedagogy, stuff like that. Whatever I have learned has been by the seat of my pants until... You know, I've taken these trainings, but as far as singing, our NAPS chapter, I just have to say, through the years, and I came in the second year after it was formed, our little chapter has brought in absolute world-class people, world-class people. Christophe Izdebsky from Stanford, one of the top voice scientists in the world. He's a good friend of Thelma's, and it came. I learned more about the vocal mechanism, et cetera, and just thinking back through the years, these incredible workshops. Alan Smith from USC did a master class in French melody and chanson. I learned more about French. Song in that that I had ever learned in all of my my voice lessons and all my vocal training just world-class people which has made me a much better teacher you know I Confucius says real knowledge is knowing what you don't know And the older I get and the more I know the more. I realize. I don't know and Studying can just continue with me studying Not just the vocal pedagogy stuff, but all of this stuff The psychological I'm always learning and looking for opportunities to learn Stop it

Christa [00:58:00] It's like it's my cat tree.

Beth [00:58:05] I thought it was this.

Christa [00:58:06] You're okay. Let's see. We covered that. Is there anything else? We've covered all of my questions actually. Is anything else that you'd like to share or something that hasn't come up or something you'd rather notes about, we might discuss.

Beth [00:58:27] No, I think, like I said, it's a huge, it is a huge topic. You know, I think the most important thing for people to realize is that the difference between the psychological, emotional, and the anxiety disorder. This was interesting. I don't know whether it was, it wasn't Journal of Singing, it was that, oh, Classical Singer magazine. It was either that or offer news There was an article about beta blockers, the use of beta blocker, which is a very innocuous blood pressure medicine. It just keeps the blood pressure and the heartbeat steady. And I had to take beta blockers for a while because my doctor said, you know... When I was with the North Bay Italian Opera Ensemble, he said, it's taking you two weeks to recover from the anxieties, this is ridiculous. And I have been dead set against it. Well, wow, what a change that made. It was like, so this is what it feels like, wow. But after a few years of doing that, my brain got retrained because it had enough experience not being afraid. Retrain is like oh we're just singing oh cool that's that's great oh it's good to know i've been It helps retrain, especially using the beta blocker in conjunction with these tools from the phobias workshop, I'm thinking it's getting about time for me to teach that for my students and then maybe opening it up to the NADS, anybody who wants to come, whatever.

Christa [01:00:18] It sounds like an announcement.

Beth [01:00:20] And it made such a difference. So finally your brain gets retrained. It shuts those circuits down. It starts recognizing what is and what is not a physical threat to our existence. And that's a really important thing for, this article was comparing beta blockers to

steroids in athletes, saying that it's a performance enhance, oh yeah. Oh my. It's just, it said, it's performance enhancing drug and should be banned and people should be tested, Performers going for auditions and stuff. Well, and I'd be like, oh he gods The difference is, okay, steroids increases muscle, it makes them faster, it makes them stronger, and it is a performance-enhancing drug. Beta blockers do nothing. A crappy violinist on beta blockers will still be a crappy violin. They just won't stress about it. Yes, you know, they I do want to make that distinction, and like I said, it's not that there aren't psychological emotional issues that can exacerbate that. If you've got this critical parent going yak yak yak in your ear, the critical parent part of us going yak, yak, of course that's going to exacerbate this over here. So you got to find ways to shut that down This is still going to be the issue until you are able to shut that down. But it's a different process. That ain't going to help this. So that's one thing that I want to make really clear.

Christa [01:02:13] I have a couple friends that use them for performing. They perform, they're gorgeous. They're not freaking out.

Beth [01:02:20] Yeah, well, you know, you still get nervous, but you don't have the pounding heart. You don't have the blood pressure. You don't get the shaky hands. And what my doctor did, he said, no, because I had a big performance coming up. He said, now don't wait until the performance to use it. He said if you can try to do some other things. So a friend of mine, she's being silly. Made a little house concert for me and and I you know and I took the beta blocker and so afterwards we were talking and and and i said well i don't know whether it worked or not and he said well were you nervous i went no well it doesn't feel like anything and it has no psychotropic effects and it doesn' make you to in the doses you take it's very small it doesn't have any physiological effects. So, you know, it's one of those things that I make my students aware of. I don't advocate one way or the other, but I suggest it and I always say, you know, talk to your doctor about it. And this is what you're looking at, drug specific, this is inter-all, it's, you know, really innocuous, but they'll tell you about that. And then you make your choice. You know, I never say, well, you need to be on. I don't do that. That's between somebody and their physician. But if they're not aware.

Christa [01:03:55] That's even an option. And they'll be like, oh, I should have done this 30 years ago.

Beth [01:04:03] Oh, that was me. It was like 30 years ago. My god, this would have changed my life. It would have change my life

Christa [01:04:14] So yeah, I went and... A coach last fall I hadn't met before and he was like lovely and supportive and everything but I'm just not good at my first like meeting anyone and so I haven't had that sure hadn't had that issue in a long time where like my heart was thudding my chest and he's like oh these things that were caused by my heart shutting and my thudding in my chest like Oh, yeah. And I was like, yeah, my body is freaking out right now. He's like, but we're, you're so nice and we're just having fun. I'm like, I told it, I've told it before I came that we were just gonna have fun. And it was just like, nah. Yeah, I'm going to be out of your chest.

Beth [01:05:05] Yeah, exactly. And that's when, and Dr. Liebgold talked about that, about the use of beta blockers, he said, you know, I don't often recommend beta blocker, but he said to get people in the beginning to a state where they can actually experience what it's like, not to have the heart going, etc. One of the things that I do with electrical storms I have my little closet in there. I keep projects in there, especially sorting projects. And so if it's thundering, I will go in there I've got my earbuds and my big ear protectors. It's the sound that scares me. And at least once a year, my closet gets cleaned. I just go through and see it as the sorting. OK, goodwill. Um, you know, I'm gonna keep that. That right that left brain. It's a process again. It changed my life I still don't like it I wish it would go away but I don't get that panic I do have to say though the L when we have the big LNU fire with that LN you that big lightning storm that started all the damn fires yeah

Christa [01:06:36] Um, do you feel like there's anything else that you wanted to add? I'll turn everything off. Well, thank you so much for this interview.

Interview Transcript

Deborah Meyers, Certified Acupressurist, Jin Shin Jyutsu Practitioner,
deborahmyerswellness.com

Zoom Interview, Thursday, May 22, 2025

Christa [00:00:09] Before we begin, I'd like to confirm that I will be audio recording this interview so that I can accurately reflect on your responses later. Your name and insights may be included in my final master's project, unless you tell me otherwise. You're welcome to skip any question or stop the interview at any time. Or if you are telling a story and you accidentally say someone's name, you can be like, can you redact that? Cause I'll just be typing this up. Do I have your permission to record this conversation and to include your name and professional role in my final project? So this is, yay! And thank you so much for meeting with me to do this. So this is Crista Durand speaking with Deborah Myers on May 22nd, 2025, and she has given her consent to be recorded and identified in this research. So can you tell me a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Deborah [00:01:07] All righty. Well, my name is Deborah Myers, and I am a business owner of Deborah Myers Wellness, which in the past was also, and still is called Health at Your Fingertips. I am an acupressurist. I've been in private practice for over 30 years, which I'm very blessed to say, because I can't imagine not getting to do what I get to do. I'm not just an acupressure, I'm a Jinshin Jitsu practitioner. Jinshi Jitsu is an ancient form of Japanese acupressure. And when I was first introduced to this whole experience, way back in the 70s when I was in college, I took Dr. Waterwick, it never entered my conscious thinking, I would do it for my livelihood. Is up to. I constantly discover how to make use of everything I had been introduced to as self-help. And I saw right away that utilizing the information of the body being an energy system and accessing the energy and helping it find balance and harmony was easily available by just using our fingertips. So from the get-go, I was always doing self- help acupressure. And that's what helped me through life. And then it was when, and I was always learning and receiving and getting more information. And then in, it was 1993, I was in a really bad car accident. And ended up with multiple herniated disks. And surgery was recommended. I said, no, I know what I need to receive. I went searching for someone who could do light, gentle touch, kept doing all my own energy work, and as my body was healing. The light bulb came on saying, girl, you know this, just do it.

Computer [00:03:12] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:03:13] Closed at my insurance and securities office, gave all my business away, and I've been doing this ever since. Awesome. And from the get-go, I was always telling and showing my clients what to do for self-help. I knew it worked for me. I wanted them to recognize that all you needed to do is have a technique that is easy to do, easy to remember, and easier to remember to get around to doing because the benefits are noticeable.

Christa [00:03:44] And so you are also a singer, so what are some of the ways that you use these tools to help yourself as a singer?

Deborah [00:03:57] Well, what I know with the body being an energy body is that it's all about breath. When the energy's flowing, the breath follows. When the breath is there, the energy flows and follows. And so specific acupressure points used in combination with each other can help the breath be more expansive, both the inhale and the exhale, which means the cage can expand and allow those. Movement of the breath to take care of the voice. So the voice doesn't have to work so hard when the breath is there. It's actually also been working with the tissues. When energy is flowing, the tissues within the body on all layers and levels are more lubricated. Which means there's more fluidity, which means even the vocal cords have more room to

function to their best ability. When all that takes place, not only is there more breath that's moving, but it actually even helps with projection of the voice. So now the voice and the breath are working together in combination with the flow of energy.

Christa [00:05:16] And so it sounds like the system that you would use as a singer can both be related to muscular tightness or old energy and releasing that, but also can we use this system to release strong emotions that maybe have us feeling stuck or overcome so that we can't sing.

Deborah [00:05:41] Exactly you hit the nail on the head because everything that I do works on all layers and all levels physical mental emotional even spiritual so whatever has Affected the body and created a condition actually I call things projects and their problems

Christa [00:05:58] Uh-huh.

Deborah [00:05:59] Are a lot more fun to work with and have a beginning and an end. So when we help our bodies be able to express themselves energetically, all the different systems in the body can not only function easier, they can step up to the plate and do their job. In the muscle, they can attend to the fascia, whether it's new, a new project, or an old one that the body has brought in along the way, or all of a sudden it has become more chronic, or more, a newer one, because it's something else happened to make it bigger. What the body does when the energy's blocked, when it's stuck, it creates a space where... The body can't experience the ongoing flow, which is what it wants, because energy has to move.

Computer [00:07:04] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:07:04] Not like being in a state of stuckness. So that's that physical part of the body. Then the emotional part of body is one where, you know, you can want to do something and yet old, old ways of being, old patterns can come into the mix and affect how you want to be in this moment in time. And so something stressful takes place, something impacts your ability to be in the moment and and Be up on stage or just be in a moment in front of a microphone or be in A moment and just express yourself through the projection of voice through singing or speaking If something like that transpired it can literally take your breath away. Oh So with energy balancing it literally can help me pattern we program give the body a new habit, a new way of being, which is really an old way. It's showing it again, how to be able to express itself, which is why it's so beneficial any time you wanna use your voice, whether it's speaking or singing or whatever combination they're of, even to the point of speaking your truth. It just helps be able to be in the moment and share who you wanna be.

Christa [00:08:29] Mm, lovely. Especially in my own studio, I'm always looking for how do we express authenticity as an artist. And that sounds like it really helps. Helps you find what is your authenticity as an energy being.

Deborah [00:08:48] Exactly. Thank you. So yeah, for instance, when I'm with working with individual clients, or I'm teaching a workshop, it's about showing that we can be fully proactive with our bodies and energetically help them be better prepared for what we're going to ask them to do and better prepared for what might come towards it. So in that realm, when we are proactive and literally helping the body experience balance and harmony energetically, by balancing the rivers of energy that go through your body, they're called meridians and channels in Eastern medicine, we balance those and the body says, I'm ready, I'm prepared. In that realm you are literally better prepared, even if you are on stage to offer your your true self in whatever you're displaying.

Computer [00:09:46] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:09:47] Part you're playing or a song you're singing or a combination thereof. If something transpires before your performance and it has a and maybe it was something that happened on the way to the place or maybe it's something that happens in the family or in your world whatever the case may be it could easily affect what you're going to do and how you're going to appear, want to appear at your very, very best. So we can help the body literally let go of whatever got created in the moment to give itself back all the good possibilities you get. Program for kids in schools. And what I'm sharing with these kids is that no matter what you

want to do and who you want be, whatever you enjoy doing and whatever puts a smile on your face, whether it's a sport of any sort, gymnastics, or whether it is being a musician or singing or being on the stage doing theater or playing video games. If you do anything and it puts a smile on your face and it makes you feel joy. My guess is you want to do it more and want to do it better.

Computer [00:11:14] Uh huh.

Deborah [00:11:15] And if you do it better, then it's all about winning, yeah? Especially with a video game. Or whatever the case may be. And if that's the case, it's about success. No matter what you're asking your body and your being to do, if you can more easily step up to the plate. Give your full best, you are going to feel better about yourself and each time thereafter you're going to be able to express yourself that much easier and that much more fulfilled and that much more in that space of, yeah, every moment of the day we are in a state of performance, whether it's for ourselves or others, why not always step up to the plate and be there for yourself by being prepared.

Christa [00:12:02] Mmm. Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:12:04] That's authenticity.

Christa [00:12:05] That sounds great. So part of this project is, you know, seeking, well, most of the people that I've been interviewing are either voice teachers who are certified in a second modality, like Feldenkrais Alexander technique, or professionals that are also singers. I wanted people that were also singers so that they had kind of one foot in the world at least, you know, so like some people, like trauma-informed therapists that are also singer kinds of people. And so one of the things that this project is seeking out is we're always trying to delineate that voice teachers don't go too far over into like being a psychologist in a lesson and to give. Tools that are, like you said, easy to use, easy to remember without them having to do like a full training and be a whole certified other thing. So do you have a couple of examples of what you might teach someone of something that's easy to do, easy to remember that they could do with a student to get the student to. Be more calm or be more present or let go of things that happen outside the studio so they can work.

Deborah [00:13:38] You're speaking my language, girl. This is what I would share with anyone of any age. Ready to use their voice. And I use it for myself. I am not a professional speaker, a secret singer. I am a professional singer. Yes, you are. I've been singing all my life, but usually just in school choir, church choir, that sort of thing. And one thing, and then I just didn't do it for a long time. And when I started again with Christa, it was all about Feeling more comfortable with myself to be able to do it And you might remember that when I first started with you was actually working at getting my voice back

Christa [00:14:29] Yes.

Deborah [00:14:31] Okay? Because I didn't have a good singing voice at that point. We don't have to go into that, because. And one of the best things you can do for yourself, no matter who you are and what you're doing, is to give yourself a hug. When you give yourself hug, just lightly touching your upper arms. And there's no wrong, because there's right. It's a very light, gentle touch. You just gently place your hands on opposite upper arms, anywhere from up in the upper arm or down into the elbow, wherever your hands want to comfortably be. Hold with light gentle touch for a couple good breaths and you're literally connecting with the respiratory system. You're connecting with energy balance points that are connected to the lungs and to the diaphragm. You are also connecting energy balance points in the back side that are all about expansion to the extent of vascular system as well as offering you and your body on all layers and levels limitless life power. There happens to be a point right at upper arm, that's all about connecting with the senses. And when we connect with any of our senses and allow the sensations to be expressed and give information to your cognitive as well as emotional process, all of a sudden you're further ahead without having to even think about it. You're just giving your body the information.

Computer [00:15:56] Mm, mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:15:56] This is about breath, this is about flow. Give yourself a hug and show yourself. You love you because then your own best friend. Oh and you're along for the ride. It's a game of reciprocity another one that I dearly dearly love to do and show is Right underneath your collarbone if you follow you right under a light gentle touch under your collarbone And where the collarbone and the first group meet There's a little triangular indentation on both sides. And when you cup that, doesn't matter which hand that you use there, with the thumb on one side and the fingertips on the other, you're cupping the sternum to help your body find that space of receiving the energy, gathering and receiving it and send it to every cell of your being. With the additional hand that's where it's gonna go, it's going to help bring the breath in. And bring yourself to a place of calm and receptivity, allowing yourself to be in the moment with no fear, with no stress, with no anxiousness. If there's none of that, what do you have? Freedom and space to be. So when you hold here and then hold your fingertips with your other hand directly on your tummy, with your fingertips in a vertical pattern below your navel. Put those two together and all of a sudden you have more expansive breath when you've got your hand on your tummy you're connecting with foundation with safety with security with stability and opening up the whole body's ability to be able to um spread the word spread the voice projection so when you're doing this you're helping your body feel that space It works so well, it drops all the tension in your jaw.

Computer [00:17:54] Hmm.

Deborah [00:18:00] It works so well. This is one of the best things you can do in the dental chair. That's how quickly it works. And it helps your knees let go. Because this is connected to breath. Been told as singers to not lock our knees. Lock your knees, you can't project. And all of a sudden you have less and less breath to move your voice through your body and out through your throat. Stay locked even if they are locked they won't stay locked and all of a sudden you have more space to express what you want to say and or say

Christa [00:18:48] And some things that I also appreciate about this is that, one, it seems like it's something that a singer doesn't have to think about for it to work, because there's so many things that we're always telling singers that they need to be thinking about while they're learning new technique, that it seems, like, if once their hands are there, they could just it and forget about it and it's still working.

Deborah [00:19:18] Exactly. The beauty about any of this is once you've tried it, your body remembers it. And if it feels good, you're going to remember how to do it. So yes, there's a couple of them you're gonna want to practice.

Computer [00:19:32] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:19:32] And continually have the body experience that space. But you don't have to understand what you're doing. I think it's to five-year-olds.

Christa [00:19:43] You know, I actually do.

Deborah [00:19:46] No longer have a good cognitive process.

Christa [00:19:49] Uh-huh.

Deborah [00:19:50] They remember what feels right and feels good and does the trick because literally what I offer are energy tips and

Christa [00:19:59] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:20:00] And when that is in place, and once you've been practicing it, you just do it because it feels good. You don't have to understand what the energy balance points are. You can't do it wrong, because there is no right. So even if I say the point I want you to touch is the base of your front rib, you can be anywhere in that vicinity, because you'll connect with the energy. Now there is a flow pattern, as you all know, that I teach everyone, all my clients and all my students. It's called the Daily Clean Your House Flow. It's a nine-step self-help acupressure flow that I wrote 27-plus years ago. Because I wanted every single person I was working with to be able to go home after their session and experience a way that they could easily access their

own energy. Create an ongoing foundation of energetic balance and harmony. So what I profess is that if we find some way, whether it's that or another way, to have the body consistently experience balance and harmony, you know, the ability to step into whatever you want to do at any time, when you're in that place, this tip, like I showed you, of cupping your sternum and holding your tummy will even be that much more um easily available in the moment for exactly what you're searching for mm-hmm that step where i said give yourself a hug that's the first step of the day to clean your household and the whole thing can be done in five to 10 minutes.

Christa [00:21:36] Now, in terms of singers, would you suggest doing the Daily Clean Your House flow right before a lesson or a performance or after a lesson? What are some really excellent times to support their singing process?

Deborah [00:21:56] What I like and what I suggest is that every, if possible with your timing, that you start the day doing the daily cleaning household. And then off and on, your body is going to appreciate it so much that off and throughout the day you can use any of the nine steps individually for their purpose without you even knowing what the purpose is. But your body learns it. And then prior to your singing, practice, or performance, just giving yourself a hug for a moment and then cupping the sternum and holding the tummy will bring your body right back to the memory of what it's searching for in the sense of movement of energy so that your voice and your whole entire body can follow through. Because that's the trick, right, is to have follow through So the performance is all you want it to be, so we can be a success at whatever we're searching to do. Okay, I'll answer your question.

Christa [00:23:01] Yes. And then the second thing that I wanted to ask you about within this is the other thing about the cupping of the sternum is that I've seen you use it while you're doing vocal exercises, not just so many times. Let me kind of reframe this. As I'm looking at modalities, there are certain modalities that you would want to do separate from the singing, like a certain kind of breath work would happen separate from doing a scale because you can't do both at the same time. There are other modalities that you could do things at the time like Feldenkrais or Alexander Technique, you could move the body a certain way and also sing at the same time and so I've seen you cup your sternum and while you are doing the scales or exercises. For singing so it's nice that it seems like it can be done at the same time.

Deborah [00:24:00] Yes definitely in fact when i when you see me do that more often than not i'm feeling that i don't have quite the breath i wanted to have or i'm feeling that i'm tight in my shoulder blades and so this cupping the sternum and holding the tummy immediately brings you to that place of openness you just can't it can't your body can't help but let go. One that you maybe haven't noticed because you know is if i have if my jaw feels tight or if i just feel like there needs to be extra room i might just place for instance my left hand on my right jaw for just a moment with this hand the other hand directly underneath my collarbone and just like that i have more saliva

Computer [00:24:55] Mmm.

Deborah [00:24:56] I have more open sinus cavities. Because a lot of times with singing or speaking, what gets in the way of being able to have adequate space in mouth and throat tissue is that there's a constriction in the sinuses and the nasal passages, even in the ear canals.

Computer [00:25:17] Mhm, mhm.

Deborah [00:25:18] All of your body let go of that constriction like that is going to create, immediately have the space to do what you want to do. So I might do that and then immediately from there go in to take that hand that's on the chest, slide it over to the sternum, bring the other hand down to the tummy. And I have just done a couple steps in combination that bring all of that in. And then I really have saliva.

Christa [00:25:44] Nice.

Deborah [00:25:45] The one thing I didn't say is when you cut your sternum, you are literally connecting with the kidney flow of energy. What are the kidneys about?

Christa [00:25:55] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:25:55] Leading through it.

Christa [00:25:57] Nice.

Deborah [00:26:00] The fluid they create, they excrete into the bladder to get it empty, right? Yes.

Christa [00:26:05] Yes, yes!

Deborah [00:26:07] Dryness is not connecting with the purpose of the kidneys, which is fluidity, creating lubrication. And if anyone happens to ever experience that kind of dryness and you feel like, oh man, I really need to have some liquid right now and it's not appropriate or it doesn't work in, cut the sternum and hold your tummy and you'll have the fluid.

Christa [00:26:31] Yeah, because I've noticed it seems like many people, you know, a side effect of feeling nervous about speaking or singing is that they dry up all their saliva leaves, it's

Deborah [00:26:45] Good point because everything I do is about helping the body physically, mentally and emotionally. When there is any anxiousness, for whatever reason it's brought up, it will affect the flow of energy which will affect the breath. The minute something transpires that takes you off center, it can feel like your The address got chocked. It caused you to...

Christa [00:27:16] Yeah.

Deborah [00:27:18] Wait with baited breath. Wait for the next shoe to drop. All of a sudden, then you don't have enough breath in your lungs, much less your diaphragm, much less the ability to project the breath out, because it's got jammed up. Energy has to move, so it allows it to express.

Christa [00:27:38] Nice. On the flip side, too, moving over to teachers, one thing that I've done enough interviews now that's come up time and time again with people who teach voice, they use their secondary modality often to prepare themselves to receive the person in their studio to create a safe space. And many people have talked about. Working on themselves to calm their nervous system, to release things that happen outside the studio so that they can be present and safe for their student. Do you have any advice for something within your modality that a teacher can do to create that space and be ready and prepared for their students?

Deborah [00:28:35] Again, a big one is, give yourself a hug. Love yourself first before you're available for anybody else. So when I talk about doing our own energy work, it's about giving self-care. And that's not being selfish, that's being conscious of self. When we allow our whole being to be able to be there in its fullest potential. We are not only available for others, we're first available for ourselves.

Computer [00:29:05] Hmm.

Deborah [00:29:09] So, a couple of really big ones that help the body just fully express is, and this again is in the daily flow, is to hold the back of your skull. Light, gentle touch, right fingers on right side, left fingers on left. It is all about consciousness and awareness. That point helps the body, on all layers and levels, be in that place of consciousness and awareness. It also opens up clarity and focus. It opens up the ability for the bodies to receive the information, whether it be coming from the above or from our brains.

Christa [00:29:47] Uh-huh.

Deborah [00:29:48] Our hearts or from our gut, bringing it into full play and allow the body to receive the information so it's available for how you wanna use it. And what's beautiful is it works during the daytime when we want to be awake and consciously aware, right?

Computer [00:30:11] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:30:13] But even in that space, it's about giving a gift to yourself of just being, giving yourself a moment to just feel who you are in this moment in time. Now at nighttime when you do it, it can help you go to sleep or go back to sleep if you've woken up and can't go back sleep. So the body, what's really beautiful, the body knows your intention at any moment in times as to what you're offering it. So when a teacher is searching for a way to feel more at ease, more available to their students by first being available to themselves, it's about recognizing that you already are. And it's then supporting that belief by just gently allowing your body to receive

balance and harmony. For instance, one of the really good ones to do with this is gonna sound silly. I'm giving you all the steps in the daily flow, is to sit on your hands, or hold your sit bones if you're standing. When you're holding that space, it's all about helping the body have full alignment and integration. It works with the posture. In fact, you'd notice if you were, someone was doing it right now, that their lumbar curve immediately goes into a better curve.

Computer [00:31:38] Hmm

Deborah [00:31:40] So it does work with the actual spinal column. It also connects with an energy balance point that's all about vitality. Anyone who's in the position of teaching needs to have vitality at the moment that that student walks through the door, right? Yes. You need to sort of be on and be available. Yes. So holding your sit bones, sounds silly, but holding your sit bones allows your body to be in that position, that availability.

Christa [00:32:10] Nice.

Deborah [00:32:12] And and then if you're feeling the beauty also is of what i teach and what i would i share is that you can anyone could be doing this often around often on throughout the day even in front of someone else and nobody's going to be the wiser you just hold your hands at at your upper thigh area it's close enough to those sit bones and you're accessing vitality you're sort of same being in the moment. And then take keep your right hand there and bring your left hand over to the right shoulder and all of a sudden you're accessing an energy balance area that's all about letting go of anything that's in the way of getting to where you want to get to.

Christa [00:32:55] Oh

Deborah [00:32:55] What a beat.

Christa [00:32:57] Nice.

Deborah [00:32:58] And you don't have to do the other side for it to work. And it doesn't matter what activity you are in the midst of, whether it's teaching, or gardening, or vacuuming, or studying something from a computer, whatever it is, give yourself the moment to receive the information of what you're searching for to be able to be who you want to be and do what you want.

Christa [00:33:23] Nice. And I have a question to you about length. So it sounds like, you know, some of these tips that you're giving teachers when they're like back-to-back students, that they would only take a moment, like what, how long would one hold it to receive it, like a breath or two or?

Deborah [00:33:42] A breath or two, that's all it is. Just a breath, or two. And in fact, anytime you hold a point, if you can bring yourself to a place of just a light, gentle touch, breathe into it once, exhale, breathe in another inhale, and let it go, that it.

Christa [00:34:02] Nice.

Deborah [00:34:02] And when you use light gentle touch, you can actually feel your tissue responding. Yes, you could go deep and firm, but why if you don't have to? And the beauty is that when you light gentle touch with your fingertips, you actually feel the tissue changing. You literally can feel your fingertips sinking in and the tissue becomes more palpable, pliable. What used to be a two by four becomes a marshmallow. So imagine that that's what's happening in your neck and shoulders when you hold that space where your neck shoulder come together and hold your sit bones and maybe it feels so good you can do the other side because you have a few extra moments to do it and you are connecting with the throat, with your vocal cords, with the back of your head and creating so much space that all of a sudden your chin is more level with the floor. And as a singer and a teacher, you know that it's important to be level, right? Right, right. If you're singing up, you're not going to get it. It's going to be a strain when you sing forward. So everything I'm showing allows the energy to flow up and down the body, but also allows your voice to be projecting outward.

Computer [00:35:26] Yeah.

Deborah [00:35:27] At a straight trajectory.

Christa [00:35:31] Well, and it also just seems like since these tools only take a breath or two and a lot of things that you're showing me are pretty subtle, can be pretty subtle that they're nice tools to have around for having to switch between students quickly or for students maybe waiting for their lesson to do really quickly or waiting to singers doing an audition in the, you know, waiting in the waiting room. No one's going to look at you funny if you just reach up and touch your neck for a moment.

Deborah [00:36:06] That's the beauty is everything all the steps I show nobody is the wiser they haven't been taught this

Computer [00:36:13] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:36:14] Right?

Computer [00:36:14] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:36:16] Um it just is what it is with ease with comfort um and that i think is what is really special for especially kids of all ages because especially children of all ages are very um sensitive most of most are very sensitive about what are they seeing me do They have that major awareness of trying to be watchful because they always feel they're being looked at, always feel like they're doing, who knows? So if we can take that anxiousness out, and I call everything anxious. I do not like the word anxiety because that is a label, that's a condition. Anxiousness is a moment in time. Treat that, if you treat anxious like that within your body, it means it's a moment in time that will easily and effortlessly change. It doesn't have to be a full fledged label.

Christa [00:37:21] Ray, you don't have to be anxious all the time.

Deborah [00:37:24] Oh, no, it's just a moment of time. Love it. And if it works for what I'm sharing, imagine I have wedding planners that learn specific points to utilize when they're working with their brides and grooms.

Christa [00:37:42] Oh, wonderful.

Deborah [00:37:44] Because more often than not they are in so much stress in those moments especially a big wedding that they get themselves into anxiousness

Computer [00:37:55] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:37:56] And how many times you hear this story where they get woozy.

Computer [00:38:00] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:38:01] This will not allow woozy to happen, if that's the case at an altar, so to speak. Imagine being on stage and giving your body the opportunity to be so calm that it won't even go to that place. So you can even do this with intention for someone who's performing. If you're holding music and you can't use your hands, but you know that this works with intention, you'll see yourself holding your chest. And maybe you don't have two hands, but you have one. You allow one hand to hold your chest, and with intention, hold your tummy. And all of a sudden, the body knows what you're doing. It even knows it with intention.

Christa [00:39:01] Mm-hmm. Love it. I should have asked this earlier, but can you give me a brief description of jinchin jitsu and acupressure as a modality?

Deborah [00:39:21] Yeah, I'd love to. So recognize that your body's an energy system, and everything's energy. Even our furry animals are energy, and plants are energy. Everything's energy, so the body you walk around is an energetic being. It has rivers of energy that run through it vertically and diagonally. In Eastern medicine, they're called channels and meridians. I love calling them rivers. When those rivers arrive full and smooth, good current and good level, they can fulfill their purpose, which is to take care of your body, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Have everything be in such a state of balance and harmony that all the organs are not only fulfilling their task, each is collaborating with every other one because everybody knows that everybody is doing their own job. This is all about helping your body do multiple tasks all the time. Which you know it's doing anyway, but how about helping it do it with ease, with calm, with just being there. So when you access the energy of your body via your fingertips,

you're literally holding your hands on specific acupressure points. That when they're held in congruity, simultaneously, they will start talking to each other. And be able to fulfill their purpose.

Computer [00:40:49] Mmm.

Deborah [00:40:50] So when that transpires, your body can more easily handle if there is blocked energy. When does blocked energy happen? When something impacts the system, daily living, stress, tension, habits, emotional uncertainty, trauma, physical injury, ailment. Anything could be, in the past, become chronic, anything could be acute and be present day experience. Doesn't matter when it is. When it impacts that the body holds on to the symptoms, it doesn't take long that all of a sudden the body creates blocked energy around that space. The blocked energy starts acting looking like a beaver dam and as any beaver dam sits on any river it changes the flow pattern. It drops the level, it changes its current, it changed so well it can do its job. So when we hold the points, when we touch them, and oftentimes it's directly on the acupressure point or it's above and below, doesn't matter. I won't get into that right now, but what it does is it gives information to the energy to flow.

Christa [00:41:59] Mmm.

Deborah [00:42:00] Pushes through the beaver dam, the beavers dam breaks up. So in your body, well in a river in the in the mountains, we know that the beaver dam is holding on to all the gunk from the river that's coming downstream. The twigs and limbs and trunks and anything else of garbage that got thrown in, right?

Computer [00:42:18] Mm-hmm.

Deborah [00:42:19] In our bodies, guess what? What it's holding on to is the garbage, the gunk, the toxins that got created as a result of whatever project was created. Could even be inflammation, could be from the stress, could be from an ailment, could from, well, allergies and having phlegm and sinus constriction and anything else. Could be from headaches. Whatever it is, if it has held long enough. Is going to create the build-up of blocked energy, the body doesn't... And we help it move by just holding the points and everything starts shifting. So then it becomes like peeling back the layers, like layers of an onion. It becomes like a beautiful, cyclical pattern of unwinding. Because these meridians that are going down, down your body and up your back and just look free flowing, is what they want for helping them do that.

Christa [00:43:30] Right, and we use that word flow a lot in performance. Whether people are studying music, dance, or sports, performance, flow is like the it word of the last decade. How do we set our bodies up to experience flow moments so that we achieve peak performance?

Deborah [00:43:55] Exactly and that's what it's all about peak performance equals success success equals the body being in flow the energy is so much flow that the breath can't help it it's going to follow

Christa [00:44:08] Nice.

Deborah [00:44:09] And so is your smile. Cause if you're in angst or whatever, if your body's in angsty, you're not gonna have a smile on your face. The key is to have a smiling face. And then the body's really happy because this is all about helping your body be happy and comfortable.

Christa [00:44:29] Hmm

Deborah [00:44:30] Express the joy. That's what music is. Yes. Express the Joy.

Christa [00:44:36] Yes. So Deborah, is there anything else that I didn't ask you about that you think is important to talk about today?

Deborah [00:44:49] I think the main thing is to help your body be easily prepared, easily prepared to just step up to the plate whenever you want it to be there.

Christa [00:45:05] Nice.

Deborah [00:45:06] And with that in mind, just whatever you decide to do to help your body be in that space, that's the key. That's the keep.

Christa [00:45:19] Love it. Well thank you so much for meeting with me today and this is great information. It sounds like it could be very useful for teachers and students to use in the studio.

Deborah [00:45:34] Well, you and I have talked for a long time about maybe me coming in and doing something like that.

Christa [00:45:39] Right? Well, as soon as I get done with this project, I won't have a master's projects to do constantly. I'm looking forward to all kinds of other projects.

Deborah [00:45:50] There you go. I know what you're talking about. I created another one from the looks of it. Thank you.

Interview Transcript

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Santa Rosa Symphony Assistant Conductor

Music Director and Conductor of the Napa Valley Youth Symphony

Sebastopol, California, Tuesday, May 20th, 2025

Christa [00:01:40] Very cool, that sounds like a great project. So hello, thank you. I have one little bit of business to read before this and then, you know, we'll basically start off with like who you are and go from there. Alright, so before we begin, I'd like to confirm that I'll be audio recording this interview so that I can accurately reflect on your responses later. Your name and insights may be included in my final master's project unless you tell me otherwise. You're welcome to skip any questions or stop the interview at any time, or if you accidentally say something you shouldn't, you can take that part out because I'm only turning in transcripts, no audio. Do I have your permission to record this conversation and to include your name and professional role in my final project? Thank you. So this is Kristo Duran speaking with Alexander Khan on May 20th, 2025. And he has given his consent to be recorded and identified in this research. Um, so can you tell me a little bit about who you are and your background, your journey in music and teaching?

Alexander [00:02:54] Sure. So my name is Alexander Khan. I'm a professor of music at Sonoma State University. At Sonoma state I conduct the Sonoma Symphony Orchestra. I teach conducting occasionally. I teach a first year class for music majors. And I teach generally one or two GE classes for non-majors. This has been my tenth year. I am wrapping up my tenth years at Sonomastate just this week. Before that for seven years. I was at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. And before that, I was getting a lot of degrees. I got a bachelor's in French horn from Indiana University, a master's in a doctorate in music history from UC Berkeley, and then a graduate performing diploma from Peabody.

Christa [00:03:44] And then, so today we're gonna be delving into the other side of you, which is kind of mindfulness and other modalities that you may have studied to help musicians be more calm when they're practicing and performing. So what led you to start studying some other things outside of music for mindfulness, for being calm?

Alexander [00:04:13] When I was a freshman in college, I took a Tai Chi class just out of a whim. It was a good time of the day. And it fitted my schedule really well, so I was curious, I took the Tai Chi Class. And additionally, I was kind of doing some readings in Buddhism. And those two things combined helped me realize that Buddhist meditation and Buddhist philosophy and Tai Chi, which is a more embodied practice. Helped me phenomenally be a more relaxed present musician and so since then that sort of planted a seed since then I've been more and more interested in the ways in which mindfulness can help musicians embodied awareness can help musician making music especially at a professional level is incredibly stressful psychologically emotionally physically It takes its toll on the body, on the mind, and on the spirit. Professional musicians really need tools to be able to deal with that stress that comes with making music.

Christa [00:05:28] Now, did you feel like you were kind of at an average stress level when you started this journey, like as a student, or did you feel like your or above average stress level before you started this journey? Great question.

Alexander [00:05:44] Good question. I feel like probably the stress level at every music school is slightly different. I feel that every school, for better or for worse, and maybe even every studio within every school has its own stress level. My studio, the studio that I was in at that time, was a French horn studio, and my teacher was, how do I put this gently, very very hard on us, and very demanding, and sometimes very belittling. And so that, combined with the fact that... Um, there were about 70 other horn players at Indiana University where I went, um, led to a fairly high level of stress because you were always kind of wondering what your ranking was compared to every other person. I feel that, uh, you know, to use just another example, like imagine a school with a studio teacher who's promoting kindness, who's, who is promoting sort individualized journey. Who's discouraging people from competing with each other, and at a school where there's not many, many, many, more students than there are opportunities. I feel like in a school like that, the stress level is, it's easier to have a lower stress level. All that being said, I feel that stress levels in general among music students are probably at a very high level right now. Just yesterday I was listening to an interview with Jonathan Haidt. Wrote *The Anxious Generation* and it's a book I read and I really enjoyed and one thing he said in his interview that he also said in the book which is that years ago people in their late teens to early 20s had very very high levels of happiness compared to people younger and older and now it's the opposite at that level, that those years are now, we're seeing people at that age. Have extremely high unhappiness and stress levels. So it's really taken a very sharp turn in the wrong direction in terms of the happiness and stress level of that. I would agree with that. That generation.

Christa [00:07:57] That's what I observe as a teacher, yes.

Alexander [00:07:59] It's really interesting. Really interesting.

Christa [00:08:02] Did he have theories on what were his theories on why?

Alexander [00:08:05] Well, that book talks a lot about the impact of social media and smartphones. That's primarily his culprit in that book is smartphone, social media, the constant demands on our attention from our devices, our constant need to compare ourselves with other people through apps like Snapchat and Instagram and Facebook and things like that. So that's that's his main, his main culprit. I mean, personally, I think. There are other reasons to be stressed out of that age. Climate change, the economy, AI, the presidency of Donald Trump, these are all very, very strong stresses.

Christa [00:08:48] Yeah, I really like the I was talking to one of my other students. She interviewed me for a project she's doing at the JC in psychology and We're just talking about how we're really loving the the shift in When people are like seeking therapy for certain things like the stress like the young people being stressed out and How are like well, is it real though? Like are there real reasons? Oh, okay. So like let's not pathologize. Your feelings, like you're not just like 18 and like, why are you sad?

Alexander [00:09:22] Anyway, that's why I hate to say it, but I'm like, why wouldn't you be stressed out, given the state of the world?

Christa [00:09:33] So that studio situation seems really stressful, but do you feel like before you were going into your undergrad that you were a pretty chill person, or did you already put pressure on yourself to perform in music?

Alexander [00:09:48] I would say I was definitely not a pretty chill person I would say my my anxiety level at that time and this was a long time ago now, but it was probably like a little above average.

Christa [00:10:00] Okay, um, I'm gonna check the holes. All right, so. Okay, so why don't we go back down? Hold on, I wrote some notes that are not here. No problem. Oh, there you go. Okay, well, I guess I accidentally deleted it, but I was going to talk about your book. What is the name of your book again?

Alexander [00:10:34] Caring for the whole musicians.

Christa [00:10:35] Thank you. And then you wrote it in conjunction with the Alexander Technique person. And so did you study that modality of Alexander Techniques in your mindfulness journey?

Alexander [00:10:48] I did, I did. I was taking Alexander Technique lessons for many years while I was a graduate school at Berkeley and then later when I was living in Pennsylvania at Gettysburg, I took Alexander Techniques lessons with a teacher in Baltimore who had a number of students at Peabody. They're very similar. In a nutshell, mindfulness is awareness of the present moment. Through breathing, through meditation exercises, Alexander Technique is mindfulness of the present moment through awareness of the body. This is oversimplification of the issue, but there's so many similarities, which is why a book that combines both mindfulness and Alexander Techniques made so much sense to the authors, myself included, to the editor as well.

Christa [00:11:42] And how, where were you exposed to Alexander Technique? Like, how did it come across your path?

Alexander [00:11:49] I think first it came across my path at Berkeley because I had a pretty severe injury when I was at Berkeley. Is that not a dog? It is a dog, Bob. You're not supposed to destroy it, you know? You're supposed to play with it. Oh, the squeakiness is gone. Yeah, I had a pretty severe injury where I had stayed up all night typing a paper, which was a bad idea. And by the morning I felt an incredible tension in my arm that I... It took weeks and months really before I could even type at all again after that one night. And so at that point I was looking for something to help me avoid that from happening in the future. And Alexander Technique was one of the things that came up.

Christa [00:12:45] Oh, nice. And then, and then when you, since you were already studying mindfulness, yeah, made sense to me. And I also would imagine that, you know, conductors especially would benefit from the Alexandria technique because You have so much movement in the shoulders and the stand, the posture and everything.

Alexander [00:13:06] It's really helpful for conducting.

Christa [00:13:09] Um, all right. So when you are talking with your students about mindfulness, so my kind of glean from the book is that there's one set of like mindfulness where it's a practice, right? That you would recommend people actually practice it over and over. But if you had someone come into your studio who was freaking out. Are there certain exercises that you would do with them, like right then and there that you borrow from mindfulness that someone could benefit from without committing to a practice?

Alexander [00:13:52] Yeah, I mean, absolutely, immediately, the simplest way to... Ground oneself is to connect to the breath. Be aware of the breath, practice some slow breathing. Taking time just to be aware of their breath from time to time during the day is such an easy way to get into mindfulness without having to commit necessarily to a regular meditation practice. But just you know maybe committing to once an hour I'm going to take three deep breaths. I mean that takes very very little time on her day, but it's such a helpful endeavor just to take three deep breaths once an hour or once an hour. Going from from Alexander technique, you know one thing that's very important Alexander technique is something called constructive rest where you just stop whatever you're doing. You lay down on the floor or a table, Alexander technique table and you just kind of be aware of your body quietly and that again is something you could do for 20 seconds 30 seconds. In a way, going back to the what I was saying earlier about the anxious generation, I find that most of my students, when they have time for a break, let's say it's a break during a rehearsal or a break doing a class or break between classes, nine times out of 10, they reach through their phone during the break and then they go on Instagram or whatever. But if they were to use that break, and I tell them this over and over again, if we use that brake to meditate or to breathe or to just do some simple physical activity or take a

walk in nature. That's going to clear your headspace so much better than what I normally see happen, which is to go and check your email and check Instagram and check social media.

Christa [00:15:38] Mm-hmm. And then also an interview that I was watching that you did for something, I don't even know what it was, you were talking about to the mindfulness about when you're in process, like when you are playing to not have judgment about like how you're playing or that was a wrong note or at that time. Do you have any exercises outside of a committed practice that you have your students do or tell themselves to maintain that commitment to what they're doing at the time and not to have judgment about it?

Alexander [00:16:22] I really recommend to students that they start to pay attention to the voices in their head that are telling them stories about who they are. And that story, for some students, might be, I'm an excellent musician and a wonderful human being and I have a support network and I feel confident and secure about who I am. Unfortunately, that's a very small percentage of the students most of the students their inner voices are telling them you're not good enough you shouldn't be here you don't deserve to be here these other students are better than you are your teachers don't respect you know are looking down on you so to sort of start to notice that voice and then be aware that they have a choice to maybe not believe everything that voice is telling them and to choose alternative ways of talking themselves slowly start to substitute one type of language for another. So for example, rather than saying to yourself when you're playing, oh, I'm rushing, therefore I'm a terrible musician, choose instead to say, oh I think I could slow this down a little bit, and to take away the judgment. So it's not that we don't wanna notice things that we can improve upon in our playing, it's that we wanna put labels on that. We don't want to add negative language and negative judgments on top. Of the observations that we're making. If we observe, we're a little sharp, or observe, a little flat, and commit to figuring out ways to adjust your intonation. That's totally perfectly acceptable and normal. When we say, oh, I'm a little bit sharp, therefore I'm really the tune, I can't believe I'm not, don't have a better sense of intonations, I should have been further along with this piece, I should be a better musician. That's the sort of negative spiral that we wanna try to watch out for.

Speaker 3 [00:18:18] We'll be right back.

Alexander [00:18:21] There's a professor of neuroscience at Harvard who wrote an excellent book about a stroke she had. It's called My Stroke of Insight. And she talks about how basically the part of her brain that is in charge of critiquing everything she does was totally shut down when she had a stroke. And she entered, despite the fact that it was a very serious medical condition, she entered this state of almost pure bliss. And she calls that uh... That voice in the head uh... The itty bitty shitty committee and that's the way I talked to my students about it you don't have to believe everything your itty-bitty shitty committee is telling you

Christa [00:19:02] And sometimes we also feel like we're alone in that a few years ago I did a panel for NAFME and they were asking questions and you know I said something about not tying your self-worth to how well you play your instrument.

Alexander [00:19:20] Yes, that's.

Christa [00:19:21] Because that was definitely a journey that I had to go through, but you always feel like you're the only one telling yourself that you're awful if you don't get the skill right. Yeah. And so, you know, I talked about that and one of the students came up afterwards and they were like, that is the first time I've ever thought about separating myself from my worth as a human being, from if I could get all of my music perfect. And I was like, oh good, I'm glad I saw it because now I've been doing it long enough. That it's normal to me to just be like, oh, I could do that better or whatever. And it's just like, okay, instead of just being like, oh, you're the worst person ever. You can't play this A flat scale.

Alexander [00:20:01] It's really important and it's so hard to do that because, you know, we live, unfortunately, you know in a capitalist society where we are told very frequently that our value is tied to our net worth and our abilities in our careers and our success in our career. And so in earlier societies, Hunter, thousands of years ago, Hunter Gatherer societies, your worth was tied

to your family and your network, the size of your network and how useful you were to other people in your network. How many friends you had, how many close contacts you had. That's a different society, and it's gone. And I think one of the ways we can sort of avoid the sort of equation of self-worth with net worth and with professional success is to really cultivate strong friendships and strong family ties to help us realize that we have so much in our lives to enrich our lives outside of what we have to offer as professional musicians or professional whatever it is.

Speaker 3 [00:21:03] Mm-hmm.

Alexander [00:21:03] So that's something I recommend to students as well, like just make sure you really are cultivating a strong network of friendships and family members.

Christa [00:21:11] This life.

Alexander [00:21:12] Yeah.

Christa [00:21:14] Outside of the practice room. So if someone were able to commit to an actual practice outside of the studio, what would you recommend for them to begin with?

Alexander [00:21:37] Twice a day, take five minutes to do some mindfulness of the breath in the early morning is best and then late at night. You can start with five minutes. Obviously, if you can do 10 or 15 or even more, that's even better. But there are now so many tools out there to help you get started. There's things like the Insight Meditation Timer, Insight meditation app on. There's Headspace, which is another very popular app right now. There are plenty of books out there about mindfulness. There's the greater good program at UC Berkeley, which has a wonderful website with all sorts of meditations on it. There's just so many resources out there now that are that are so easy to take advantage of that. You know, it's really easy to get started now. I think there's so many people who are trying to do this to integrate this more in their daily lives. Great places to go you know keeping track of your journey as well with a journal it's really helpful to keep you on track just to commit maybe every day write down you know i'm gonna write write down i'm going to commit i'm going to come into five minutes a day of meditation today and keeping yourself accountable to do it by next time waited to have accountability in your life or find one other person who's also committing to it and keep each other accountable.

Christa [00:23:03] You also talked about setting up a system of your pre-game, your game, and your post-game mindfulness habits. Can you speak to that a little bit?

Alexander [00:23:14] Yeah, so. Things to do before you perform to help you be more relaxed while you perform. There are things you can do while you're performing to help you stay more relaxed when you perform and then there are things to do after you perform because unless we're doing all three of those it's really easy to get into a negative head space. So if I say well I'm really nervous now but as soon as I go out on stage I'll relax once I start performing that never works.

Speaker 3 [00:23:46] Right?

Alexander [00:23:48] Or if I say, okay, I'm going to commit to meditating for an hour before I go on stage, but then not really think about how you're going to act while you're on stage. That also doesn't work for me. So, and the third part again is, what are you doing after leaving the stage? And for me, that last stage is really interesting because so many musicians, especially students, the first thing they say to me after they get off on stage is They tell me where they made a mistake, right? They say, they may have played a two hour symphony, but the first thing they say is, you know, at minute 36 and 20 seconds, I played a G sharp instead of a G natural. So the tendency is to talk about where did you make a mistake? And I understand the impetus behind that. It's to say, I know what I need to do to get better. It's actually a very laudable instinct. I mean, if. If we don't realize where we're going to make mistakes, we may not grow as musicians, but what I encourage all musicians to do after they get off stage is to reflect upon the experience emotionally. Did you have a positive experience? Did you get a negative experience? What emotions did you experience while you were on stage? How connected to the music did you feel? How connected did the other musicians did you feel? Think about the

experience and the process of making music rather than instantly. Reviewing what went wrong and what went well. And, you know, that's also common because we have a negativity bias. We tend to remember negative experiences much more easily and readily than positive experiences. And so, again, you may have played a Brahms symphony and 38 minutes of it might have gone really, really well, but you were going to remember those two minutes that weren't so great, much easier, then you remember all things that went well.

Christa [00:25:45] Um, so what do you recommend as, as kind of like the cool down, the mindfulness post game cool down besides, so is it just the, just focus on the emotions of how you felt about the piece? Are there any, um, like additional like breathing or anything like that, that you would recommend?

Alexander [00:26:05] Another good one technique is to express gratitude, to either write down something you're grateful for about the performance or to express it verbally to somebody else. Showing that you're thankful for the experience also helps remind you of what a gift it is to be able to make music and not take it for granted. Another thing is to try to disassociate, as you said earlier, the self with the value of the performance. And this goes both ways. So let's take it off stage. And it went really well and you think, oh, I'm great. You know, I did such a good job. People must love me. And to really be happy when people give you praise.

Speaker 3 [00:26:50] Mm-hmm.

Alexander [00:26:50] This is the flip side of the coin is that you want to try to avoid not only associating your worth with The results of the concert when it goes poorly But also when it go as well to sort of step back and again remind yourself, you know My value is not in hell while I perform

Speaker 3 [00:27:08] Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Alexander [00:27:08] Even if you love the email from the university president telling you what a great job you did. We all love it to get compliments. If you rely on the compliments too much, you're going to be really, really thrown off guard by the criticisms. So you have to keep in mind to try to find a middle path both ways and avoid the, you know... This goes back all the way to the Tao Te Ching, where in the Tao te Ching, in the very beginning of the Tao Te Ching it talks a lot about not being too obsessed with the fruits of your labor. Do your work. But don't get too tied up with the results of your work.

Christa [00:27:56] Mm-hmm. And definitely also, I feel like it ties in with like intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, right? And like walking that line where you're, where you are trying to be a better musician or a better artist, because like that's what you're wanting to do, but not because like, so every time you do a great job, everyone here's, here's a treat. Yeah. Here's a treat!

Alexander [00:28:21] Well, again, you're fighting against a whole system of education that's based upon grades and parents giving approval or disapproval based upon your grades, teachers giving approval or disapprobation based upon the grades, and so, of course, it's hard for musicians to wait. What? I'm supposed to just enjoy the activity and not worry about, you know, how that's But I need my A+.

Christa [00:28:49] I have a friend that got her masters and then quit singing right after because they gave her an A- on her final recital. Oh my gosh. She was like, done! Um, are there any other modalities that you've explored in your life? Yeah, that's a great

Alexander [00:29:09] question because I feel like For me, it's not that I'm going out there and preaching, mindfulness is the answer or Alexander Technique is the answer, not at all. I feel like whatever you do. That leads to this feeling of relaxation, that leads this feeling openness, that leads the feeling of awareness, that leads feeling of presence, go for it, right? And if mindfulness doesn't work for you, that's fine, try Tai Chi. If Alexander technique doesn't for you try yoga. You know, I'm a pretty regular yoga practitioner as well. And so I feel like there's no need to tie yourself down to one activity or the other. Find what works for you. There's all sorts of ways to get out what we're talking about, whether it's through taking a positive psychology class, or doing Alexander technique, or doing body mapping, which is related to Alexander technique or

the Feldenkrais method. You know, for me, for example, I took a few Feldenkreis classes and it just didn't really it didn't really connect to it, but that being said. You know, I have plenty of friends who love our family of Christ, and so I'm not going to pooh-pooh it at all. I just feel like you have to find what works for you. What are you going to be able to stick with? You know? Is it Alexander Technique? Is it meditation? Is it positive psychology books? Is it yoga? Is it Tai Chi? For me, I'm I'm, not too dogmatically tied down to one or the other of these. I just think it's important to find the one that works.

Christa [00:30:52] Mm-hmm. It was interesting because everyone I've interviewed so far, everyone has a different modality and but all of the like the impetus was the same for everyone in which was like how do I deal with the voices in my head telling me I'm not worthy to make music. And then they go into their different ways. Um, alright, um, what? Could mindfulness look like in a rehearsal setting? Like what does it look like an action?

Alexander [00:31:27] The easiest way to include mindfulness in a rehearsal setting is to start off the rehearsal with some mindful breathing. Because people are coming to that rehearsal from other classes, their minds might be probably are very likely on, you know, the grade they just got in a chemistry class or the fight they just cut into with their partner or the traffic they were sitting in on the way of the rehearsal. Mindful meditation is a great way to sort of bring everybody together to the table and help guide them towards the present moment and away from whatever it is they were thinking about before the rehearsal began. So a short mindfulness of the breath practice is a really great way to start the rehearsal. Another thing that I like to do at the beginning of rehearsal is to encourage musicians to set an intention for the rehearsal Because we often just go into rehearsals, like, not really knowing why we're there. What are we going to do?

Christa [00:32:28] My conductor will tell me. He doesn't play these notes.

Alexander [00:32:30] Yeah, but like if we sit down and say, I intend to connect musically with my stand partner in this rehearsal, or I intend play without pain in this rehearsal, or, I intend to focus on my breathing in this rehearsal, to set sort of some intention for how you want to show up for life during the next hour or two, it's so important, so you're just not kind of just there going along with whatever, you know. Playing when you need to play, resting when you're supposed to rest, but a little bit more committed to having a goal for what you're going to be doing with your time.

Christa [00:33:08] Uh-huh.

Alexander [00:33:09] During the rehearsal.

Christa [00:33:10] That's smart. I often set goals for like performances or auditions with my students that are also not performance related where it's like, you know, our only goal for this one is to remember, breathe. Yeah, or whatever. But I forget about like rehearsals. Yeah. Like of actually doing that or lessons. Um, and then do you shifting over to I'm assuming that you've taught private studio lessons in your life.

Alexander [00:33:38] Surprisingly, not that many. The only extended period of teaching I've done privately is conducting.

Christa [00:33:47] But that's okay too. That counts. So are there any instances that you can remember that you've had someone come into private studio and they've been like too upset to work and that you have been able to successfully like guide them to be able to continue in some way?

Alexander [00:34:10] I think the relationship with a teacher is very intense and it can often feel like it's another family member or a mentor that's not somebody just helping you with your musical journey but with your emotional journey in life. And so I think it is important to develop a sense of trust with your private teacher that you feel like you're comfortable letting your private teacher know what's going on emotionally. But yeah, I think it's helpful to create an atmosphere in the studio where obviously you want to focus on the music as much as possible, but where if there is a crisis, emotional crisis, you're gonna be okay with that and not get upset about it as a

teacher and say like, well, we have to get this etude, blah, blah, block. I think that's really important to address whatever issues are going on before you move forward with the music.

Christa [00:35:09] And what is your style of addressing issues? Do you just talk through it? Do you find that breathing helps or does it kind of like deepen the, like getting in touch with your body sometimes deepen people too much into their emotion and then they are like, now they're crying or.

Alexander [00:35:29] Yeah, I find breathing is a great way to deal with it. You know, in Buddhism, there's a lot of guidance about how to deal deep emotions, which is to try to get away from the story. So if the story line is, I'm upset because X, Y, and Z, et cetera. In Buddhism, a classic technique to deal with that is to go from, I'm up because blah, blah, and really diving deep into the story. Is to then just focus on, I'm upset, you know, focus on what are you feeling? And then try to understand what that feeling feels like in the body, like to go from the emotion, to label the emotion and then understand what's going on in the the body for that emotion. And then to eventually non-identify with the emotion. So for example, you might say, I am angry because my boyfriend did this. Then you go to I am angry, and then you go to I'm angry and it feels like X, Y, and Z. It feels like I'm tight or tense or. And then the next step is I am angry, I am feeling angry, I'm feeling anger. I am not my anger to realizing that there's a self beyond the emotion, that there is a vastness, a spaciousness to who you are that can step back from that anger. Because once you can label the emotion it kind of loses its power.

Christa [00:37:05] Nice. I like that process. Hmm In your perfect future, what would musician training look like if it was going to incorporate some of these modalities that you've incorporated, like if you were designing a program to teach someone to be a musician or to be a teacher or conductor working with other people.

Alexander [00:37:41] Well, I definitely try to do. A lot of this in the freshman class that I teach, there's a class that's required for all freshman music majors at Sonoma State. And in that class, we do a little analog center technique, we do little yoga, we a little meditation, we do do a a little psychology, we do touchy. So I expose them to lots of different options. I don't feel like it's really enough because it's like a week or two of each of these for one year and then they don't have it for the rest of their time. I mean in an ideal world. You would have a full-time Alexander Technique class, a full time music health class that you could take every year for credit. And so I do see more and more of these types of classes popping up, but it's hard to make it work financially and hard to fit into the schedule. There's so many things that they need to learn. I think the students, when the university takes these things seriously, they feel like they're allowed to incorporate these things into their life and take them seriously. So the more it can be incorporated into regular classes and... And part of the curriculum, the better.

Christa [00:39:10] Yeah, at least your intro class is opening the door. It's like, oh, this exists. I want to know more. And they could follow that for sure. That would be, that would be a fascinating department if everyone in the whole department were trained in like kindness and, and being present. And you had those, like you had a full time Alexander teacher. Full-time Feldenkrais teacher or something like that it would be amazing because I do feel like you know outside of um well we carry our emotions in our bodies often and so like a lot often when we have reoccurring like injuries I feel like they're a combination of like the the posture or the thing that you were doing but also like how you've held emotion in your body that led to that. And just thinking about, you know, how many violinists I've talked to have had, like, a journey of rebuilding their body because they had so much pain in their shoulder they couldn't play and things like that. It'd be nice to just, like get that from the start.

Alexander [00:40:18] I mean, that's the thing with music and that we're all teaching in some ways the way we were taught and music has this incredibly powerful sense of lineage. Like, well, yes, I studied with this person who studied with, this person, who was the original blah, blah, and so it's hard. It's a very slow process, I think, compared to maybe, you know, to compare it to people who are like in the field of education, who are doing research and

education and, you up on the latest psychological research. Musicians don't necessarily have that commitment to pedagogy and improving their pedagogy because we're just, you know, we think the way we train is probably the way that we should teach. So it's a much slower turnaround process, but it's changing, just slowly.

Christa [00:41:08] I was explaining that concept to someone the other day of, like, the, like... Lineage. And they're like, I can trace my teacher back to this teacher in Italy thing. And they were like, ooh, singers are weird. Yeah, that totally happened.

Alexander [00:41:21] Totally happens in conducting violin playing.

Christa [00:41:25] Mm-hmm. It's beautiful. I think it's beautiful to have that lineage and also it can be limiting if you don't go outside of your Or if you like define everything you are by like what you can trace back to Are there any other things that we did not touch on today that you think would be important for people to know or you would like people to consider when they are working with students to have strong emotions?

Alexander [00:41:58] Question. I think in general, teachers need to get rid of the... How do I put this? They need to remove the taboo about talking about emotions.

Speaker 3 [00:42:23] Mmm.

Alexander [00:42:23] And I feel that way in general. In the world of like university level music making, even professional music making. You know, we're supposed to like not really show our emotions in professional settings, right? There's this big taboo. And removing that taboo, and not to say that everybody should be going around like, you know, complaining all the time about everything that's going on, but to remove the stigma of talking about emotions because all humans have emotions. They're under the surface and they're probably informing what you say, um, whether you're aware of it or not. And they're probly informing what the other people, what somebody else is saying to you, whether they're aware or not, and so why not, um, just be okay with starting with a lesson, like, okay, let's check in. How are you feeling?

Speaker 3 [00:43:20] You know?

Alexander [00:43:21] It's not necessarily an invitation to start telling a long story about why you're feeling this way. Like, we want to avoid the, you know, I'm feeling anxious because I got a B on my chemistry test and blah blah blah. We don't want to necessarily make room for those long stories, but to just, um, how are you feeling? Let's check in with our bodies and then make that a starting point for where you are at that day.

Christa [00:43:46] And also, along with being anxious, I find younger generations more empathetic and caring and sensitive than I feel like some older generations have been just in their lives. And one of the things that I would hear them say is that they didn't feel like university teachers treated them like people. People, not that they wanted to like, therapies, but just like, who are you? Yeah, what are you doing today? What are you going through? Okay, like we acknowledge you. And it's also an interesting setting, university setting, is because we're trying to like get all the stuff done by a certain time. There's a lot of stuff to do and also create like the professional musician, which is different than the amateur musician. But as you say, I feel like there is this taboo in all directions, not just complaining, but like even of showing like joy. And happiness and gratitude. And it's, you're just like, okay, well, but I believe that you can be joyful and excellent. Yeah. And it probably you're gonna be more excellent if you're joyful because we're human beings and we're artists in all of this structure.

Alexander [00:45:17] That's the weird thing about being a conductor and a teacher for example you know if you're teaching a theory class uh and i don't usually teach theory but yeah just as an example you spend that theory class like you're 100 focused on right answer wrong answer information this information you need this information but yeah and then as a conductor when you're conducting a college orchestra you're having this intense emotional experience especially in the concert. That connects you to them on such a deeper human level, that sometimes there's a real disconnect between how you relate to the students as like an imparter of

information on the one hand, but as a human being sharing an intense emotional experience on the other.

Christa [00:45:58] Yeah, totally. Totally.

Alexander [00:46:06] I find I connect with the students on such a deep human level in the orchestra that that sometimes feels weird to be just like, okay, you have to resolve this third, it's like, wait a minute, we just had this amazing emotional moment and now I have to like give you a B plus on your theory exam or whatever.

Christa [00:46:23] Yes.

Alexander [00:46:25] That's all weird.

Christa [00:46:28] System. All right, anything else you can think of?

Alexander [00:46:32] No, this is really a pleasure and it's funny because I have a rehearsal tonight, so I'm like, okay, let's see if I actually do anything that I tell you I think we should do because when the rubber hits the road, sometimes you just focus on getting through the piece.

Christa [00:46:51] Yeah, you'll have so much time.

Alexander [00:46:52] Do I actually commit to doing some of the things I just talked about?

Christa [00:46:57] Right?

Alexander [00:46:58] In a perfect world.

Christa [00:47:00] Well thank you so much for being with me. My pleasure, thanks for making the time.

Interview Transcript

Karen Clark, Voice Teacher, Feldenkrais Method Teacher, karenclark.studio
Petaluma, California, Friday, May 9th, 2025

Karen Clark Interview Friday, May 9th, 2025

Christa [00:00:01] This is Christa Durand speaking with Karen Clark on Friday, May 9th, 2025. And she has given her consent to be recorded and identified in this research. All right, great. So to begin, I would love to hear a little bit about your teaching background, both like what educational institutions you've come from. Through voice training and then how many years you've been teaching and what kinds of settings.

Karen [00:00:39] Okay. I did my vocal training at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. I completed a bachelor's degree there where I mostly at first focused on music education. I switched to music performance and then continued and got my master's. I complete my master in that same music school. And During that time, I studied opera, but I became very interested also in early music vocal styles, back for a little while as a graduate assistant. I taught for a couple of years for the Early Music Institute that had been started there by Thomas Finkley, where it was specific to how do you do vocal ornamentation and Baroque music, how you use a little more pure tone for tuning and... Medieval and renaissance music and from there I became very attracted to medieval music so I ended up doing a lot of performing but primarily in early music and I still enjoyed singing Lieder and some opera but really I'm more of a I really because of my love for poetry and song I was more oriented for concert music and chamber music. During the course of that time, I would still audition for different opera choruses or things, and I had a lot of vocal tension, so we'll get into that a little bit at another time. But I did go on and I taught in community music schools right out of graduate school, happened to move to West Hartford, Connecticut, and taught for a community music school there. From there. Moved to Princeton, New Jersey, and so I ended up teaching in association with the music department at Princeton for five years. And for a couple of years with Westminster, when it was Westminster, I don't know if I've changed now, but I did their community music school. So I worked with, you know, from teenagers through adults in that case. And in Princeton, there were a people interested. Not only in opera and song literature, but also new music, because Princeton had a composer's ensemble and I actually ended up performing with them. And then after that, I went,

came to California, ended up teaching at Sonoma State for a few years in Roanoke Park. And then I have had the opportunity to teach at UC Berkeley for the music department, teaching voice classes for non-music majors, which I really enjoyed. And so that's sort of the, for the number of years I've been teaching, if you include my graduate assistantship, I've been teaching about 42 years.

Christa [00:04:05] And I'm 40 years old.

Karen [00:04:07] So there you are, you were, you know, like, not yet.

Christa [00:04:12] You got making yourself.

Karen [00:04:13] Heard.

Christa [00:04:14] Fantastic. And then, so you've had experience teaching students that are pursuing degrees in music and you've experienced teaching kind of what I call lay people that are pursuing it for either interest or young people that may or may not pursue it in college. That's right.

Karen [00:04:35] That's right, a wide spectrum of interests.

Christa [00:04:41] And styles I imagine, a wide spectrum of styles.

Karen [00:04:43] Yes, absolutely.

Christa [00:04:45] Yeah, okay. Nice. So when you first started teaching, do you feel like, oh, let me back up. So one of the reasons that I was interested in interviewing you in particular is that I'm looking at different modalities and techniques that can help teachers and students get through big emotions that are getting in the way of their singing in the studio. And kind of parenthetically singing on stage too, but there's a lot of, this is not really on performance anxiety per se, but just, just everything. And it's, so when you first started teaching, were you already exposed to and interested in Feldenkrais? Or did that come later? Were you teaching and thought I need something more to connect with people?

Karen [00:05:41] Well, yeah, when I first started, you know, we, you start out teaching what you think you know right and what I thought I had learned from my instructors. And so it was the idea of vocal technique. And then, because I was also performing and really getting in touch with my own... Anxiety and really my I reached a point in my singing life where the things I knew I was capable of doing I couldn't do and I I would I was doing everything my teacher said. I could read any number of books. And I could not do the thing, or I would be fine in rehearsal or practicing and then I'd go to audition and totally What do you call it? And I was like, okay, so then what happened? When I was living in West Hartford, I was recommended to a vocal coach, Alan Farkas, Alex Farkus, sorry, who was wonderful pianist and voice coach and who was studying to become an Alexander Technique instructor. Like he was going to London from time to time and working over there with the teachers. On the Alexander Technique. And it's a fascinating story, the day that changed my life where I was coaching a Rossini aria with him and he asked me to sing a phrase again, might have been from, I think it was an aria from Chandler Wendelon, you know. And he said, okay, would you sing this phrase again? And I'd like you to think of your right foot. And I'm like, whoa, whoa whoa, okay, you know? And I did. And the phrase just came out effortlessly, right. And I left that lesson kind of freaked out thinking, you know, wow, he's like a shaman or something. But the more I got into it, and actually, even after working with him, I did have a bomb of an audition, you know, it was just like all the talk about up the back and the long spine and everything. It was like, there was something else. Big missing for me, right? As wonderful as a coach and teacher that he was. And so, but what I will say about that experience was it set me, I remember getting very excited that, because I had left, to be honest, I left graduate school and my upper teacher there had said, Well, you know, you have all these vocal defects. But I had a fast vibrato, is what it was. Nobody could fix. And she says, but you know, there are many people who had wonderful careers in spite. You know, like that was her encouraging words. And so.

Christa [00:08:57] In spite of you're terrible, you could do that.

Karen [00:09:04] But what after working, and by the way, Alex Farkas now, I think he still is on the, he's an Alexander coach at Bard College. What I learned from him is like, I'm gonna be able to figure this out. It was like, I remember really clear moments of where I was practicing and really beginning to sense my body.

Speaker 3 [00:09:32] Hmm.

Karen [00:09:33] So this was the beginning of my felt, sensed experience of myself in singing that had been totally absent up until the time, you know, when I'm out of graduate school by the time I mean, I'm almost 30 years old, you That's when a friend came. We were going to workshop at Amherst College for early music, Amherster early music. And she was raving about the Feldenkrais method. She was, you have to try this. And I was like, Oh, that's Patty being Patty, blah, blah. You know, well, they had a Feldenkrais teacher at Amherst and I got to have a session. And that then, you know, it's, It's a slow process becoming aware. Of our sensations right because and this is where we get into the the competition between what our mind is saying is not always what our body is saying right and i could i tell my students this all the time you know the reason i can't give you a book and tell you oh this is how you're going to learn to sing is it's experiential i have to be in that moment being present with no sensation. That did really start to change my approach to singing. And then I moved to Princeton. So when I was teaching there, I decided, I went to, I met a couple of other colleagues in Europe. For some reason, Feldenkrais was more prominent there. They were highly recommending it. And so I got to go and work in Princeton in the group classes that are called awareness through movement. My dear teacher Michal Ben Rubin who now lives back in Jerusalem and that was when I mean all kinds of light bulbs started going off and a lot of it was about my self-talk because in Feldenkrais I think you know it's so individual how it reads or how someone will take the work of Felder Price method awareness. It's you take what you need, right, and leave the rest. But the big piece for me was, I will never forget, in one of my first awareness to movement lessons, and you're doing these really gentle, kind of abs, the lessons are kind of abstract, very constructed, well constructed, but movements maybe you do every day, but in that context, it feels really weird. And the teacher said, Michal says, So notice you're. Your thinking, how you're taught yourself talk, how you're talking to yourself. She's saying this to the whole class, right? And I'm like, I noticed for the first time when I was talking to myself in a really horrible way, you know, sort of that nagging commentary. Who knows where it comes from? Let's just say it exists, right? Yeah. And it's like, Oh, who do you think you are? Oh, you're really stupid. Oh, God, I bet you look really clumsy. And I bet you're the only one in the class who's not getting this right. And that's the whole beauty of fellow Christ that really sold me on it was that you're wanting to notice everything in a non judgmental way. And it'd be like, and then you want to be curious. And then it's The thought I had at that moment, because I had some big performances coming up in New York. I mean, on big stages, you know? And I was like, well, how do I get up in front of people and sing with this kind of, how do open my mouth to sing in front of 500 people with that kind of chatter? Right. How horrible, right? Like torture, right. I was not enjoying singing. And in fact, I remember then a private lesson I had with McCall. Because she did, she had some background in psychology, she worked with Gestalt. I was getting ready for a big performance in New York and she could tell how anxious I was. I couldn't be in my body and she pinned me to the Feldenkrais table and she said, you are not allowed to enjoy singing. I mean, it was just, she was so, right, Gestalt, she's taking on what was going on in me. And I had to yell at her to get off. I mean it was this enacting. Really what I needed to be saying to those committees in my brain, right? So anyway, so that's how then, I mean I would say even about then, and now this probably should be confidential, but because I ended up doing a trade with Michal, and it got me interested in this book. Called The Singing Cure, gentleman in London who was working with patients who had strokes, who had really severely physical problems, and he was finding that they could sing even when they couldn't talk.

Speaker 3 [00:15:06] Mm.

Karen [00:15:06] And I have the book, Paul knew him, I think. And I got the book out even just a couple weeks ago, because it was like a touchstone. And I've got involved with that, because Michal had grown up in a culture where she wasn't allowed to speak really straight. You know, children are to be seen and not heard. So she wanted to sing, but you know, it was. All pent up in that highly, cool, disciplined kind of way, and that's why I got then interested in the singing here. So for me, that singing took on a whole new dynamic, like whole new side of singing, right? It's not about performance. It's about the person. And how you can express and how connected your voice is to your person and their experience.

Speaker 3 [00:16:07] Mm-hmm.

Karen [00:16:08] So that's the, those are the, I guess the highlights of how I got here.

Christa [00:16:19] Nice, nice. And then when did you decide to become a Feldenkrais teacher?

Karen [00:16:27] Okay, so that was, I was with someone, I was in a relationship with someone who had a very terrible car accident. I've been doing Feldenkrais as I have been, and then this gentleman decided he wanted to do Feldenkrais training, and the teachers we were most acquainted with, we actually went to Sarah Lawrence College for a workshop they taught, and they were starting a training out here in California, so just to describe, a lot of times Feldenkrais trainings happen a few weeks, a couple of times a year, people have to take off a couple months. They decided to offer what they were calling a residential training for if you lived out here, it was in Marin. And we'd have intensives, like one in three weeks in October, a couple weeks in January. And then we were meeting every week on Wednesday evenings and one Saturday a month. So it was a really nice way to practice this awareness. And so that's how we moved here so he could get in the training. And then within this first week of being in the training, he's coming home, blissed out. And I'm like, I gotta join the training. Well, and it's so interesting because, well, I will mention, it's, I think, an interesting aside because Moshe Feldenkrais, and other people talk about this too, but Moshe Feldenkrais would talk about our unavowed dreams. I think this is very interesting. What it means is that there are things that are hidden in our unconscious, I mean dreams, right? Things we would really like to do. I still look at this for myself, even at my mature age, you know, I was like, what is it I'm really wanting, desiring to do that I'm not allowing myself to become conscious of? So a lot of times you say, you end up, I didn't even know I wanted that, and here I am. So this was the case where I was coming out to California to do my singing career. I'd come out here to do concerts and workshops and knew quite a few people in the music community. And then I remember even when we were staying with friends, a gentleman from Seattle came and wanted to have a voice lesson with me. And as he was leaving, this is before I met a fellow Christ training man. He's like, okay, I'm going back to Seattle. He goes, I'd like to find a teacher there. What do you recommend? And I said, what I really recommend is that you find a voice teacher who is also a Fulton Christ teacher. And within three days, I was signing up for the training. But it was an uneventful dream. It was like, oh, this is OK for my partner. I'm going to do everything. But it me who wants it. We do that all the time. And so that's how I got into the training, and then it just, I started practicing differently. You know I mean to practice where you're sensing yourself, right? I'm not just doing scales, like, because my teacher said I have, oh, now I have to do the fast passages. It's like, or if I want to sustain a tone, what am I sensing in my body? And then it becomes this playful, not goal-oriented trying to recreate maybe something that happened that felt wonderful yesterday. It's, like no, what am I doing to create that? And how about if I sing this tone, I'm going to think of my back ribs. I'm going to see, is there a sensation? Sometimes it's a sensation, sometimes it's imagination, sometimes it is a little bit of old, right? I start to play, my singing gets better. Didn't know I could do that.

Speaker 3 [00:20:28] Mm-hmm.

Karen [00:20:29] And so it just becomes, it just opens up like parts of the brain and you're interacting with yourself in a really intimate, beautiful, creative way, right? That's the point. Not goal-oriented. I think that's really hard for most of us.

Christa [00:20:47] Yes, especially Americans. Oh yeah. I find that for myself.

Karen [00:20:54] And I say to my students, oh, don't practice as if you're in front of an audience. Your practice is, that's for you, right? That's you connecting with yourself. Then the beauty of performance is you have that embodied experience. That's what you're sharing.

Christa [00:21:10] Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Yeah, so. Yeah, we are very goal-focused. That's one of the parts of this program that has been really strange for me, is getting away from the fact that I didn't need to come to a conclusion or like have a goal in these projects. Like you could. That's not like how you get an A, they want to see what your process is and like how you explore the topic and like, how you've pieced it together in your mind, and then they're like, great, like you don't have to be like, and I've proved that this is

Karen [00:21:47] Right. Yeah, exactly. Yeah, because that's more, well, Hellman-Christ would say a lot in his work about, oh, what the method is about is we're learning how to learn. Learning how to learning, right? What's my experience of my learning? And that was the other thing about. How it influences my teaching is, this was one of my trainers, Dennis Leary, who I just will never forget these words. He says, well, what we're doing, he's talking about public price teachers, but it's true of singers, singing teachers. What we're trying to create an environment where learning may happen. And I can remember some lessons with my opera teacher. It was like I was going in there to perform.

Speaker 3 [00:22:48] Mm-hmm.

Karen [00:22:49] And get berated. Actually, that's the old model of teaching, you know, the empty sieve and, oh my goodness, the things the teachers said to me that crushed me. I mean, you can't sing when you're sobbing. Nope. Just really, you know, and maybe I hear things differently. Not everybody would take things the way that I did, but I had a very difficult time being treated like that.

Speaker 3 [00:23:17] Mm-hmm.

Karen [00:23:18] I don't think it would be allowed nowadays, the way some people would talk about it.

Christa [00:23:25] I'm definitely not loud, but I also just heard from students, especially at university levels, that there's still a fair amount of teachers that, not necessarily super unkind, but kind of abrasive, and they're kind of bracing while they're having their lessons. One of the reasons that I picked this topic for this project is one of my friends had a lot of voice teachers in their life, and then recently started working with Susan. And I'm like, oh, it's the first teacher that's ever cared about how I felt. It's the first teacher that said, well, how do you feel when you sing that phrase? And the answer was, totally terrified and stiff. Oh, well maybe we should address that because how are you going to sing if every time you are about to sing you feel terrified and stiff? And that was like this huge revelation. And I was like, that's a good point. More than not of voice teachers in my life have been, like I felt like I'm bracing. In the lesson and I have to put up this protective barrier and some people were like kind of abusive and I did some lessons recently with Heidi Moss Erickson in Fairfield and she's really into like neuroscience and play and she was asking me to play and I was like... I believe you, I believe this method, and this is terrifying. Like I'm terrified to do this with you. But a lot of it was like, for me, walking into like a voice teacher space. Yeah, there's just an old, my body was just like, we got a brace. We have brace and protect because they're about to like attack you. Exactly. Yeah.

Karen [00:25:29] Yeah, and imagine that because, you know, there's your voice so connected to who you are, your nervous system, and you're getting ready to be observed. Judged right and that's the you know I like to change that word from judging to differentiating you're you know you're wanting yeah you're there because you want to get better but it has to be connected to who you are and how you sense yourself how you resonate your voice has everything

Christa [00:26:11] mm-hmm yeah I find that that now you know part of it part of in doing this project is you know having to think back on a lot of things and you know like where your 20 year old self is versus where your 40 year old self is or and I don't have an experience out of where

am I like 60 year old stuff will be but you know But I was just completely like disembodied as a 20-year-old, you know, like and you know I still I don't I was like disassociated a lot so I don't have a lot of memories of a lot of things but I do have this very clear memory of the first Feldenkrais lesson we did as a group at Sonoma State and we were like I have this very clear of us like sitting in our chairs and Warren and you being like since your right butt cheek or something. And then, now we're gonna stand. And is it that right side of your body, like lighter? And I was like, it is lighter. I have a body? What's going on? Like, just being like, is this magic? I hadn't even sung, but I had so many sports injuries and psychological things that were representing in my physical body that was very tight at the time, to be like, Why is that side of my body lighter now? It is. And also thinking about the benefits that you can get from Feldenkrais without understanding it. I didn't understand what was going on. But you guided us through some breathing, asked us to focus on one thing, and something happened without.

Karen [00:28:08] That's, that's the process of awareness. That's it. Right. Is that we're, yeah, I mean, it's a place of study in a way studying yourself and your experience because it doesn't mean, you know, you're not going to drive like that. With your eyes closed. But your driving can improve right how you're using yourself the overall goal is to become more spontaneous.

Christa [00:28:36] And also the nice thing about that too is at that time being able to free something without digging into like all those psychological things, right, because I've been in therapy for like 25 years and that's been very helpful and it's you dig and there's pain and you learn how to deal with...

Karen [00:28:55] A lot of good things.

Christa [00:28:58] But you don't necessarily have to dig into all of that if you're doing Feldenkrais.

Karen [00:29:03] I mean Moshe Feldenkrais is a very interesting topic to talk about because there is a gentleman in Berkeley who is a psychologist and friend of Moshe Feldenkrais. I heard him describe once, and I can't think of his name right now, but it's very interesting. Oh, Kellerman, Stanley Kellerman. And he came up with a psychological method. He could diagnose depression based on how someone stood, like their posture, right? And Moshe Feldenkrais would get into that a little bit. But as Stanley Kellerman said, well, he couldn't go there. Like, just for himself, he could go there, he's not. He did talk about psychology, but for Moshe, it was that our psychology can improve through our becoming aware of our body. I would have arguments with my teacher, Russell Dellman, who studied psychology and is a Zen Buddhist. He now calls his training embodied life. So it combines Feldenkrais with meditation. Beautiful. I like. I'm so grateful that he was my teacher, but I thought I would hear from him too often in our training that, oh, you don't want to get caught up in your story. I remember that. It was like, I don't remember raising my hand, pissing off and saying, well, how about some of us who are just learning our story? You know what I mean? Yeah. Because it does come up through the body and sometimes we don't even have words for it. But there's okay something happened here. I mean, a couple of examples, I have one, years ago I had a student, and we were doing a Feldenkrais lesson on the table. She was there for singing, but we were looking at breathing, and I had her do a movement almost like you're putting the palms of your hands near your head, if you were going to do a backbend, right? She wasn't gonna do a backbend. It wasn't like it was more gentle than that. Mm-hmm, but even this gesture with her looking up She's she had an ain't she got really anxious. Mm. Mm and she's like You know and I brought her out of it right away. I know so she goes I can't do that I don't know why but you know, it's like yeah, that's what you listen to that, right? There was something that didn't feel It wasn't that I was asking her to do something that even you wouldn't think it looked risky. It was a movement that for whatever reason brought up anxiety, right? So you listen to that, and again, if it felt useful and she wanted to share, maybe there was some story. Maybe she didn't know though, right. I've also had, speaking of unavowed, back to unavowed dreams, which just totally fascinates me. At one point, I lived on Wildcat Canyon, north of Berkeley, and I could see the birds writing their

perimals out, and it was like, gosh, you're going to have a pair of binoculars. You just know so much is going on out there. And I would always tell myself, I can't really afford binoculars. So it was one afternoon, I did a public Christ lesson for myself, right, listening to an audio, and on the floor. I don't even know that I had a conversation with myself. I rolled up, stood up, got my purse and my keys, I went to REI and I bought binoculars. You know what I mean? I was able to do something spontaneous, right? Like that. So there's the fun and sort of playfulness of what can come from listening to our bodies, you know? So yeah, you can get more in touch with the fear. More in touch with yourself because like even what you're saying, I have too have had a lot of psychotherapy and it just goes really well with becoming more sensitive in your body, right? More in touch, we're trying to become more human.

Speaker 3 [00:33:30] Mm-hmm.

Karen [00:33:31] Really in touch with Moshe in his book, you know, and often I like to repeat is we're wanting to become aware all of our human experience. So thinking, sensing, feeling, breathing, and moving. And it's not to become overly self-conscious like you're going to be frozen in space. It's you want to be more spontaneous. When you're singing on stage, when you're, I remember I had a student when I was at Sonoma State, this guy I don't know what his name was, but he was in the theater department, and actually that was pretty cool. The theater director there gave permission for a couple of the theater students to have private Feldenkrais lessons with me. This was a cool thing. The guy had a part-time job at the movie theater, and so I asked the students, you know, would you write a little bit about, is this helping at all, or do you notice anything different as you go through your life? It was so cool. He wrote, he goes, well, you know, I'm a part-time manager at the movie theater and I had a disgruntled customer come up to me yelling, and he said, I was totally, I handled it like... I was embodied, he was able to handle it and not get anxious or afraid or just be more present in his body. And I have a couple of stories like that with students that I'm just as proud of those as I am of anybody who's going on for a singing career and I mean that totally seriously.

Christa [00:35:10] Mm-hmm. Oh, totally. Yeah. Yeah, I mean you're helping people help people live a better existence

Karen [00:35:17] Yeah, and maybe you end up, my other success story like this is a young gentleman, baritone, who, I mean he had done Feldenkrais because his mother became a Feldenkrais teacher, but so he had some knowledge of the work, but he loved all these heavy duty bass baritones, arias, you know, and what, who was that Russian bass who was his favorite? He'd send me these YouTubes and... But he would be honest, he'd say, I know I don't have a voice like that, I mean he'd be like, hey can we do some Schubert, you know what I mean? But we had a serious talk once and he was like, I don't have a real voice like that, but I would like to have something related to music as a career. That's all. I don't know if I mentioned or he, maybe his brother or something said, what about a piano tuner? So I contacted my piano tuners friend in Berkeley and he goes, oh, just tell him, you know, he should just go hang out with some pianists. I'm like, no, this is a different kind of guy. And I remembered that there is this instrument building, refurbishing, and tuning school in Boston. I'm trying to remember the name of that. It's like the name of the street that the school's on. Not cheap, not so easy. He and his brother ended up both going there. This guy became like the head tuner for Steinway in Dallas, Texas and then was at, oh, what's the music festival in Colorado or? He was like the main tuner, and he's got a full-time job now at Ball State University as the piano tuner for the school, right? He married a violinist, and they have a couple of kids. I mean, that's an example, right, you know? He started out loving singing, and that carried him into... He gets to be around music all the time.

Speaker 3 [00:37:35] You know?

Karen [00:37:37] And so that's what I love about this process of being in a space where we can learn and And then you become more open to new opportunities, new options, right?

Christa [00:37:53] The more open in a body you are, the more receptive you are.

Karen [00:37:58] You're you're another success story right that you love singing you study singing now. You're a teacher You're creating that opportunity for how many more people? Where if we'd all thought well, I've got to be a famous, you know make it or break, you

Christa [00:38:17] Yeah, I definitely had that though, like, I think that like, in academic settings, that was definitely like the push, right, like oh, you're really talented, you should pursue this and be a performer and like whatever, and I was like having like anxiety breakdowns What is going on? And it's multifaceted for me, but one thing I realized, I was like, well, did any, no one stop to ask me, do you like traveling? No, not that I don't like traveling, it's just especially at the time I had so many like health issues with the Lyme disease that I didn't know I had and stuff that it was like when I was away from certain like my foods and my sleep routine and stuff like that my body started going haywire really fast and so when I would travel, my health declined really fast at the time. Where they're like, do you like people? I'm like, no. You know like people but but like the life of like jet setting around everywhere and dealing with like lots of people and and yeah and i'm like it's not quite who i am though but no one ever asked and they were like just just do this yeah and then like and then breaking down inside and like talking with theirs and theirs is like i don't think that's who you are though right Like.

Karen [00:39:57] What do you want? Yeah, it's like with this idea of what we think we should want, or what this person said, or that person. And then, who am I really?

Christa [00:40:11] And I felt really judged by a couple of my teachers because what they want for me is not what I want for me. They're like, oh, well, you should do this because you can.

Speaker 3 [00:40:22] Get out.

Christa [00:40:29] I feel their disappointment emanating off of them in the lesson and that really makes it a really great lesson where I can be free to express myself.

Karen [00:40:44] Yeah and I've probably gone on both ends of that and even as a teacher, you know, because there's something like, well I'm supposed to have expectations, I have to teach them how they have to be out in the world and it's like, no.

Christa [00:41:01] A good learning process, okay.

Karen [00:41:04] Indiana, where I went, I remember shortly after I got out of school seeing the cover of Opera News where the title of the main article was Indiana University's Opera Factory. Producing opera singers like a factory, that's what they wanted, you know? And so... And they, at a certain point in time, maybe it's still true, they have the longest running opera season, a full season throughout the academic year and three operas in the summer. You know what I mean? It's like, and um, so, so that, in that case, you have the, the voice teachers, like agents, vying for their students. And wanting you to progress so that you would get this role, you know, for them, right? I mean it was, it was run like an opera company, people have said, right, and so it doesn't mean I'm learning, I'm trying to perform, and oh, and on that note, I just want to circle back because we were talking about creating the environment for learning, and But I know, and I know Susan knows this too, because there is, I mean, we use the word training. Because when you are on the opera stage, it's training, right? You've got the vocal technique, you've got orchestra you're singing over, you've the conductor, you're interacting as much as you can with people on stage, right. And so, there has to be this training where I see, remember Susan, you know, getting people to respond in real time. And you, that is an aspect of it, right, but. So I guess I'm just wanting to make that distinction. We are talking, when you're talking about performing an opera, that's a training. It's like ballet, right? Not the most natural thing. And then there's the whole aspect of how does the person experience themselves in singing.

Speaker 3 [00:43:10] Mm-hmm.

Karen [00:43:11] And that's where, you know, like I say, I'm really glad when some of my students I hear that they're doing well and performing, and I'm just as glad for the woman who came to me a few years ago, couldn't utter a note, and being a wonderful musician, wonderful pianist, getting lots of work as a great sight reader in choral ensembles. I remember our first lesson we sat in a corner of the studio. She's in a chair and I'm facing her, just trying to get her

to make a sound—you know what I mean? And she's like my age, right, and still having this sort of struggle. So we're talking about a wide spectrum where we need the opera teachers for opera and then. I feel like sometimes, I mean I see this honestly, I still think about going back to school and maybe getting a degree in therapy. I know it's pretty involved, it would be very expensive, but I sometimes think of looking for a program that, some sort of certification because that's really what my heart likes. The joy that singing can bring.

Speaker 3 [00:44:32] Mm-hmm.

Karen [00:44:35] And then back to Feldenkrais, as I was going to mention. At a Father Christ training with this wonderful teacher who had been a close student of Moshe Father Christ, Mia Segal, she recently passed away. And at our training she invited me to one of the last days to lead the class in a song. It was just this really simple, it was like a round that we made up out of a box thing. It was very pretty. And This was after the students for a week lying on the floor, sensing themselves, right, breathing. It sounded amazing. There were many people in the class who had never sung before. They were amazed that they had a voice.

Speaker 3 [00:45:31] Mm-hmm.

Karen [00:45:32] And so there's my example of becoming embodied, and then learning you can make these sounds, I don't know, I just think it's gratifying beyond anything else I could think of.

Christa [00:45:53] Mm-hmm.

Karen [00:45:54] Ha ha ha ha!

Christa [00:45:56] Because it's always slightly spiritual to me that people can sing. We don't really need to, but everyone can, and it's a thing that we do, and the vibrations that it brings up in the body, and just, it's pretty miraculous. And how everyone has their own sound, right? You see that in formal education, you see that all the time, you know, 20 people can sing the same Schubert song and sing it 20 different ways. And it's wonderful and it's different every single time, it's so unique. So going back to, so in this project, one of the things that we're exploring is the line between, you know, being a therapist. Also helping people through their emotions as singing in the studio. And so to me, especially what you said about how Feldenkrais can access the body without necessarily having to go into like a therapeutic level speaking. So it sounds like it's a good modality to use during lessons where you can just ask people to focus on something and that might help them through strong emotions. Or to clear emotions so that they can be able to sing.

Karen [00:47:32] Yeah, it's, well, yes, that advantage of having the training where I can do hands-on, because, you know, and I know in the voice teacher world there's big discussions about should I put my hands on my student, but it's really helped that I'm trained to do that, right, where it's real gentle and with real clear intention. And so one example. Long time student of mine, grew up in Hong Kong, and very musically inclined, has studied music in college, and would make a certain amount of progress. And actually he ended up doing a value price training, so I feel successful in that. But what came up was... You know, I could talk about the boy at rib cage. He couldn't feel his ribs. And I'm telling you, so I would even do a lesson on the table where I'm like, just touching part of the rib cage, oh, you feel how this moves? I see my hands rise as you breathe in. He couldn't feel it. And then. The memory came to him, I don't know if the memory came to him or he then felt comfortable to tell me. He'd had a traumatic experience as a kid watching his close friend almost drown, right? And it's like, oh, and he had had an illness that very young, like maybe six years old, where he had to be hospitalized and was on.

Christa [00:49:19] Like a ventilator? Yeah, ventilator. Oh, yeah.

Karen [00:49:24] You know and the thing was we didn't have to focus on that but it was it was good that i could have the hold the space that he could identify and communicate that to me right and that's important because as voice teacher i would just keep harping on that right okay your ribs are say your Yeah.

Christa [00:49:48] Get those out! Get those OUT now!

Karen [00:49:55] I'm not kidding, somebody told me lately, someone my age who had a previous voice teacher many years ago would say, this teacher would say this to her students, well I can do it, if I can so can you. I was like, okay that is the worst part of the teaching I think I could ever imagine. So it happens is the case. But to my mind, it's like, oh, I've got this way in. And let's say, oh, this week, maybe I have some cases where I'm not even going to talk about the ribs, we're going to do some movement, I'm going to see what they notice. And then you sort of let that unfold, right? Because it's about the person becoming aware, not what I tell them I observe. And that's what's so different, right. But my other example for that... Yeah, this was after I was trained in Feldenkrais, a friend of my, you know, previous flute player, whatever, not a professional musician, but she was waiting on me to go to dinner. And she was in the next room, and I was finishing a lesson with one of my soprano students. You know, I was aware, I knew what I was doing, and after the student left, my friend says, Well, you realize she was singing flat, don't you? And I'm going, I certainly do know that. And I said, and I know where I am in her process, too. I knew in that moment it was not gonna help for me to say, you're flat, you are flat. And you know, I get this from my students who sing in choirs all the time. Well, if you don't have something to offer as a way of addressing it, don't just keep saying that.

Christa [00:51:47] You ready? You know what I mean? Oh, yeah. Yep, yep, yep. The same friend that's studying with Susan now. People always are like, you're flat. They don't like tell her anything.

Karen [00:52:06] Think of a happy thought, many images that, or even a real technical, specific technical note. But yeah, I have no patience for those situations.

Christa [00:52:23] Because if you knew how to fix it yourself, you wouldn't be doing it. So just saying that you're doing it is not going to do anything for you.

Karen [00:52:30] But I mean, that's the thing about the fun part of learning to be a better teacher, right? Is that I could, maybe you could think of, oh, could you brighten that vowel a little bit here? Probably that would fix it. But you don't have to keep telling the person that they're not rising to the occasion or whatever, you know, very demoralizing, just pointing out what's wrong.

Christa [00:52:53] I just love what you just said, which was, it's not about, what doesn't actually matter what you observe, it is about what that person can sense, they can't sense it, it doesn't. You're their guide to hopefully get them to sense that eventually.

Karen [00:53:16] And that's the only way for a singer to become more consistent is that they are sensing more clearly what it is they do.

Christa [00:53:25] Yes. I try to check in with my students a lot. Well, one, two, as I tell them, I'll be like, so how did that feel? Where did you feel that vibration or whatever when working on something technical? And I'm like, the reason I'm asking you is because you need to be able to recreate this without me. My job is just to guide you and give you my ear. My technical knowledge but then the reason we're stopping is like where did you that was right where was it right where did it live like let's stop and think about it and I definitely have especially one student right now that can't feel anything I'm like where'd you feel that And I have complete like empathy for that because that was me. Like I'm not in my body at all. When I started my very technical singing journey, they'd be like, where'd you feel that? Feel? Do I have a body?

Karen [00:54:31] I was the same. I know I know what you mean. Yeah. Well, and there's that. It's like that as a teacher, you're because you're you're observing in a non judgmental way. Right. You start to see more the person like this, this gentleman I was talking about with the lack of awareness in his ribs, and I can tell he goes into his head a lot. You know, because I'll ask him. Okay, how did that feel? Or what did you sense when you sang that? And I can see him going to his head and he starts telling me everything that was wrong.

Speaker 3 [00:55:13] Oh, no.

Karen [00:55:14] Well, I know and I know I don't want it. I don't know what I don't want to know what's in your head What's in the body, you know, and so but I know a long enough now where I can say something like that in short And I'm not yelling it's not abrupt or anything. No, but it's I

try to wake him up and come back into your body Right. We need to be reminded of that so many times

Christa [00:55:37] Mm-hmm. Some of us more than others. And some of us don't even know how to be in our body whatsoever.

Karen [00:55:44] I know. Well my early on experience, this is when I was in grad school and somebody had introduced me to yoga and gave me a book, Richard Hiddleman's Yoga in 27 Days. And so every day of the month you're doing a different yoga pose. I grew up in a fundamentalist Baptist church. I think there was a lot of body shaving going on and I did not feel comfortable in my body. So that's amazing.

Christa [00:56:17] Especially because you're what are you like six two? I'm six one. Okay

Karen [00:56:22] six two issues yeah and so yeah a lot of shame and feeling made fun of and just very awkward in my body so I'm doing yoga I can remember doing yoga and feeling like I was doing something wrong I was all by myself doing yoga and I was like, because it felt good.

Speaker 3 [00:56:47] Mm-hmm.

Karen [00:56:48] And then in my mind, I equated feeling good with being sinful. That's pretty deep, right? Yeah, yeah. And I can't tell you there's any one person who's like my grandmother. Hahaha

Christa [00:57:04] But also like sometimes like the just like the culture you grow up in and around you pick up

Karen [00:57:13] And we were still, we were having parties and singing country music. I was going to dances. I was having fun with my friends, but I felt simple and that of paying attention to my body and feeling pleasure in my body all by myself. That was something simple.

Speaker 3 [00:57:33] Mm-hmm.

Karen [00:57:33] And then I remember going after one of these yoga sessions, where there must have been some deep breathing and really getting things opened up, I went and practiced. And it was like, wow, my singing felt effortless. It was like... And I swear that it was too scary for me. But that's another one, like, you know. That was early on, and then a couple years later, I'm meeting with Alex Farkas, and I can see from my right foot, and then I get the Feldenkrais. It's this whole sort of unfurling of recognizing that I have a body.

Christa [00:58:13] Yeah, that's only

Karen [00:58:14] And to be able to talk about this what a gift with you that you know what I'm saying, right? There are many people You know what? I mean?

Christa [00:58:22] Still in process of being in my body but it's it's been a big journey and come a long way from right where I was which was completely disembodied all the time and just like completely locked up and

Karen [00:58:38] Yeah, but the good news is though, there's no end. There's no goal here, right? That and this is where I get excited at my age because, and I still, when I teach awareness through movement, I share this, there is no end to our learning. I hope, even the day I die, I'm still becoming aware of some part of me, you know, or some aspect of, you know, my... Human experience. There's no end to that. So it's not like there's an end goal. It's like, Oh, well, I didn't become aware and then everything's going to be all right. No, it's a, it becomes a daily practice. Right. Which is nice.

Christa [00:59:19] And also, singers and people with bodies, your body and your voice are always changing. It's not like you discovered the secret to singing at a certain age because our tissues change. Yes. And so we have to continually study and learn and be aware as our bodies and our issues change.

Karen [00:59:42] Yeah, and that's reminding me here what I was teaching at Sonoma State. I come home and practice. I remember one day like, Hey, wait a minute. I'm 45. I'm not 18. I was teaching 20-year-olds, but I'm 45. So it's like how I sing is not how they should sing and vice versa. I just

Christa [01:00:13] Right.

Karen [01:00:15] Because we also pick things up by osmosis, right? Um, what else?

Christa [01:00:23] I'm going to look back to my prepared questions real quick. Let's see, we answered that. We answered that, oh, here's a good one. In your experience, what kinds of emotional or psychological challenges tend to show up the most in your singing studio?

Karen [01:00:53] I think that harsh judgment, harsh self judgment, and you know, some of it I attribute to working with a lot of really intelligent people who always have to be the first to know. Goal-oriented. Goal oriented. And and it will even this job when I was telling you about They're wanting to let me know that they know what was wrong before I get a chance to.

Christa [01:01:30] It correct because if you know I identify that if you know what's wrong then you can tell people that you know what's They want to get the...

Karen [01:01:41] First before I get a chance and I'm not even thinking that way right I'm not even well and actually early on I had this experience this was when I was at Princeton really smart girl and she was in one of the singing groups those people amazed me there were people in those singing groups at Princeton who couldn't read music and could pull a pitch out of the air knew exactly where they were going to be seeing this, you know, and I say, well, what? What note do you need? Oh, well, what note is this? I'm like, OK, you need a beat. And she was kind of like that and then I remember one day we were vocalizing and she started to close down and almost cry and I said, what's going on? You know, I just asked her to make a sound, right? And, um... I just know it's going to be out of tune. I just know it will be out of tune, you know, and Mm-hmm.

Christa [01:02:49] Before even doing it.

Karen [01:03:00] I can't help you if you don't make a sound, right, like just any sound.

Christa [01:03:08] Right? Sometimes that's hard with some people. Yeah.

Karen [01:03:12] Yeah, and that was a very severe case of this self-critical mind, and I mean similar to what I said about my more recent student who's an adult, but some people will tell me, oh I grew up in a household where I wasn't allowed to make a sound, or my mother or my father was always criticizing me, and, I wasn't allowed to practice. Something like that.

Christa [01:03:45] I have a student recently who said that if she practiced at home, her mother would stand over her shoulder and be like, that's wrong note, that wrong.

Karen [01:03:58] So, what do you say to that? And now, I'm back. Remind me what your question is.

Christa [01:04:04] So my question was like the most common thing you see, which is the self judgment.

Karen [01:04:11] Self-criticism, self-harsh, harsh self-judgment, yeah, being afraid to make a wrong sound. That's the most

Christa [01:04:29] So then the follow-up question to that is what are some of the ways that you use the Feldenkrais method to overcome this in studio?

Karen [01:04:41] Well, sometimes I'll have them lie on the table, you know, find a comfortable position with the knees bent, feet standing, and I will verbally guide. So sometimes I have that benefit of I can either do hands on or I can verbally guide, and that way they're not distracted by touch, right? It's something they're feeling, it's like, do you feel movement in? You know, sometimes I go through like the lower abdomen, the side, the ribs, the upper chest, and I hold one exercise. I call it the morning dove cooing and just to start to coo. You don't even call it singing, you know. Like, so it would maybe start like, see if I can. Oh, oh, oh. Where do you feel that coming from? Let me check here, is it, you know, I'm often thinking out of the attachment of the diaphragm at the bottom of the breastbone, you're like, ooh, ooh, where do you feel that? Oh, if you were gonna make that a longer tone, what happens to your body when you make a longer tongue? Ooh, stay forward, right? So it's a little mini exercise on what air compression feels like, right, which creates resonance. So. Can be something that simple and then another exercise I like is okay from that to do like um I call it the counting exercise where you can do you're going to start counting in your sort of reciting from the cooing one two three four five So

they're starting with the. Gentle speaking voice and gradually turning into tone while paying attention to their body. Right? And again any any exercise like that that works you can do it as much as possible and then they start to sense right so I'm not we're not even talking about singing a song right now it's just like how do you create a tone and how do you sustain that tone like that a little playful.

Christa [01:07:06] So if someone comes to you and you're like, how did that feel? And you're, like, well, I know this, I did this and this and wrong. How would you redirect them? Would you use a method from Feldenkrais to redirect their thoughts somewhere?

Karen [01:07:24] Yeah, I would. Always coming back to the body and the sensation. Maybe I did this in the workshop you last had to come to. The body scan with singing, we just stay on one side of the body and that's a nice way, like sensing your right foot as if your right foot could sing and then you come up the right ankle. Remember that one? And then it's very that's the learning like you were saying after you said you're right butter. Yeah. Hey, it's different when I pay attention to this, right? Right. So right away, let's say to connect up to how I'm directing my attention changes my experience of myself.

Christa [01:08:21] And do you say anything to them? So like, you know, say I'm your student and you asked me to sing something. So I'm a voice student first. And then you bring in the Feldenkrais to the voice lesson. And if you're like, oh, I know I did this wrong. Do you have anything that you like say to them, like, let's not think like that. Or do you just go right into an exercise and be like, hold that thought, breathe into your shoulder.

Karen [01:08:48] Right, you know, yeah, that's a good, that a good way, too. It's like, oh, okay. Yeah, I think I heard that. And then, well, another. Which is what tool might be. It's like, well, okay, try and recreate that. Whatever it was they thought they did wrong, okay, let's find out what that is, right? Can you recreate that, right. It's just like when you have your students recreate what felt good, okay, now can you do it the other way? Because it is this process of learning to differentiate. Oh, hey, that doesn't feel as good. Hey wait, I can direct my attention or I can switch something. They're learning that they have the ability to self-correct.

Christa [01:09:44] Mm-hmm like that um let's see um we've answered that one great Um, have you noticed changes in how students breathe, vocalize, or carry themselves when they begin to process emotions after you've brought in Feldenkrais elements to the studio?

Karen [01:10:15] That's an interesting question.

Christa [01:10:22] Well, as you're thinking about that, you know, something that that I talked with Susan about is kind of this like pathway of when you do really deep work in voice, often you'll see deep life changes in in someone. Yeah. And also vice versa, for sure. But since we're we're studio teachers that are in studio and that's the aspect of the person's life we're working with. We see these changes and so for you adding like that extra element of like that you're also a Feldenkrais teacher and a voice teacher in one and how that affects people, their lives or you know their whole demeanor outside of the actual singing voice.

Karen [01:11:12] Yeah, thank you for that because it does remind me of a very recent experience actually was just over the holiday. Very talented student, has a great day job, you know, really smart, like MIT trained and. A really good site leader, studied piano, and we'd make a certain amount of progress in the vocal training, and then it would be like... Yeah, I know, you know, I was going to be a concert, I could have been a concert pianist, you know. My piano teacher just kept trying to get me to practice all the things. This person had, I think, depression, fear, and I was like, and nobody, none of the groups around them are good enough for it. Oh no, I don't really like it. And so we had a lesson before the holiday where, and I don't do this very often, but I put my foot down. And I said, you have to decide. You have to decided. Do you want to be here or not? Do you wanna learn to sing or not, you know? I was like, no, you don't have to learn this aria. I know you really want to do this music. So fine, I don't care. I'm trying to teach technique, you now? I see you're talented, but you have decide. We got together, sure, and then, you know, and after I do something like that, I'm like, What have I done? Yeah, so I invited

her, actually she ended up, because she's from Berkeley, and she ended up needing to be at Petaluma, so we got together and had coffee. And you know is very nice we could know she was thanking me she goes she goes i i i really do thank you that's what i needed to hear and i'm i needed take a break and i said i totally get it so she told me about and she's doing some psychotherapy and she told me about this book she was reading so it's beautiful she after the holiday She sent me this card with this long note. And, oh, it's so interesting after our last lesson and meeting, I was reading in my book, I don't remember the name of the book. The psychologist described almost the exact scenario that happened with us, you know, like where he had a client who was like, okay, it's a balls in your court. You're either going to go with this because you want to learn or, you know, yeah, or just go on, you'll be fine in your life, you know, but she recognized herself in that, right? And she said, so I went to a bunch of concerts during the holidays. And here's what I want to do. It was like it helped shape. It helped get her to determine what her real goals and desires are. And that's the other aspect of teaching that I like that there's no way I could have known, you know, when I'm thinking I've done something wrong, because I set a boundary, you now and I was like, Okay, this is up to you now, right? Where if I had taken too much responsibility or... I mean, I can still share that I don't like being in that position, but that's what she you know, what she needed to hear. And it's I see the difference in her. She's showing up at concerts, she's showing up at lessons she knows what she wants to do you know so yeah and she's an adult you know right she's almost your age you know what i'm saying yeah so that can happen at any time but that's what i love about this work that and isn't it true we're talking about music but it's really about life yes all these people and this is why i'm such an advocate for the in the humanities. It's about who we are. I don't care how much money I make or how much somebody you know I mean more power to them but I'd rather know who I am.

Speaker 3 [01:15:45] Do you want to be in the video? Uh-huh, uh-huh.

Christa [01:15:48] My therapist said that once when we were talking about the process and was really stuck with me because it was probably like 20 years ago where, you know, I was just, I'm like, all these people want me to do these things and I'm having massive anxiety because the things that go along with the things are not who I am. And I don't know if I like that, those things. And I was like, well, you it's a good exploration to have because a lot of people just push through to be successful. And then they wind up in my office 25 years later and they're like, I hated everything I did. Who am I? Like that. I have a lot of adults in my studio right now who sang when they were younger and then some person told them that they couldn't. And now that they're closer to the end of their life, I'm so proud of them for doing the singing thing that they've always wanted to do, that they had the courage to do it. And they're great. I'm like, I am so sad someone told you that and you haven't sung for 30 years because you are, it's lovely.

Karen [01:16:55] I don't know.

Christa [01:16:58] So, but I'm proud of them. Let's see. This question is, do you have any students that you've introduced this work to in studios that have like balked at it or been really skeptical? And if so, did that get overcome eventually or?

Karen [01:17:22] Well I have a number of students who have been with me for many years and so there's something they continue to get and then I've had a couple of students where I can kind of tell And I get, just like what we're talking about, there are some people who can't give over to that vulnerability. It's vulnerability, right? It's like, one person comes to mind, very set in how she wants to sing. She likes to do Renaissance polyphony. Very set in how she wants to sing. I can hear that there could be a lot more comfort and dimension and options, but she doesn't. So she came for three lessons and that's it, right? And I know she sings with other students of mine and I'm totally fine with that, right. And I get it because it's like, you know, you've heard of when singers change techniques, right? It's self-image, right, it's, like, oh, I'm shifting, right

Christa [01:18:34] Yes.

Karen [01:18:35] Yeah, so I know there are a couple people that, well actually this one woman I keep telling me about that I ended up sitting in the corner with, she would come to my class. I used to, in Berkeley, I had an awareness through movement, so Feldenkrais singing weekly class. I remember she came for a few classes and then, but, and she would just say to me, I'm not really getting what this is about. Well she couldn't go there, This you know what I mean? That's like so however somebody wants to whatever they say I've had to learn I don't take it personal wasn't something that I didn't say it wasn't something you know I'm uh so I oh I know that that is true some people just can't go there It's okay.

Christa [01:19:25] I've been teaching long enough to experience that several times in both directions, but it's not related to Feldenkrais for me. But the singing voice, like I'll have adults that they'll have the most amazing lesson. They'll make this like huge breakthrough. They sounded crazy incredible. Maybe they cried a little bit because it was so good, but they quit the next week. I'm like, okay, so you weren't writing it because I've had other adults where, um, just seeing them transform themselves with the work. Like they have these amazing leaps in their voice studio. And then I see them like change everything about their lives. Like I had this one young man who worked in the tech industry that was taking lessons once and he was like shuffling, you know, like poor posture. He had like long hair and like leftover his face and We were doing voice lessons and you know just like talking about like the posture and taking deep breaths being present in the world all this stuff right and then one day he like came to a lesson to knock on the door he'd cut his hair he made eye contact he's standing up straight and I was like Like it's so fun to see those transformations, but yeah.

Karen [01:20:46] Like that. Yeah, no, I do. I do I noticed those. Well, the one student, my one Petaluma student, I may have mentioned her. She came to me when I first moved to Petaluma, so that's like 20 years ago, nearly. And a similar situation where we had a lesson where her voice started to open up. And I could tell she felt very vulnerable. And then within a couple of weeks anyway, oh, and I have to stop lessons because, well, and true. She had good excuse. Three little girls, you know, toddlers or, you know, two to age, two, to six or whatever. But I thought that was an interesting time. So cut to, you know, a few years ago during COVID. She called me and she said, could we, could you help me, could you start on Zoom lessons? She had developed this problem of dysphonia? That's like where she just couldn't, she couldn't see anymore. And she's a cantor in a church in town. And so she'd be cantering and her voice just totally cut out. I know. And even her speaking voice was sounding really growly. So over the course of, we started during COVID and we did Zoom lessons a half hour, three times a week. So it was like voice therapy, but it was spelled in Christ. Like I could see, you know, I'd have her sit where I could see her peripheral, her side view, her sitting in a chair. I could direct her attention to breathing. Sometimes I have her lie on the floor. And then with speech articulators, when you're on Zoom, you can see somebody up close, right? I could see what her tongue was doing or whatever. Then I finally learned, oh, because she's a physical trainer, she was teaching outside in a park during COVID without any amplification.

Speaker 3 [01:23:07] Mmm.

Karen [01:23:08] So combination of yelling, basically, and I said, you know, you've got to get amplification and anyway, kind of to There were many, then we could come, we started that in person, masked, you know, we did the whole transition through time. And there were times when it worked, and we did a lot of table lessons, all in various times, when it didn't work. Plenty of times when she left and I'd be like, I don't know what I'm doing. I wrote, but I'd wake up the next morning and I would think, okay. No we have to go to the pelvis. Now we have you know I get these was looking for all these strategies basically my concept was I know that there are muscle straps attaching the larynx inside the chest wall and inside right back here and um that's why we need the boy at ribcage because the larynx needs to be suspended so I was like okay how do I build that up from the Boy at ribcage, keep this air, because she was so physically fit, tight as a drum.

Speaker 3 [01:24:29] Mm-hmm.

Karen [01:24:29] I mean her shoulders and her clavicle was like every muscle overdeveloped and I learned early on just like those external muscles strengthened like that's not conducive to sitting. We need this internal

Christa [01:24:47] you know, we use strength and flexibility, you know.

Karen [01:24:50] Strength and flexibility. Yeah. So that was my overall, you know, you're going to get a larynx so it's suspended because your vocal folds aren't going to find each other until there's air under the way I want to say. And then even, so this is how the Feldenkrais work has helped because I can, without it, I wouldn't have had a clue. And in fact, I contacted a friend of mine who's now the head of vocal pedagogy at, colleague, I guess you'd say, at USC, Lynn Holding. She's pretty big in maths and stuff like that. She had just come out with a book that I have. And so I thought, well, I'm going to send her a message. I'm gonna ask her, what does she do in the case of this? She wrote back. She goes, wow, that's a whole can of worms. That was, OK, I am not going to get any help from her. But this person is singing now. And interestingly, during the time, And now her three young daughters are. Out of college or maybe the last one just finished college during the internship or whatever. I could see her, the student, the mom. Really not being able to be in touch with reality. I remember the day after her last daughter left, she said, Oh, I'm fine. I'm not gonna do empty nest. You know, I'll find my buddy. It was like, well, during the course of the last few years, um, she started therapy, started getting in touch With some of these things that submerged and singing again. I remember I went to Christmas Eve service two years ago and I didn't tell her I was coming. I sat. She couldn't see me. I would not have imagined that a few years ago. Three years ago, I would have not imagined. We had to shift There's like, okay, you're sitting where you're comfortable. You're sitting wherever you can. And then, over time, it gets better and better and range increases, right? Until very moving, a couple months ago, at the end of her lesson, she says, Here I want to tell you The other day my therapist asked me to think about... Who in my circle, you know, do I really feel like I get unconditional love from? Which is that you came tomorrow.

Speaker 3 [01:27:47] Oh.

Karen [01:27:48] Oh, I was able to hold space for her, or whatever. And of course, we both cried and we hugged and you know, but and I always am clear, yeah, but you did the work. Right? Right. You're showing up for yourself, not for me. Right. So for me, I as a voice teacher, more and more, I feel like I'm more like a therapist. I mean, like life. My life coach. I don't know. Maybe that's overused. It's not quite right. I mean, I do care about the music, but isn't the music so much a part of our, you know, like you say, spiritual experience? Whatever. I don't know what I believe in sometimes, but there's something to it that is a way of our personal expression that, you don't get another way.

Christa [01:28:44] So you've already stated that you just recommend people in general are voice teachers and they get certified in Feldenkrais. If someone was not going to go through all of the Feldenkrais training, are there one or two things that you feel like everyone could incorporate into their studio that... Come from that Feldenkrais tradition that would help their students move through difficult emotions while they're having a voice lesson.

Karen [01:29:19] Well, yeah, I mean now I mean there are more and I don't even know the names of all of them but somatic practices and trainings right doesn't have to be felt in Christ, but but the way that I think it works for me is that And is that gonna be the same for everyone right but say what I would recommend if you can, if you could take an awareness through movement class where you're starting to sense yourself and then start to explore what does singing feel like after I've done this lesson or that lesson. Gee, we focused on the pelvis and my singing feels better than ever, right? So, okay, there must be some connection. In fact, there is. Connection between pelvic floor and the diaphragm. I mean the whole internal working of the body. Right. But the point is is that you know a little bit of study of anatomy but more importantly what you're sensing and then you start to teach from there and you can't say exactly that uh

Well, gee, um, uh, after that public Christ lesson... I sang this note, it felt effortless, I felt like it was here, might be different for your student. Right. But you have that palette of, a phrase I came up with I like, we're increasing our palette of sensory awareness. So back to how would I, for someone not doing a Feldenkrais training, I would at least go to some workshops. There's plenty of stuff online. There is a wonderful... It's called bollum crease. Access Feldenkrais. The teacher is David Sermack Burson. He's out of New York with all kinds of lessons that he offers with different teachers, different series, very affordable. And sometimes they go on sale and you get the recordings forever. I recommend that, you know, you would engage in a practice like that, because again, it's not that you could read Moshe's book, but you're still going to want to do the lessons. So then you start to get this felt sense of experience of yourself and then, let's say with the speech articulators, you just direct someone's attention to how do you What's your tongue doing? But the more you have that self-reference, the more you can imagine any other person. It's just what voice teachers, good voice teachers do.

Christa [01:32:19] I have like 10 interviews scheduled, but since you're the second one, that is a common thread in both. When asked how are you going to help your students more was to work on yourself.

Karen [01:32:36] Well, and I even say, you know, when I'm, I'm still performing, not a lot, but I still practice, you don't know when I perform, I practice. But I used to notice that my teaching was a lot better when I was performing. Like, I had this, it was like this immediate experience of... I could just hear differently, right? Because I was more connected to myself when I'm performing, preparing for a performance, going through all of that. I seem to be able to imagine or take in a little more of what somebody else was maybe doing or perhaps maybe.

Christa [01:33:23] Mm-hmm or feeling. Yeah, you're like, oh, yeah, I remember I'm nervous when I do this. Are you feeling All right, is there anything that you wish more singers or teachers understood about the emotional body and how it lives in the voice?

Karen [01:33:56] Well... These two things come to mind right away. Oh, one, I think I heard Thomas Hansen say this, and I have had the experience. So I'll describe my experience. I actually, I was in the first Berkeley Festival, this is before I lived here, and they moved me out, I got to do this big role in a medieval passion where I was mother married.

Speaker 3 [01:34:28] Hmm.

Karen [01:34:29] And the scene of the crucifixion and I did this in college. It was a role that I knew really well. But just before the Berkeley festival, dear friend of mine, he was like in the early stages of the AIDS epidemic. And I had just learned that she dilates, like two days before I'm coming to rehearse and get ready for this performance. Oh. Mother Mary seeing her son on the grass, right? Yeah. This guy had been like a brother to me, big brother. Yeah, I know. I remember having to have a conversation with myself even two to five minutes before I was going on stage to sing. This can't be about how you can't be about holding I have to be able to say. Be in the moment. And then, I didn't know to put it like this, but then years later, I hear Thomas Hanson talking about this very thing. The singer needs to be able to have all the emotions, you wanna feel all the emotion, but not have the emotional response. Right? So like if you're doing a venge aria, or whatever you call that, you can't be livid. There's no frickin' way you can open your throat to sing when you're mad as can be, right? Yeah, right. Same with crying, right, the throat muscles close, they squeeze, you're blah, you know, all of your resonators are otherwise flowing and occupied, and um, so that- That piece of wanting to feel all our feelings and really be with that. I say, actually, I told one of my students recently, beautiful aria she was singing, a lament. She'd get ready for an audition and she was telling about when she was practicing. She goes, oh, I totally broke down. Oh my God, this can't happen. I said, no, but that's why you're practicing. When you're practicing, let it go, like really, that's another reason we sing, right? It's about our personal, it's about human expression. So you want to know all that. And then by the time you're in performance, like that's in your memory bank, right, that you have all of that, you're going to sing from there. And I even sometimes will I mention the

cooling exercise Sometimes I do this whole chest area needs to soften and it can be I used to walk around like this like a plate of armor like voicing singers have to soften here and I would say I have this lesson where it's called flexion where you're you're softening everything Even in writing that you're allowed to cry, but then you decide to sing.

Speaker 3 [01:37:56] Hmm

Karen [01:37:57] very interesting but you have to practice this in the comfort of your own home you know and it's like or the fellow price where I can have a space or somebody feels like well maybe they're going to cry maybe they're going to laugh maybe they are going to sing right but it's that getting in touch with where is that that fine line between having a feeling and then being able to sing right? Not cry. Right. But there's some... It's interesting, but that comes to my, I think it's still, I don't know why this came to mind, your question was about dealing with the emotions, and then announcing them, expressing them.

Christa [01:38:47] Uh, yeah, it was what you wish, like, teachers understood about the emotions in the body.

Karen [01:38:55] Yeah, well, another strategy or not a strategy, I think it's real. I like to think of, you know, because of all the medieval music, I like the ancient history and there's this book I got our library. I mean, it was the study of these ancient singers that was their life, and they could tell these long epic, like Homer stories, right, from memory and each one. There were these singers who would hear at once and then could read, could perform it. Right? I don't know how they did this, but that's what the book says. And, of course, there might be slight variations or whatever, but this is where, when it comes to, say, nervousness or anxiety around singing or singing in front of people, if to use ancient singers because... Your you're creating something in real time in front of people and if there's this way that that's like a sculptor would practice right you're just searching chip in a way and thing comes into form and I always like to remember how the word performance breaks down it's it's per form it's like it's creating form for something that previously did not exist That's what you're doing when you recite a poem, if it happens to be set to a melody, that's what you're doing. And so I feel like, and I do this, I know from my experience, I do do this. I try to create that world in my imagination. So it doesn't mean I'm not engaged with my audience, but it's not entertainment in the sense that, I mean, I'm. I'm doing this to create a moment in time, and I think that's why I like, say, doing medieval music and whatever, because I'm working on program notes for my next concert. And I think it was Saint Augustine, there are two things, one, somebody, I think he said, those who sing pray twice, and the other one is that It's more philosophical writing, but he's talking about when you're singing, you're in three places. You're in the present, you are in the past, and you're in your future. All in that one moment. Yeah

Speaker 3 [01:41:33] Yeah, that's true!

Karen [01:41:37] I like being, you know, I feel like that our anxiety and our fear of being heard or fear that this phrase is going to go like this, no, the more you connect with your sensations and your imagination, you're creating this world that comes from you wouldn't be there but for you. But you have to practice with that. You know, you're building, that's what you're building, right? Yes, you want your high notes to sound good, but I bet they'll sound good when you're really connected to yourself like that. Right. It becomes something different.

Christa [01:42:18] Yes. Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you would love people to know about your Feldenkrais work within the studio?

Speaker 3 [01:42:32] Um.

Karen [01:42:43] I feel like we covered, pretty much. I mean, I'm just looking, because I like to write, I have written some things, but it seems like... I mean, I just keep emphasizing that it's a process of learning and, you know, and I often think about you'll hear actors talk about this, right? They have to go to these places within themselves to find what a character was like, and we do this as singers, too. And I just feel like that the more The more you can go there, the whole idea of performing takes on a different dimension, more positive. I tell my students who

are getting ready for auditions, well, who is the new actor in Breaking Bad? I was not a fan, but. I think he's a very good actor. I liked this, I think there's even a YouTube video of him. When he goes to an audition, he's not seeking approval, he is not trying to get the job, he's using an audition as an opportunity to do his work. So I think if we could come from that aspect of you're getting to do your work. Rather than seeing the snow perfectly or seeing the sprays or see.

Christa [01:44:23] For seek approval.

Karen [01:44:24] Yeah, or seek approval, right? I mean, you have objectives, of course. And yes, we, goals can be good, you know, depending on what they are. But, yeah, you're not seeking approval.

Christa [01:44:38] But it could be a goal like, I'm gonna stay embodied during this whole song.

Karen [01:44:44] I had a student years ago, her goal when we did a voice class, she says, well, my goal is to not pass out or get sick.

Christa [01:44:53] Great goal. Love it. And she did.

Karen [01:44:55] And then, and soon after, because she was singing like with Oakland Symphony Chorus and kept losing her voice by the end of a concert set, and pretty soon she's not losing her voice anymore, right? That's a sign of being more embodied. You sense what you're doing, right? Yeah. And that's more important. Again, it's not so much what I say or what I think I observe. It's what are you sensing? And that is unending self-knowledge. Yeah, self-awareness.

Speaker 3 [01:45:28] Mm-hmm.

Christa [01:45:31] Mm-hmm, awesome. Anything else you want to add?

Karen [01:45:37] You know, I might think a million things after you leave.

Christa [01:45:40] That's what Susan said too. She's like, I'm gonna think of something after we're done.

Karen [01:45:45] But it's because, yes, thank you for this opportunity and also for your conversation, that you too, because it's. It's just very meaningful.

Christa [01:46:02] It is. It is, yeah. I think the interviews are probably my favorite part of this project. It's just so, I don't know, I think especially post COVID and making more and more progress in my life about like being embodied in the present moment. I'm really enjoying connecting with people more because I can like be here. So, and then to, you know, hear like other people's experiences and I don't know. It's become very special to me lately.

Karen [01:46:42] I really understand. Well, it's nice for me to get to connect with you after having you in a couple of classes and way, way long time ago. And just to see where some of those students like what people are doing and what you're doing and the really great gift you are to the community. It's amazing. No, I feel more and more passionate about this kind of learning.

Speaker 3 [01:47:14] Mmm.

Karen [01:47:15] Value it has for people. For me, I think music, I say this often, I really believe it saved my life. Because there is a discipline involved, right? Showing up for yourself. And, oh, well, the other thing I might offer is that this word discipline, which I learned from M. Scott Peck, the book, The Road Less Traveled. I don't know when I first read it because discipline, we often associate with punishment. You know, discipline means I see a belt or a stick or whatever.

Speaker 3 [01:48:00] Mm-hmm.

Karen [01:48:01] And he talks about discipline being self-love.

Christa [01:48:06] Mm-hmm, you're gonna make that time for yourself to show up for yourself

Karen [01:48:10] or if I drink too much that's not good for me or if I do you know what I mean it's like this like just setting knowing what is really nurturing and nourishing for you and and then the like for me as a singer I love I love practicing I mean I joked early on but I can remember last time I was for something that seems really hard, a lot of fast notes, some bop things. I had last practicing, setting the metronome, I get a little faster, okay, see if I can, you know what I mean? It's like setting those challenges, but getting to explore how I could do it and feel good. Yeah, you know I mean, that's a sense of embodiment and where I could feel myself. It didn't feel like I

was beating my head against a wall. It didn't feel like it didn't know what I was doing. It was just a matter of how many places could I sense at one time. And you know, so it was playful. That's the other aspect. And there have been studies that playfulness, we learn far better when we're playful and curious than the whole study of mindful education. Where they did a double blind study, I guess that's what you call it, they had two groups of adults being taught piano for the first time. One group was taught in terms of it has to be this way, no that's wrong, you have to do it this way. The other group was taught in terms of inviting, you know, all that suggestion. Maybe you want to do it like this. Oh, maybe try this, right? This sort of, the language of possibility, the language, of options. And of course, which group learned more rapidly was the one that was taught in terms of more encouraging and inviting support.

Christa [01:50:28] Right, because I mean there's often more than one way to do things, most things in the world. So it really closes off the mind to be like, this is how you make eggs. This is the other way! Like, what if...

Karen [01:50:46] I try this. I mean that's where you get creative. Maybe it doesn't always work out. I've had some flops. As a friend of mine who came for dinner once, I tried a new recipe, and she's so funny. She always sends cards for everything, and so she sent me a thank-you card, and it was such a compliment to our friendship that you felt comfortable to explore and experiment. Because the cake tasted awful. But she was a little complimenting, and I felt so comfortable with her that I could experience. Try a new recipe.

Christa [01:51:28] That's what I'm gonna say next time, I do that to people.

Karen [01:51:32] You'll notice we have watermelon.

Christa [01:51:36] Yeah, I can't even want to see the cake

Interview Transcript

Dr. Judith Hoffman, Chiropractor, Movement specialist, cotatichiropractic.com
Zoom Interview, Thursday, June 5th, 2025

Christa [00:03:21] Uh, I do, let's, I have, I need to read you a thing, um, before we begin. Um, so before we began, I'd like to confirm that I'll be audio recording this interview so that I can accurately reflect on your responses later. Your name and insights might be included in my final master's project. Unless you tell me otherwise, you're welcome to skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. Do I have your permission to record this conversation and include your name and professional role in the final project?

Judy [00:03:53] Absolutely, please do.

Christa [00:03:55] Great, so this is Krista Duran speaking with Judy Hoffman on whatever date this is. Thursday, June 5th, 2025. Great, and I'm going to pull up your email, but could we start with a little bit about who you are and your background in singing and then also your background in chiropractic or other as a yoga teacher and other modalities?

Judy [00:04:26] Yeah, I started singing apparently when I started talking. Um, I, my mom, uh, had, had been like, no, no. Like she wasn't, she never sang in any sort of avenue, but she's saying, uh she did audition for a pretty big role in Israel back in, anyway, my mom's saying and then, uh my aunt is a lifelong professional choir singer.

Christa [00:05:00] Mmm.

Judy [00:05:01] Who I grew up singing with, you know, annually at family parties and I've just been around music for all my life as long as I can remember, at least singers. I wasn't exposed to like musicians and musicianship until college and that was when I really started to study music. I started college when I Number 17. And I have done musical theater on and off throughout my younger years. But when I was 17, I was recruited to a semi-professional choir. And performed at both and then every winter we did anywhere from I think a dozen to like 18 Christmas performances

Christa [00:06:03] That's a lot.

Judy [00:06:05] We performed at like the. All all kinds of private parties for famous people and stuff so we did we did it and I did that for three years. I studied music in college for I told you I quit due to vocal fatigue and emotional stress.

Christa [00:06:33] Mm-hmm.

Judy [00:06:51] I've been teaching yoga for over 13 years now. About 13 years. And movement practices. I also have a number of certifications in different bodywork modalities, including... What was I going to say there? No, but we can do this bodywork modalities.

Christa [00:07:26] Yeah.

Judy [00:07:27] Make myself laugh a little bit. Um, so, uh... I'm a student professor or one of the main tutors hired by the school for three and a half years. I taught all of the basic sciences, licensing board exam reviews, and I've been a chiropractor. Functional being and not a collection of components in part.

Christa [00:08:20] Mmm, nice and to you know give you some background and like some of the other people I've been interviewing they've either been Teachers that are certified in a second modality like Feldenkrais, Alexander technique things like that Or they've been Singers that are also professionals like you so like singers that are all so therapists Or you know like things like, that and so I'm interested in your unique perspective about what stress and trauma do to the physical body and how that inhibits singing.

Judy [00:09:09] So from an anatomical perspective, man, that's just such a complex question for so many reasons, because there isn't just one way that your body will inhibit your access to voice under stress, right? Because when we're stressed, There's a lot of mechanisms and it really also depends on the individual stress response, which one of these is going to dominate, right? So first and foremost. Singing, but there's a correlation and I'll explain. Basically when We are developing in the womb. The psoas muscle is one of the first and largest muscles to develop. Its primary mechanism is to put us in the fetal position.

Christa [00:10:09] Hmm

Judy [00:10:11] It's origin point is at the posterior. When things contract and become inhibited, they contract towards the origin point. Now why that's relevant is when you're contracted in your psoas muscles and it's pulling towards that origin, pulling towards the posterior diaphragm, you're going to get posterior diaphragm inhibition. Also, it's the fascia, right? The fascia is strung along that entire area. So those things are connected intrinsically. So when one is tight and inhibited, the other things in that area will become tight and inhibitive just by virtue of how fascia works. There's a great video that I was watching just the other day and I reposted how like, if you have a musculoskeletal restriction in the fasci, it will restrict areas. Completely like say you have it like here next to one shoulder both shoulders will become inhibited even though one is more obviously inhibited than the other so these fascial effects are global and distribute entire regions and across the body in areas that we don't expect them to so all that man I feel like I need like a picture like I'm like explaining words like let me get out my diagram.

Christa [00:11:38] Yes, I have diagrams I can put on here.

Judy [00:11:43] Cool. Perfect. Let me just tell you what she's talking about. So then, right, not only do we get inhibition in the psoas, so that contributes to poor posturing. In musicians and singers in particular, that's the tendency to lock out the knees and be inhibited in the frontal hips, Right. So. That's the psoas tightness, posterior diaphragm tightness. The other connection to that is inhibited hips, inhibited posterior diaphragms. You're gonna get, well two things, lower cross syndrome, so functional postural syndrome is gonna create pain problems down the line. But you're also gonna disengage your core muscles. It's a compensation for a lot of singers where they stand super tall, chest up, shoulders tipped back, not actually engaged. Because they're tipping their whole rib cage, and then they're getting diaphragmatic breathing and expansion in the front, but not in the back.

Christa [00:12:48] Yep. Mhm.

Judy [00:12:49] Um, and, and that will create this coordination patterns in their core for long time to come. Um, not only does that run locally, but then we have the neurological pathways, right? So the neurological pathway that runs down to the diaphragm comes from C four actually. Um, so we're talking middle of the neck. So if we're getting neck stress, which we know is common in singers, over time, you're singing and saying, and that stress of belting, and you get tired in your posterior diaphragm restriction, you start using your superficial accessory respiratory muscles, and so all of this stress starts building up in here. Well, up in here, we have vagus nerve. So vagus nerve runs down and controls all of our autonomic nervous system, our breathing capacity, our heart rate, our resiliency to stress, digestion, so all the things that autonomic nerve system regulates, so you're getting autonomic nervous system dysregulation. Then just all of that aside, right? Just having stress in the neck in general is gonna start to tighten up around the vocal cords. And I actually believe that that comes from, you know, there isn't a lot of evidence to support this, but my belief and understanding and working with the body is that anytime you have diaphragm tightness, right, anywhere in the diaphragm, because it's a horizontal structure, it's going to the myofascial restriction, the pull, the pinch point at the back, is going to pull on the structures that run through it. So right, not only do we have this horizontal structure of the diaphragm, but we have diaphragmatic, the hiatuses, so the holes in the diaphragms where the esophagus runs through to go down to the stomach. And anyway, there's other ones for the aorta and such. But the point is that if it's pulling in one point, it's gonna pull on structures running through it and then all the way up. So I actually think that some of the vocal cord restriction comes from that diaphragm pulling on the esophagus, pulling all the way up to the vocal cords. Because if there's if there is diaphragm or esophageal tightness in one area, it's going to pull on the entire structure. There was another thing I wanted to say, oh, the pelvic floor. The pelvic floor is really not spoken about, and this, sorry, I'm not sure if I'm getting away.

Christa [00:15:34] It's okay, keep going. We'll go back if we need to.

Judy [00:15:37] Freestyle yeah um so the the pelvic floor is an analogous structure to the diaphragm and i think one of the biggest limitations about learning breathing in general but breathing for singing especially is the lack of acknowledgement of the pelvic floors maybe because it's a lot of kids that are learning singing i don't know but it it's it's the only horizontal running structure in your body, besides your diaphragm, pretty sure they're supposed to coordinate and work together, right? So proper, true breathing mechanics, the diaphragm is supposed to relax, and the pelvic floor is supposed, to relax down together.

Christa [00:16:20] Mm-hmm.

Judy [00:16:21] And as we exhale both are supposed to draw up and in. It's that dis-coordination pattern that leads to poor circulation to the prostate and aging men with pelvic floor dysfunction. There are women with prolapse issues, whether it's bladder or uterine prolapse, because of pelvic floor imbalance, not to mention just kids in general, but are like kids. But the pelvic floor, I think, is really understated in its importance of being a functional structure in allowing the body to be more resilient in singing. We're not learning how to breathe right.

Christa [00:17:03] Agree and also just you know linking that all up to trauma sorry my dog's playing and speaking next to me of course I've worked with a lot of people that have these issues that you talk about with the shoulders tilted back and the diaphragmatic restriction and not accessing their true core muscles and things like that. And just my personal journey accessing those and then I think about my students is that I feel like those systems of the body are often really affected by trauma. I know for me that my diaphragmatic structures my access to the core, the root of my being was like obliterated by trauma. So it was, when I was working on all that, I also had to like work on the traumatic things that like led to that. It wasn't just a physical thing.

Judy [00:17:59] Absolutely. Yes. Thank you for reminding me the prompt too. And then the trauma response is huge in the pelvic floor, right? We store so much emotional memory in the

hips and the pelvis in general. And Everybody absorbs trauma and holds them in their body differently, but the learned cultural response from the majority of us is to gas and hold our breath. And also to curl in.

Christa [00:18:36] Protect ourselves.

Judy [00:18:37] Protect ourselves. And it's all all of those structures that I just talked about are impacted in that process. And it's worse in some areas and some people more than you know what That's just trauma. That's how everybody absorbs it in their own way.

Christa [00:18:58] So just staying on this track of the physical trauma in the muscles, the tissues, the fascia. You know, in the studio, I'm sure you've experienced it, you know, a lot of times teachers are working with posture, with systems, like accessing systems correctly for singing. Would you have any advice or kind of go-to exercises that someone that's not a trained chiropractor or yoga teacher could suggest safely to their students?

Judy [00:19:42] Each everyone had a jiggle. People are so uptight and especially singers who've been like drilled to death, like to singing death, if you will, or creative death maybe. But people just need to learn how to jiggle and like let go of the tension in their body. Because the reality is that if you ever ask someone who's like rigid and traumatized to jiggle, You can imagine like your brain immediately knows it's like, oh, yeah That person's gonna look rigid and stiff and they're not really gonna be jiggly. They're gonna be inhibited and Reserved and it's that Limitation of the body to unlearn Unconscious contractions. Yeah, right. It's it's the we're holding on to these trauma responses and contractions and inhibitions and tightnesses and in all of these places. But if we can just learn how to like bend our knees and jiggle and jiggle every part of the body, get those muscles swinging around the bones, you find out real quick where you're tight. When you learn how jiggle properly, you're like, oh, that side doesn't move. So I think jiggling is invaluable and also deep squatting. I mean, getting that pelvic floor to release tension and also have resiliency and strength is crucial in the ability to like build proper breathing mechanics. So get your students into deep squats and have them do breathing exercises there warm-ups in a deep squat or you know And and experience what that feels like and then jiggle or whatever You know what? I mean get people into their bodies in a different way So they're not just stand with your knees slightly bent and big

Christa [00:21:42] Yeah. Yes. Now is there a proper technique to the jiggling?

Judy [00:21:52] The proper technique to jiggling? I could demonstrate, but it really is about just jiggling everything.

Christa [00:22:01] Shake it all out.

Judy [00:22:02] All right, hang on, I'm gonna demonstrate. Okay. Here we go. We're gonna see if I can get a good chip. I'm going to take my jacket off so you can actually see. My little body and my sweatpants this could they go in your report they're gonna see this weird

Christa [00:22:19] It's all it's all transcript. Oh, yeah See, that's not what I would have imagined at all. I'm glad we're having this.

Judy [00:22:33] You can get weird with it. Side-to-side and being able to like...

Christa [00:22:43] Uh-huh.

Judy [00:22:45] Move in all direction. But I'm also like bending and like jiggling my knees and getting my leg muscles swinging around.

Christa [00:22:53] Uh-huh, hips, shoulders, knees.

Judy [00:22:56] I also want to point out because sometimes when I show people and they're like spastic And they like get weird with it and they like shake their necks and all kind of like

Christa [00:23:10] Oh, right?

Judy [00:23:10] So it's about having a tapered control of like, not whipping your body around. Like you're trying to just like go to every end range, being able to be in a safe range for your body that's like getting everything moving. Does that make sense?

Christa [00:23:30] And what is?

Judy [00:23:30] I don't know if I have better language around that yet.

Christa [00:23:32] That makes sense. And what if they're too inflexible to do a deep squat? Is there something, a modification to work on that could be helpful?

Judy [00:23:44] Um yeah keep practicing okay and use honestly and use a structure to lower yourself down i'm gonna give you another one okay we're getting movement here Say you have a wall, and you can't squat. Walk yourself down, and then get as low as you can, and then sway your hips side to side.

Christa [00:24:09] Mm-hmm.

Judy [00:24:09] And hold it for a few seconds and then come back up. Do that every day until you can go all the way down. The other thing is just like doing stretches, too.

Christa [00:24:22] Mm-hmm.

Judy [00:24:24] Hip mobility. That's pretty much it.

Christa [00:24:29] Love it. And then, you know, a lot of what I'm talking with some of the other people I'm interviewing with are ways that they are calming down the nervous system. So I want talk about from your perspectives. The connections between the nervous system, dysregulation and vocal inhibition. And again, if there's anything that an untrained teacher could incorporate into their studio to help students.

Judy [00:25:12] So. Big part of Calming the nervous system is just proper breathing mechanics. Mm-hmm. We really when we're breathing better, our nervous system is automatically less stressed, but learning how to breathe better can be really difficult. That said. My mind goes a few places. It's like the age of the. Be like some of the kids, some of the kids coming in have like problems at home. So then I'm like, do we need like a deeper one? One of my favorites for just like calming down when you're really upset and like you're really like nervous system keyed up, right, depending on how upset the person is that we're trying to facilitate a calm is taking your two hands and cupping them like this and just covering. I actually learned that from Roberta, I love them. Yeah, it's a Z-Health move. 30 seconds of just like covering, and there's like other ones too, but I find that even just doing this, what we have to appreciate is that every single thing in our environment is a nervous system input. The sounds in the room, the lights, any moving object. The interpretation of every word that's being said is all nervous system input. And when a nervous system is totally fried and taxed, every minute input is sends you is too much. Yeah. So removing some of that stimulus for a period of time, like covering the light in such a way that nothing comes through. And you're just focused on breathing and preferably in a silent or quiet room.

Christa [00:27:24] Mm-hmm

Judy [00:27:26] that really can bring the nervous system back down. The other thing is like, earthing, grounding, like taking your shoes off and just feeling your feet on the floor, doing some like mindful walking, or even sitting down and like massaging your own feet because of the proprioceptive nerves that are in the feet and ankles and the way that that feedback loop of like feeling safety.

Christa [00:27:52] Mm-hmm.

Judy [00:27:54] And comfort can be reassuring to the nervous system and allow it to ground. There's so many different breathing exercises. I don't wanna like, get in and date you with like, you know, they're out there, there's lots of them. But those are just some of my like immediate thoughts of that, like.

Christa [00:28:16] Yeah, and those are more, those are unique. Those are unique.

Judy [00:28:17] How upset is the person? Yeah, exactly. What kind of intervention?

Christa [00:28:22] Exactly. And, you know, in your words, why is nervous system regulation good for singing?

Judy [00:28:43] My I just what isn't nervous system regulation good for?

Christa [00:28:54] It's good for being a human!

Judy [00:28:57] Oh wait, you went silent. Where'd you go?

Christa [00:29:00] Um i think i'm still here okay are you am i can you hear me

Judy [00:29:07] Yeah, I can't now. Sorry, it like blipped in and out for a second. It did, I think.

Christa [00:29:09] It did, I think the internet connection...

Judy [00:29:12] Okay, why is it good for singing? First of all, capacity and longevity, like your ability, like when your nervous system is more resilient, you have more endurance because your body isn't expending energy, metabolic energy on nervous system stress. So you have metabolic energy to give to your performance.

Christa [00:29:47] Mmm, nice, love that.

Judy [00:29:50] Baseline yep Secondary when you are more grounded and present and the nervous system is calm You're more able to Connect with the cadence

Christa [00:30:07] Mm-hmm.

Judy [00:30:07] Aggressive qualities of the music. Whereas when you're stressed and like thinking too hard about it, there's more of an emphasis on like pitch match and like timing match. But you know, when you hear someone that's like technically on it, but like, they don't have their emotion behind it, because you're thinking too hard. Yep. That. And just when your nervous system is calm, and your breathing capacity has access. You're going to have more more capacity and endurance to sing for longer and to a greater belting degree or high notes or low notes or whatever your thing is, but you'll be able to do it better.

Christa [00:30:52] Love it. All right, we already talked about some of these, but do you have any other practical ways that teachers can work with the body to release tension and have more access to more freedom vocally that they could do as an untrained and in second modality? And if you don't have any more, it's okay too.

Judy [00:31:25] The only other one that I would say and it's because of some of the specific posturing related to singing posture stress.

Speaker 4 [00:31:35] She's a baby. Hi, cutie. Oh, my goodness. Look at those ears. It's your mama. She's been gone all day, and now she's busy, and I want love. Yes, you do. Sorry. Um. He he he he.

Judy [00:31:53] What a cutie. Okay, so related to specific singing tension posture, like the posterior tension, I think doing things like, what are those called? Like the vocal, I always call them like the vocal rainbows, you're going.

Christa [00:32:09] Oh yeah, like sirens, uh-huh.

Judy [00:32:13] So I think doing those like with some spinal waves because it's spine tension and spine segmental mobility that we need to get like optimal nervous system flow. Yeah. And so getting the whole spine moving like while you're kind of, so getting whole spine while you releasing vocal cord tension. Cause I always think of those like vocal where they call fire hydrants or rainbows. Um, I, I feel like those help release vocal tension, but if you're holding tension elsewhere, it's like half effective, but you can get like your whole body into it and make it like a body fire hydrant.

Christa [00:32:56] Yes.

Judy [00:32:58] You might actually get like a little bit more release from that, but I think the ones that we talked about are really

Christa [00:33:07] Um, and then my, just my last thing was just kind of your reflections on the role of like body-based awareness for performers to help them through emotions, stored emotions, difficult emotions. And if you have none, it's okay too.

Judy [00:33:32] Why do I have nothing to say?

Christa [00:33:33] At, uh, 1034 at night.

Judy [00:33:37] Area. I'll say one thing about it that I think the emotional awareness and maturity is lacking in the majority of people. If you could teach that skill, please teach it to everybody. But that said, you know, it only stands to benefit every individual. To being their most authentic and grounded and peaceful self is to have that body awareness when we're starting to feel stress and to not hold it, swallow it or bury it, but to acknowledge, embrace and release it in real time. That's the whole society. We all need that at the end.

Christa [00:34:22] Yep, nice! And is there anything else that we didn't cover that you would like to add or think that's important?

Judy [00:34:35] No, I think I got into my whole little rant in the beginning about anatomy. I really think that's the whole thing. Like it's just about understanding how connected everything is. Yeah. And if you can, and if you could let go of all those little spots, man, focal freedom just sounds like the ultimate goal. Like, it's or a disciplinary modality for people to achieve that.

Christa [00:35:12] In my studio, I take a lot of elements of Alexander and Technique and Feldenkrais because again, you only can go so far with like, this is a vowel shape and stuff like that, but if people don't know how to use their core and how the muscles work together, then at At a certain point, I'm like, we have to integrate you.

Judy [00:35:42] Another great. I love felt press, get people to do a partner... Waves

Christa [00:35:56] Yes, I should do that for our workshop someday. Yeah. We'll have people pumping in pairs.

Judy [00:36:10] Pump in.

Christa [00:36:11] Book pumping. Awesome, um, well, I think that's all of my questions. That was very great. I had some great fabulous Quotable quotes in there Especially you know about how, you know, you might still be singing if you had had people as guides that were helping you in these areas. It's just so true with so many people.

Judy [00:36:46] At the at the peak of my like performance. I don't want to call it a career because that's generous. But you know what I'm saying? Yeah. The time when I was performing, I was probably like the most traumatized and like unprocessed in my life. And there was so much stress in my body. And then I was in these like extremely high performing, high standards of rehearsal. The amount of stress that it caused me on top and it being the one outlet that I really like, I had nothing going for me. And I was like, I'm gonna take a beginning singing class. And the teacher walked up to me after the first day that I opened my mouth and he goes, I need you to join my choir. And I was like, oh, I was so terrified because I just had so much going on. I was, like, winter auditions. And he was, you just auditioned. I need you to be there Monday through Friday at 8 a.m. I was oh, shit. So, you know, it was like this huge opportunity to me to have a purpose and something that I really loved and enjoyed and was passionate about. And then it like. It made me feel like I wasn't capable of moving forward professionally because I wasn't resilient enough under the circum, like the endurance trial that I was being put through.

Christa [00:38:19] Yeah, and you know, it breaks my heart too and you don't I'm glad people come back when they're you know in their 60s or whatever, but I have students coming back and being like You know, I haven't sung in 30 years because of things like this And then I'm like, oh it's too bad you have great voice like I'm sad that you have this Trauma or you had this other trauma people weren't able to like help you through or

Judy [00:38:45] People tell me I got an alright singing voice, and I'm like... It's like bittersweet because it's like yeah, there was a time when I really wished I could have done something with that night I've always loved singing like but it's just a it's justice for funsies

Christa [00:39:02] now. But it's less stressful. Yeah, it is. When it's for fun.

Judy [00:39:10] Kind of, except now that I'm getting older and I'm like getting muscular vocal cord changes, and I don't have the practice consistency that I once did, not being able to hit the same notes as...

Judy [00:39:29] We should chat. Try to sing something and be like, no, that doesn't sound, I can tell that that does not sound right.

Christa [00:39:35] Oh, right. We should, we should chat. Yeah. Cause, cause, uh, you know, as you, you age and your vocal folds change, they change consistency, they change weight, and then you have to kind of, it's like relearning something about your body, like your entire life. Like how, what do I, what I do with this now? So we should chat.

Judy [00:39:59] I'd love that you can get it all back. I always love chatting with you. Okay.

Christa [00:40:02] Okay? Alright, thank you so much for taking the time to have this interview with me and one more question. Are all your after name initials and certifications on your website so I can list them?

Judy [00:40:24] Yeah, something like DCERYT and YACEP.

Christa [00:40:29] Oh yeah, okay, it's on your footer for your email.

Judy [00:40:33] Oh, yeah.

Christa [00:40:34] Yeah. Okay. Great. All right. Thank you. Hope to see you soon.

Interview Transcript

Heidi Moss Erickson, Voice Teacher, heidimoss Erickson.com

Zoom Interview, Wednesday June 4th, 2025

Christa [00:01:19] Um, okay, so I have to read you a thing before, which is before we begin, I'd like to confirm there'll be audio recording this interview so I can accurately accurately reflect on your responses later. Your name and insights may be included in my final master's project. Unless you tell me otherwise, you're welcome to skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. Do I have your permission to record this conversation and include your name and professional role in the final project? Yes. Right. So that way. This is tiny, tiny, Hmm. Sorry. No, no problem. I never use zoom anymore. Oh, yeah. Right.

Heidi [00:02:08] Exactly, that was our COVID mainstay. Right. Recording in progress.

Christa [00:02:13] Okay, there it was. Yay. So, this is Krista Durian speaking with Heidi Moss Erickson on June 4th, 2025, and she has given consent to be recorded and identified in this research. Um, so can you share a bit about of your background both as a singer and a scientist?

Heidi [00:02:37] Yes, so I'll try to be brief. I do, oh, I have to say, okay. So yeah, my background is in both science and music and I started at Overland in a double degree and then I went on to graduate work, actually in biochemistry and neuroscience and I worked in a lab for seven years. And I should say, throughout that time, I actually wrote an essay, but I wanna. Put in the front that I have a history of depression and mental health and that kind of thing. So that was always sort of my motivation early on for sort of, especially the biochemistry of neuroscience. But then I went on, I was in a lab, funded my singing habit, became a professional singer. And in 2007, at sort of the height of my career, I came down with a severe cranial nerve injury. And I was told I'd never sing again. My larynx is asymmetrical. My articulators didn't work. And it took about two years. But that's when I dove into the motor part of neuroscience, of how the vocal mechanism is wired. And so it was kind of through, you know, sometimes through tragedy. You know, I also had an abusive marriage. Like, there are all these things that. You could look at as sad stories, but they ended up being really useful stories in terms of creating a curiosity for how the brain works, both, you know, in our bodies are instrument, our minds are instrument and in addition to the motor. So it's sort of combined all of these things. And because I had a background in science, I knew how to read papers, I knew how to critically read papers. Because sometimes people say, oh, it's science. It's in a peer review journal. And that does not mean it's right, right? And to be open-minded when things change, right, when your mind changes. So it sort of was a philosophy of thinking as well as application that then I applied to my teaching.

Christa [00:04:42] Um, and then what kinds of students do you typically work with? Like ages of skill levels, that kind of thing.

Heidi [00:04:48] Yeah, so I mean my favorite for the longest time I worked with adult amateurs that was sort of my favorite even elderly people So it was like people who just had a passion for wanting to sing but you know We're I taught continuing ed at the conservatory. I taught pre-college. So it's really all age groups. Now I work at a university. So I'm working with college students. So, I would say all ages and even neurodivergence, and I just love treating everyone as sort of an individual and there's no formula, it's just meeting them where they are.

Christa [00:05:25] Nice, nice. Um, all right. And I know you wrote some answers to some of these, though.

Heidi [00:05:35] Yeah.

Christa [00:05:35] Um, so it's...

Heidi [00:05:37] I said we were a little too long.

Christa [00:05:39] That's okay!

Heidi [00:05:41] I have a touch of the tis of myself, so I...

Christa [00:05:44] The more information is...

Heidi [00:05:45] Yeah, I wrote a chapter for Oxford Pedagogy on Neurodiversity and that's the whole thing. It's like biodiversity, you know, so.

Christa [00:05:53] Yes. Um, what are some of the most useful insights from neuroscience that you feel like might be useful for run-of-the-mill teachers to kind of grasp?

Heidi [00:06:11] Yeah. Ah, that's why I'm writing a book. So it's taking a book, I think we've the whole field. I mean, first of all, we have to realize humans have been doing this for, you know, more than 12,000

Christa [00:06:26] And by this you mean singing?

Heidi [00:06:28] Yes, and it came before language, it came before music, and we've made it complicated and we've taken observational science of what is observed as what is done, and, we've lost sight of the why and the how that I work with the Hindustani classical singer, like how other cultures do it, this western music-centric approach that has gotten so thinky and so observation based, conflating observation with action. If I see my belly doing this, that means I do this. I think the first thing I would say, my dad has this like four stumbling blocks to truth. There's this kind of culture of guru worship and information worship that. Just because it sounds scientific or it's anatomy doesn't mean that's how we do. Is it interesting? Yes, it's being able to critically think and discern what is interesting versus what is useful. And so that's the first thing. And then also it should be joyful. It's not something that should be a hierarchy in the space of teaching. It should be a mutual exploration. And students need agency to learn. They need to color outside the lines to feel, um, to learn how their voice works. So that those are two. And then the third element is it is not a piano, right? It is not even in how it's cortically wired, you know, the violinist left-hand cortically expands. But the singer, your brain and my brain are identical. I could take it, and that's been done. I can take electrodes for your brain, put it into a computer, audiate what I wanna sing and the computer could do it. What changes it with experience is actually the connections. That's what's unique about singing as opposed to other instruments. Also the number of muscles involved. So the fact that we've been training singers in parallel with doing scales like piano, teaching theory like, you know, we've even in this. Education system that is not conducive to what singers need. And I think we've been selecting for resilience, not talent as a result of who can withstand getting corrected more in lessons and coachings. Yes. I do have opinion, as you knew.

Christa [00:08:58] I mean one of my big insights as a singer was, you know, my undergrad teacher was awesome, very kind person, but I always felt like I was doing, like for me personally, like the things that were going on internally, I always thought like I was doing everything wrong and that everything I was singing for anybody was complete terrible singing and I realize now like some things I've learned, you know like that technique where you like say something good that happened. And then you say something like, let's work on this. Like that would have been good if anyone had been like, oh, but you are doing all these other things right.

Heidi [00:09:36] Exactly. And I always say you can take what's working and apply it to what's not. You know what I mean? It's all about homeostasis or the acoustic is right or it happens to be, you know, so let's feel what the good feels like. And then you know and I always see like I don't even call it's not like a mistake. It's like brain data. I was like, oh, that was cool brain data let's like, you know. Let's let's play around that. Let you you know, feel around that. And I also

think attention, like we are, we cannot think of more than, you know, consciously one thing at a time. And I think teachers tend to want to give everything. I think that was what was great about my anecdotal story about adult amateurs as I taught a continuing ed class. And the CEO of a tech company took it. And he actually wrote a blog for his company based on the class, because he said when he first met me, and he went to one. He said, I thought she was a terrible teacher because she was praising these people that sucked. Saying it but he said then I saw how she used that to get them better and he said so he said what he learned in voice class made him a better CEO because he started using that with his. With people he worked with rather than this is what you're doing wrong. He started to find the things that they were doing right and then that led to more improvement that had he just written out what the bad things were.

Christa [00:11:05] Right, because you don't know what you're doing, right? And then just relating that to this project, which is about dealing with strong emotions in the studio. A lot of our strong emotions are around feeling criticized and like, I can't do anything right. And then also if you have someone that has depression, trauma, low self-esteem coming into the studio, it's going to exacerbate it.

Heidi [00:11:32] Thousand percent. Yeah, and you know, I was one of those people, you know I mean I had as I said very bad depression. You know trauma and I have very strong opinions about it and I wrote that about trauma informed because I think you know we are a culture that Likes to label things and likes to create narratives and what we don't realize about the brain is that these stories get repeated and that becomes more and more so I actually and you wrote about like when I wrote something down there that I sort of the language um sorry I'm just looking at my own it was something about

Christa [00:12:20] Maybe like.

Heidi [00:12:22] Oh yeah, guiding out. How do you guide them out? And I think I like to say I'm guiding them to something else rather than guiding them out because I think that's what I found, you know, it's like I would go to therapy, right, and I would tell every week about this trauma that I had, you I didn't realize. Then I'd leave and all I would be thinking about is that negative thing or that I have this thing or even being labeled as someone with depression. It's like I, that identity became a part of my existence when really I was just trying to move on from that. And in part it was because they kept saying, you have this, we need to get you out. Um, so I think I just, you know, we're all human and, and Everyone has experiences that are traumatic that are sad and and I think I as a voice teacher cannot Change someone's psychology if they have chosen to be make that into their identity. You know, even though I have trauma, I don't say that I am, you know I need to be addressed in a trauma-informed way. Um, so I don't like that what's happening in our field with that. There's even whole psychology Papers, I can even share my review that says that that that word is actually diluting people who've had bigger traumas right when you start hearing, you know and trauma is something that Anyway, so what I'll say is I redirect and everyone's going to come in Whether it's a bigger thing or a little thing, you you know, they could be exhausted fatigue in its own way. Right. So yeah, so i'm not there to diagnose what is bringing them to this space with this affect, it can be multiple things. What I can do is in that moment is cultivate presence and positivity and safety that, and it may not be instant and it may take trial and error. I had one singer who was exhausted and she's very shy and you know, she couldn't be silly crazy. You know, in, in what, you know? Like that's that directive it, it, so I call it instead of trauma informed. I wanted to recall it empathy informed. Yes. Cause I really think that's what we have to do. Then it applies to everybody. You have to be insightful enough. I don't need to be a psychologist, but I need to know when certain tools will work. And she just needed to sit and hug herself on the yoga ball and just, you you know, have something tactile and that brought her into the space and into her, you know. So it's, it's going to be custom every time. It's not a one, one strategy, but it's always our job is to direct attention really fundamentally. And it's not going to tongue, lip, jaw, breath. It can be, you know I find

multi-sensory is very helpful because then you're lighting I look at the brain like a circuit board, like how many things can I light up at once so that I can make them present and not light up the things that are the triggering things or the challenging things. So if I can, I find tactile, there's the sensory thing for someone who's not sensitive to tactile, obviously, or squeezing a ball or hugging a stuffed animal for the fragile states, for the sleepy, low energy. And then you can sort of shift to play to, and that was the example I was gonna show you of a client I had, cause I do some neuro rehab stuff, but this is a R&B singer that I can share with you if we have time, who they, it was in conjunction with an ENT, they thought she had muscle tension dysphonia, they were gonna do surgery on her, they were going to botox her tongue. She won a Grammy last year, so she's like- What? They're gonna botox your tongue, okay. So the thing is, they brought me in, there was a light, because they said, we don't see anything wrong, right? Yep. And in one day, I can show you that. It's only three minutes, but I'll show you after later. But that idea, it was redirecting attention. And it was being so flippin' crazy and so non-targeted with the stuff that she's usually having to sing that got her so outside of it that she could sing. That kind of thing.

Christa [00:17:03] Yeah. And then, and going back to, you know, something you said just a little bit ago, which was, cause it's kind of related to my next question that I have in the list is when, and also preface, I was talking to one of the psychologists that I was talking to to interview for this project. And he was saying that people often get so attached to a modality or, um, like a way of doing things that they try to force everyone to do it. And they go like, that's how we're gonna get you through this and they don't sit in that empathetic space and notice like that's not going to work for this person. Exactly.

Heidi [00:17:42] And that's such a critical piece. That's why I'm so against methods or even labels, you know, because we have to have a huge toolbox, you know. And it's about, and even with pieces, whether it's the emotional side or the technical side, it's all context dependent. And, you know my whole thing is, you know every student's gonna come, Even if. All the stars are aligned if they had a little less sleep or they didn't eat or it's a certain time of day, we all come at it differently every time and it's knowing what's gonna open that door in that moment and knowing when to shift if it's not working, you know what I mean? That's the other thing. Yeah, so that's why I like the empathy led and not getting latched onto a modality.

Christa [00:18:33] Right. So it's part of my next question, and we somewhat answered this, but taking it a little bit further, I was reading your 2022 Nats Journal article, Making Play Part of Practice.

Heidi [00:18:45] Oh, yeah, yeah.

Heidi [00:18:46] And as you said, play is not a method. There aren't a set of protocols. The goal is daring to experiment. So my question is, if play is a method, how can we teach it to other teachers in a way that they can learn how to do something and use it?

Heidi [00:19:02] Yeah so i think i i separate play into two categories one is general non-targeted play which is we're so literal as singers right we so want to sing the you know the literal right way right and and the right tempo and so really it's about Taking a chunk, well, knowing chunks, taking a chunk or even singing the whole piece, there are different ways to do this. Invent, I have emotion cards, right? Like you can give them a foundational play that's broad. Different emotions, different characters, different tempi, different dynamics, right. Just something like that. And experiment because you will find, and this is where I disagree with Lynn Helbing on masterclass syndrome. The reason why masterclasses work because it's a different. Brain input, right? The singer in that moment is getting someone else's interpretation, which can lead to success. But that doesn't mean it's useless success, right. Oh, they can never replicate that again. The key is to understand why did that work? What happened and why did it work? A lot of times it's because a lot of masterclasses are given like emotion or gesture or something like that and not something technical. Right. So.

Heidi [00:20:27] Because there's only-

Heidi [00:20:27] Oh, sorry, keep going. Oh, no, no. But yes, there's a limited time, so, but that's not useless. That's actually very useful for the singer. And I even encourage singers to play on their own in the absence of, you know, and I can tell when, you, know, a student has just been literal and going dot, dot, for that high note because it gets reinforced, you know, it's like, did you come out from above? Did you improvise? Did you do jazz hands? You know, those kinds of things. So I think you can start small with play in terms of Intention, affect, variation, you know, singing a slow song fast, a fast song slow, taking out variables, those kinds of things. So that's, you don't, but it's not, you know, eventually you get into what, how this works in terms of the neuroscience. So then you're able, like I'm able to say, okay, I know there are five different cortical signals for one note, so I need to. If a note is difficult and they're not equilibrating or the registrations, then I can design play by creating a pattern around that note and make them do gestures to show that it's not a big leap or that the high note's down, right? So you can throw a ball low or you can make a figure eight, you know? So those kinds of things, using gesture, using, and these are all things that other cultures use, you know, Hindustani classical singers is not a written. Written genre. So they don't have this sense of quantization of notes or space, right? It's all so knowing that that's not an issue for them, because they don't conceive of low, high, like their obsessions are different. And that's another humorous thing. Like we all have obsessions, but that this is a uniquely Western classical thing of these. Registrations and quantization of everything. Yes. You know, even I never even say chest and head. It's like, there's nothing binary. And in this process, it's a gray scale. And there's, you know, all of these permutations, and everyone should be able to sing every genre, you know without a problem. And auditory and audition anyway, so it's going how we're wired to sing rather than. How the past 200 years has structured a pedagogy, right? It's a very narrow, narrow, narrow skewed lens. Yeah. I don't know if that answered the question.

Heidi [00:23:03] Um, and so, uh, something else I wrote in that, that same article was that so much of a singer's life is micromanaged and regulated and play gives them a say and removes the fear of being wrong. So be silly with them. Um, but what advice would you give to teachers who have a hard time, like letting go of control and perfectionism?

Heidi [00:23:23] So you know that to me is the problem right um i can't i'm not in control of how to change a teacher who likes to be in control Maybe the best advice is try it yourself, you know, because it's hard to teach it if you haven't experienced it. I mean, I used to be one of those people too, you know, and find us if the teacher doesn't feel safe because it goes back to we're asking a student to be vulnerable. We're asking a student do silly things. And if the teacher can't, I sometimes if I feel a student who is... Okay with it, but still shy like you can see they're smiling and they think it's fun, but they can't join the party yet I find that the crazier I am the better they can you know, again, this is engaging someone who's like Inhibited it doesn't work being crazy But someone who you can see is finds the silliness and then we play catch I think a teacher needs to experience that themselves to feel Lesson control themselves and use control in a different way. Because it's not that play is out of control. Maybe I should reframe that. It's. It's like there's this circle of this is your comfort zone and this is where the magic happens. It's realizing that babies are a great example. The brain in singing is so complicated that the only way we can get better, actually I don't think I've ever, I can share with you a document I have. Proficiency is efficiency. There's another culture which is like we learn a song and then we. Sing it, and then we move on. I think we don't spend enough time living with pieces that we get enough algorithmic data so it's automated. The way we get automated, and people who sing the same thing are at the same role, right? Or eight shows a week on Broadway is because of repetition under different circumstances. Now, they're not repeating it varied, like they're doing inversions or they're not doing different characters. But it is a repetition under different.

Heidi [00:25:49] Yeah, you feel different every day, your bodies are intimate.

Heidi [00:25:52] Exactly. So what we're trying to do in play is expedite that process because you're giving variation that gives algorithms. So if you, if maybe you tell the structured

perfectionist teacher that this is science, that we've been doing mechanistic science, but the brain I mean, this will be, this is in some of the papers I've written, but you know, respiration is signaled in singing differently than when you're just sitting there breathing. It's not the muscular thing. The laryngeal motor cortex is recruiting diaphragm, lungs, the larynx motor cortex. It's one of those things that just blows your mind, but then makes sense. It's a valve system. So whatever's happening here, that same region is signaling to pelvic floor diaphragm right it's not what's happening as you're sitting there not vocalizing yeah so when you understand that concept that you that play is scientific. And maybe that's how you word it. And I think that's the danger of the word play. Because it's essential for motor learning. Singing, motor learning, all this motor learning and singing is taken from Schmidt and Lee who studied athletics or studied things that aren't evolutionary. Singing's evolutionary. It's differently wired than any other thing. So I think we have to frame this exploration as science. And maybe that'll convince the people who want to be in control that you'll get more out of your singer if you play. I don't know if that helps.

Heidi [00:27:42] Mm-hmm. Mm-hm. Nice. All right. Good. You answered all these questions. Um, I know. I'm sorry. You're good. No, you're great. This is awesome. Um, do you have any, like, are there any, like, go-to exercises that you're just like, this works for most people?

Heidi [00:28:01] Um, yeah, I would say, as I said, I'm such a context thing, I can give examples of a pedagogical situation. So we all have, like, I have type A students, right? They just want to jump right in, jump right and jump right. And then they'll run out of air. So running out of there is a real common thing, running out of air in a phrase, and then they get paranoid that they don't have enough. And then that feeds the system and then that adds to work. Same with body mapping. I think all singing should feel energy without effort. So there's a win-win with taking a beat and it's really hard because we feel like we have to fill space. We feel like the lesson has to be boom, boom, boom, filled with space. So I will take a beat to recalibrate the nervous system. So it's the physiological size, because as we sigh every five minutes normally, but when you're talking or singing a lot, you don't, you forget, it's a natural process. So I'll do the inflating the terminal alveoli. We'll take a beep and I'll make them close their eyes while they do it. So it has two purposes. The first is. It recalibrates their carbon dioxide oxygen ratio, which is constantly getting thrown. And it can make us feel nervous because as soon as you get carbon dioxide buildup, you feel like you have to breathe, your heart rate goes up, we interpret heart rate going up as nervousness, right? There's this loop of interpretation. So it solves that, it resets that, especially those who are like, the second thing is when we're at rest with our eyes closed, Our brain is replaying the motor skill forwards and backwards 20 fold.

Speaker 4 [00:29:50] Mm-hmm.

Heidi [00:29:51] So it's a hippocampal to neocortex consolidation and just takes 10 to 20 seconds. So sometimes that reset can be helpful for everybody and myself included. So that's something that, as I said, has a double, it's nervous system reset and a motor memory consolidation step. Um, so much is going on behind the scenes and singing. That's the other thing. It's hard for people to realize that when they're not attending, things are happening and important things are happening. So I do the same, I do this same thing with a successful skill. If something is super successful, it's always chunked. Also chunking is really important. Um, So that's something I do universally. They'll come in with a piece. And we'll make an exercise out of it. So that way it's not redundant. You can make an exercise out of anything. So we'll find the sections that, you know, again, it's ironing. It's not the whole piece that's hard. It's these sections. And then we have what's called transfer of motor skills so that will transfer. But this does apply to the emotion side, because what is learning, right? And especially for, this is where, again, motor learning and that knowledge of performance, all of that, when it's a personal instrument, it's different, right. Our voice has so much of our identity, our emotion, that really it can't just be this motor skill, right, it's not a mechanism. It is part of us. And so I think it's

so important to have that, you know, whether you call it I mean, or the reward or seeking, right, to have. The nervous system and the experience of the singer be positive.

Heidi [00:31:55] Yeah.

Heidi [00:31:59] And I am of the mind that I feel, at least now, I don't even think there's any, everyone who works with me now is like, you know, I'll joke, I'll say the better you get, the meaner I get. And they'll say, I have never seen you mean. You know, it's like, because we're always playing. It's like you, oh, I always leave the lesson happy. I always lead the lesson better. I always live, and I think that should be a universal. Yes It's like, you shouldn't have a student leave frustrated, unhappy, thinking that they didn't achieve anything.

Speaker 4 [00:32:37] Mm-hmm.

Heidi [00:32:37] And anyone can achieve anything because this is what drives us. And without a clear idea of what they're going to do in between. I think teachers don't give enough of, cause it's not just fricking exercises you do all week, right? It's like the tool to know how to practice so that they feel and that the fact that there's no mystery. Like I don't want you, I don't want a student to feel like I'm, I'm creating some sort of magic. I say, my goal is for you not to need me. The best gift is... So I think it's reframe, and I hate to say it, it's like the, unfortunately, what's gonna reframe emotions in the studio. And I have a lot of singers that have, yeah, a new student I have right now, like her former voice teacher was just, I felt cruel. Yeah. You know? Yeah. And she got so afraid to sing that, am I doing it wrong? Am I doing wrong? Am I do it right? And I was like. You know, it's hard to undo that. I'm finding that challenge. She's now much better. But undoing that is hard. So it's changing a culture.

Heidi [00:33:44] That's hard yeah and also you know some of the exercises that you're doing that are that are exterior play someone could recreate i know that for me in my underground i always felt like they'd be like well why didn't you practice i'd be Like i don't besides like learning the notes and the language i don't actually know what i'm supposed to practice because i don't understand what you're trying to tell me yet yeah and it was like that constantly throughout Most of my life I was like- Well, I don't understand the concept that you're trying to teach me yet, so if I can't practice it, I'm gonna do it wrong.

Heidi [00:34:17] Exactly, exactly. And then there is worry that, you know, you, you practice and you're reinforcing something negative, right? Right. So, um, hold on, I'm going to.

Heidi [00:34:30] But if you're like, go sing this phrase and tickle some sheep every time, like, you could do that.

Heidi [00:34:36] Exactly. And the thing is, is it has value, right? And that's why how babies learn language is so is so essential because it really shows the process. You know, I look at these, there's these twins that are like, you know, and they're just talking and they've using gesture also the still that the posture shit, sorry, pardon my French, but it's like, You watch people on stage. And they're not like, you must stand, you know, and I think I move, I like, you know because it's, it's coupled and I think it's inhibitory. You know, there's this great, I used to do like these stupid yoga videos when I, when I was pregnant, but it was like, ask not what makes the breath, ask what is inhibiting the breath. And I think it's that idea that as soon as we start putting these restraints, I can't move, I must stand like this, my jaw can't move, you start getting locked down restriction.

Heidi [00:35:41] Well, I also think it, it closes the pathway to neurodivergent people as well, because like, for example, I had this one student who, um, had a lot of, who's doing with autism that had a lot of, um stemming. Yes. Right. And so one of the things that we were working on our studio was incorporating the need to move into movements that fit the song, which included like, um, moving in like Classical Italian aria from 1700, right? Which people don't like anyone to move to Right and it's just so funny because every time we'd have like a master class with an outside like person outside They'd be like, can you just sit still? Yeah, and i'm like, i'm, like First of all, you're just wanting stillness because you don't Like people moving in certain styles And

secondly, you don't you're not understanding what this person is. And so she would just be like sitting there like freaking out Like, stop!

Heidi [00:36:41] Exactly. And I think that, again, there's, we're in a culture, unfortunately, where movement, you know. I try to differentiate practice and performance. People are afraid that if they do crazy things in practice that they'll do it in performance. I was like, no, we do this to bake in the motor and to feel free. Then we'll have to practice performance, you know, but you shouldn't be stiff in performance, you can, we can stage a gesture or we can stage that. But that is part, you now, we're baking a cake here. And if you try to do, if you inhibit the movement during the baking phase, Then that's gonna lead to some misplaced tension kind of thing.

Heidi [00:37:26] Right. I'm gonna hold it somewhere. Yeah. So, do you, are there any like educational resources or courses available for teachers to kind of learn this stuff? Like you're not going to learn this in most undergrad programs, going out and being a young teacher?

Heidi [00:37:47] I mean, I think it's staying curious. And I mean I teach at the voice study center. I'm sure there's still some of the courses that I've taught on this up there. I mean not to toot my stuff, but I think. I think there are a lot of books on my creativity or the artist's way or. Yeah, I think be wary of methods, be wary of where to learn this stuff. Experiment yourself, you know? But I don't know. I mean, I sort of had to find all this trial and error through my own thing, you know, and... And your own people interactions. Yeah, yeah, and teaching. But I think, you now, reading the, like reading the neuros, the evolutionary neuroscience, and reading that, you, know, Jaak Ponskepp is the one who talked about play as the learning tool in mammals, and watching, you when you... Frame singing as an evolutionary biological thing as a separate thing that's identity that has that really needs to be treated separately than other instruments um you start to see why do we sing you know it's like it makes sense it's one of those super obvious things we don't sing to make me make pretty sound you know the brain is missing a huge piece or of information, of how to do this, if it's just about sound, and That doesn't mean sound isn't in the equation. It's just that there's. It at least just has to have a percentage. And I think it lost a huge part of the why, you know, why we sing. Yeah. And, you know then I'll use again to take out the judgment step. I do like visual biofeedback. I like singers when they're looking at a screen there's something that takes them out of self judgment. I don't know, there must be some psychology of that. You know, it's a different sense because we can't hear ourselves very well. So maybe there is something to be said for seeing wiggles on a screen. Reading music is also a distraction. So I really try to get singers to memorize as soon as they can. Nice. Because I do think that's a artificial. It's like asking people to translate Chinese in real time. It's an occipital cortex that has to go to the auditory cortex first.

Speaker 4 [00:40:29] Great.

Heidi [00:40:29] We always forget even when we're reading music, there needs to be an auditory signal unconsciously. So it's this visual to auditory that is well-wired in some people and not in others. I'm a terrible sight reader, but I do a lot of new music and it's like, people are always like, if you give me something, I can learn in it very quickly, but I can't read it on site very well. And that's a different skill, whether it's neurodivergence or what, but people always assume I'm a good reader. My piano teacher made me sight read microcosmos every lesson at Oberlin, and it was horrifying because I couldn't, like, bar talk.

Heidi [00:41:08] No! Well, I mean, I find that, yeah, so just we all live in our own bodies too and we don't know like what other people's experiences are, but like for me, I didn't realize like how dyslexic I was until one time I was doing this opera and I like highlighted my own part, which no one had ever said to do, and I was like, whoa, I can see my notes! It's not just like a floating thing. So that was a separate issue from the actual act of singing was how I was processing like the notes on the page.

Heidi [00:41:46] Yeah. And I think that's what gives us, you see people reach, right? You see this kind of associate, this, I think body mapping, which is very important because people think like the back of their throat is, I always give this stuff my first day of anatomy fizz. I'm like, it's

really, you know, the vocal tract's very small, you know? It's like this tiny thing and we think there's all this space. Yeah. And as soon as you start seeing how small it is, you then you move, I mean, that's how I helped this. It's like, oh yeah, I didn't need to work as hard as I did. Right. But I think notes are the same way because we are miss mapping where they are here. Yeah. You know, our vocal folds are this big. If you see someone do an interval of an octave, you probably would hardly see it in a scope. You know? It would be very small and there's no up and down, right? The crack white tilts down for a high note. So sometimes I'll even have singers. You know, do this. It's like, oh, all right, like this is what's happening. It's not all kind of thing. So just mapping, having it, sometimes even knowing if you speak the same language as your student is important because sometimes their definitions of things or where they think things are, we don't talk about that. So I'll ask, you know that kind of question is how do you conceive of a high note, you now? And then I do the Yoda, there is no high note. And they're like, what? You know, that kind of thing. Yes. So you start to, you're, as I said, we're responsible for their attention. And if they think these intervals are wide, or they, you know, that's gonna affect their technique. Right. Yeah.

Heidi [00:43:25] Um, and then this is something I'm just asking everyone. Have there ever been any students where you have specifically recommend that they seek therapy?

Heidi [00:43:37] That's a good question. I've had, yeah, I feel like that purview is really difficult. I feel I've established a space where the boundaries are clear in terms of I'm not a psychologist. There was a student I referred to like the school therapist a couple times because they cried at lessons. I did have a PTSD veteran once who. Got a little, you know, crazy and I actually had to, you know, get, you know, support for him myself. But yeah, I feel that because of my own experiences, I don't feel, because therapy's so varied, you know? And so, right? That I don't feel comfortable recommending therapy. I'll recommend, you have someone you can talk to, but it is very rare because in the studio I feel like we are so present and I do feel like that's part of it. I'm not their friend, I'm their therapist. Um, my job is to make them feel safe and make them feel, yeah, that I'm there support, but I'm not that. Right. And I think when you're really present, then that, that it is like CBT, you know, um, or dbt, the dialectical side where it's being very present in the moment. Um, but as I said, there are students who have, you know, cried and are having a hard day. Like that, you know. Do you have, particularly at a school where there are resources, you know, go talk to that, because that person can refer them out. But referring someone to therapy, I don't feel like it's my purview, and therapy is so variable and may have detriments. I feel like there was one, for me, where I had a situation where I was actually harmful.

Heidi [00:45:44] Yeah. Yeah. And I wonder too, I think about that just, you know, outside of this project and whatever, yeah, I've had friends that have had, you know, not good therapist experiences. Like, how do you make sure that that person is helpful to you?

Heidi [00:46:00] Right. Right. You know, and that's, that's hard for all. I think it's hard to assess as singers. And that's where, you know, I think our guru culture has heard us, you now? Because it's like this per, you know, and that why I like to say there's no mystery. I co-teach like Ken Bozeman and I share students. I share a student with, you know, someone who has private lessons with Barbara Bonney on zoom, right? And it's like, it's like that's how it should be. I was sort of raised in science, which is a very different culture where it is collaborative, where it there's not one person that has all the magic, and it's not this mystery. It's like you wanna give agency, there's gonna be someone who said something in a different way. So, yeah. But it is hard, we do deal, I mean, and this is where I was reviewing some of the papers on Trauma Informed, and I was struggling because. The part of our voice is very vulnerable, our voice very personal, our voice's identity. Those things are, you know, they're so much coupled, right? To this instrument and what happens in that room. But the boundaries are really important. And there was even one study that I cited in this, was the word trauma itself triggers. It's like, don't think of a person wearing a red dress. It's like. As soon as someone's saying they're suspecting trauma, that person's gonna think they have trauma. And that can be, right, even if they don't

declare it, or if they declare it and you continually validate. It's like, that's not my job to know. I don't know. I feel it's very difficult.

Heidi [00:47:51] I think with the answer to all my questions, are there anything else that we didn't cover that you feel like is important for people to know?

Heidi [00:47:59] You can read my answers to the things I wrote that may help, just at least for some of the neuroscience. I do think some of these, you know, I have a strong opinion of some of these, polyvagal or these things that sort of really try to. That are popular and pop and, you know, just made a lot of money off of that. And, but it's been disproven yet it gets repeated. And so how I framed it, and maybe this'll, this'll is that there's a lot lies that are true. In other words, people used to say, Oh, we can't say that I'm tickling sheep because that's not science. Well, it actually is because it's neuroscience. The brain's thinking of an image and it's creating. Sometimes I think things like Polly Vagal or... Even the things people do with breath, or putting things in the mask, right? Things that we know aren't scientific. The danger comes when science is made to have people think it's science, when really it's like an image like anything else, if that makes sense. And so. I get worried when there's over-scientific science that's not scientific, things like polyvagal, you know? It's like your brain is doing, your nerves don't have thought, right? And nerves aren't tubes, right. Nerves are not tubes. Just because my gut is connected to this part, doesn't mean that that is a one-to-one bingo, this is happening to my gut, bingo this is having to my voice. It's not a tube. Right. And there's efferent and afferent. So it's like polyvagal, all of this stuff. Well, yeah, the recurrent laryngeal nerve is a branch of the vagus nerve, you know? But it's, like, you how much shit that nerve does, you know? And if it were all connected, I would vomit when I sing. You know, it's stuff like that. Right. So it gets generalized by people who know just enough.

Heidi [00:49:57] Or versus like, what is, like you said, singing in the mask, what is useful imagery that produces a result in the brain, but it's not like physically true.

Heidi [00:50:11] Exactly and but i do think this crossover with trauma and emotion and people are hacking the vagus nerve like sniffing ammonia for singing i don't know if i told you that oh yeah i got into an argument with the person who is a well-known person who has a well known book who and i'm like someone's gonna sniff because ammonia is toxic yeah if you say to sniff ammonia And he means smelling salts, but I'm like, you can't say sniff ammonia. To hack your vagus nerve for singing. Like that is a lie. Can I show you this video real quick? Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Um, I'll send her a request because I think it it's sort of in three minutes um summarizes so this is I said is a uh she's an r&b singer um she's grand she's amazing Grammy winner but she lost she had a baby she lost her voice Basically, they were gonna do all the surgery. You're gonna hear her voice teacher. I'm in the room with her and the SLP and the ENT. You'll see what I think is too much is scales. He does scales with her, right? And the scales aren't working, but he just keeps going. And then that same day, she was always having to target. So it goes back to targetting versus play, you know? And then... Later in the room, I had her not sing her songs. I said, what's your favorite song from childhood? We found a character that got her tongue root out like alfalfa and then her real voice came in. So this is the same day. Oh wait, let me just make sure you can hear sound. Hold on. But I think it speaks to some of the things we were talking about. Like at this point I would stop doing scales, right?

Heidi [00:52:38] Yeah, because it's not working, it's not working.

Christa [00:52:44] Can we? Yeah.

Heidi [00:52:52] I at least had him inverted. But she still couldn't do it. He just kept doing it over and over again.

Christa [00:53:01] HMMMMMMMM

Heidi [00:53:04] Right? Right. So this is the same day.

Christa [00:53:11] And above our blue My heart was wrapped in clover The night I looked at you

Heidi [00:53:30] Nice, yeah.

Heidi [00:53:34] So anyway, and I show the beginning just so you can hear what we did at first because I was like being silly.

Christa [00:53:50] My love has come along. You're still here. Right? It's like we were just moving around. My lonely days are over. Yeah. And my big heart goes.

Heidi [00:54:05] Anyway, you can still hear some of the problems, but I just, it just shows you that I think we misdiagnose technique sometimes as teachers, right? And as doctors. It's like, yeah, you listen to those scales, you think there's something really freaking wrong. Yeah. So I think the other answer to the question of why play is that you may think something's technically wrong, that it's breath, that its laryngeal registration, that you won't know unless you try something different and this person would have gotten surgery had it not been for showing that she could say those things.

Speaker 4 [00:54:41] Mm-hmm.

Heidi [00:54:42] Because they were dying, even the ENT, they're targeting, they're saying, sing this note with the scope. Ah, right, it's targeted. And as soon as that happens, we get nervous, we start adding things. Right. So anyway, so that's sort of the take home. Awesome, that was a great video. All right.

Heidi [00:55:01] Yay! Well, thank you so much for meeting with me. Thank you, I hope it helps, I hop- you know. Yeah, this was great. It's turned into a different project that I initially set out for, and it's-

Heidi [00:55:13] That's what science that's good science. Yeah, it always is like that. And I think let the questions lead you rather than try it goes back to singing right then trying to say fixated on this thing because that's that's the best. The best science happens that way we wouldn't get discovery if we didn't didn't let what's happening throughout something lead us so

Heidi [00:55:36] Mm-hmm.

Heidi [00:55:37] Embrace that as a good thing.

Heidi [00:55:38] Yay!

Heidi [00:55:40] Well thank you so much. Okay, thank you. You take care. Good luck. Alright, thanks. Okay, bye.

Interview Transcript

Susan Witt-Butler, Voice Teacher

Santa Rosa, California, Wednesday May 7th, 2025

Christa [00:00:02]

So this is Christa Durand speaking with Susan Whitt-Butler on May 7th, 2025. And Susan has given her consent to be recorded and identified in this research. So Susan, can you tell me a bit about yourself and your work?

Susan [00:00:21]

Well. Starting with some of this resume that I've given you, I'll just start a little bit about that. Basically, my dharma, my passion, which the universe has helped me manifest, is singing professionally and teaching professionally in universities and in my private school. In my teaching, well, my education has been — and that's why I'm leaning towards how I'm teaching in my studio in a few moments — has been a lot linked towards the Italian school because I studied in Rome for a year. I worked with a teacher who was of that background in Santa Cecilia, Accademia, and so...

Then my educational background professionally is through Carnegie Mellon University and through UOP and then Italy and then a lot of experience and getting my feet wet performing actually in Italy with a long little orchestra there and this wonderful jewel of studio's years. So, I was led into teaching through a back door, through my assistantship at UOP. And I thought,

"What am I going to teach them?" My mentor at the time said, "You'll have enough experience, I'll be here for you. And you already know a lot. You don't know that you do."

So I started and started going, I really love this kind of exchange. And the deeper relationship, which we'll get into later too, about how you are with people who stepped into your studio. So, that's how the education started. My professional singing with the San Francisco Opera Chorus for 30 years started with a Metropolitan Opera local audition in which one of the judges was the conductor of the opera chorus, and then he pulled me aside and said, "You know, if you want a job with the opera chorus, just let me know."

So, often, at first I didn't because I was solo, solo, but what I learned about my own personality, which I have learned now to apply to other people too when they choose other options in their life — which I felt that, you know, they were gifted in the performance thing, they said no — but I felt that as a solo performer, as a single woman at the time, it was a very lonely profession. So when I had the opportunity to join this organization with the opera, which was sort of a family affair, I took it on for part-time, and then that took me for 30 years.

And then the experience that helped me then in my teaching is standing in the wings and watching these wonderful, masterful singers. Singing Strauss, singing Berg, singing Puccini, Verdi — and sort of putting my ear up to sometimes their dressing room and seeing how they warmed up. So that was also an education for me to help in my teaching studio. So, that's sort of a little bit of my...

Christa [00:04:33]

Lovely. And then just looking at your resume, you've taught voice at Notre Dame, Berkeley, California State University, East Bay, and Sonoma State University.

Susan [00:04:48]

Let's add Fresno State as well.

Christa [00:04:50]

Oh. Oh, okay. Uh-huh.

Susan [00:04:52]

But mostly, yes, a lot with the California State University systems. And each time that it happened, it happened because a door opened for me and that was something that I haven't written before. And then my teaching, as you just said, I've done a lot of university teaching — probably more than 40 years of that. All levels: the beginners, senior recitals, graduate recitals, but I've also taught with professional singers too — which is what I hope we get into a little bit too — is their intentions are much different because they're professional intentions; they're not educational intentions. So I had to learn that it was a very different modality that I had to move into when I worked.

Christa [00:06:04]

And also, we're diverging off of the set questions. Can you speak to the difference between also your private studio students and then like the university setting? Because I know when I was in the university setting, there's so much more pressure to get things done. They have to learn so many pieces by a certain date and you have to like try to help them sing and get all this stuff learned versus like when you're in your private studio. Yes, there are deadlines, like people have concerts or things like that, but I feel like I can get more deeply in work with them because there's not this deadline to get things done.

Susan [00:06:51]

Yes, there's a lot of elbow room when I'm working in my private studio, and also what I have found in teaching private studio too is that many of them come also with their own goals and sometimes their goals do not meet their level of technical understanding. And so that was a challenge. That is a challenge sometimes to do in a private studio. But there is a lot more flexibility in there and there's a lot of time to get deeper into their own artistry and their own personalities.

Christa [00:07:49]

So we've kind of established like three different areas of people that you've worked with that have different kinds of goals. We have like university students, we have professional people in your private studio, and then we have kind of a vocational or vocational other people in your private studio, all with different goals.

Susan [00:08:11]

Yes, and all very different. There was something though about the university teaching that I sort of liked for me because I am such a technical rabbit that I can technique more sometimes than maybe that person might appreciate it. Well, in the university you have to get through it, you're right. You have to produce, you have to get them through that recital — both emotionally, technically, and artistically. So that was a big deal. But in the private studio there is a lot more, I might say, elegance to it.

Christa [00:09:03]

Now when you, you know, going back to when you said “Am I ready to start teaching?” and your mentor said yes you are and you started teaching — way back then were you already interested in the emotional aspect of teaching or were you thinking more about the technique and then as you worked with people the emotional aspects started coming in?

Susan [00:09:26]

That's exactly what happened, yes. Because, and this is what I want to get into later, in my own teaching now — even then I said, I can only teach what I know. What I really know. And that I don't want to dig or comment in any wrong direction. So I pretty much at the beginning, yes, stuck with the technique and the general principles that I had learned and knew worked for me. So, the emotional... the emotional ones came more when I started working with the artistic side and preparing them for recitals and things like that to get into the deeper aspect of the piece.

Christa [00:10:12]

Well do you feel like, you know, in your own singing journey as a student, do you feel like you were pretty steady on the emotional side, or did you have like emotional hurdles in lessons or concerts that you had to learn to overcome and build like skill building?

Susan [00:10:34]

I think, looking back, that there were hurdles, and my specific one — and what I'm seeing in a lot of them coming to my studio at that time — because my life was mainly geared towards my singing, so I didn't have any outside emotional things to confuse it. But there was a lot of negativity involved. I was my own enemy. My self-talk was not healthy. And I was with a studio teacher who was a perfectionist. So those two things did not quite work.

And so I think that held me back. And it prevented me from enjoying my singing. That and just the insecurities that I had, and as I said to you, that did not allow me, I think, to soar up as much. I just didn't have that kind of early self-talk. And truly, combined with the perfectionism,

my own personality, and my — in all honesty — my religious background, which was very much non-positive. So those are some of the things that I had to overcome and, you know, losing sleep over it, saying "Why am I doing this?" Why am I not enjoying it? But something kept at me. And then there was a turning point that we can talk about later.

Christa [00:12:34]

And do you, so do you feel like for the most part, you had to figure out things in life to help you deal with all of that or did you have any teachers or mentors that helped you with the negative self-talk, etc.?

Susan [00:12:52]

A lot of it I had to figure out myself. However, there was my one person, a mentor, when I was in college, and his name was Lorenzo Malfatti. I don't know if you knew him. A native of Lucca — which is that change, that was a big change — when I went to Lucca that summer with him and eight singers there. He was the most positive, heart-centered, educational person. That was part of my healing, I would say, and my body's power.

Christa [00:13:45]

Do you feel that just being around him and in his approach is what kind of shifted your paradigm about your self-talk? Or were there things that he reached out with — like exercises — and said, "Hey Susan, let's try this. Don't talk about yourself like that."

Susan [00:14:07]

Well, I think mainly that he always — and this is what I use later on too — has always accentuated something positive that was happening. So instead of all the negatives — now that, now you really do well — let's take that, and how do you feel when you do that?

And so that, because of the time and intense feelings — "What do you mean how do I feel?" — it was, um, so... I think he was a very deep teacher to me on so many levels, by going with the positive. "Okay, so let's take that and how you're feeling about that. Now let's move into this other thing that's a little more challenging. But you have it. You have what it takes. You don't believe in yourself in that. You need to know that. You need to take my opinion. You need to take others' feedback." And I was never told that before, at that time.

It was always, you know, you don't need... who he is. Finding the one thing that's positive, reassuring me — because I respected the hell out of him — that if he saw that in me, then I need to see that in me.

Christa [00:15:37]

Do you think that past teachers could see what you were doing to yourself, or do you feel like it was very internalized and they wouldn't have known how you were talking about yourself?

Susan [00:15:53]

Um. I don't think they saw it. Especially the one in studio work. But again, indirectly, my high school choral teacher — he was another one that was an inspiration to me. And again it was just, a lot of it is who they are in their own humanness, who they are in their life experience. And I think that has a lot to do with how we are when people — well, who I am — when people come into my studio. I think what they see in me is a result of all my experiences.

And you know, it's interesting you're saying that because both were men. They weren't nurturing women — they were nurturing men. And they really gave me a whole different point of view of looking at life and my own self-acceptance.

Christa [00:17:22]

As I've been reading about different modalities as I do this project, I was kind of feeling a little bit bad because I wasn't like, "Oh, I have this system for helping my students," or whatever. But, you know, one of the modalities is co-regulation — like just being a grounded, joyful, accepting person helps regulate the other person's nervous system without having to necessarily do anything.

Susan [00:17:57]

Absolutely. And that is, again, one part of your other questions in there — that you gave it a label, I just gave it what you explained it as. As, you know, when they come in, and who am I, as I'm greeting them, or before someone comes in the door or in my studio. That's why it wasn't good for me to do back-to-back lessons. Because I needed time in between lessons, if I could, to just breathe and kind of get into who's coming in next and rearm myself.

Christa [00:18:30]

Mm-hmm.

Susan [00:18:30]

And so a lot of it comes — the modality — I would use another word to enhance what you just said — is indirectly, in an indirect way. To just be there, make sure I'm grounded, make sure that I'm positive. And make sure that I feel positive about this individual who's, in essence, putting his or her vulnerability into my area, into my space, for that hour or half hour or whatever it is. So that would be a good label to one of the modalities that I use.

Christa [00:19:21]

In direct.

Susan [00:19:23]

Indirect. I will... Knowing how important grounding is — to feel grounded before you speak so your energy is not flailing all over the place — and that has come to me too through my own studies of meditation and yoga, Alexander Technique. I'm going to sit down there and — in my own spiritual studies — I'm very eclectic in that, but most of it involves awareness. Awareness.

Christa [00:20:32]

No worries. So that actually kind of segues into — when you were just listing some of your modalities — the next question on this is: are there any specific modalities, frameworks, or methods you've studied or adopted in your studio to help singers navigate anxiety or strong emotions?

Susan [00:20:52]

Yes, so that goes back to a lot of my spiritual paths that I've taken and that helped me ground myself. I mean, how can I ground someone else or try to read them if I can't do that for myself? So I think through a lot of my own private therapy, my own spiritual paths, then what I do — I say indirectly — is bring them in and... tell me all my secrets.

Before a certain person, or whoever that person is, comes in I say, “Okay, what do they need today? Help me. Tell me what they need today.” So I really kind of do an inward bend first, which I can talk through — my meditation and yoga and so on. So that I really do.

So I’ll start with grounding first. I think... I’ve had experience in the last maybe five years of working with someone who works with professionals. I went to the city and worked with them a lot, and you go in and you start vocalizing right away. And I never felt that I did my best.

Well, after the third time that that happened, I went early, and I went, “Okay, I’ve got to do this myself, and I’ve gotta ground myself, I’ve gotta vocalize in a way that connects me to my core.” And then I’m able to move into whatever he started with me right away. And so — especially with — no, that’s not true. I think at any level now that I work with, I’ll start with sitting, breathing, grounding.

And with some people, if I observe that their body is not fluid — I’ll say it in a positive way — we’ll do floor work. I’ll have my yoga mat out. We’ll sit down. I use Alexander Technique — I think when you lay down and feet up, something under your head so the neck is in the right proportion to the alignment of the larynx. And then just do some deep breathing and awareness and just open up.

I do some hands-on, which these days, I think in a university setting may not be as safe in the sense of the atmosphere there. But I do — and I don’t know how, since the body is the instrument — sometimes I wonder how it is possible to teach without having to do some hands on. You know, “Are you expanding your...” either that, or “Is the little kid expanding her...” “Okay, how is the back?” Those kinds of things.

So, I think — have I answered your question, or did I digress?

Christa [00:24:50]

Well, we were just talking about all the different things that you bring into your lessons that you find help people’s emotional states.

Susan [00:25:00]

Another one that I do — I work with some — I think I mentioned to you another situation that unknowingly, before they came into my studio, and because in a university setting you need to accept everyone who’s accepted. There were two people who came in — looked normal, acted normal — did have some special needs which I was aware of before they came in.

But whenever they would connect their breath, their voice to make these sounds, their whole demeanor would change dramatically and their eyes would bulge. They would — they could not hold a sustained tone. And so that was huge for me. So what I did with them was a lot of breathing and a lot of just sounds that were emanating from their basic... and then refer them to therapy.

And ask me that question while we’re talking because it was another thing I wanted to add.

Christa [00:26:40]

What was just all the different modalities that you employ?

Susan [00:26:43]

Yes, so another model that I have learned is in order to kind of disconnect the thinking, analytic,

critical side of one's brain — which is very much American culture — I will do these breathing exercises with the eyes and the head moving, for example.

And I learned this in an acting class where... You ground it, you breathe, and then you let the eyes go first, then let the head follow. Be there, let the eyes look back, then let the head fall right and left. And then when they would do that at certain times, all of a sudden — not all of the sudden, gradually — I could feel that the energy was shifting.

It wasn't so high. And then I'd have them — and I still do this sometimes, even though I don't find long enough — is meant to just add sound. And then just let that basic organic production emanate and then move from there.

Then I would move into sighs, for example, which would...

Christa [00:28:20]

Yeah.

Susan [00:28:22]

...saw, and that still happened a little because I could feel them tense up. And then we go into little scales. And I would — and I still don't at first — and I think you know this about me too — I don't go to the piano right away.

I have them show themselves and me where the voice wants to stop. And then from there, it gets here, it gets into the head voice — then we start there and link it lower. Or it gets into the lower work and we start there and start expanding it in the other direction so that it's — oh, here we go! — oh, you know, plucking over the beyond.

I would use the word: organic. A more organic kind of approach — a mentality and production.

Christa [00:29:32]

And it's okay if you don't remember or if they never told you in the acting class, but did you know if there was a specific technique that that was drawn from?

Susan [00:29:44]

Yes — was it the Roy Hart? No. I think it was just incorporated into one of their warm-ups. There's one though — and here's another warm-up though that I used to do in acting class — which also helped them because it allowed trust.

When I was teaching voice class — and this was from an acting book that I had, because I wanted to break down the walls and I wanted more trust built up — even though I haven't used it lately in studio, but even the idea of having people lean back to back with each other — it's a very vulnerable and trusting kind of thing.

And in the back — and it's amazing — that connection that you can feel with another human being back to back. And then you do it with someone else — that was in the classroom situation — and it really made more of an authentic kind of environment of expression and safety.

Because I think sometimes people — because the voice studio is a very, I call it, a sacred space — the minute you... to me... so...

But so I think there is strength in vulnerability. And there is strength in... so that they are free to be free and make mistakes.

There was a book that I have read — that I don't have — called *Soprano on Her Head*.

Christa [00:32:13]

Mm-hmm.

Susan [00:32:15]

And that's similar to that kind of approach that I try to incorporate.

Christa [00:32:29]

Before I move on to the next one, were there any other modalities that you wanted to talk about?

Susan [00:32:39]

Um... I think I have mentioned — as I say — the eye movement, some of it, my acting. I think there are a lot of things that can benefit singers in taking a basic acting course. I really do. Because you're interacting with other people and you're not just being yourself. And so that would be one modality that I would recommend that I think I have come from, indirectly.

Yeah, besides the Alexander, besides yoga, and besides just moving and using things for distraction.

I remember taking — attending — one of the NATS workshops when I was a member of the Bay Area one and they brought someone... that was... it was about, you know, distracting. Like even... well, okay, yes I have used these.

Like if I find something so outside, I'll give it a tennis ball and I'll just say, "Just toss that," and say, "You know, now just — first of all — not singing first, just saying sounds that are healthily produced." Tossing, turning, bending down, shaking out, coming up, opening, letting the body loosen up.

And then going in once the brain has gone into that mode rather than staying in that other mode. Then — okay — let's experiment with this phrase with those ideas.

Christa [00:34:37]

I also remember you used to have like those little emotion cards that you would distract people with. Now listening to it, I'm like, was that so people couldn't sit in their heads and judge themselves?

Susan [00:34:53]

Yes. It's a distraction — but a positive one. Yeah. Thank you. I should bring those back.

Christa [00:35:01]

And just for the recording, do you want to describe the emotion cards?

Susan [00:35:06]

Yes, I read these cards. They're just very general. "Sad." "Joyful." "Surprised." "Angry." "Grief-stricken." Those, those kinds of things. "I'm happy." "Perplexed" — that's a multi-level one

— but there were different... you know, some of them were basic, some of them a little more, you know, like “perplexed” or “confused.”

But basically ones would kind of come basically to the solar plexus — right there — and start you there: anger, sadness, happiness.

Christa [00:36:00]

Yes, thank you. And you’d give them the cards and be like, “Pick a card, and now sing this scale like...”

Susan [00:36:09]

Well, that’s the other thing that — now that you mentioned that — I think I’m going to bring it back. I use it in a different way.

When I have a vocalise now, I try to find, okay, what vowel do they need? Okay, well what consonant do they use? So then I try to invent a sentence that uses those, so that they say something in meaning.

Like, if they need — for example — if I need to do something with the tongue, I’ll try, okay, I’ll say, “Say ‘I thought this’” and bring the tongue forward. And then so that they’re thinking, so that both sides of their brains are working.

And so the vocalise is not just “ah,” but it’s a sentence that has an emotional hookup or content.

Christa [00:37:10]

That was a five o’clock hour!

Christa [00:37:16]

Oh, kind of circling back though, we started talking about this — I just asked you if you were always interested in emotions or if that developed over time. But I feel like the unanswered question there still is, when did you start deciding to bring that stuff in after you started teaching?

Susan [00:37:38]

You know what? That’s an excellent question. Let me see... it doesn’t come to me to say that it was a conscious decision. It comes to me to say that little by little I was noticing that this was happening. “Oh my goodness, I think I used one of the techniques from yoga today, and I need to do that more.” Or “I used a phrase that I learned in my therapy session. I should maybe use that more.”

And so I was noticing that it was going more deeply — that it wasn’t so superficial. And so, to the point where when I say to myself or others say, “I hang up my... or I’m a teacher of singing,” I’m hoping that I’m a teacher of self-development. I hope that I am a teacher — a guide — to their own self-esteem through the art and the teaching of singing.

Because singing — and I thought you do — but it’s all about breath. And breath is emotion.

So to answer your question, I don’t think it was a conscious thing. But when I became aware, then I became more conscious of using these tools. “Okay, how can I use these tools more?”

Christa [00:39:47]

So do you feel like, you know, when you very first started singing, people would come in and you'd start them on scales and then it kind of changed? Or do you feel like there was something more innate within you that already from the very beginning would be like, "Well let's take a few breaths," or something else like that?

Susan [00:40:07]

No, I didn't think... I think that I started more in that cookie-cutter way. But not for long. But I think I did. And then the more that I taught, the more and more that I'm teaching still — and so much more aware of the power of the breath and what it connects to in emotions and of course the instrument itself — that I just became more... using the breath as a beginning tool and starting with the breathing.

Christa [00:40:59]

All right, let's see, we answered all of those questions. Very nice, very nice. Okay, so then this next section is about kind of like personal stories. So one of them is — well, before I ask this question, when you were talking about the students that you referred to therapy, can you have an estimate about how many students that you've referred to therapy over your teaching career because they had developed like emotional issues that were not able to...

Susan [00:41:39]

Okay, the more subtle ones — which I'm beginning to trust myself more and more on — because I've been working with someone maybe for three or four months and I felt something is blocking them. I don't know what. And of course, immediately I go to me — okay, what am I doing for them that is helping them not block?

And then I think there are about five or six of them that I realized later that it wasn't anything that I could do. And it took a lot more time to get it from them, but it was reflected in their singing and I couldn't figure it out. And they would come back and say, "You know, I had to do a lot of inner work."

I'm ready to say that — and they were both different individuals. One of them confessed to me that she was going through a divorce with her mate, you know, and wouldn't tell me emotional things like that.

And other people would just have traumas that they haven't dealt with.

And so I would say, you know, there were those two extremes that I described to you. And then there were the others that took me more time to identify because they were — so thank you — or compensate.

And if you're singing, or trying to free the body to sing, it doesn't work. It only brings it more to the surface. In my experience.

So for those people, at first I was hesitant to say, "You know, I think there's something you need to do," because in my own... I thought — as I confessed to you a moment ago — I thought it's something I'm doing that is not working for them.

Right. And that was not the truth.

Christa [00:44:38]

Right, you didn't want to assume that they're the problem. You're doing this self-reflection, like, "Should I refer them to another teacher? Like, are we not connecting?"

Susan [00:44:48]

Right, exactly. But it turned out later on — when I think three or four of them came back to me and said — I was... I really... they came back because they wanted to start singing again and said, "You know, I really had some deep things that I had to work through."

So there were two that I did say, "You know, I do think that there is something blocking you." One extreme — which I told you in another conversation — "You're better to spend your hard-earned money on therapy right now than singing."

And I didn't say it as directly to these other two, but I did say, "I think there's some blocking here. You'll be able to sing better when you work through those."

And then there are those who have been in our time in the studio — which I'm sure you may have experienced — where there's some exercise or thing that you're doing with them, or a certain piece that they are performing that has touched a nerve in them and they will break.

And I think that — there's another question you asked in the training later on — that is actually a compliment to the studio work that one is doing. That they feel safe to do that.

Sometimes we as teachers don't know how to handle it well. And I think that's the kind of instruction that we could be more instructed upon: how to best serve that student in total breakdown at that point.

Christa [00:46:59]

Which leads to the next question — if you had any stories that you felt comfortable sharing about a time when you were able to work through a point like that with someone and keep going with the lesson — if there was some way that you were able to support or move them in a direction where they could process it.

Susan [00:47:26]

Yeah. Well, as I said, that is something that I think it would be helpful to have some other... I will tell you in a moment, but I'm also saying that having some professionals to guide, I think, would be good to help you on that question a great deal.

But for me, I go back to my therapy sessions, and it's to listen. To listen.

Christa [00:47:55]

Get it together, person!

Susan [00:47:56]

[Laughing] Get it together right now. Every straw. No — okay. I think first, what I have done is applaud them for allowing their vulnerability to expose itself to someone — to someone whom I may hope they will trust.

And I say, "I am very honored that you have chosen or feel free to express in this quality for you, in an unexpected manner."

Christa [00:48:37]
Mm-hmm.

Susan [00:48:39]

So the first thing I do is that — is to say thank you in some way. And just — then it's just a matter of — you know, as they say, emotions — usually either it's anger or sadness that you're dealing with in the studio. And they come in waves.

So I wait until that wave has gone. We may sit on the piano bench, of course, or a place to sit, perhaps. Sit down for a minute and just kind of... and say, "Wow." I just keep saying to them, "How brave of you to let —" and just reinforce how important that is — "to not be ashamed of what just happened."

And then wait until the wave passes. Sit down perhaps, water, Kleenex, and that's really easy to get. Just breathe. Breathe. Breathe. "Is there anything else that needs to come up at this moment?"

If not, maybe, "Could we maybe go through some words of the piece," for example. Maybe not the same kind of thing again, but you know, "Let's just do — let's look through the poetry from these pieces that you're doing," rather than singing again.

But some other thing. Or an exercise that pleases them. But use it. But I would not go back to, "Okay, even after that, go back and sing the piece." I would maybe go into the words, into poetry, into... something more artistic. "Okay, now let's take a moment now with where you are. And maybe there's a piece that relates to that emotion." And pick that piece and say, "Now give me a backstory to that."

After one has — if it's emotional anger — I mean, it can trap you right in your throat chakra, in my nomenclature. And so we'll probably then move into something that applies to singing or to the artistry, but not singing itself, perhaps.

Or they could say, "No, I'm ready." I mean, you know — and read them. "Okay, okay, let's —" you know, read what — read them and honor them. But that's what I think. I really...

Christa [00:51:44]

I had an adult student a few months ago, and you know, you start every lesson like, "How was your week?" Like, "How are you doing?" Whatever. And she was like, "My husband died last night." I was like...

Susan [00:51:59]
I love you.

Christa [00:52:00]

Did you say that?! I was like — oh. Like it was — I mean it was not... You know, I was very not ready to receive that or expecting that. And that was what I was thinking internally. I was like, "What are you doing here?" And I was like, "Oh, I'm so sorry. How are you doing?"

Susan [00:52:21]
Oh, um...

Christa [00:52:22]

But what she needed was to sing. Like we say. And she cried. And she's like, "That's the first time I've cried since he died." And I was like, "Okay, I guess this is what you needed today." But it was pretty like... okay. I guess this is...

Susan [00:52:40]

But it was like... okay, here's me: okay, if someone came and said that to me, I would say, "Do you need a hug?" I mean, I know that's way out there, but you know, "Yeah... do you need touch? Do you... do you —" you know? And then, "And what do you need today from this lesson?"

"Would you like to sing?" Or, you know — and some people, you know, just want on — and that helps them too. And that's a very complex moment. But see, those are the things we face. Those are the things you face.

And you wouldn't think so as a voice — you'd think of a doctor or whatever, you know, a psychologist. But a voice? A person? He puts their thing under a card up there as a Voice Teacher.

I have — I just have to say one more thing about another person that I had as a student — this is the end — he would have a similar vocal thing that I explained with my other two where it wasn't — it was in the eyes, would do something very different.

And — but somehow he kept the balance that didn't pull me way over to suspect. And I still put that in a box.

And I was doing acting classes — as someone would say, "None of that now!" — class at Hayward.

And in order to have more vulnerability, before we started each semester, I would say, "Give me a minute, each person had to get up and give an emotional moment." Okay?

Christa [00:54:58]

Oh no.

Susan [00:55:00]

Okay, uh-huh. And he got up. And I can't recall exactly what he said. But it was a very... something. It's something that I should have gotten right away and told him to go to therapy.

Because two months later, he took his life. So it's those kind of things — like the thing that happened to you — you take them and you learn from them.

And you — I do — I've learned from them. And I said this: I'm not going to be... I don't want to say "cowardly" to take that action. But that's the word that comes to me now — about not referring him, you know, or not recording what he said.

It was almost like these people now, you know, go out and shoot people. And the teacher said, "You know, I should have known. I should've seen that."

Yeah. I should have seen that in that individual. Anyway, so... it's like things will come across in our lives — in our studio and our work — because we work deeply.

You know, I think the first thing is to thank that person for being so honest.

Christa [00:57:24]

Alright. I think we've answered that whole section. I mean, a lot of these we've touched on, but we can be a little bit more specific. So — what are some specific signs that you notice physically, vocally, or behaviorally when a student is struggling emotionally, when they haven't told you?

Susan [00:57:55]

Okay. Two things have come — three. Three things.

One: it's everything. You can tell that this is all blocked. So — and when it's hard for them — because that's number one.

Number two is how they speak. Their speaking voice and the jaw... If they're like, "Hey," like this — it can be very subtle. Or if they... if they cannot release their jaw and allow their tongue to kind of... jaw...

And the third one is around the eyes. Tension around the eyes. I read their eyes. Or — and even in resolving, like maybe this, or you know...

Christa [00:59:13]

And clenching their hands.

Susan [00:59:14]

Or how they hold energy in the back of their neck. It just — you know — can be, I guess it could be many other things like those that I've added.

And it's just, again... awareness. And also, sometimes their speaking voice can tell you a lot about where they're coming from. And the rate that they talk.

However, is that — not as much your generation — but I don't know whether you've noticed this, Christa, but they talk to me faster. They just talk faster. Wow.

And I notice that sometimes it's hard — "What do you mean?" — to understand them. Their generation. Maybe not, because they're used to hearing this fast talk now, you know?

But I am used to a slower tempo. Anyway, so — some kind of rate of speech or how they reflect. So what you're hearing, what you see, and what you feel on an energetic level.

Christa [00:57:24]

Ah, all right. I think we've answered that whole section. I mean, a lot of these we've touched on, but we can be a little bit more specific. So what are some specific signs that you notice physically, vocally, or behaviorally when a student is struggling emotionally, when they haven't told you?

Susan [00:57:55]

Okay, two things have come — three. Three things. One: it's everything. You can tell that this is all blocked. So — and when it's hard for them — because that's number one.

Oh no, that's one of them.

Number two is how they speak — their speaking voice and the jaw. But if they like pinch like this — it can be very subtle — or if they...

If they cannot release their jaw and allow their tongue to kind of drop...

And the third one is around the eyes. Tension around the eyes — and read their eyes. Or even in the resolving, like maybe this... or, you know...

Christa [00:59:13]

And clenching their hands.

Susan [00:59:14]

Or how they hold energy in the back of their neck. It just — you know — can be, I guess it could be many other things, like those that I've added.

And it's just, again, awareness.

And also sometimes their speaking voice can tell you a lot about where they're coming from — and the rate that they talk.

However — is that not as much your generation? But I don't know whether you've noticed this, Christa — but they talk to me faster. They just talk faster. Wow.

And I noticed that sometimes it's hard — "What do you mean?" — to understand them.

Their generation — maybe not because they're used to hearing this fast talk now. You know. But I am used to a slower tempo.

Anyway — so — some kind of a rate of speech, or how their inflection...

So what you're hearing, what you see, and what you feel on an energetic level.

Christa [01:00:40]

All right. When you see emotional interference showing up in a lesson, what is usually your first step?

Susan [01:00:58]

Oh. So there's a difference between emotional interference and emotional... of it. Okay?

So in interference — what I'm interpreting in that question is — there's singing, and there's interference.

Christa [01:01:20]

Right, like some of the things you've mentioned before where you're like, "Oh, their shoulders go up to their ears when they breathe."

Susan [01:01:26]

I think the first thing I like to do when it's interference is movement. Either — maybe even some movements that will, in some ways, distract them. Or in some way, enhance a direction that I want to go.

So again, I think it depends on what it is — what emotional thing that is manifesting physically.

Let's say it is the breathing, for example. "You know, let's just take some warm-up breathing."

Let us just — humor and other visualizations — like, "You know what? Just for a moment — because I know you're an actor too, because you're a singer — let's just be a gorilla for a minute," you know? An animal.

There's something that loosens their brain, loosens their body — that the activity of the body coming down and loosening — and the idea of being more of an animal than a higher-thinking, critical...

So I will use body movements, I'll use... and I will use sometimes other sounds.

For example, "Okay now — okay, you know what, this is — this is fun — oh, let's just do a pull, or turn around and be a..."

Well, I guess the animal idea is good. Or, you know, using the arms as a movement, for example.

Again, it depends on where they're holding their emotion.

If I'm seeing their eyes do this — you know, well let's just pretend that you are taking some bags and you're just trying to...

I think it depends on what it is. If it's eyes, or it's a jaw — there's nothing that can loosen them up.

Also though, sometimes — no, I wouldn't — no, I won't use it this way. I would use this in a different way.

I found in some times a mirror can help. Looking in the mirror and saying, "No. Just imagine how soft that is around your body. So you notice that softness. Now, ah..." Just that kind of thing.

So, I think a lot of it has to do with movement. And shifting — definitely not pursuing what they're doing.

Moving entirely away from whatever they're doing at the moment, and then maybe come back to it.

So movement. Moving away from that. Distracting it with something. Entering something else.

And again, it depends on where I feel that they're holding. Or I might say, "What are you thinking right now?" "What's your — what, what..."

Well, you know what, and see if they can relate to me something. But not find that, "Oh your shoulders are so tight, let's..."

No.

"Okay, okay. Let's think of — oh, all right."

And some kind of visualizations will help. I use those kinds of techniques when I find it's emotional.

But again — if it's chronic, and they come every time like that — then I think it's time to just say, "You know, I think some therapy will help you."

This is such good — a good...

The good work. Singing is a wonderful way-shower to people.

Christa [01:06:22]

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Susan [01:06:23]

It's a way-shower. And so here — this is showing you a way. Maybe do a little bit more about yourself there, and then come on back.

Christa [01:06:35]

I think I've seen, you know, many of your students change a lot about who they are as they've done really amazing vocal work.

Like, their vocal transformation is running parallel with their human transformation.

And I've seen that in a couple of my students in my studio too — where whatever was holding them back, they've decided to let go through the vocal journey. And they've become different in some way.

Susan [01:07:07]

Yes, especially at the stage or the level of guidance that we are matched with them in their life journey. What did you just say?

Christa [01:07:30]

Oh, about people's personal transformation and their vocal transformation walking hand-in-hand.

Susan [01:07:36]

Yes. A lot of that is — singing is a therapy. I mean, I know a lot of purists would say, "Well, we're not therapy." And we're not. Okay, yeah.

But we're guides, and we are way-showers.

Christa [01:07:52]

And it's intensely personal when you are your instrument. Because if anything is wrong with your instrument, something's wrong with *you*.

Like, if you feel judged — like, "I can't hit that note" or "I don't sound this way" — it's *you*. It's not like you have this clarinet in front of you.

Susan [01:08:10]

Right.

Christa [01:08:11]

But you can see it in there, you know?

Susan [01:08:16]

Oh yeah — but you have to change your embouchure a little bit or something.

Christa [01:08:19]

Yeah, get a new reed.

Susan [01:08:20]

Or if you have something on your wrist — yeah, your wrist has to be this — I mean, I can't see...

Christa [01:08:26]

Yes. And I want to say that it *is* very emotionally personal for other musicians and their playing of their instrument, and their value judgments about themselves that can happen when they can't — oh absolutely.

But I just feel like when *you are* your instrument, there's something deeper about successes and failures within music.

Susan [01:08:50]

Well, it is. Because our voice is our voice. It's our speech, it's our singing, it's our crying, it's our yelling — it's everything.

Christa [01:09:02]

And it goes backwards too. Where — you know — we've spent most of the interview talking about what we're supposed to talk about, which is how these internal and external things affect the production...

Susan [01:09:16]

Yes.

Christa [01:09:17]

...of the voice.

Susan [01:09:18]

Yes.

Christa [01:09:20]

The clarinet doesn't care if you're sad.

Susan [01:09:23]

And it doesn't affect the reed. It doesn't affect the vibrator. You know — that's impersonal. You've been crying, you've been sobbing, or you've been yelling at your whatever — and then you come in for a voice lesson — well, your vibrator is all... it's all messed up.

Christa [01:09:45]

And I think too, listening to you today — well, doing this project and listening to you today — have brought up a lot of things about, you know, *why* we study these things and why we do these kinds of projects.

And since I have the liberty to choose my own topics in this program — like why we choose certain topics — and of course, you know, part of it is wanting to be a better teacher so that you can guide people safely and effectively in this safe space that you're trying to create.

But, you know, listening to you — since I have, you know, the more personal relationship with you through the years and through my vocal journey — I think a lot of these projects can be about understanding ourselves.

Susan [01:10:38]
Absolutely!

Christa [01:10:41]
Right? What we've been through — or what we can still go through. Because I listened to you in the lens of: I was your student when I was 20 and I was going through all these things that you were trying to navigate in your studio.

And then I've seen you teach other types of personalities, both in like a private studio setting or like a masterclass setting.

And seeing how your techniques work for other people, or have worked for me.

And I still have, like, a lot of personal questions for myself as to what will work for me.

Because obviously we did a lot of good work together — we did — in your studio. But I also remember a lot of me being obstinate and resistant to a lot of the methods that you're describing.

Susan [01:11:43]
What?

Christa [01:11:47]
Not because they're not good methods. Because I see them work for other people. But because *I* am who I am, and I was going through what I was going through at 20.

Susan [01:11:59]
And truly — yes. And now, reflecting back with you and our work — I think there were... were I to project myself after — and the two of us — yes, I would say there were things in there that were going on with you, um... that were natural and essential that I didn't understand.

And... and that's the way it thinks. And, uh... oh — and the other thing — that brings me to the word "dialogue."

So were I — were we to go back those many years — I would probably now, knowing who I am now, I would be more dialoguing with who you were then.

Christa [01:12:57]
I'm not sure. I keep on wondering if part of it — like a piece of my reflection — is right now in my studio I have a student that reminds me a lot of me. And it's so frustrating because they're completely shut off — like just...

Susan [01:13:15]

I'll...

Christa [01:13:16]

...dead. And they love — they come back. I can tell they love singing. But it is a lot of incremental patience and empathy. And I'm like, what's going on in there? Because I know what was going on with me, and it was bad stuff.

Susan [01:13:45]

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Yes, you know. So that is so awesome now. And there's your teacher.

Christa [01:13:53]

They're my teacher.

Susan [01:13:55]

And so, Christa, that is so exciting though. I mean, honestly...

Christa [01:14:06]

Honestly. I love working with them for that reason. Because I think they would have quit already. And I'm working on, like, how do I reach you? Do I reach you? Do we just do this? Is this just what we do, and that brings enough to your life?

Susan [01:14:25]

At this moment in time. And you might reflect about our work then and say that. But then — look where you went from there.

So that — I think that's a whole other conversation I'd love to have with you at another time.

And if — it is coming back. Coming back for a reason. And he's being helped. You don't realize, but it's something that he needs at this point. And he needs it just the way he's getting it.

And — you know, okay — here's... okay, this is from my own spiritual studies and intentions. And I use this. My singers and in my private life — which has some personality challenges —

But I do put the intention out to my higher self: "If it is meant to be in another way to help this individual and our relationship and his or her higher self, you will be able to."

And if it's not, it will stay that way. And it's what it needs to be until it needs to be something different.

But I think the intention — if it's clearly stated — when I clearly state it in my... I get an answer. It'll say, "No. Leave it right now."

Or there'll be a situation that completely surprises me, and there'll be a revelation or a healing.

And you know, I think we are all — here's my... I don't like calling myself a teacher anymore. I don't like titles anymore.

I think we are all on our journeys, and we are guides to each other.

And so if you're in a situation like that, or something, I would say: "If I need to do something different, or something needs to be revealed to me about how to work with this lovely soul that's brought to me" — and me to me, and me and him — it can be anything you call it.

I call it a higher consciousness. But it can be any family.

Christa [01:17:39]
Uh-huh.

Susan [01:17:39]
But, I use that. I use it a lot.

Christa [01:17:45]
And I love that concept that we're guides or, you know, like that you're exploring together with your student what their good path will be.

And you know, through this program and this particular project, when I'm looking at — because I'll be interviewing Heidi Moss Erickson in a couple weeks — and she approaches things through neuroscience. I've taken some lessons from her.

I was listening to another podcast yesterday, actually, and the neuroscience people are all about play and exploration and not saying to the student, like, "This is how you do it."

And so — so interesting — with your spiritual background, the being ready for who the people are — it feeds into that, the neuroscience community.

Susan [01:18:44]
I think there is some parallel. Or sometimes really meeting of those kind of things.

But I'm glad you mentioned that — play. Because sometimes I will use that word: "Let's just play today. Let's just use this time and we're just going to play."

Christa [01:19:01]
And I think that is — it's so good for humans and it's so good, like, students — like, I see that in my students.

And then again, I keep thinking back to my process and how it doesn't work for me because I'm so bound.

So bound that the idea of play is threatening and vulnerable. Like, when I had my lessons with Heidi — I mean, because I've always given you like looks, like the cards...

Yeah, I think that there's something great for normal people.

And I would always, like, give you the stare of death if you asked me to use the card.

But when I went and took my lessons with Heidi last year — neuroscience, it's all about like play — like, "You're trying to reach this note, we're gonna, like, tickle some sheep udders in the sky."

And I really recommend it, right? I recommend it. But I was like, "You know, if I was 20 years old, I probably would have given her the stare of death."

Susan [01:20:19]

Yes.

Christa [01:20:20]

“But now — like the years of therapy and stuff — I said to her, I said, ‘Heidi, I literally cannot tickle the sheep. I want to. I want to be here with you. And I cannot.’”

Susan [01:20:32]

And that’s your truth. And look what strength that comes in. Do you — are you from...

The other one I want to say is Brene Brown. Do you know any of her words about the strength of vulnerability?

And how much power there is — and authentic power — in being vulnerable?

Christa [01:20:37]

I was like, “It’s not you. I believe in your method.”

Susan [01:20:41]

And see — but you’re at the maturation stage where you can verbalize that.

You process it and you verbalize with her.

And were we together, you would say something like that to me — that I would give you, and say...

I’d say, “I honor you because you know yourself right now. You know where you are in it. And that is fabulous.”

Christa [01:21:04]

So as we do this, I’m trying to explore that other side that also matches where I am and what I would do with someone like me.

Susan [01:21:19]

Well, yes. And those are all good questions. And you *do* have someone now who is giving you a mirror in some ways — not in the — but more in that 20-year-old sense.

Christa [01:21:30]

Yeah, exactly.

Susan [01:21:31]

You have a different stage now, which we were just talking about, but still... isn’t it exciting to grow and go and — I still am — I’m going, “Oh man, I’m still — this is great. I’m growing. I like it.”

All the time. But it’s always growing.

Christa [01:21:57]

Yeah, yeah.

Susan [01:22:00]

That is — that’s wonderful. That is wonderful. Neuroscience, yes!

Christa [01:22:07]

Yeah, so such an exchange — it's just how the neuroscientists are like... I mean, it's something that they've said in education for years, is that the brain learns better when you play.

And so they're — you know...

Susan [01:22:22]

And so we're still undoing some of these old models that we've had.

They don't — they really don't work.

For a happy — for a full healthy organism. Right? You know — there was this wonderful tenor — again, so blessed to sing with him. He was, I mean, in the choir when he was — was in the chorus when he was singing all these beautiful tenor roles at San Francisco Opera.

You'd think he had everything. But he took it slow.

So, you know, there are — you think somebody has everything in the discipline — but no.

There's so much more — good things — in life. Like play. And it gets you deeper.

Christa [01:23:11]

Yeah. If you can bring yourself to play — maybe one day I'll get there.

Susan [01:23:22]

You don't know. But I have to tell you that I've seen glimpses.

Christa [01:23:27]

Glimpses of play.

Susan [01:23:29]

I've watched — more than that. More than once.

Christa [01:23:31]

Working on it.

Okay, so then — move into the section about your opinions — other teacher training.

So, in your opinion, how prepared are most voice teachers to address emotional or psychological challenges with their students?

Susan [01:23:52]

If I were to put a number from 0 to 10 on there... I would say — I would take a four or five, in general.

Also in a university setting, where you don't have to — you know, it's just like — as you mentioned before, in the beginning of our session — you know...

Time, time, time. Deadlines, deadlines.

Christa [01:24:17]

Yes, yes.

Susan [01:24:18]

And it's really a challenge.

And they come — like you did — I mean, it is such a vulnerable state.

And especially now, with all that's happening in the world. So much.

I think that we — I say four or five — and I think we really need to be trained to do more of that.

And learn how to deal with it — maybe even in a sideways manner. You know, even coming into a lesson — you know, “Okay, let's do some writing and reading.”

“Okay, well, no — this isn't quite right, you know — okay, all right, let's just do some stretching and some funny noises.”

So the brain is so damn tight.

All right.

So, yeah, I would rate it at that. And I think we definitely would benefit from some — what are they calling them? Education courses, or things like that — that address that.

Christa [01:25:30]

Which segues into the next question: are there gaps in teacher training or resources you think need to be addressed?

But I would also change that question, since we kind of talked about it, into: are there resources that you might recommend for people's training?

Susan [01:25:50]

Ah, okay. Well, the ones... well, those are my technical ones.

Christa [01:25:54]

Okay.

Susan [01:25:57]

But I would say — and there were reading lists after that — but...

I also mentioned — and I'll see if I can find that book on acting — but I think there are many more now that — actually I'm not familiar with, but I would be happy to become more familiar with — that deal with that kind of thing.

There are like — even these personality training things — that can help you get insight.

Like endomorph and ectomorph, for example, where some people are slower moving and others are like this — and how to work with those different kinds of personalities.

And even that basic physical one, for example.

And there are so many other modalities, I think, that we could explore like that.

There are other psychological tests even.

There's one that says — with different personality colors — so that you can deal with... it really helps to know. And I know they're not as deep.

But they are indicators.

And I think they help.

And they can assist.

And then also how we learn — some are auditory, some aren't.

Some are visual. Some are kinesthetic. Some oral.

So you — when you're teaching someone, when you're working with somebody, guiding someone — like you — you might approach, at least at the moment, the visualization one.

But you might have one that really will work with you — with who you are at this moment as a human being.

And so those kinds of things too — even those practical ones, in addition to the psychological and spiritual ones — I think could be very well addressed.

Christa [01:28:06]

I had a student once that was diagnosed — literally cannot see images in their mind. So if you were like, "Pretend you have an apple in your hand," they like couldn't.

Susan [01:28:16]

See, you have to know that. Well, you know, like dyslexic people — before they really identified dyslexia, they were put away as being stupid.

And so, the more that we can — as guides or teachers, whatever we want to call ourselves — of other human souls, to know and to recognize, I think the better off we'll be as those guides and teachers.

Christa [01:28:45]

Which I feel like you kind of answered the next question with that lovely statement, which is: What do you wish more voice teachers understood about the emotional experience of singing?

Susan [01:28:57]

I... I... the emotional and the emotionless spirit of singing — in regard to that specific little soul that's standing there and putting his or her adult or teenage or six-year-old or eight-year-old self in your hands — where they are coming from.

I think that has to be something — it's the one where she was a doctor and she trained other doctors — I'll see if I can find that one — to guide themselves on intuition.

And you can't imagine the insights that they made with their patients when they turned into their intuitive hits when they were with them.

So I'll see if I can find that too. Anything that takes one out of the head and into the deeper part of one's other personality or one's awareness.

Christa [01:30:15]

It's kind of the marriage between intuition and knowledge. Like, you can know all these things — you know how the larynx works and how this vowel is supposed to phonate on this scale — like, all that, right?

Susan [01:30:27]

Yes.

Christa [01:30:28]

But it doesn't really matter if you don't have the other piece, often.

Susan [01:30:36]

No, it doesn't. I mean, in the beginning it seems to be important — in the beginnings. And it's things we do need to know, yes. But they have to wrap around this other concept. Otherwise, I don't think we're being...

Christa [01:30:52]

Well, I mean — and I see it kind of in, like, since I have the music school, so there's a bunch of teachers that I see. And I know, like, their student turnover and things like that.

And there are certain teachers — every teacher at the school is a technically great musician — and there are certain teachers who have almost no student turnover. Their studios are full all the time.

I don't think that they're technically better musicians than any of the other teachers. But I do think they have that extra empathetic, intuitive thing that — they make these, like, real human connections with their students.

Susan [01:31:33]

And maybe the word for that might be: essential. To be a good guide-teacher — more of an essential. If you really want that, that is a quality that is essential.

Christa [01:31:49]

I've been thinking — well, obviously I want people to have wonderful music lessons in the world, because that's why I do what I do — but also, as a business person, like the turnover rate on the other teachers...

I'm thinking — after I complete this project — of doing some sort of teacher training program so that...

Like, we should try to, like, boost that. So I've been thinking a lot about, like, how do we... how do you do the work? Can you learn techniques to boost it without doing 25 years of therapy first?

Susan [01:32:28]

I think there are some — even the ways one might greet someone coming in.

I mean, I think there can be some superficial techniques that can really work.

My husband loves *Saturday Night Live*, and they did this skit the other night — and these two officials were training their office people about how to deal with criticism...

Christa [01:33:01]

Oh, the sandwich one? I just saw that — where they're like, "You put a negative in between two positives." And then people were being really nasty. That was so good.

Susan [01:33:09]

But take that and mold it a little bit, you know — because maybe that's what they do. Just little things like that.

Christa [01:33:19]

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. It was brilliant.

Susan [01:33:21]

It was brilliant! And yet, there was so much rightness in there. I thought, "Absolutely."

You know, anyway, yeah. So... and you know, you have someone greet you as you come in into your studio — you know, eye contact. Or even — even little things.

So those people feel *seen*, rather than just an individual coming in and having to play scales and see if their technique is right, or if they get the notes and their rhythm right. No.

Christa [01:33:59]

More than that. It is. I told new teachers, I'm like, "It's okay to take five minutes of the lesson to check in." And they're like, "Am I wasting the parent's money?"

And I'm like, "No. Because you have to make a connection with this person — otherwise, what... it doesn't really matter what you do musically after."

Susan [01:34:16]

You know what? In a lot of ways, it really doesn't matter.

Christa [01:34:19]

Like this — music is just something we do together to connect.

Yes, it's a skill. But like, if you think about anything really — like playing on a baseball team — it's something.

We're, like, choosing an activity to connect over.

Susan [01:34:32]

Yes, yes.

Christa [01:34:34]

So if there's no connection, what's the point of the scale on the piano?

Susan [01:34:38]

And so, again, a lot of it is in which the one — in this case, the guide — where they are in his or her consciousness, you know?

And so your guide, your one, gave you a very clear... "Don't waste your money."

We're in a business.

How many articles have I read? You know — once I started thinking of it not as much a business, but as — I don't know — something bigger than that, that's when I started making money.

That's when it started being abundant for me.

Business, business, business. No, right? But when I thought of it as something deeper, and helping mankind for God's sake — I mean, the concept — hello.

Christa [01:35:35]

It's like the money is just like the energy flowing so that you can live after you've helped. Like we help each other.

Susan [01:35:47]

Yes. Yeah. Yeah. And you can be in *any* business and do that.

Christa [01:35:54]

Yes. Eddie! I've been thinking about that very recently.

Susan [01:35:57]

I think it was written by a person who owns — now that's a very profitable publishing firm.

I think you've got a woman because you published your book about that — and he's doing great because he's coming from a whole different level of consciousness, in a way.

Christa [01:36:22]

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. The skylight company used to think about that — like, "I love sunlight. And bringing sunlight into people's homes. This is fabulous."

Susan [01:36:35]

Yes. Yes.

There was a story about — I don't know — someone was doing a really sharp chart. Two bricklayers. And one said, "I'm laying one brick after another. One brick."

And the other said, "I am helping build this amazing structure to bring God into..." you know, whatever.

Yeah. Yes. So it depends on how you look at it. And one is work — and there's a whole different vibration of energy that comes in when you're working that way.

Christa [01:37:11]

So is there anything else that we didn't cover that you would like to share?

Susan [01:37:17]

You know, I think you've done a really good job with me.

Because I think, in the threads of, you know, diverting and coming back — I just think that... oh — okay. What I want to share with you is that I feel this project that you are doing is so *essential*.

And I know when projects are done and people use them as references and you can go and record them — and that's why I took this invitation to be with you very seriously — because it really helps so much, I think, deepen and expand the awarenesses of the quality of how we teach and how we guide.

So I really want to say that to you. That I think those are great. And your questions are amazing.

And I think just the importance — that we're not, you know, teachers of singing.

We are — we are guides for — through the means of our teaching and singing — for developing a better world.

In that way.

Christa [01:39:01]

I love it. Thank you so much for your time.

Interview Transcript

Melinda Moreaux, Voice Teacher, melindamoreaux.com
Penn Grove, California, Sunday, May 25th, 2025

Christa [00:01:32] Alright. I know, I was just talking about sewing all day. Oh yeah, so I have official things I need to read. Before we begin, I'd like to confirm that I'll be audio recording this interview so I can accurately reflect on your responses later. Your name and insights may be included in my final master's project unless you tell me otherwise. You're welcome to skip any questions or stop the interview at any time. Do I have your permission to record this conversation and to include your name and professional role in my final project? Yes. Yay. So this is Krista Duran speaking with Melinda Moreau on Sunday, May 25th, 2025, and she has given consent to be recorded and identified in this research. So then we can loosely start. So let's, can we start with a little bit about who you are, your background in music, specifically in teaching.

Melinda [00:02:34] So I grew up in Silver County to grow up in poverty and didn't have the opportunity to really do music as a child other than I did band, clarinet and band, which was fun. But I really wanted a piano, but that was not something that was possible. And life circumstances were really insane. And I had a really difficult childhood. So I knew my mother would not support me once I was 18. So I quit high school at 16 and went to JSC and started indicating piano classes at 16. Nice. And loved it. And then, you know, I've been doing piano ever since. Marilyn Thompson took me on me when I was just in the state and took me out on the street even though I was technically a pianist. She's just really sweet and she's very, very lovely and helpful. And gave me so many great lessons. And then David Sloss was the conductor, the opera conductor there at the time, and I took conducting lessons with him, and he was also... Very kind to me, and very helpful, and so I got to do some conducting things at Snowman State when I was a student there. Doing a musical, stage managing, things like that, and doing some assistant teaching, teaching piano classes and things. And it took me 11 years to get the D.A. Because I had to work while I was taking classes and so did the J.C. And some of us did it back and forth, which I saved money. And then, I wanted, I really admired the people who had gone through the Kodai program at Holy Names because, I don't know, they just had a way about them and an approach in terms of teaching and sight-seeing. I was just like, I want to be like that. So I went and got my mouse through the Holy Naines and it was just a blast. It was so cool to have this, their attitude is we teach people the way they actually learn, not the way we wish it.

Christa [00:04:48] Mm-hmm. I love that.

Melinda [00:04:49] I love that. Yeah, whereas a lot of the teaching I received in school was more the opposite. Teachers were disappointed in the way I learned. And I'm dyslexic, and I was tested really bright, but I didn't know how to spell when I went to college. I didn't know that that was a thing, because of my background being really sketchy. So. The JC was great because I was used to that, but some say it was just really difficult. The teachers there were very upset with me a lot. Because they thought I was misspelling things on purpose, I think, or something. Oh, right, right. You know, they'd get mad at me if I turned in the paper and I didn't even know how to write, because how would I? They would just get very upset. And I would be like, oh, yeah. So, the Sonoma State was a little sketchy. I loved the performance stuff, but certainly the theory and the air-chaining stuff was like, this is not the way I want to be taught. This is not where I want it to be. I'm sure it's changed since then, but yeah. So, Holy Names was just awesome. And in between all that, my first conducting job was at Wooden Strip Theater in Oakland, and it was a union job when I think I was 19, and I was really involved. Yeah, but they wanted somebody who wasn't quite connected to the union because they're having union troubles and I thought it would be nice and pliable, and I'm sure it was. So I did three seasons of that, which kind of gave me a background in like, well, what is the real world expectations for a performance? And for my voice teaching, I always felt like real world expectations of trying to get some cast in the show was what I was going for as a voice teacher. Right. Yeah. And then I was mostly a choral singer and didn't really know how to sing. I couldn't even sing above C, above middle C, but I was a chorale singer. And I got frustrated with that and went, I'm going to learn how to sing. And so I found a teacher and decided I was going to learn how sing it. I think I was starting when I was 36 or something. Oh wow Yeah and she had been an opera singer in Italy and she had kind of an unconventional way about her. She worked with ACT and she worked with the ballet and she was all about the words which was not the way voice was taught so much back then. It was all the technique and she's like no it's all in the words. If people can't understand your words, you're not doing it right and And she's just really smart, she looked at a lot of people at Berklee, looking at Berkeley and the urban music world, and I had some connections to that world. And I basically learned how to sing, you know, at the age of like 45 or something. It took about ten years to learn how to say. And there were a lot, there was just a lot emotion. In there. I would go in for a lesson, I would cry. I was set for five minutes and this teacher was great but she was also kind of a little old school, I'm Judge Meadow, and so she, you know, she'd go, oh that's not right, and then I would just cry for the rest of the time because I was like, but I don't know how to do it. And so eventually, you now, it became a little more and walked emotionally, and they both were just the same.

Christa [00:08:30] Mm-hmm.

Melinda [00:08:32] So some of it was life experience. It's hard to get over early child abuse. I had a lot of physical abuse when I was a kid. And I still have physical issues from that. And I just had parents that created an atmosphere of fear. So I was always afraid. And we were taught to open closed doors silently and everything was all about silence and so making noise

Christa [00:09:09] Oh. It was just. Ha ha ha.

Christa [00:09:14] Yeah, I'm learning how to make noise and then in singing it's always about like being more and more resonant so aka loud.

Melinda [00:09:22] Bye!

Christa [00:09:23] Exactly!

Melinda [00:09:23] Exactly! Exactly!

Christa [00:09:25] And then you have to work through that.

Melinda [00:09:27] Right. And I was the odd person out in the family. I was the one who wanted the fix thing. I wanted to make things right and everybody else in my family system was like, well you just don't make any noise. Right. That was their story.

Christa [00:09:38] Right, that was their survival strategy.

Melinda [00:09:40] Exactly, right. And mine was like, fuck this. This is stupid. When my sister got pregnant by some mad head, she was, you know, 16 and she got pregnant. And my dad was like, she has to marry him. And I was like no, no, we need to kick you out and bring my sister home and raise the baby so she can still go to school because she's a merit scholar and we're getting brochures from Harvard. This is ridiculous. Yeah. You know, but nobody listens to me.

Christa [00:10:13] Ah, shoot.

Melinda [00:10:16] My sister would have a harder degree if they didn't listen to me.

Christa [00:10:23] Oh, wow.

Melinda [00:10:24] So that's kind of the background I think, yeah. And then I just started singing, I think my first like early gig was the choir, the Cathedral Choir at St. James, the soprano. I had no idea what it was, they'd never sung soprano before. And I was still learning how to sing and the director there was. He was a heroin addict in his late 60s and had a maphead boyfriend and he was a really good organist, had a really good ear, and he said he would like constantly go, M'lady, could I have some water? Because you'd go off and shoot up. And, um... But he had this... It was a hilarious game. There's a couple like Anthony Martin was in that choir. You can tell he was a serious kid. But yeah, and he had this great ear. And so when I heard him singing and it was slightly off, he was just like, and I go, I don't know. How am I supposed to do it differently, you know? So it was a great learning experience.

Christa [00:11:38] Parenthetically, I got invited to a sex and drug party at that guy's house once when I was like 18. Did you? I did.

Melinda [00:11:44] Oh, so you know who I'm talking about? Oh, wait, that'd be the different guy. Was it Steve? Or was it, because Steve was there forever, and then they replaced him with this guy.

Christa [00:11:54] The guy that was there for it. Oh.

Melinda [00:11:58] I don't know what it means, though. The older guy with the boyfriend. Yeah, yeah. Did they have the fancy house? Uh-huh. No, that was the other guy. That was the guy that this guy replaced.

Christa [00:12:10] Oh, sweet. So they are they are freaking winners.

Melinda [00:12:15] I was here, like the choir invited me to his house for this thing, and then he was like, I don't know, he was looking at the icon, and I was like... Very odd. So, a Sex and Drugs party.

Christa [00:12:30] Yes, I was invited to sing. Yes, yes. I was invited to sing, I sang, and then things got weird. And then I was like, alright, I'm out.

Christa [00:12:39] That's smart. Really? That's probably what it was.

Christa [00:12:46] What is going on here?

Christa [00:12:47] I'm not here right now.

Melinda [00:12:49] If it's cocaine, I'll stay. One of my students was going up to Zadakir, and her older sister said, okay, listen, the thing you need to know about your first year of college, all the drugs are free, because you're young and cute. So when you're in college, all the drug is free, so you won't try as many drugs as possible. Poor girl is still an addict. Oh, no. Oh, no. Wow, that's funny. It sounds like you've got a lot of story.

Christa [00:13:19] Oh man i think this it's been interesting it's always interesting to stay in a place for a long time since you're from simone county too because you like know people and also i feel like people don't have like long memories and i'm like but but this thing

Christa [00:13:37] I don't want to work with you anymore!

Melinda [00:13:49] Yeah, when I went to the J.C., the guy who taught music appreciation there, he was lovers with the guy, who had been my dad's first lover, who was a prominent centrist. And we would party at that guy's house, and we would just get drunk all the time. And I was 16, you know. Just nobody cared about that.

Christa [00:14:12] Yeah, and there's a couple other directors or people that don't run things anymore when I was younger that I would always be like. That's a stay away from you, too!

Melinda [00:14:29] There was one at Sonobar that he was being slimy with a couple of my students. And they were 15 at the time. I brought him in here and I said, I'm really happy about this. And the guy was just mad, he was mad at his girls. And I said, OK, well, I just need, you know, you're going to work with my students, and you know that you are not interested in, you're not going to try to sleep with them. And you're gonna try to be inappropriate with them, and he wouldn't say it. So I called Sunderbarn and said, hey, you know you guys kind of know the problem. And they told me, oh, he's just a bad guy. He's such a good guy. He's one. And so that I went up the chain to the next person and I said, okay, just so you know, I want you to know that you have a legal liability because I am informing you by email that this is a problem. And going forward, if anybody sues you, this is proof that you have been forewarned and you did nothing about it. And then they, you know because I said you cannot have, you know a 35 year old man working with these girls alone. This is just not okay. You know, the stage manager there, or some other responsible adult, this is not okay, this is what some adults should do. Yeah. Yeah. And so then they put a minder with him so that there was a director that just followed him around all the time. But yes, I'm not sure, I don't know if it would happen that, which is good.

Christa [00:16:02] Yeah, yeah, and it's nice to be able to send my students places now because for a long time I wasn't sending them to Cinnabar or Sixth Street.

Melinda [00:16:09] The same thing at 6th Street.

Christa [00:16:10] Yeah and I was like no I can't recommend that you can work there and be safe so and so now I'm like

Melinda [00:16:18] Yay, Emily! I know, Emily's great. Trevor's great, but I really trust her. Further up the chain, there are the people that answer the questions. They, you know, they were, I have to always have to remember they were younger than me, like they don't necessarily know how important this is.

Christa [00:16:40] Yes, and there's lots and lots and lot of people that are great directors and musicians that are not predators, or at least emotionally immature, inappropriate people at the very least.

Melinda [00:16:52] Right, right. You don't know if they're really proud or very, very religious. Because this guy, the guy I brought in here to talk to, he thought that he was, you know, really attractive. He's not. And he thought, you know, the girls would just be really happy and sleep with him. Yeah. And that was the attitude I had for him. And now, I'm gonna have a drink with you.

Christa [00:17:18] Yeah, also just know, even if anyone's happy, just know. No, yeah, just don't. Just know.

Melinda [00:17:24] Yeah, at first glance already, no. Yeah, exactly, exactly!

Christa [00:17:27] No! No! No!

Melinda [00:17:36] But anyway, so that's kind of my background. I did a lot of floral conducting too. Okay, all right. In the organization.

Christa [00:17:43] And then are there any, you know, specific modalities that you investigated or got into for helping people through strong emotions in the studio?

Melinda [00:17:56] But probably the most helpful thing, if we're going from global to specific, the most helpful thing is every morning just meditating on who I'm going to see during the day and during the 11 kindness meditation about each student. Um, you know, holding them in my heart, see if there's any friction there or if there is anything that I'm not quite comfortable teaching them. I told this to a therapist once and she goes, you're in couples therapy, and she goes, I'm your husband? You do that with your husband. And I was like, yeah?

Christa [00:18:41] I'm like, yeah, maybe I should. Yeah.

Melinda [00:18:51] So, but that's been really helpful, especially since I've been really sick. And there are a few students that if I wasn't sick, I would be able to deal with. And I have, like, I have one student tonight and it's a little swings towards the sociopathic. And I normally wouldn't even

bother up with the parents, but being a little less than. Yeah. And she was like, I know what you're talking about.

Christa [00:19:23] Good.

Melinda [00:19:27] Right, I want you to pass through normal in society and I want you to find that doing good things is probably the best. So, so that's like the root of the teaching, like if you're talking about bringing strong emotions into the last time. Because my ability to regulate my own emotions around the students is like the most important thing. Yep. And to be able to breathe.

Christa [00:20:02] Yeah, and that's something, you know, I've done enough interviews now that a lot of people have brought up is they have their different systems for making sure that they're emotionally regulated or or they've like thought about their students that day or they prepared the space.

Melinda [00:20:22] Yeah, right, right.

Christa [00:20:26] And did you learn that somewhere, or read a book, or how did you access the thinking about meditating and preparing yourself that way, how did that come to you?

Melinda [00:20:41] Two sources, one was listening to a diatonic that Jeff went through where they were taking questions afterwards and people were asking him, what do you do if? And he would say, well,

Christa [00:21:01] Yeah.

Melinda [00:21:02] But that was the beginning of everything else that we were doing at the time, right? And then I get a lot of tick-off comments.

Christa [00:21:10] Mm-hmm.

Melinda [00:21:14] And it's really how we're able to regulate my emotions around my father, who's the one who beat me up and said, he didn't want to have anything to do with this for about 35 years. He just kind of disappeared. So every morning I would wake up and imagine he was a five-year-old. And that would mean a whole weekend. And I would hold him in the sun. And not for him, but for me. Yeah.

Christa [00:21:41] Yeah.

Melinda [00:21:43] And then my dad needed help in his last year in life. And I didn't see him, but somebody called me and said, your dad's here. He doesn't need your help. So I needed help, and then that last year, and I think I remember what it was. And he was basically a five-year-old. And he's sweet. It was difficult.

Christa [00:22:03] Mm-hmm.

Melinda [00:22:04] I had almost met with her at the beginning of the year. So taking on Han's work was really helpful. Awesome.

Christa [00:22:21] So do you have any systems or methods to help people in your studio if they're experiencing big emotions that are hindering their ability to work on things?

Melinda [00:22:41] I think so. I think one of my adult students, in his grades, used to be a Russian machine. You know that called?

Christa [00:22:53] Mm, mm, mm.

Melinda [00:22:53] And that was the people who were at Orange and Green.

Christa [00:22:55] Oh yeah, yeah, uh-huh, uh huh.

Melinda [00:22:57] Yeah. And he and his wife were in that colt. And they're both collected people. So his wife comes and lays on the couch during his lesson. And she said, the gift you're giving him is that you're truly listening. And she says, nobody else really listens to him. And I think even the studio, as I get more experienced, There's... The people are able to regulate their emotions in the studio so much better.

Christa [00:23:37] Mm-hmm.

Melinda [00:23:41] I think me being quiet and listening helps.

Christa [00:23:46] Mm-hmm.

Melinda [00:23:47] I have a scholarship student whose mom died of hemorrhage three years ago, and he sent him down. His grandma took him along to grandma's, and she was the daughter of the children and passed away. And his dad is living homeless on tribal land. And he's a really good student, really good center. I, since, you know, we're so empathic as teachers, and so just being innocent with what I know about him and the emotional burden, because he came in right after a huge crisis where it was 50-50, and I mean, that's less, and my child is just kind of on the flip-flop, that sort of thing. Mm-hmm. Wait for him to come forward a little bit with the emotion. He's more comfortable in his head. So let's stay in his bed for a while and praise him for all the things he's acknowledged. We can do some instrumentalists, we can do a lot more about the science with him and what works and what doesn't work. I have some acoustic experiences that I do with them where they can feel. And it's not particularly scientific, but it gives them a sense of how powerful an example is. Yeah. And so at ULS, we just started talking about his work. And he was like, ah, I want to be cool. Just coming forward a little bit.

Christa [00:25:42] Mm-hmm.

Melinda [00:25:43] So my job is to kind of, I see it as just being there and being open, and a virgin sector, help him feel the voice of all the people in his body, so he can have that joy of sitting with his full voice. And I always tell them, you know, it's not about making you... Sound like something, so the most important thing to put you out is who you are, personally. And all of your experience and spirit and all of that, we need to hear that. You know, the things you're trying to hide from people, that, that needs to be reminded that it's true. You want it all there. So my job is this, it's like, you know, little egg soaps with a dinosaur in the middle, and just be able to slowly, you know, step off and find your true inner balance of work. And see what kind of sound you're going to get.

Christa [00:26:38] Mm-hmm, all right, so it sounds like you're acknowledging them as a whole person.

Christa [00:26:45] Wow.

Christa [00:26:46] And then also that's so profound about like listening to people because that's our job is to you know listen to their voices very very very closely but we are listening to all of them and it is a time when someone can be like completely listen to and observe.

Melinda [00:27:14] I thought that was one of the things about doing co-work that was harder for me because I felt like I could share with the hurt and pain of the co-workers when they were singing and so sometimes it was overwhelming because in that environment it was hard to get people to move forward because they're trying to do the nature of the beats to kind of hide

Christa [00:27:43] Yes, that's the nice thing about choirs, that you can hide. I talk to choir singers about that all the time. I'm like, you can't be like this wispy, blendy thing as a soloist. This is, now you are you.

Melinda [00:27:58] Right, and what's the most important thing in a choir is don't be noticed by the others. Don't be reminded of those, you know, to and from.

Christa [00:28:07] Yes, conform! CONFORM!

Melinda [00:28:13] That's great. Yeah, that's right. More often than not, it's just kind of like, ah, it is frustrating because of the no-gaze.

Christa [00:28:25] Unless you, that's how I got into, let's say more real singing, is that our choir director required everyone to be taking private voice lessons, not necessarily from her, but from someone to be in the choir.

Melinda [00:28:39] Yeah, that's great.

Christa [00:28:41] I couldn't hide anymore to Ursuline. So when I went to Ursulin, the choir had already won like superior gold at like everything in the world. They traveled to Canada and like it was really high level stuff and I was a band student before but there was no band so I was like well I guess I'll do choir because it's music. And then I remember the first day, like, opening it, it was like an eight-part a cappella thing in a different language, and I was like... Ah! I thought choir was easy. I was, like... What is this? That first semester was rough. I was...

Melinda [00:29:20] What's up, Jenny?

Christa [00:29:21] No, it was Diane Strohmeyer.

Melinda [00:29:24] Oh, okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Christa [00:29:25] Yeah, it was a really great experience with her and that first semester it just like blew my mind. I was like what are we doing?

Melinda [00:29:35] And so who is your first voice teacher?

Christa [00:29:37] Barney Brown.

Melinda [00:29:38] Oh, great.

Christa [00:29:42] And then in high school then I studied with Claudia Larson. Oh, I love Claudia. Right, I loved Claudia. And I know her.

Melinda [00:29:53] Oh yeah? Yeah, because that was the principle of why I wrote the next one.

Christa [00:29:58] Oh nice. I never run into anyone that knows Claudia. I'll be like, Claudia Larson. They're like, who?

Melinda [00:30:05] She's good, yeah, I think she had a lot of integrity in the kind of work that she was doing. Yeah. I mean, we never know what each other is really doing. Other than, I should observe more, because I asked, I had lunch with Ted, which was great, it was really like long lost sibling. Yeah. It was really fun. He's wonderful. He's lovely. And so I said, he made this statement, it's really interesting, And he said he didn't know that women can't teach. And then he kind of went, what did I just say? I said, no, that's really cool. I want to hear it. I said so I found it a virtue of teaching, just specifically young men. Yeah. I said I want you to, I want watch. I want see what you do and what's, you know, is it just a demonstration that's so helpful? Uh-huh.

Christa [00:30:57] Yeah, I think the administration can be helpful. I've lost the guys in the studio.

Melinda [00:31:01] Yeah, I have a lot of guys that are teenage and listen to me talk to me. Yeah. So we were talking specifically about my student A and how... I think it's okay for me to say this, but because he's trans and I work with him through his transition and you know, it was great, it's really cool to do, but I haven't been able to get the resonance out of his voice and I don't know if it's because he was trans or if it was emotional stuff. Uh-huh. I was hoping to bring Dave to his head, because if Ken had made the same observation, why didn't he have more resonance? Who's got to be before him?

Christa [00:31:46] Yeah, yeah, yeah he does.

Melinda [00:31:48] Yeah, so...

Christa [00:31:50] Yeah, and I just think like how you like move through it, recently I've been feeling like the reason that I have so many guys in my studio is that in our like culture women are generally safer and more nurturing.

Christa [00:32:06] Yeah.

Christa [00:32:07] And so the people that are in my studio are people that need a lot, like a really gentle...

Melinda [00:32:13] Oh, yeah.

Christa [00:32:15] You know what I mean? Like everything is just very gentle, like we are exploring just so lightly.

Melinda [00:32:23] Yeah.

Christa [00:32:27] And yeah, if Ted lived here, I would, I like Ted. He was my choir director my senior year. So it's a good thing I was a good kid at a choir at Ursuline. Oh, he was part of it? Yes. Yeah, so that's how I know, like know him. And so it's been interesting, like, you know, growing into colleagues from that. But it was a great thing that I was like the person in there being like, everyone shut up, I want to sing. Yeah, he was like, he's like, teaching girls, like the all girls, he was like my oh his horse like every day. He was like I loved it when you were just like

Melinda [00:33:08] Sit down and sing. Yeah, right. My brother was teaching at Richmond Junior College. You know, it was like a college fair. He was teaching math. My brother is this huge guy with a hair down the nose and big bushy beard. You know quite a presence, but they weren't

allowed to discipline anybody based on like they would get fired if they got too many negative reviews. And so it was, you know, mostly black. Yeah. I met this white guy, and they were terrible. And he said this little old lady in the pink velvet tracksuit stood up in front of the class, just tying the tracksuit. You all sit down and shut up. This man is trying to teach us.

Christa [00:33:54] Yes. And he's going to look you down and be like, thank you. Yes. Oh my gosh.

Melinda [00:34:06] Yeah, so I think it would just be... I think it would be really cool to observe each other's lessons and see how we work. Because in the CODI system, that's considered standard. We're supposed to be doing that all the time. We're watching other people teach in the classroom. So it's different. But in that case, it's to give feedback to the teachers and to gain new ideas. Yeah. So I think that would be a really cool thing to do.

Christa [00:34:36] Yeah, I think that'll be really fun. Yeah, right? Um, let me just look at my little questions. Yep, we're doing good. We're doing great. Okay, we answered that. How about this? Do you integrate movement, improv, or playful techniques to help singers feel more embodied or expressive?

Melinda [00:35:06] Yes. So the point is embodied and expressive, and I think most of what I've learned about Amanda is the acting and working with working on the acting side and doing things with monologs. And one of the things that I love doing and don't do enough is in songs that have specific items listed is to change that up and insert different words in there as you go while you're singing. And don't go to the next thing until you're done. And she didn't know what you were going to say. That's a really fun one. I'm kind of hooked up with other things. I've done some vocal improv with them from the circle song stuff, because I worked a lot with Bobby McFerrin's circle song. He used to do it in New York every summer, and I probably went three to five summers and worked with him. So that was really helpful. So I do things like when we work on rounds and things and work with drones, you know, like old drones that we want to use, just so that they get, and I don't really talk about, I almost never talk about tuning per se, unless they're really advanced, like, oh, you never have, I know it's, I don't think you're sporting that well, because it's not in there, but most of the time I wouldn't even go there, because people get all pissed about it.

Christa [00:37:01] Mm-hmm, and then get tight with trying to make it happen.

Melinda [00:37:04] Yeah, it can happen, but like the feel of, okay, I'm on the drone, and it just, you'll have that first feel, and then that second, and then the final second.

Christa [00:37:14] Thank you.

Melinda [00:37:14] Maybe do that kind of stuff and do some things with SoulPatch. Because I do the certificate of merit thing. Oh, that. Yeah, which it's pluses and minuses. But I have one student, they failed her because she was acting on her song. Oh.

Christa [00:37:44] It's just not boring enough.

Melinda [00:37:46] Here's what's going on.

Christa [00:37:47] You need to make sure that early classical music is as boring as possible. Because it's boring as possible.

Melinda [00:37:51] Because that's what it's there for. Yes. Yeah, that's why we call it early music. It's before we even dig into what there is.

Christa [00:37:56] Yes, before they had emotions.

Melinda [00:38:00] Because there's no ocean in Bach.

Christa [00:38:02] Are you happy?

Melinda [00:38:07] Oh my gosh! Yeah, yeah, that was really good. And she's, you know, she's just a solid, solid singer, solid actor. I mean, she is tan, you now, why are you a pale, a ten year old? It's just not worth it.

Christa [00:38:20] No.

Melinda [00:38:24] Yeah, so I can post that in the future. Yeah, I know.

Christa [00:38:29] All right, and you answered that one. How about this? How do you approach the balance between vocal technique and emotional well-being in your teaching?

Melinda [00:38:40] And how are those, how are you seeing those as being related to technique and emotion?

Christa [00:38:46] An open-ended question. In my studio, there's one in the same.

Melinda [00:38:54] Yeah, I don't think there's a difference. I was thinking about, so I do some exercises that I found to be super helpful, but they hate them. And I got one of them. Were you around when Jim Meredith did that workshop and he brought in a bunch of different exercises? That was a while ago. But he has one that's like.

Christa [00:39:21] Do-do-do, do-do do, do,do,do Do-Do-do Do- Do-

Melinda [00:39:26] He he he he. And then she goes, hee hee, he hee. And they despise that. And so I have a lot of fun around just like, oh my god. And then they turn down the volume for that. Nobody does that. That's so amazing. Just out in that line to them about stuff. And I'm just reminding them that, yeah, this sucks. I know you hate it. But I found the most improvement in my singing if I'm using this particular exercise.

Christa [00:39:56] So that's why it's... I mean, like, let her enjoy fall now. Like, you will sit here and do this.

Melinda [00:40:01] No, no, no. I try to be as real as possible with them, except I'm lying to them, but that's pedagogy. I always joke about how the piano students, my cat, will come up and sit on the bench next to me. That's awesome. That person is on the edge.

Christa [00:40:33] That's really cute when your cat comes in.

Christa [00:40:37] I don't know.

Christa [00:40:39] In your opinion, how prepared are most voice teachers to address emotional or psychological challenges with their students?

Christa [00:40:47] I don't know.

Melinda [00:40:49] Because you never see anybody. Because you never seen anybody, yeah. And it would be interesting to see. I mean, all I have is my experience, which I think is. You know, I haven't had that many teachers, and I've had some kind of failures with the people for lessons, and it was too much. I don't know. I love it. You know, do you know Suzy LaMoros? She's the woman that, she sold the company, but she had the Madeleine company, Elvis Lee Madeleines cookies. Oh, uh-huh. Yeah, like, and that was her company. And very brilliant businesswoman, but also like, really nice. And I was working on some Bach cantata, and she said. That's a progress. So kind, because I'm like, no, I gotta do the next thing. I gotta, I got to remember the next day. And just this concept of this like, you know, that little pause you have there, that's when you, you make sure that everything's aligned, you know the next time.

Christa [00:42:08] Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Rest for a rest day. I'll make a great studio sign.

Melinda [00:42:16] Right, right. I mean not for collapsing, but just for like, you know, finding that buoyancy in that space.

Christa [00:42:22] I'm recalibrating.

Melinda [00:42:25] Because that thing of, you know, going through and the diagram gets higher and higher and Less and less and less.

Christa [00:42:34] Use this time to reset that.

Melinda [00:42:36] Yeah, so I don't know, now I know the features that I had, you know, the first, really, in their study work was amazing, but also not particularly kind of.

Christa [00:42:57] Mm-hmm.

Melinda [00:42:58] Well, he was stuck, but, yeah, and I started to see people on the very end, and it was lovely. A lot of it was just figuring out on my own.

Christa [00:43:16] What your systems are going to be.

Melinda [00:43:18] Yeah, like all the stuff about the minutiae of facial muscles and what's getting involved in there and how that's getting in the way and helping people to find ways to, you know, to relax the muscles of the bones.

Christa [00:43:38] Mm-hmm.

Melinda [00:43:39] So, the Boston Library. Yeah, I studied with this tenor who lives in Maryland and he's the same format. And he had just like one thing, and it was hypertension of the genitalia, the same.

Christa [00:43:55] Oh, jeez.

Melinda [00:43:56] Which I thought would be terrible, but it fixed all my job problems and really helped me to understand how you can be engaging the mass-sitter on figuring out how it works and whatnot. And he just does his only thing. And I asked the conference assistant, do you see what he's doing? Yeah, that's what he does. You're staying here, you're staying half way through in Aria, and then it goes off on the stem. It feels really awful.

Christa [00:44:24] You're like, it was helpful for me, so good.

Christa [00:44:29] This is the only thing I love.

Melinda [00:44:38] So how many people are you interviewing?

Christa [00:44:42] I'm about 12.

Melinda [00:44:46] I'm going to be quiet.

Christa [00:44:48] I haven't interviewed Ted, I should have interviewed Ted. When I was thinking of people, either people that I knew had a secondary modality, like I am a voice teacher and I'm a certified Alexander teacher or something like that, and then other people like you, whose students always seem really calm and grounded when I see them. They just are doing their calm-grounded thing, and I was like, let's see what system Melinda has.

Melinda [00:45:19] That's all, that's all Amanda. Because I had this one student, brilliant student, and she was working on Sake and Mommy, and it was always out of tune. Everything she said was just like that. It was my girl, and we were in work. And Amanda came in and said, okay, now this is what I'm going to do. Okay, you're going to come at me, and you're gonna talk to me, and you gonna, you know, perfectly into it. Perfect. So, whatever was getting in the way. So, now, like, I love the comment from Blue, or one of my students, where he just said, I love that you started right when you came out.

Christa [00:46:00] Mm-hmm.

Melinda [00:46:03] So that's one of the things that lately that I've really been getting on about, you know, start doing the direction. He's like, ah, one of the piano stars. Because I didn't see his heart. Because you've got to go through a process to know why you're singing. Because if you don't know why, you're seeing that verse line. And the nice thing about that, like you were talking about nerves and something, like that, for all of them, it gets rid of the nerves, like once they're singing, they're never nervous before. Competition, but they're... Yeah, they're so much calmer, because once they're in character, then the ego can be lifted out. It's no longer about caring about how they sound, it's about enjoying the character.

Christa [00:47:00] Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Melinda [00:47:02] Yeah. Which is really where I always pull me back to. If they're struggling at all, we start there. When you're singing that high note, why would the composer put a high note there? Well, I think maybe they wanted it to be loud. So let's try it loud and see what happens. And I didn't think nothing of like non-attaching, like not attaching to whether or not that note is good or it's loud or whatever, but let's try and see. Yeah, non-Attach. Did that work for you? And then sometimes the first logo, that sounded terrible and I'll say, oh, actually that sounded really good and I'm an expert and you're not, so just, you need to rethink that.

Christa [00:47:44] Yeah, exactly! In those instances when they do something new and it's just so awesome and they say it sounded terrible, I'm like, you're just not used to it yet. It's just new, new things are happening.

Christa [00:48:00] No!

Christa [00:48:03] There's a lot of like common core themes with the different teachers that I'm interviewing that you brought up, which is like training the safe space, working on the self and

your own emotional regulation and space that you make for people, and then like the element of like playfulness.

Christa [00:48:26] Yeah, right.

Christa [00:48:27] Around things and the non-attachment to the outcome.

Melinda [00:48:32] Right, right, we're just here experimenting, let's see what happens.

Christa [00:48:37] Yeah, and then I think you bring in another piece, which is like the realism, like people really like to have people be real with them.

Melinda [00:48:45] Oh, but you're saying, yeah. And it's.

Christa [00:48:46] And it's, I think, most people do. And especially like, especially when things aren't great. Like, that was terrible, but yeah. Yes!

Melinda [00:49:04] And they'll say, you're lying to me. I said, oh, no, no. This is what sounds like when I'm lying to you. You know what that was? Yeah, exactly. This one of her favorite ones is, I could not unlock hers a long time ago. I could NOT unlock hers. You know, a really pretty 15-year-old who, the center of her world was getting men to fight over her. Like, this was, I mean, she was like, what is going on here? And I could get her to just sing, and then she came in one day totally high on that, and sang really well. I was pissed, I was piss for a little lesson, because I knew she was high on math. And she laughed, and when this other kid came in, I said, oh, she's high on the math. And I just had kind of a fit about it, and he's the son of a therapist, and he goes. And then he comes in the next week and he goes, I really thought about what you said. I want you to know this is the first time that I've been sober for a lesson. And I was like, I'm not my intention. It was a big pothead that didn't know it. Oh my gosh. And he was like yeah, no I'm actually sober today.

Christa [00:50:29] Oh, the professional, like, dealing with people is always so interesting, working with people.

Melinda [00:50:38] Well, I think it's better because I have control over it. I had to let a student go for non-payment and assholery around the non- payment. And it didn't get any better anymore. And Jason texted me. She said, I was told you were like this. But it's OK. I would be.

Christa [00:51:06] Great. That's okay. Yeah, I don't weed out the people that don't want to pay. He, he, he. Ha, ha, ha. I'm sorry, you don't like my boundaries about getting paid.

Melinda [00:51:18] Yeah, and I tell people from the beginning, I said this is a really important part of my personality, and I'm a little over the top, but you have to pay me by the bridge, you have pay the bridge. And I text you on the second and say I don't have to payment. Then you say I'm so sorry that it's too late, P. And I say, oh, you're always so good about paying and I'll pay you later. I said, this is the ritual, but we have to modify this because otherwise it's just not going to work out.

Christa [00:51:45] Yeah.

Melinda [00:51:46] How do you do it? You do automatic payments.

Christa [00:51:49] I don't do anything because I have the business and my office staff deals with everybody.

Melinda [00:51:56] You don't have to get into that. No. You don't have an alternate personality.

Christa [00:52:02] Oh, nice. Nice. Yeah, they enforce all the studio rules and tell people you can't come to your lesson anymore because you haven't.

Melinda [00:52:16] Have you ever met that person I recommended to you, Michelle, have you ever met her? Because you asked me for a voice teacher. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. I sent you her name I think, didn't I, or did you? I don't know. She's a trip, because I did a business coaching with her, and you don't need it because you got your shit together, but it was really interesting. She is fierce and just like, you know, do not fuck around, do no do this. Yeah because one of the things she says is do not expand into a multi-feature studio. I was like, I don't think this seems to be going fine with that. Like, do you ever regret not just having...

Christa [00:52:52] Oh yeah, totally, all the time because, well, because I had a business before that and so I understand about running businesses.

Melinda [00:53:01] What would you do with it?

Christa [00:53:03] In construction.

Melinda [00:53:04] Oh, okay.

Christa [00:53:06] It's a construction company.

Melinda [00:53:08] Like a general contractor.

Christa [00:53:09] And then our specialty is skylights and tube skylights. I'm noticing your tube skylight! They're great! They're a great product. I wanted like every room in my house.

Melinda [00:53:23] But look at this, they have a neutral color down here. Right, right. And put so much light in here. And we're penetrated out to the max. Because I built this. I was the general in this. Oh, nice. I mean, trusses driving up in a row and all that. Yeah, it was so fun. I just loved it, you know.

Christa [00:53:46] They're great products to use, they collect light as well, it's not just passively coming in through the skylight window.

Melinda [00:53:54] Oh, right. That's interesting. Yeah, so that's why they're so bright.

Christa [00:53:58] They're built to like collect it as long as possible if there's outside light and it's really concentrated in.

Melinda [00:54:05] And so what kinds of projects would you do?

Christa [00:54:08] Um, we did residential and commercial, like we did the skylights on the new Berkeley Public Library, we did those skylights from the Marin, um, what do you call it? Marin, County of Marin, like educational buildings, like are there things at, or

Melinda [00:54:33] Thank you, you will see the skylights in the end.

Christa [00:54:35] Yeah that was my specialty so that was like those would be like we did big you know commercial projects for California and Sonoma County and residential stuff and so I was familiar with running a business and managing people's personalities.

Melinda [00:54:51] I don't know how many, how many of the police...

Christa [00:54:54] Um, it was pretty small. We had like, like five people in the office.

Melinda [00:55:00] That's still alive.

Christa [00:55:01] And then probably our guys in the field, so what we did was we would hire other companies that we always worked with. Yeah. We know because of the like how you know sometimes it would just be like residential stuff and then sometimes we do Berkeley Library. Yeah right. So they all were contractors and then, sometimes they combine them on projects or they're doing their like little thing.

Melinda [00:55:25] They're doing their like little thing, the whole thing. But those are nice jobs. Yeah.

Christa [00:55:50] And so I was familiar with like dealing with people's personalities and like managing people. Yeah. And so when Asia wanted to sell the music school, I was told by his, I'm like, Asia wants to sell me the school, but I don't know, I am tired. Yeah. And he's like, no, I think it will be great. And he, because he's never run a business himself. And I was like, okay, I can help. And he was like I'll help, it will great. And I'm going, okay. And so then we did it and it was like destroyed our lives the first year.

Melinda [00:56:21] And what's his background?

Christa [00:56:24] Tech, he's a software engineer.

Melinda [00:56:25] Okay.

Christa [00:56:27] Yeah, so it like just obliterated our lives. I actually like cut my hair this short and I had seven outfits that I wore for the seven days of the week. Yep. And we worked because he still had his full time job. And I still had the construction healthy at the time. And we work to like 20 hours a day for an entire year and completely just burnt to a cinder and died. Yeah. And then COVID started. That was 2019. And the COVID started which I think saved us in a way.

Melinda [00:56:59] Why? Oh, because.

Christa [00:57:01] Because there was less stuff. We were, school did really well in 2019 and then that, because we were spending like \$1,000 a month to keep it open for all, for like three

years. But there was like less that we could do. And so it was like good to like be sitting around at home and recovering from our extreme burnout.

Melinda [00:57:27] Yeah.

Christa [00:57:28] Um

Melinda [00:57:39] And he goes, you know, you're just an introvert.

Christa [00:57:51] So now that we have it all squared away in their systems and I have amazing office staff, it's mostly fine. I think I have a little like PTSD about dealing with people because most almost every day is totally fine and it'll be like one person I have to deal with and I'm like

Melinda [00:58:12] And how do you deal with the difficult ones? Like, are you able to regulate, or do you?

Christa [00:58:17] Oh yeah, I literally, I was just saying this the other day, so like especially during COVID when people were going insane, I had so many situations where like parents would send me emails like cussing me out, like just so inappropriate. And then I would be like really upset and I would like take 24 hours to think about it and then I'd write like a really professional non-emotional reply and like blah blah blah. I've been thinking about lately, because some of these people that I had issues with that were just so explosive, like we'll see them in the community, and I think they're totally genuine and they'll be like, hey! And I'm like... Do you have no emotional regulation like if I ever got to that point where I sent someone something like that or Talk to them like that on the phone I wouldn't talk to them anymore because I had done that

Melinda [00:59:12] Right, right. I just feel like, I just don't really want to...

Christa [00:59:17] Oh, what is going on with our reporters? So yes, I feel like I'm really good at, like I have my process where I go scream at trees or whatever and then come back and be like professional. And most of the NOLA teachers right now are really great and chill and so we're.

Melinda [00:59:37] You got it.

Christa [00:59:38] We're in our groove, but I understand her point about like you become a business person versus like if you just have your own studio, you can focus on the music.

Melinda [00:59:50] Yeah, and she was just saying like, you know, dollar for dollar, we could probably make more money as an individual teacher, was her thing. Yeah, it's probably not true, you could have a background in it, but she's probably talking about most of the people who, they stumble into it because they essentially go, I have a waiting list, so I should do a multi-teacher study.

Christa [01:00:11] Uh, uh-huh, uh huh, uh hmm.

Melinda [01:00:13] Right, and I've had that before, right at that point that I'd have former students teach out of here and it didn't tend to work, but they didn't have to have a sacred light ethic. Whereas now, like, Kayla is teaching acting to a bunch of my students and she's charging a fair amount of court, which is great, and her dad made a little studio for her in her house, and she lives in the city mostly. And she's killing it. She's just killing it as a private acting coach and the kids love her and they come back really, really well focused on what they're doing acting wise.

Christa [01:00:58] Awesome.

Melinda [01:01:01] And she's teaching voice at 6th Street. You said, I gotta send them to you because I don't know what to do. No, just keep them. Keep them. They're fine. They're not gonna hurt them. They love you.

Christa [01:01:13] Yeah, he used to learn over time, he'd try stuff out.

Melinda [01:01:18] She is an amazing director. She did the tech high moment, yeah. Did you get a chance to see that? She had all the girls just like, they were just so fierce.

Christa [01:01:33] Awesome

Melinda [01:01:34] Yeah, and all these different body types and all of these girls just like, yeah, you know. But they were not self-conscious about their bodies at all. And it was so cool to see and such a really good theater experience.

Christa [01:01:51] Awesome.

Melinda [01:01:52] Yeah I was like, how did you do that? You're 19, you did that with those kids. That was great. Yeah, I want to see more of that kind of directing. Yeah, yeah. And that's what I was talking about, great queens. Oh and I did get the um near Shalom said yeah we could use their space. Oh, nice. And great acoustics, beautiful skyways, really cool. Awesome. OK. Yeah, and they're lovely and relatively inexpensive, so we should look at a date, you know, when we can do that, and Sonoma Sings would just basically do everything, but you guys would do the write checks from our money, write checks for our money and then do the insurance with that, that was for you guys.

Christa [01:02:42] I've been talking to a lot of my students and they're excited about it.

Melinda [01:02:44] Oh good!

Christa [01:02:46] I think it's going to have a lot of interest if we get the word out.

Melinda [01:02:50] And then we agreed to do the contest for the Joyce DiDonato thing. They are telling me they cannot give me a date for the master class. And I'm like, how do we do a contest if we don't know?

Christa [01:03:05] Like Sonoma State or Joyce.

Melinda [01:03:07] The Screen Center.

Christa [01:03:13] Put your leg in it and sketch it out at a time. Ha, ha, ha.

Melinda [01:03:19] Because they said, well, there's so much going on academically of that thing if we can't fidget because we have priority. We're giving \$50,000 to the Green Center for this. Yeah, I'll push you. Yeah, right, thank you. Thank you, because that was kind of my attitude. Yeah, because am I right that we need if we're going to do a contest?

Christa [01:03:42] Yeah, yeah.

Melinda [01:03:43] We need to have like a date because we're so busy.

Christa [01:03:45] Yeah they'll be like am i here at that time when are we doing that right just just send in your materials we'll maybe tell you when we're doing it

Melinda [01:03:55] We'll make it, yeah. We'll be like all those other shitty things you've ever applied for. Yeah. Yeah, so I'm assuming like video editions.

Christa [01:04:05] Yeah, I think it'll be great.

Melinda [01:04:08] All right, I'll start putting that together. I'm starting to get a little better. It's just been, this has been fucking eating my brain.

Christa [01:04:16] Because after we burned out, after we burned out in 2019, I got COVID right at the beginning of 2020. And it was long COVID and I had like no nothing. There was nothing left. I'm gonna be like, why didn't you pay the business credit card? And I'm like, I don't know. It's like, did you make a list? I'm, like, i can't follow lists anymore. I can't

Melinda [01:04:40] And my guilt over being paid by Bob every month to do this, and I'm like, I am not giving him his money's worth.

Christa [01:04:51] We're going to jam pack the fall.

Melinda [01:04:53] We're in jam-packed with it. Thank you.

Christa [01:04:54] Jam packets because Jonathan's gonna do things.

Melinda [01:04:57] Oh right, and we're going to do the drag queen thing, and he wants something at Jarvis but I don't know what to do there that's different from what you guys are doing.

Christa [01:05:05] Oh well do you want to do like another class with someone or like a master class at Jarvis?

Melinda [01:05:12] Yeah, because we could do like, I mean, for an artist, I can pay probably up to 10 grand for that.

Christa [01:05:19] Yeah, I think if we, I can think about.

Interview Transcript

Joe Persinger, Ph.D. Licensed Psychologist, drjoepersinger.com
Sebastopol, California, Friday, May 16, 2025
Interview Transcript
Joe Persinger, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist
Santa Rosa, California

Friday, May 16, 2025

Christa This is Christa Durand speaking with Joe Persinger. On Friday, May 16, 2025, and he has given his consent to be recorded and identified in this research. So to begin, could you tell me a little bit about your background? And you're schooling as a clinical psychologist.

Joe Well, I got into it so much late in the game. I was... After doing undergraduate school. I worked for several years in various things, including research. Lab technician. Doing safety evaluations on new drugs for FDA approval.

Christa Your undergrad was in biology, right?

Joe The reason I didn't go to medical school was because I had undiagnosed. ADHD. Wits. Wasn't even a word back in the 60s when I was at school. And, was a somewhat indifferent student. So after graduating undergraduate school, I did. Number of years of various work, including the research, and then I decided through my father. Actually got me interested in humanistic psychology. Which was unusual for him because he worked for the State Department.

Christa Yeah.

Joe I grew up in northern Virginia just outside of Washington, D.C. And I developed over a period of about a year and a half an interest in psychology and the motivation to go back to school. But I've never had a psychology course. So, I looked around for schools where I could take a major's worth of psychology in two semesters and wound up at the University of Massachusetts. After completing that, I moved to Los Angeles. And work again in the fellow was doing research on experimenter mediated neurofeedback training. For epileptic veterans. And I did that for a couple of years and then got into graduate school. In psychology. At the Alliant University Los Angeles campus. And was there for the program for four years. Including two years of undergraduate internship, various. Locations around Los Angeles. Afterwards, I took a break for a year. ...And... Lived in a bungalow colony. In East Hollywood. Met my wife there. And then one day, the owner of the... Colony court, Muggle of Court. If you know anything about poets, Charlie Bukowski went two doors down.

Christa Oh my god.

Joe It was that sort of a neighborhood.

Christa Ha ha!

Joe And The owner came by at Christmas to wish it some Merry Christmas and said, by the way. I bought some property up north, you want to go manage it. And we were at loose ends at that point. We said, well, we're interested. Where is it? He said, bidday, good-bye. And we said, well, where's that? And he said, will you remember the movie, The Bird? That's where it is. When do you need us? Next week. We quickly pack up. And drive up to Bodega Bay. And I spent a year and a half. Myself and my wife managing the marina and a number of other things there Until I got a job with the county mental health department. And worked there for three years getting my postdoc hours.

Christa Oh, nice.

Joe And then... Spent a short amount of time in Bakersfield decided that Even though the job was good, the climate was not terribly supportive. So we moved back to Sonoma County and I opened up a practice. In Santa Rosa in 1982 and have been there ever since. I got a job with Kaiser in 1995 in the pain management department. And split my time between Kaiser and my

private practice until retiring from Kaiser at the end of 23. And I still maintain a part-time primary practice.

Christa And within your practice, do you have any specialties?

Joe Generally speaking, I would say it is somatically oriented. I much prefer in-person visits to online because Some people can, I cannot pick up on subtle. Embodied cues in the person I'm working with, unless they're actually in the same room as I am. I find the work just much more effective that way. I do a lot of trauma therapy. In addition to whatever, you know, anxiety, depression, whatever a person comes in with. Chronic pain, chronic medical conditions. In whole or in part it comes down to a dysregulated autonomic nervous system. Typically... Chronic sympathetic windup. Although sometimes both branches can be wound up. A person can alternate between sort of freeze, dissociation, disconnect, and anxiety, guardedness. Irritable bowel is a great example of somebody that alternates between the two. And they come down and... Alternating this is Missing Goose. Her official name is Gray Goose.

Christa Oh, you like that? You're so tiny.

Joe We were probably drinking vibe martinis.

Christa My goodness, you're a teeny kitten!

Joe And I'm Izzy.

Christa He's so soft.

Joe Yeah, it's great to get your fingers in there.

Christa Mm-hmm a really soft cat Do you smell the dogs?

Joe Uh...

Christa Now, in your practice, are you...

Joe Oh, modality check.

Christa Yeah, monolies. I wouldn't say you need a lot of talk therapy or anything. It sounds like when you're working with the nervous system, you're going to have to...

Joe Not a whole lot, I do a lot of... Training modalities I use are hypnosis, which I've used for... 35 years. EMDR, which is essentially bilateral brain stimulation. Used when somebody is stuck in some sort of a stress memory. Somatic experience of trauma therapy, which is Peter Levine's. Approach that he developed back in the 70s. Cognitive behavioral skills training and redirecting thoughts, that sort of thing. A lot of somatically oriented breath work training. So it really depends on the person and what they come in with.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe Typically every session involves some dealing with some sort of stress condition. That's mainly why people come in. They're unhappy with

Christa They're in enough pain that they seek help for something. Have you ever worked with any singers or performers?

Joe I have worked with some performers, not specifically singers. And Again, it's about... Assessing how well they're tuned into themselves.

Christa What kinds of problems were they having that they sought coming in to work with you?

Joe Some were creativity blocks. Somewhere... Performance anxiety. I think those probably were the two main. Main things that they came in with.

Christa OK.

Joe And some were just wanting to feel like they were getting in their own way somehow.

Christa I think we all are getting it our own way.

Joe To some degree or another, yeah. You know, we're the product of art. Upbringing.

Christa Uh-huh, uh-huh. Um, so then switching over to you as a singer, can you give me a background of like your singing life? Well, I should say singing and performing life.

Joe When I was young, when I was in college, well, again... I grew up with a chronically dysregulated nervous system, so it was virtually impossible for me to get comfortable. It really interfered with creativity and curiosity, so I had like two years of piano lessons when I was a kid, and it went nowhere. Because I couldn't enjoy it. I did have a lot of exposure to music because

both my parents. Didn't perform, but they loved listening to it. So I listened to a lot of classical music and a lot of jazz. In undergraduate school, I took out the guitar. And enjoy playing that. And singing mainly folk. That broad range of stuff. That continued after I got out of graduate school. Let's start out with a six. String nylon. I got a 12th string after I got out of graduate school. Enjoyed playing that a lot. Got to the point where I was relatively good, I could place a lead over mine. And that Leo Kahnke... What's his name? Fair-Forward Soldiers. It'll come to me. Anyway. I did that for a number of years. Until. We moved to Northern California and it kind of trailed off. It did it sporadically after that, but. Not consistently. And that lasted up through... Sometime in the 80s, I guess, and then... The other muse just sort of... Dissipated and I stopped playing. So guitar and singing folk songs, that was the main thing. Had a couple of lessons here and there just along the way. Nothing serious. In the early 90s, I took lessons which were not technical, but just to sing. The teacher had us. Would find little halls and things for us to do performances, and that was enjoyable. That's pretty much the extent of it until I retired from Kaiser and Decided to take up singing again

Christa When did you... That went the teacher before me Was that the first time you were performing for public?

Joe Mainly, I mean here and there I did a couple of stints at a coffee house. Way back. When I was still in school. I did a couple of... Theatrical productions in College. But they didn't involve singing. I'm just trying to think. I guess the next real singing I did was when I got the part of Larry in Sondheim's company with the Santa Rosa Players.

Christa Oh, nice.

Joe And. That was fun. That's pretty much it.

Christa Okay. One of the things that I love about you is when we do performances or anything like that you always come up to me you're like, that was fun! And a lot of my students come up to me and say that was terrifying. But I did it anyways, I'm proud of them. Um... Now, do you feel like you have always been pretty comfortable performing for people, or...

Joe Particularly since 1995 when I had to start teaching groups and classes. On a regular basis.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe I've gotten comfortable. Although... I notice... Often when I teach, my nose sweats.

Christa Hmm, interesting.

Joe The rest of being no, just one dose.

Christa Yeah, something's working hard in there.

Joe It's like vasomotor rhinitis, I think, is what it is.

Christa Uh, okay, so, um... Do you ever feel as a singer or performer? Like you used any of the tools that you know to work on yourself to calm down, ground, center, move through difficult emotions for yourself.

Joe Yes, but I find the best stress management technique is to know the material.

Christa Yeah.

Joe You can get that part. I have printed out a bunch of breathing. Skills that I teach. For the patients that you're welcome to.

Christa Thank you.

Joe And again, you can use them for your project. And also you can. Print them out and hand them to anybody you think could benefit. Awesome.

Christa Thank you very much.

Christa So the printouts that you just handed me have a whole different. A bunch of different breathing. Of techniques. So can you explain to me why you feel like those are? Helpful. For people and what they do to them.

Joe There is an old Buddhist expression. Breath sweeps mind. And how I interpret it is... When a person's is upset. One of the most effective things they can do. Is to... Calm down your system. Because really, you can think about being upset, but in order to be upset, your body has

to be involved. Your autonomic nervous system has to be involved. I mean, you can go into loop thinking and all that sort of thing, and it could be useful. Train yourself out of that. But your body has to be involved. Primarily the sympathetic nervous system which is involved with energizing. But when there's a perception of threat, it just mounts by play.

Christa Hmm.

Joe And there's no threats. It's just good energy. It is good excitement. One of the best ways to calm your nervous system is through your breathing. That's why I spend a lot of time early on with my folks. Who are in chronically stressed, teaching them how to breathe, because most people don't know how to breathe when they come in.

Christa Uh huh.

Joe Short, shallow, irregular. Which was fine. If you have to deal with a tiger over there. And you want to remain very still. Until you can figure out how you're going to manage. Is a chronic condition this is Yes. As we know. Terribly hard on the entire system. Well, there's Tootsie Pop. In touch.

Christa Particular breed of cat.

Joe They're sisters. They're both Burmese.

Christa Oh my goodness.

Joe And like sisters. One moment, they'll be sleeping cheek by jowl.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe The next moment they'll be squabbling.

Christa It's pretty.

Joe So that's what I spend, what I spent particularly early on. Training people. Basic relaxation of your spots breathing. But then more. Advanced techniques that can really help. Settle down the nervous system. And it could be any one of the ones in there, just depending on what I feel the person could benefit from.

Christa Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. And, you know, the, just scanning these, one of the... Lovely things about the breathing that you just handed me that it seems like these are things that teachers could use without crossing that line to being a psychologist.

Joe Calm down and take a breath, that's not psychotherapy.

Christa Or in this one where they're breathing in for and counting while they breathe in and then counting while you breathe out. You breathe out.

Joe Go online and find box breath anywhere. It's not psychotherapy, it's just. Paying attention to what's happening. And. Learning what it feels like to be stressed. What it feels like to be anxious, what it feels like to be darned. How it shows up in the body. And, you know, you can help anybody notice that, you don't have to be a... Licensed professional. You can see it when they walk in the door. Try taking your breaths and learning your body and mind.

Christa Uh-huh, uh-huh.

Joe So any of those basic sorts of techniques where you're not saying... Well, now tell me about that time when the teacher had you in front of the class and embarrassed you and you've had stage fright ever since. All right, that's. You know, moving over the line. I notice that you're really tense, irrespective of your history. Let's see if we can help you learn skills to bring that down.

Christa Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Um... I'm going to slide a little bit off topic because I just glanced at my notes that I wrote down. Um, so one was about One thing that I notice about you as a performer is that You always seem very calm. Whether or not you feel like that inside. Calm and you say you have fun and so I was wondering if there are any like rituals or any of this work that you do for yourself before you. Go into a performance.

Joe Learning the material. Loosening up. Deep breathing. Bye bye. Some breath work is designed to energize. Shining breath is an example in there. Where you're breathing and you're pumping the navel at the same time. A more extreme example of that is Kundalini breath of fire, which is not...

Christa I think I'm familiar with that one.

Joe Checking with other people. Other performers maybe, how they're doing. You know, just feeling that connection.

Christa Hmm

Joe I think that's important. I'm not out there alone, but I'm part of a... Stage family, so to speak. We're interacting, and I think that could be... Both helpful and Not only for me, but and others.

Christa Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Joe I don't know if I included the heart man. Breath thing in there.

Christa I don't think that I saw that one just when I scanned them.

Joe That one is also a good one. I should print you out a copy of that. I can email it to you. It's quick coherence breath, essentially. And you can use it. Pretty much anywhere you think of somebody one or more person or animal that you have a close affectionate connection with, a loving connection with. You breathe deeply and slowly, you smile gently. What I teach people is, everybody knows when you feel good you feel like smiling. Not many people know that the nerves that manage your facial expressions are two-way. Feel good, smile. Smile sends a message back to your brain to feel better. And physiologically. Those nerves are 80% sensory and only 20% motor, which means 80% of the information they're sending is from the face to the brain, not the other way around.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe So deep breathing, gently smiling. Think of somebody... One or more, you have a loving connection with. Remember a time when you were with them and feeling that or just imagine them with you or in front of you And imagine breathing in and out through your heart. I tell people it's right in the middle, it's not all to the left. And Allow yourself to relax and notice if you begin to feel kind of a warmth and expansiveness begin to It's fair. In your heart, in your chest, and just keep doing it as long as you enjoy it. It could be 30 seconds, it could be 10 minutes. And notice how far your body will allow that feeling. To. Does it stay in your chest? Does it expand to other places in your body? The more guarded you are. The more your body's gonna resist. But it's training, and if you do that, tell people, if you do it every day. You literally will train yourself. To allow this feeling. To. Extend further. And... It will have. A significant effect, again, on your autonomic nervous system. Your ability to release and relax and feel safe.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe It's one of the things I often ask folks when they come in is when's the last time you felt safe?

Christa Oh, that's a big question.

Joe And not uncommonly people will think. Well, I'm not sure I ever have.

Christa Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Joe Well, that's a red marker for somebody that was raised in an ace. Household, adverse childhood experience. Well, they never. We're wild. For a lot of themselves to just release, relax, and feel met.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe So folks like that. If you're motivated, you can retrain themselves, but it takes a while. Can show up in singing, somebody with an ace history is going to have a harder time relaxing and just expressing themselves. He's learned to be on guard. It wasn't okay to be spontaneous If a vocal instructor were to see that and it became pretty clear that that was a major impediment, then, you know, a recommendation that they see somebody and... Training trauma therapy would be really good. Piece of advice for the person.

Christa Mm-hmm. No, it's good that you said that was along the lines of Something I was gonna ask later, which is when I'm interviewing voice teachers, one of my questions for them is. When do you, or have you ever... Recommended. That. A student in your studio seeks professional help. So this is a very nice specific thing. To say. If you notice these symptoms.

Joe I wonder if somebody can't relax.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe Then you know, without going into their history, just suggesting if they're not seeing somebody. Might be a good idea to see somebody. Specifically somebody that doesn't do just talk therapy, but understands how trauma is held in the system.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe And it could be... Certainly it could include things like Felton, Christ, and Alexander. That it may need more, just depending.

Christa And how... Now, if someone was... Looking or if there's specific words or phrases that teacher could recommend to see someone like you that

Joe I would recommend for somebody in Sonoma County. That they go to two. Websites. The Redwood Psychological Association and the Redwood Empire. The re-camp. Redwood Empire Chapter of the California Association of Marriages and Painting Therapy.

Christa That's a mouthful, isn't it?

Joe Reconnected. And look at their list of providers and filter for. Those folks that do. Trauma or PTSD were. And those people that have a somatical earring into practice. And they're different. You know, ways to do that. Those will be good for again. It takes whatever insurance the person may have. That would be what I'd recommend.

Christa Okay, all right.

Christa I just want you to check on my... Um, question. Alright, here's another one for you. You personally... Um. Has anything changed about? Your understanding. A hardware psychology and singing intermix. Since you started studying. Voice. Maybe with the... A teacher before or with me. Giving revelations.

Joe One of the important things in my work with you is your insistence. Than I project. Which is exactly opposite. Of my traditional style. Of not projected. And. Again, it goes back to an ace childhood.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe Where it wasn't okay.

Christa Would be out there.

Joe To really be out there, so. Somebody in that environment is going to learn to be there, but only halfway. And so they... Hold themselves in.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe And they may learn how to be. Talk really well, and that sort of thing, but at a deeper physiological. Level they're still holding themselves in.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe And I would say in terms of my own embodied experience, that's probably the... Most salient thing that's come out of it.

Christa Interesting. I'm a little bit surprised just because you've been leading group classes for so long.

Joe When it's... Material that I know. I don't have to be all that me out there.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe Because I know the material, I'm comfortable with it. And again, I started out... Back in the late 90s. Exceedingly nervous. It was like when I was in university. I wanted to do some... In front of the curtain But I was terrified.

Christa Mm.

Joe So the first. Part I got was part of the chorus. And it was still terrifying. But then gradually through experience again. To be more. Comfortable. I was still, and I noticed when I watched myself in some of the videos of, like... Little Mermaid. That what strikes me is how not out there I am.

Christa Mm-hmm. Do you feel like you're putting yourself out there in the moment and then you watch it later?

Joe When I watch myself, it seems like I don't have very much energy. And I don't feel that when I'm there. But it suggests to me I need to... That that would be a good direction for me to... Focus more.

Christa Mm-hmm. Interesting. Yeah, it's always interesting, our perceived experience. And now on the day of. Being able to record everything. In the external.

Christa Um, let's see if it answered that. That's wonderful.

Christa Can you answer that? We kind of answered this, but I'll ask it one more time in this.

Um... From your perspective, what might voice teachers benefit from understanding about emotional processing and regulation?

Joe I think we can all learn. To be more adept at really looking at a person, how they move, how they hold themselves, how they. Brace. And how that affects. That are what it's singing or whatever. And to pay a lot of attention to that. You know, I'm sure you've run into this. How the person you're working with is getting in their own way. And two. Learn things to help that person. Move through that somehow or release that or let it go. I would say that's probably the... Single most, I mean, you know, you can... Obviously... You, for example, have an excellent ear in determining the quality of a person's voice. Then how do you teach them to... If they have a chronic constriction. And he teach them to notice it. What the sensations are and then what they can do to begin to release it. I'd say that's the main thing.

Christa Lovely. That was an excellent answer. I loved it. Um... Well, this is a good one, which we partially answered as well, but. How do you think voice teachers can create environments that support both technical growth and emotional resilience?

Joe Well, one thing is good feng shui, the physical environment.

Christa Mmmmmmmmmmm

Joe that even if a person isn't noticing the... Let's say the room that they walk into. Should feel safe. And then, of course, the personal contact, how old... How good of a co-regulator is the voice stage.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe How calm are they able to? How calmly are they able to... Maintain themselves And what kind of a friendly connection can they? Can they truly enjoy? Connecting with the person.

Christa Mm-hmm.

Joe That you're worrying with. I think that... Like both of those things, the environment and the connection provide sort of the foundation. For which to work. If either or both of those is missing, I think it's going to be... Take more work, more effort. Both the teacher and the student. I have to... With like the technique. And not pay attention to the underlying feeling of unease. That most likely is there.

Christa It's been. Very fun during doing these interviews during this project. Just talking with people, different people, about how they create like safe spaces. Because that's the theme that comes up again and again. If you don't create a safe space, then you're in. Not getting anywhere to begin with.

Joe Well, you can... Do the technique stuff. The embodied experience that's going to be interfered with. You know, I would think you're looking for is to have somebody. Learn how to be comfortable in their own body. While they're singing and then take that feeling of comfort and take it wherever they're going to perform.

Christa Right.

Joe But if they don't have it to begin with. I mean, how can you, for example... Truly interpret. A song. If you're not feeling safe. You can do it to some degree that it's going to be impaired.

Christa That's nothing. Um... Let's see...

Christa So Thank you. Answer to all of my questions actually that I wrote down. Is there anything? Else that you'd like to share about the intersection of mental health in the singing that you think is important that we didn't. Cover or that I didn't ask for.

Joe I think it can be a marvelous avenue for people to hide. Takes courage, takes motivation. That it can be transformative. Yes. And those people that are the most nervous even thinking about taking voice lessons. Are the ones that I think can benefit the most if they do.

Christa Yes. I was telling my husband yesterday... I have a new student who's fabulous. And I have students that are... Like need help And our students are fabulous but are just feel so unworthy to sing in front of people or are so nervous or think that they're poor singers. And they're great. Like, they're already great before they walk in the door. And that's really, that's all I do is be like, you're awesome. You're awesome. Go sing in front of people. You can do this. It's just like giving them permission, I don't...

Joe Permission and encouragement.

Christa Yeah.

Joe And it can really, whether or not they ever do it professionally, it can be really transformative.

Christa Yeah. Um... Yeah, there's like another subgroup of students they have are people that are 50 plus, who were told when they were young that they weren't good. I know that they've made enough like... Progress in their life to come try. I mean, they're nervous about it. And it always makes me so sad because usually they're really great singers. I'm like I'm so sad that someone told you when you were young, or at least you perceived. That someone told you that you couldn't do this.

Joe Yeah, it just takes one... Distressing childhood experience to shut that door.

Christa Or or miscommunication

Joe Mm-hmm. It can be distressing on the child's part, but as we know... What could be inconsequential to a grown-up could be huge to a little kid.

Christa Yes. I had a student yesterday that was telling me her drama teacher was telling her this weird thing and I was like, that's really strange. Maybe she meant... This. And I was like, you know, sometimes when people are telling you things... You have to... Reframe them somehow, because doesn't make sense and like you're not interpreting it right or maybe she's just telling me crazy stuff. But as an example, when I was in like second grade, I was in a musical and the mom that was like doing her makeup. I was like, I don't want a weird eyeliner, it hurts. And she was like oh, but we need it so we can see your eyes on stage. But to me for like 20 years meant that my eyes were too small for my head and that gave me like a complex when I was young. That my eyes were too small for my head, so I needed eyeliners. Right side.

Joe Funny how kids interpret things.

Christa Yes, yeah.

Joe Step. Song from a chorus line. About to draw the t-shirt carp.

Christa I don't know the chorus line very well. They're doing it at 6th Street this year.

Speaker 6 Is that right?

Christa You have a student in it.

Speaker 6 Yeah, we've been fun to do it. Any! Capacity to dance, which I don't.

Christa Oh my gosh. Yeah. Well, um Thank you for these printouts, I'm definitely there. Read them and use them.

Speaker 6 Hang on for a sec. Copy the heart breath.

Joe MA Persinger.m4a

Christa Say that again, please.

Joe In addition to... It feeling good. Physiologically, you can shift a person into a state of high... Respiratory sinus. Arrhythmia. Otherwise known as heart rate variability. Which is a sign it's synced with your breathing. When you're in that state. As you exhale, your heart rate goes down. Can go down as many as 10, 15 beats per minute briefly. And then. It comes back up as you breathe in until the next time. The less variation. There is, synced with your breathing. The more stress you're under. If there's literal or no variation... That can be damaging to a person's health.

Christa Mmm.

Joe So you can get fancy biofeedback devices that will show you how much. Not arrhythmia, variability there is. This is it. Way that doesn't cost anything to.

Christa We encourage that regulation. And this is Specifically you're saying this about the heart focus exercise Interesting. So there's a, on the bottom of this page there's the trademarked quick coherence is that.

Joe It's a trademark of the HeartMath project, which you can find online.

Christa Okay

Joe There are a wealth of information. But there's no problem duplicating that. Right.

Christa Right, I was just running a heart math. Oh, there you have it.

Joe And if you've got a spare 150 bucks, you can get one of those. Devices you clip onto your ears, you plug it into your smartphone, and it will tell you. Graphically with lots of colors. How much variability there is. Then you breathe and try to get the tone to change. And as it changes, that means your variability is increasing. So it's a nifty little biofeedback device.

Christa That's awesome. There's so many interesting things that are like apps on the phone now that can help with so many things. I was asking, do you have a biofeedback device that you... Experiment on yourself with. Yeah.

Joe I have many. I had neurofeedback training, but decided... It was extremely expensive. Ultimately decided I need a whole different office set up for it. You need an office for the same. It's cumbersome, it's messy. You have to apply... 18 leads to a person's head. And then. Get them to watch it screen, and depending on the graphics, their little video games that they... Play to increase. Brainwashed activity in one place, depending on their initial. Uh... Decrease it somewhere else and could be remarkably effective, but it's a whole different area of specialization.

Christa Mm-hmm. This one's very involved.

Joe Mm-hmm.

Christa Technically.

Joe This is a quick way to do it. Something that can make If a person practices every day.

Christa Oh, nice.

Joe Thanks. Like any other skill.

Christa Right, and I imagine, you know, if you... Have a voice studio, you know, we're telling people to practice their singing skills every day, so this is something that you could potentially integrate into it if you have a student that's a little dysregulated. Exactly that they could add to the beginning of their practice really do this breathing exercise Then do your scales or you know, whatever the technical things you assign

Joe There are apps, as you mentioned, that call math and so on. Common one. That if you're willing, if you are a Kaiser member, you get the premium version for free. I think that's still an effect. Headspace is another... And they have, like the call map has, 10 minute audios. That you can play anytime. That will help you calm down your system.

Christa Hmm.

Joe And those can be useful for folks too.

Christa Mm-hmm. This just sounds like such a lovely way to begin a practice session. Be calm and regulated before you do the technical musical aspects of a practice session.

Joe Three minutes. Of breathing. And smiling and releasing and relaxing. And then going into the warm-up. Can make a difference.

Christa Sounds very nice. Sounds lovely. One of the reasons that I chose this topic for the project is because I have a friend who's a singer and She recently changed teachers to the teacher that I had when I was in my undergrad Who? It's the only teacher I ever had that did any sort of regulation, calming, like, anything at all. End. And my friend was like... This is the only teacher I've ever had that... Was like, how are you feeling when you sing and they realized that underneath, you know Her technical problems is that every time she went to sing she was

saying like oh shit I'm about to sing freak out like before she even started with anything. So they've been doing a lot of work grounding and releasing and doing some somatic stuff because like singing on top of that. Like frenetic foundation is not really a key to success

Joe That's a good teacher.

Christa She is. Ah. Yeah, she was very, very in tune in that way. A lot of the teachers that I'm, you know, interviewing who I've not taken lessons with. Are very... We call them right at their secondary modalities, like interviewed Karen Clark, who you did the Feldenkrais workshop with. Mmm. Mm-hmm. Last year. Interviewed her and then in a couple weeks I'll be... Interviewing Heidi Moss Erickson, who's also a neuroscientist. And I have taken lessons. With her, and she's, um... Her style is very different because everything that she does is really centered around. Um, play.

Joe Mm, mm-hmm.

Christa And doing I'll call it doing strange things with your body that access different things in your brain that release things in your lyrics, right? So she'll be like, sing this note and reach up and... Pet a sheep's belly.

Joe I like it.

Christa Yeah, yeah. She's a hoot. She was funny. I liked her lesson style. I hope you enjoyed this video, and I'll see you in the next one. Yeah, so, this is... I think that's the most fun part of my project, is... Getting to talk to all of you and get your perspectives. I feel like we got a couple of really great jewel sentences. In the center.

Joe Couple of years. Gems in there. On the beach.

Christa Yes. So, yeah, so thank you so much for taking this time to meet with me, and... Absolutely. That's awesome.

Joe It was fun.