

THE BREATHINGBOOK

Horn Edition Contents

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I want to acknowledge Gail Williams who, in 1995 during a coaching session at Northwestern University, said quietly (many times!), “I really think The Alexander Technique would be good for you.” Gail unknowingly provided the final nudge that prompted me to set up my first Alexander lesson. Many thanks to Lucy Venable, Professor Emerita of Dance at The Ohio State University, my first Alexander teacher, who provided a solid foundation of introductory lessons. In 1994/95, there were others with whom I crossed paths who, unprompted, enthusiastically shared their experience of The Alexander Technique. Among them, a priest/amateur singer from Brooklyn and fellow retreatant at The Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. He expressed amazement that I was a musician living in Columbus, Ohio and didn’t yet know Barbara Conable.

I am very grateful for all that I continue to learn from Barbara Conable, Founder of Andover Educators, Master Teacher of Body Mapping and The Alexander Technique. Barbara has been one of the most influential people in my life.

The Pivot Alignment Warm-up (aka: “Spider Web”) is from my teacher, Nick Perrini. It’s one of many very useful exercises passed down from Dr. Donald S. Reinhardt. Three of the other exercises are adapted from routines shared by William Caballero, Principal horn of the Pittsburgh Symphony. Bill customized them from routines shared by his teachers at the New England Conservatory and Boston Symphony colleagues. They are the Air Release Exercise (Harry Shapiro), Tonal Centering (Dick Mackey), Progressive Chromatic Slurs to the Octave (Charles Kavalovski’s variation on a Christopher Leuba method). Bill credits Mr. Shapiro for teaching him the importance of a good exhalation before inhaling to play. I’m grateful to Bill and Nick for their emphasis on healthy, complete exhalations. I offer reminders of this in the subdivision instructions of each exercise. This practice supports the Body Mapping and Alexander Technique emphasis on allowing exhalations to truly finish to help achieve breathing integrity.

I greatly appreciate the illustrations of Kristine Aman and Benjamin Conable. I am very grateful for Kristen Fryer’s creative assistance with the photographs.

The chapter on Constructive Rest is adapted from Constructive Rest: The Audio Guide Series (constructiverest.com) and Coaching Constructive Rest by Barbara Conable, a tool for Andover Educators (bodymap.org). Used with permission.

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Preface

One of the difficulties of teaching the horn, or any wind instrument for that matter, is that tone production and the muscles involved therein, are mostly invisible to us. By contrast, consider the more obvious physicality as a pianist strikes a key, a string player draws a bow, or a percussionist wields a mallet. It comes as no surprise that for wind and brass players there is so much misinformation and so many misconceptions about breathing and supporting, the most basic elements of tone production.

David Nesmith's 'Breathing Book' is a welcome addition to any horn player's library. Too often horn players dwell on the role of the embouchure and overlook the importance of relaxed, efficient breathing and exhaling. Mr. Nesmith provides the reader with not only a wealth of information and facts about our breathing anatomy, but lays out a clearly guided path of self discovery, leading to a tension free system of playing the horn. His unique experience as a certified Alexander Technique instructor and a professional hornist, combined with his communication skills make this a must read!

Erik Ralske
Principal horn
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Erik Ralske was appointed by Maestro James Levine as Principal horn of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra at the start of the 2010-2011 season, after declining an invitation by Gustavo Dudamel to become Principal horn of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Previously, he was Third horn and later Acting Associate Principal horn of the New York Philharmonic for 17 seasons.

Mr. Ralske is on the faculty of the Manhattan School of Music and Mannes College of Music. He received his Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees from The Juilliard School.

Introduction

For every sound we can conceive there is a unique coordination of body movements that will produce that sound. In the act of playing, the vibrations resulting from these movements are received by the horn, amplified out the bell and resonate throughout the prevailing acoustic environment. Our sound conception, along with the coordinated movements of body, breath, and horn work synergistically to produce our personal horn sound. Ideally, when our sound conception is rich and clear, when our movements are free and efficient, when our instrument is of high quality and in excellent working condition, the resulting horn sound is free and sonorous.

The horn, being a wind instrument, needs air flowing through it to produce sound. This air comes from our breath. Characteristically wind blows freely. Breath moving from our body through the instrument also needs to be free. It may be safe to say that much or most of our relationship with the horn revolves around learning how to be in consistent command of dynamic breath control. When we have this command, playing the horn is easy. Lacking freedom of breath control, playing becomes more effortful than necessary and our sound, technique, and musical expression are compromised. Limitation may range from a vague unease that something is “off,” all the way to a clear experience of discomfort with a sound that is tightly pinched and unpleasant, along with a significant loss of technique and expression.

There are three main reasons that our breathing is not free: a misunderstanding of the structures of breathing, a misunderstanding of the movement of breathing, and neck tension.

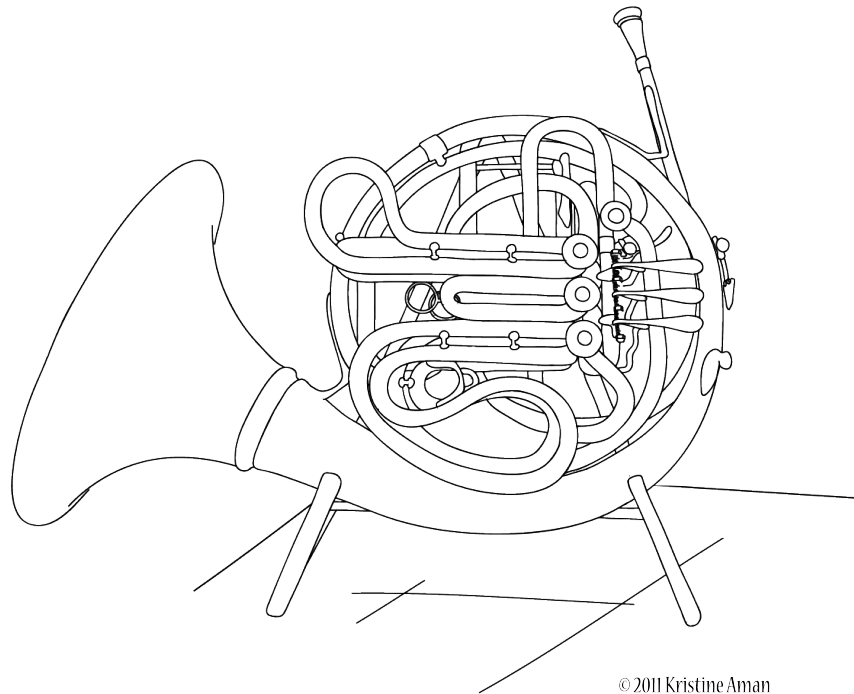
In this book we explore resolutions to these issues from the perspective of Body Mapping. Body Mapping is the conscious correcting and refining of one’s conception of the body, its parts within the whole, and the movement of those parts. Our body map, also referred to as our internal representation, has been located in the brain and is a significant subject of study by neuroscientists. We now know that we move based on the body map in our brain, rather than based on reality. If the conception of our body and its movement is inaccurate or inadequate, we will move based on those inaccuracies and experience less than optimal movement. Movement resulting from mismappings may range from merely uncomfortable to painful to debilitating.

One’s body map is present all the time whether we are conscious of it or not. There are many horn players who breathe freely and play well with no idea they have a body map. For those of us who would like to improve our own breathing or the breathing of our students, becoming conscious of the powerful influence of body maps can literally be a breath of fresh air.

There are many schools of thought on the technique of playing the horn, from individual approaches to traditional styles. Whatever technique you choose or are being taught, as long as it is not contrary to the natural reality of our structure, that technique will likely thrive given an accurate and adequate body map of breathing.

The information in this book is offered as a basis for your technique, not a technique of playing the horn itself. However, the playing exercises emphasize certain aspects of technique practice while incorporating reminders of what you are learning about awareness and Body Mapping. When technique suggestions appear in the text, they are clearly indicated.

Remember that your main instrument for musical and artistic expression is your mind and body. Consider the discipline of Body Mapping an essential tool for learning how to use this instrument well.



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Find more information at:
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First Things First: Constructive Rest

Smart farmers know they must prepare their fields before planting seeds, otherwise, their crops have little chance of thriving. So with learning, it's advisable to prepare the receptive field. Cultivating receptivity improves our ability to make connections and allows new information and new experience to take root.

A very good way to prepare for learning is to do Constructive Rest regularly. Constructive Rest is very useful at the beginning of any practice session or even before a concert. Our most important instrument for making music is our whole self of mind and body. Constructive Rest is a time to enhance our relationship with ourselves and with our environment.

Five Intentions of Constructive Rest

1. Cultivate an Overall Integrated Body Awareness
2. Encourage Muscular Freedom Now
3. Facilitate Breathing Integrity
4. Promote an Accurate, Adequate Body Map
5. Renew a Healthy Relationship with Space

Five Intentions of Constructive Rest

The first and most important intention, **Cultivating an Overall Integrated Body Awareness**, means becoming more aware, in a nonjudgmental way, of information received through our senses, including our sense of motion and position known as kinesthesia. We are open to other sensations, such as our emotions, pleasure, pain, hunger, and thirst. By choosing to show up to ourselves, to be present, we begin preparing the receptive field. This first intention is a necessary prerequisite to all the others.

The second intention, **Encourage Muscular Freedom Now**, means to consciously release muscle tension. When we feel stressed, the physical manifestation of this stress usually begins with a tightening of the neck muscles. This pattern of accumulating neck tension exerts an undue influence on the relationship of our head, neck, and back. F. M. Alexander, the creator of the Alexander Technique, called this pattern downward pull. When present, it causes our movement and breathing to be uncoordinated and inefficient. During Constructive Rest we seek to release this tension, and to allow muscular freedom in the neck and back, radiating release out through our five appendages: the jaw, both arms, and both legs.

The third intention, **Facilitate Breathing Integrity**, means to recover the natural, wavelike movement of breathing. We learn to notice and cooperate with the four phases of each cycle of breathing: the inhalation, the transition from the inhalation to the exhalation, the exhalation itself, and the rest at the end of the exhalation. Breathing integrity returns when we consistently allow the rest phase to be as long as it wants to be, allowing the next inspiration to be truly reflexive. Constructive Rest allows us time to be more interested in, and encouraging to, this natural breathing rhythm.

The fourth intention, **Promote an Accurate, Adequate Body Map**, means clarifying and enhancing our conception of our body regarding its structures, the size of those structures, and their appropriate functioning. For our movement to be more efficient and less prone to injury, it is important that our conception of our body, the parts within the whole, matches reality. Since we move based on how we think we are put together, if we have inaccuracies or inadequacies in our body map, we will not move and breathe as freely or painlessly as nature intends. Constructive Rest is a time to bring what you are learning of the truth of practical anatomy and physiology into direct experience.

The fifth intention, **Renew a Healthy Relationship with Space**, means organizing our attention toward more openness and receptivity to the space all around us. Many of us are addicted to concentration, a narrow, effortful use of attention. The playful mind, on the other hand, is attentive to the task at hand in a large world of awareness. Constructive Rest is an opportunity to open our awareness, allowing an organization of consciousness that is fluid and relevant to the moment. Easing open our attention naturally encourages more freedom in our body and breath.

