

John Tarr

Edda's lesson

Edda, a middle aged woman who is a church organist and choir conductor came to me for help with her arms and shoulders. For the past year, she had been experiencing pain and stiffness in her left arm. This pain came and went and she noticed that it also seemed related to her stress levels. She also felt that both her arms and body could be more flexible so that she could be more expressive with her conducting.

For the first lesson, we worked with her sensing her shoulders and arms, and how much tension she had even when resting. We went on to explore how she used her chest and ribs to allow her arms to become freer and lighter. Her pain disappeared and she said she had much to work with on her own.

Before the second lesson (the one I'll focus on for this study), I happened to see her conduct her church choir and play during the service. This wasn't planned but luckily happened by chance. She asked me if I could watch her conduct and perform in case I might see more than when she was in my practice. I told her that I usually can't help myself from doing so, so yes, I would. Watching a student in their environment can be a great asset. When working with musicians and dancers, I often ask if I can see/hear them perform. This has led to some nice concert experiences as well as more effective lessons from me.

While watching her conduct, I could see that she wasn't really supporting her arms and shoulders with the rest of her body. I also had the sense that she was "going to the choir" instead of "letting them meet her." I thought that this may be part of the reason she tended to crane her neck forward and round her shoulders. This may not make sense but if you've ever conducted an amateur music group, you might know what I'm talking about. If not, I'll try and explain.

One of the conductor's roles, especially in an amateur setting is to motivate and encourage. Church choirs can be made up of those who love to sing and/or enjoy the camaraderie, but may be shy or insecure when the audience is there. The singers also may need to be guided and encouraged more than a group of professionals. As a director, you may get the feeling that you have to push, pull, uplift, support and even carry your singers. Of course the conductor can't really do all that but the feeling that she needs to do so, can develop over time and become a habit. Ironically, I have been in situations in which the harder the conductor tries, the less energetic and responsive the group becomes, often causing the conductor to become more agitated. Hopefully that bit of background will help you understand my observations. It's also important to know that when making an interpretation like the one above, it's only a hypothesis and should be handled with great respect and care.

What I saw in her movement was that, "going to the choir" was causing her to reach her arms, shoulders and head farther forward than was good for her supporting herself. With her arms stretched out to the front from her shoulders, they would have less ease and range of motion so this might explain some of the stiffness she was feeling. It also could be more tiring to conduct like that as well.

Fortunately, we had a lesson scheduled the very next day so my observations were fresh when she came. She asked if I had seen anything in her conducting and I told her about my

idea that she was going to the choir rather than staying with herself. This made sense to her and she felt it was a worthwhile idea to pursue. In fact, it seemed to be a kind of relief for her, to have been understood in this way.

I began the lesson by having her stand and raise her arms as if she were to begin conducting. While repeating that several times, I had her notice how and where she felt the weight of her arms, and what she needed to do to compensate her balance so she wouldn't fall forward. I then had her imagine conducting her group and how that felt compared to just raising her arms. She began to sense herself leaning forward, craning her neck a bit and reaching out with her arms. I then had her imagine that her choir was very attentive, interested and keen to follow her direction.

When that image began to settle in, she began to breathe more easily, her shoulders dropped a bit and she didn't jut her head as far forward as she had before. She remarked that her arms became lighter and her movements more fluid. With the sense that we were moving in the right direction for a meaningful and useful lesson, I decided to work more on the idea of her pelvis and legs supporting her arms.

I had her lie supine on the table, with a roller under her knees and some support under her head. From there, I observed her breathing, the shape of her chest and back. I noticed that the movement of her breath was most visible in her upper chest with very little movement in her abdomen. She also had a pronounced extension in her lower back and her chest remained flexed while lying on the table.

With all these observations, there are many places and ways to start a lesson. What would be the best way to begin? Because her focus had been on her arms, and we had worked on the sense of support during the previous lesson, I decided to start there because I figured it would make more sense to her rather than starting with her legs and pelvis even though that was in the forefront of my mind.

I began by sliding my hands under the tops of her shoulder blades, supporting them very gently and waited while observing her breathing. As her breathing slowed and deepened a bit, I waited some more and saw that she took a larger breath, and I felt her shoulders sink a bit into my hands. I slowly began to slide my hands away, letting her shoulders sink some more as I went. From there, I began bending her right arm (I chose the right because her left had been painful, albeit less so after the first lesson) at the elbow so she could sense how she let it come back to the table. As in the previous lesson, I could sense that there was a fair amount of work in her upper arm because it was difficult for her to let her forearm return to rest on the table. I continued with this approach with her whole arm, left side and then with her legs as well.

After that, she was breathing more deeply and her lower back had settled closer to the table. She remarked that she was becoming aware of how much extra work she had been doing. From there, I began to gently roll her pelvis in the directions of "six and twelve" (from the ATM Lesson, "The Pelvic Clock"). At first, she didn't allow much movement but as she began to notice that she could soften her lower back, she found it to be "new and interesting." After I had a sense that she could more easily follow my suggestions, I had her stand up her legs and begin to move her pelvis herself. She was keenly interested in these movements and remarked that they were very unfamiliar to her. As we continued, I pointed out some other places along her back, neck and head that she might feel the movements of her pelvis and suggested that she could review these movements at home. She responded that she was eager to do so.

Ending that part, I had her roll to the side and sit up on the table. She felt very different and as if she, “Didn’t have to do anything to support herself.” After having her roll her pelvis while sitting, she stood up and also felt the sense of ease standing. From there I had her lift her arms again, first just to sense the weight (they felt much lighter) and then to imagine beginning to conduct. As she conducted, she said her arms felt more fluid along with being lighter. She also said that it would be easier to conduct the piano (soft volume) passages more clearly and smoothly.

She left saying that she would repeat the pelvic clock movements, and observe how she reacted to the choir in the upcoming rehearsals and performances. In a following lesson, she reported better being able to “stay with herself” while conducting and notice when she tended to “go to the choir” and how that caused her arms to become heavy and stiffer.

One of the reasons I chose to write about this lesson was that it shows how intention can affect action and even cause discomfort. Her sense that she needed to do more (than she could) to get the choir to sing out, follow her, and express the music was causing her to conduct in a way that wasn’t healthy for her arms and shoulders. She also remarked that that it was fortunate that I am also a musician. She felt that my observations of her conducting and my experience leading groups and being lead were helpful for me to better understand her needs.

One of the questions I’ve asked myself is, “What would I have done had I not been able to observe her conducting” (and/or not having the musical experience that I have)? Would I have been able to help her as effectively as I did? What would another (non-musician) practitioner have done? Because the patterns of intention and self image present themselves in many ways throughout the whole person, I know that another experienced practitioner would have been able to help her just as well, but using different observations and interpretations. Being able to observe her “in action” was indeed serendipitous but I believe we could have come to a similar result even without that opportunity. We might have just talked more about the idea of supporting her arms and she probably would have noticed that herself when conducting. There are most likely also other actions in her life in which she over extends her arms and creates unnecessary work for herself. Each practitioner has her/his own unique perspective and experience, which can be useful to a broad range of special interests and situations. And, sometimes it’s just fortunate to have certain opportunities present themselves.