



# Sound Music Education

## The Pedagogy of Empowerment™

### A Pedagogy for the New Science

Babette Lightner, 2016

#### LOFTY GOALS

What is the lofty goal for your choir? How does the pedagogy you employ serve your goal?

Here is a possible lofty goal: *The choral setting creates the opportunity to make music in an environment which allows each member of the community to thrive, while the larger community is enriched. The more beautiful the music, the more the members thrive. The more each member thrives, the more beautiful the music.*

#### PREMISE

It is the basic underlying premise of Sound Music Education – The Pedagogy of Empowerment™ – that by empowering the individual artists, the pedagogy serves the making of great music. All the individual artists come together to create, as a group, the experience we define as choral music.

In the art of singing, the artist is the instrument; the vocal instrument. In order for the instrument of the human system to be able to sing as fully and capably as possible, the human system needs to be able to function freely. To function freely, a person needs to feel empowered within the choral setting.

One aspect of the choral director's job is to create the conditions to allow each singer, each artist, each instrument to function fully with the least amount of interference. In order to do that, the choral director needs to know something about how the human system works to function and to learn.

#### UNDERPINNING

The underpinning of Sound Music Education – The Pedagogy of Empowerment™ – is the ongoing curiosity about what allows the human system, in this case the singer, to thrive. At its root, sound music education is curious about how the human system works, how it is designed, how it learns, how it sings.

This core idea is captured brilliantly in the work of Leon Thurman, who for years has articulated the idea of “Human Compatible Learning/Teaching.” Human Compatible Learning/Teaching is based on the idea that the closer your learning/teaching is aligned with how things work, the easier, safer, and healthier your learning/teaching will be. Embedded in this idea is the willingness to throw out inaccurate ideas and update one's approach as the science changes. Since science is changing on a daily basis, it is also imperative that the learner/teacher/director



states clearly that all she can teach is a current point of view. We have a current point of view that is always subject to further proof.

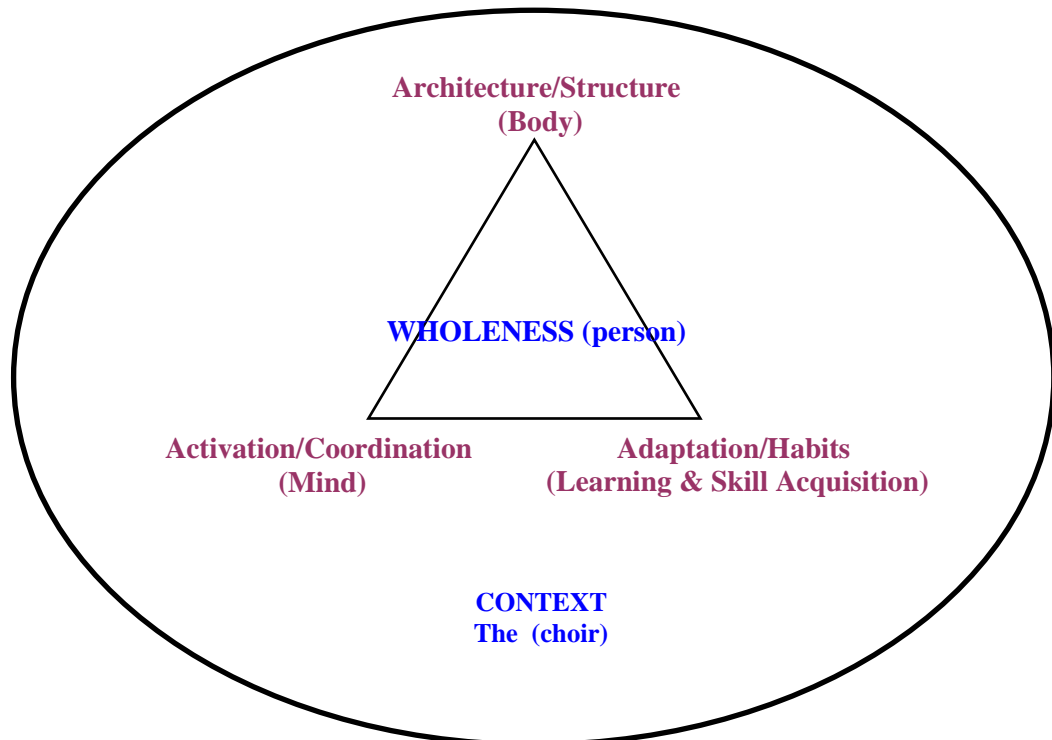
The pedagogy is based on four pillars:

1. Curiosity about how humans work to learn, to thrive, to sing.
2. Openness (Willingness) to update inaccurate information, no matter how convinced we are of its accuracy, so that our teaching is as aligned as closely as possible with our current knowledge of how the human system works.
3. Clarity that all we have to work with is a current point of view, not the ultimate truth. This point of view is based on the newest science to which we have access.
4. Service - We serve the music, the individual singers, and the corporate community that is the choir.

Making curiosity, openness, clarity, and service the foundation of our educational system allows us to educate teachers, their individual singers, and their choral community as a whole.

## THE PEDAGOGY AS APPLIED TO MOVEMENT FOR SINGERS

The following diagram is the scaffold for understanding Sound Music Education – The Pedagogy of Empowerment™:





This pedagogy is about empowering the whole person (triangle) within a context (circle). The triangle breaks down the whole person/the human system into three parts:

- The architecture or the structure of the body
- What activates and moves that structure (intention/mind)
- How the system adapts, learns, and unlearns. This encompasses acquiring skills, as well as how habits are created and changed.

These three aspects of our system serve as a scaffold for our teaching.

In this article we will look at how we can use these three aspects of the human system to explore a pedagogy for teaching fundamentals/understanding of physical structure. I would like to begin by looking at the current common pedagogy about structure. This will help us see the distinction between different pedagogical points of view.

The current and most common idea about physical structure for singing is referred to as posture or alignment. Many pedagogy books start with this topic. Students are often instructed to stand with one foot slightly forward, shoulders back, neck free, in a tall, noble performance-ready stance. One of the challenges of this approach is that people get the idea that there is something called “good posture,” and that they should have it.

Many singers come to me for lessons because they want better posture. When I ask them why they want better posture, they look puzzled. Through the lens of the old science, good posture has become a virtue in and of itself, so it takes a few minutes for them to even understand the question. They often start by saying, “Because my voice teacher says I need to improve my posture.” I’ll ask a series of questions like, “Why would your voice teacher want you to have better posture?” Eventually, we get to the root idea that good posture is supposed to help facilitate good singing.

The premise behind good posture is the idea that the shape of the body (posture/alignment) affects the ability of the instrument to sing. This makes some sense, since we have established that the whole body is the instrument – and it needs to coordinate freely to sing well.



## **ARCHITECTURE**

Let’s apply our triangle pedagogy scaffold. It is essential that we understand the architecture of the body.

It turns out we aren’t a postural system.



Current research about human function and design calls into question posture/alignment models. Anatomist David Gorman synthesizes this research into a model he calls the pre-sprung-elastic-coordinating-suspension system (coordinating-suspension system, for short).

The rules of physics for a postural system and a suspension system are TOTALLY different.

Think of two bridges: one built on columns and the other a suspension bridge.

If a construction crew went out to fix a suspension bridge as if it were a column design, it wouldn't work.

But this is exactly what we do when we apply postural instructions onto the human body. From the coordinating-suspension system point of view, you can't create the conditions for easy, efficient singing by teaching good posture!

If the goal of our pedagogy is to serve the artist by aligning our teaching with the way the human system works, it is essential to learn about this coordinating-suspension-system model.

**THE TOP CORNER OF THE TRIANGLE: KNOW ABOUT THE ARCHITECTURE,  
AND KEEP UPDATING YOUR UNDERSTANDING.**



**ACTIVATION**

Now let's go to the left corner of the triangle and look at activation. In the postural model, people are told to position (control) a part: bring (for example) shoulders back and down. The implied belief at play here is that you can use your mind to put your body parts in a place and that the parts will stay that way. If you stay in this improved organization, then you will be able to sing better.

Let's investigate this. Try staying in free, good posture and rush. Try staying in good, free posture and concentrate on your E-mails. Try staying in good posture and do just about anything other than thinking about "good posture."

Our architecture is coordinated by our intention, and therefore shifts and changes constantly, affected by what we are attending to. In other words, we are always in the perfect coordination of what we are doing with our intention or attention.

A common singing example of this can occur the moment a singer begins to sing. Just before the beginning of the song, the singer is in the "proper singing stance." Then he begins to sing, and his head moves instantly forward.



If you see this singer from the postural model point of view, you might interpret this event as evidence that he had lost his good posture, or that he has a ‘bad or inefficient habit’ for singing. You might conclude he needs to learn to keep his head aligned to sing.

The coordinating-suspension system model interprets this event differently: a teacher working from the new science point of view would conclude that the singer began to sing and his attention or intention brought him into this head-forward coordination. If it is true that the singer is in the perfect coordination of whatever he is up to, then it would follow that **he didn’t put** his head forward. He didn’t **do** it; it **happened**. This distinction is key to working with the coordinating system. The singer had an intention, and his system coordinated his head forward. If the singer didn’t **do** (actively consciously putting his head forward), it makes no sense for him then to actively, consciously keep his head aligned.

In the postural model, a well-intentioned teacher might then go to great lengths to help him become aware of this inefficient habit. Subsequently, he would practice keeping aligned, thinking his head and neck to be free. To achieve this freedom, the singer has two options: thinking of his alignment, which means he isn’t focused on the music, or by using lots of tension to position his head. Before you know it, he’ll need to work on being free to express the song. Can you see the quagmire of this postural pedagogy?

Like the postural model perspective, the coordinating-suspension system model’s perspective, realizes that the head coming forward will interfere with the suspension of the larynx, breath flow, and other parts of the architecture that need to be able to function freely to sing optimally. But unlike the postural model, the coordinating-suspension perspective holds that the problem is not the position of the head. In other words, the position of the head is not a postural problem. If the singer is in the coordination of something that brings his head forward, we need to find out what is going on in his thinking to help him not to interfere with his architecture.

We need to bear in mind that the singer is the only person who has the information about what he is up to. When there is an interference, the singer has the information to make change, even if he doesn’t know it yet.

In the empowerment pedagogy, there is a method of inquiry to help teachers and students make sense of interferences. When you see the current organization of the architecture as a function of the person’s intention, you can look to the root of the interference. In this way the head-forward issue becomes a vehicle for the student to learn more about how his system works. The more he understands his system, the more he is empowered to make discoveries and choices. Instead of having a bad habit, the student may discover he has an amazing system that gives him useful information.

**THE ACTIVATION/COORDINATING CORNER OF THE TRIANGLE:  
THE ARCHITECTURE EXPRESSES THE ATTENTION AND THINKING OF THE  
PERSON. REMEMBER: THE PERSON HAS THE INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT  
SHE IS UP TO.**



## ADAPTATION, LEARNING

So if you aren't going to teach posture or alignment in choir, what *do* you teach? Learning about the coordination-suspension system model is important. Unlike learning a skill, we are innately designed to have full, easy, buoyant stature. We are designed to stand, sit, breath, move. **Being free to sing isn't a skill – it is a birthright.**

The pedagogy of stature is mostly a job of removing inaccurate ideas about stature. It is also a matter of teaching more accurate ideas about human design, so that students don't impose misconceptions onto themselves. It is about giving students ways to explore and self-assess. Perhaps most important of all is creating the conditions in the atmosphere of the choral setting in which students feel safe, engaged, successful, and autonomous. These last criteria are what research shows create the conditions for learning.

A basic tool of this pedagogy is creating explorations as a means to teach information about human design. Setting up comparison experiences is one method of exploratory teaching. We can, for example, ask the choir to, "Lean forward, lean back, and come to relative balance." We then ask them for information about the experience: "What was the difference between these three experiences?" Through discussion, we can help them to see the significance of their observations and experience. "Can you see how your system gives you different sensations to tell you about your balance?"

Through the exploratory process, singers learn from their own experience. They not only learn principles about their amazing design, but they can also experience that assessing is fun and useful. Healthy assessment is essential to autonomous learning. Autonomous learning is an essential ingredient for thriving. One four-minute exploration activity in choir per week can add up to significantly increased self-knowledge.

Instead of learning a list of postural instructions, students can learn to self-assess. Here are assessment questions that would indicate a certain measure of self-knowledge. I have put the purpose of the assessment in italics:

- Can you tell when you are in even distribution with the contact surface and when you are not? Do this when sitting, standing, crawling. Notice the effect of being in and out of support on your torso volume. *This is an assessment about balance and support, the foundation of suspension.*
- Are you free to move in any direction? *This indicates levels of positioning and holding.*
- Are you free to bounce a ball? *Same purpose as above.*
- Can you tell when you are moving from your joints (hip socket-head to spine joint) or moving from the middle of your spine (neck, waist)? Put another way, "Where are you bending?" *This is the key to what posture is generally about: the ability to retain the volume and elasticity of the torso.*



- Can you tell when you have full volume of your torso, or when you are compressing either in the front (slumping) or back (opening front at expense of back, lifting sternum, noble posture). *This is another way to assess torso volume.*
- Can you tell when you have gained height at expense of freedom of movement/elasticity? *This reminds students we need flexibility as well as shape to sing and move freely.*
- Can you tell when you feel free to breath? *Assessing relationship of structure to breath function.*
- Do you feel more or less human? *This is to help detect any rigidity or what we call the “singer’s (or conductor’s) set.”*

There are many more useful self-assessments.

Before a student can answer these self-assessment questions, they’ll need to know some information about their architecture. Here are just a few useful architectural landmarks:

- Identifying landmarks of your horizontal dimension: Where is your pelvic floor, thoracic diaphragm, vocal folds, base of brain, crown of head? We call these diaphragms. When you can feel the relationship of these horizontal dimensional landmarks (diaphragms), you have a means to assess your volume.
- Understanding the elastic nature of spine and torso so that you can feel holding and interference.
- Do you understand natural sequencing of movement? This is absolutely crucial for conductors!! If you understand this, you will never do another ‘shoulder roll’ in your life.
- Location of hip-socket nearer pelvic floor than waist. Where do my legs begin and end?
- Head on spine joint (atlanto-occipital joint) between ears, behind nose, near roof of mouth.
- Do you know gravity works in both directions? Can you sense the light contact you have with the planet?

The list of this kind of knowledge is long.

When I work with students, I say to them: “Fundamentally, this work is about developing your own authority in understanding how you work. The key to this kind of empowerment is gaining the information to help you determine for yourself what does and does not work for you, versus focusing on trying to get someone else’s (usually the teacher’s) perspective right.”

**THE RIGHT CORNER OF THE TRIANGLE: LEARNING HAPPENS IN THE STUDENT. THE STUDENT HAS TO DISCOVER FOR HERSELF HOW SHE WORKS, WHAT’S TRUE FOR HER.**



This article touches on the application of Sound Music Education – A Pedagogy of Empowerment™, to our physical structure. I have witnessed educators explore the application of this new material to many aspects of music education. The primary result of updating ideas and pedagogical methods has been more success and inspiration. Best of all, it tends to result in empowered students. Students who leave lessons and choir excited and feeling good about who they are in the world. Students who can learn on their own. They are intrinsically empowered – not empowered by external praise and a teacher-centered pedagogy.

It is an exciting time for research on the human system. As we learn new facts from science, we have the opportunity to examine our practices to reflect the new knowledge. In some cases, as for me in the shift from teaching alignment to teaching suspension, we have to invent new pedagogy. The heart of Sound Music Education – A Pedagogy of Empowerment™ – is not so much a new method you need to learn; it is a perspective to help you discover the pedagogy that works for you and your students. It is a living, dynamic pedagogy.

#### Notes:

Thanks to Jen Moir and Axel Theimer for their contributions to this article. Sound Music Education – A Pedagogy of Empowerment™ – is trademark of Babette Lightner and Jennifer Moir, all rights reserved. The triangle scaffold diagram is a copyright of Babette Lightner, 2015. The pedagogy suggested here is an integral part of the BodyMind and Voice summer course with the VoiceCare Network.

***Babette Lightner** is director of Stones in Water – a Movement Education, Alexander Technique and LearningMethods™ Center in the Minneapolis, Minnesota and western Wisconsin ([www.lightnermethod.com](http://www.lightnermethod.com)). Lightner is a Registered Somatic Movement Educator, has a degree in Dance, is a Certified Teacher of the Alexander Technique, and is one of four Certified LearningMethods™ Teachers in the US. For ten years she taught in the Professional Actor Training Program at the Univ. of MN. She created human coordination classes for the Music Department at the Univ. of MN and at Macphail Center for the Arts. Recently she developed a BodyMind and Music class for the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University during a semester residency. She was the Artist in Residence for the Theatre Department at the Univ. of WI, River Falls. Lightner has lectured and taught for many universities, institutions, and organizations including the Guthrie Theater, Sister Kenny Institute, Balk Opera Music Institute, Taipei National University of Arts in Taiwan, and with the internationally acclaimed a cappella group Rajaton. She is on the faculty of the VoiceCare Network ([voicecarenetwork.org](http://voicecarenetwork.org)). For 20 years Lightner has maintained an individual practice as an Alexander Technique Teacher and more recently has added LearningMethods™ to her work. In this practice she works with people dealing with pain, stress issues, and with performers who want to get better at what they do. For more information on this work contact Babette Lightner at [babette@lightnermethod.com](mailto:babette@lightnermethod.com)*