

ROBERTA GARY ON TEACHING AND LIFELONG LEARNING

PART II

BY ROBERT L. BOZEMAN

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very helpful...
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eat your rice.
When tired,
close your eyes.
Fools may laugh
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This is a continuation of an interview with Roberta Gary, first presented in the March issue of TAO.

Robert Bozeman: So, you’ve demonstrated a vast knowledge of the body and in your biography I would assume that the Andover Educator portion of your life has brought you to a greater knowledge of the body. That led you to co-author a book, *What Every Pianist Needs to Know About the Body* by Thomas Mark, with supplemental material for organists by you and Thom Miles, your husband. Would you tell us first a little bit about what Andover Educators is, and then anything else you’d like to say about that or the book?

Roberta Gary: Back in the late ’80s or early ’90s, I met Barbara Conable, who was an Alexander Technique teacher based in Columbus, Ohio, at that time. She came to Cincinnati one day a week to teach Movement in Acting, here at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM). I had read a little bit about Alexander Technique and I was interested in it because it was just becoming known that people who had had polio in their childhood sometimes got something called post-polio syndrome when they were older, and became unable to walk or further disabled. I made her acquaintance and it was certainly one of the wonderful and fortunate things that happened in my



Roberta Gary at Fritts Organ Opus 25 in St. Joseph Cathedral (Columbus, Ohio)

life. She immediately began to work with me at the organ, helping me learn about the body. At that point, she was just starting to think that musicians ideally needed to be Alexander Technique teachers. However, that is a long, expensive training and most of us were not able to do that. Instead, she developed a system, a curriculum you could say, to help us know enough about body, movement, and gesture so that we could help not only the students in our own areas, but also other musicians. She named this group of teachers Andover Educators. I think she lived on Andover Street, so it didn’t have anything to do with Andover Organ Company or anything like that. Thom and I were in the group of seven or eight people who first trained with her to do this. We did a six-hour video trial course, she graded it, and then certified us as Andover Educators. She is now retired, lives in New Haven, Connecticut, and the group goes on. It has a new director and a growing number of people who are certified to do the work. As a part of this, she encouraged those people who were working to be certified to write a book about it. Tom Mark, who lives in Oregon, is a very fine piano teacher and she asked him to write the book for all keyboard players. I pushed to have it say, “What every pianist, organist, and harpsichordist needs to know about the body.” That wasn’t a very good title, though he does write that his book applies to all keyboard players. Barbara

then asked Thom and me to write some special information for organists, which interweaves throughout the book, and then a chapter at the end describing unique things that organists do.

Especially when it comes to pedaling.

Yes, in pedaling and how you need to move from the hip joints. It is a different balance problem for organists than for pianists.

And I'll ask you to go on because there is an important term I'd like for you to mention, which is . . .

Rockers, or as Barbara called them, the sit bones. They really are called *ischial tuberosities*. That's why we don't want to have to remember that! It's the bottom part of the pelvis. The first thing that Barbara Conable did with me at the organ was to help me to find the rockers. I said, "What?" However, if you look at them on a skeleton, they look like little rockers. All pianists use them and any musician who sits to play should know where they are. We should also know where they are when using the computer. But, if we don't use them at the organ, I think we're really asking for trouble.

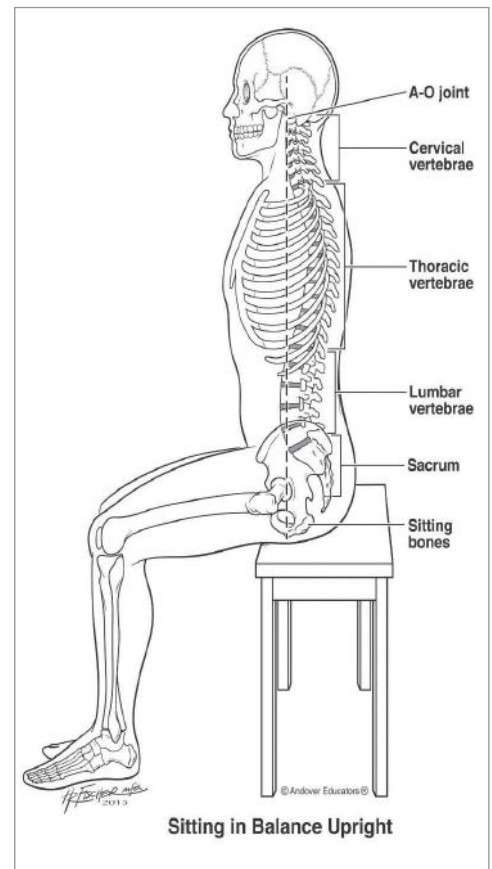
And unlike pianists who sometimes have a padded bench, we have a solid surface on which you can really find contact.

You should be able to feel them. We also have to remember that it's the muscles that move them. We know they're moving, but we are also using muscles. Remember that "work" is not a four-letter word!

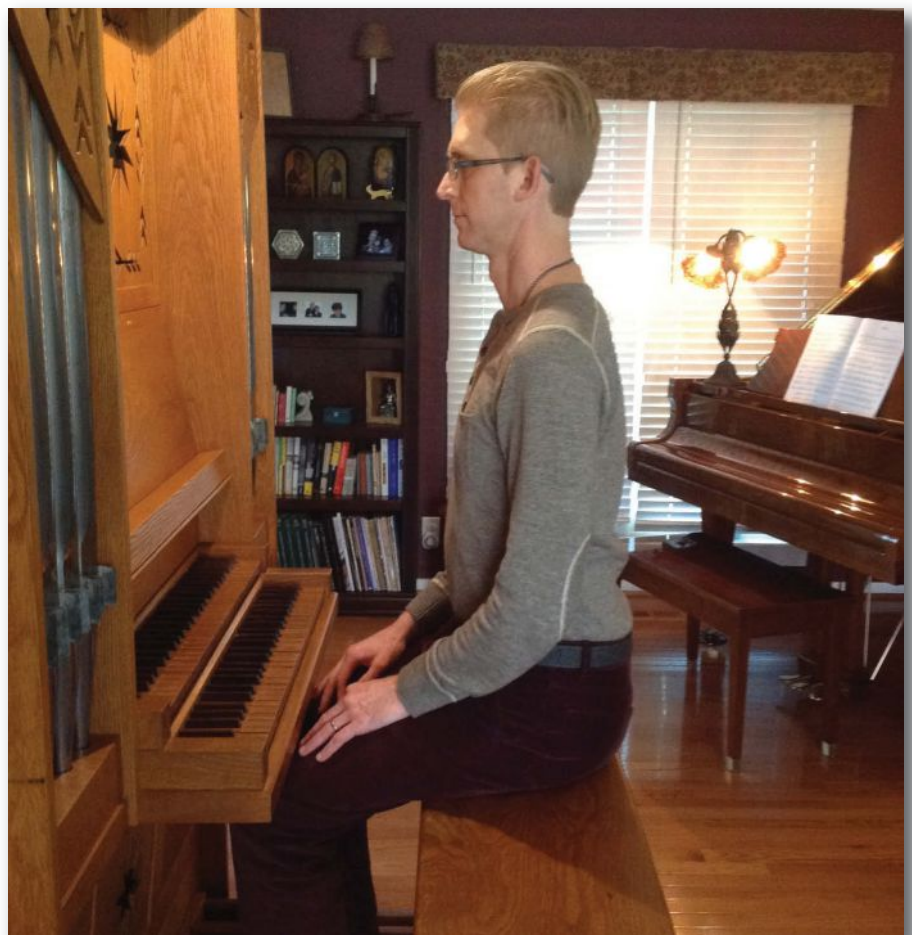
You've used these concepts with me at the organ in pedaling. I especially remember the Vivaldi-Bach *Concerto in A Minor* where the feet reach way to the right while hands have to be in odd positions on the manuals. That's when I began to really study the rockers. Would you talk about your approach to pedaling, the incorporation of the rockers,

and how that has influenced your approach to pedaling? I'm thinking specifically about those of us having been taught in a tradition of knees together, heels together, measuring and the other term that I've forgotten . . . pivoting.

Well, I'm going to start first with the knees together and say that this is another advantage I had because of polio. I actually couldn't keep my knees and heels together at the pedalboard, so I was never taught that. As a result, I didn't have to unlearn it. My pedaling, well any organist's pedaling in the general repertoire, is probably about 75% left foot, 25% right foot from the nature of the pedalboard, being that the bass notes are the ones you are using the most. I could be wrong, but at least three to one left foot. Mine is probably four to one, as I'm not using the right foot as much. I understand the reason for



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Robert Bozeman sitting in balance at his residence organ (Charles Ruggles Opus 4)

teaching pedaling this way, as it is supposed to help the beginner by measuring intervals, as you said. However, at some point they're going to have to leave that as they get to a bigger interval, then pedaling is done in a different way. You measure by touching over the pedal and so on. But, what if I put my foot on the swell pedal? I'm not keeping my knees together—that would be very hard to do! I believe if we would start teaching the pedal from the beginning not with the relationship between one foot to the other, but the relationship between one foot and its next note, it would be better. That involves getting to the rockers and hip joints. If I'm going to move my foot and leg laterally down the pedalboard and think it comes from the knee, I'm in trouble, because the knee doesn't work that way. But, if I know that I'm balanced on my sit bones and that my hip joint opens out to the side, just as my shoulder joint does, then I can easily reach down to the bottom of the pedalboard and up to the top part of the pedalboard and I can keep in contact with the pedals and know where I am. You use the kinesthetic sense of your legs through this nice organ shoe that has a thin sole, and you know where you are.

You are moving from the hip joint when you do that. At other times, you're moving more from the ankle joint, but there's something else happening. In the same way that you move your arm along, arm leading the hand, or arm just sitting here and playing, work is really coming from the beginning of the arm, but certainly a lot from the shoulder joint too. And it's a lot like the leg in that sense.

For pedaling, I had to learn sideways is easiest. Then I learned to rock back a little and then forward. You must always be in contact with the bench when you're rocking back and forth because if you don't, especially when rocking forward, you get this feeling you are going to fall off the bench. And do you know what you have to do to not fall off the bench?

You have to bend from the hip joint, but keep in contact with the bench.

Yes. And you're going to have to use the muscles of the thighs. Front, top, and bottom, front and back, however you're looking at it, and the glutes too; also the muscles of the pelvic floor, which are muscles we don't talk about much in teaching keyboard.

So, everything engages?

Everything engages. If we don't, we're going to fall right off into the keyboard and I think that's why a lot of people don't move much, for they feel that they're going to fall. So, they haven't gotten in touch with any awareness of what's happening in the pelvis and in the legs, especially the upper legs. It could be because they are too focused on what they are doing with their hands and feet. So, is all this stuff in between just to hold together my hands and feet? And what about our brain? There is so much more than our hands and feet if we will just bring our awareness to it.

So, for someone who wants this greater awareness of the body, what can they do? For example, I came to study and do this degree with you, knowing of your training, and asked you at the very beginning to improve my body and awareness, and address tension issues.

Yes, I remember.

As a result, my lessons and independent study on this topic led me to this project.

Right.

How about for people who are not in a degree program? How can they learn more?

One can do private study. Of course it depends on where you live. You can find an Alexander Technique teacher in your area. The Feldenkrais Method is also wonderful and I've done some study with Cynthia Allen, who I know you're going to be interviewing as

well. It comes from a different aspect, but that's great. It's the same reason that I did not study organ only with one person. Even though I might have thought that person had more answers than I knew yet from him or her, I wanted to study with somebody else too. In your community, you may be able to find a teacher of some somatic discipline with whom you can work. You can, as you said, take the six-hour course ("What Every Musician Needs to Know About the Body," Bodymap.org). You can certainly read our book, and we each get five cents for every copy sold!

For someone who may be watching or reading this project or has seen a clip of it, but hasn't any of these physical issues or complications, can it be helpful to have this awareness or incorporate some of these gestures into their playing or at least be thinking about them?

I of course didn't mean to suggest that only a person who had polio or broken bones or had a lot of tension is going to benefit. I think that anybody, musician or not, is going to benefit from more awareness. We know that when it comes to the music score itself. If I learned a piece of music two years ago, five years ago, and come back to it, and decide I had better go work that up again, invariably I'll realize, even at my advanced age, I didn't see something before. Or I did see it but I didn't really understand it. I didn't realize that this could be easier, more musical, or better balanced. I already have this piece in my body awareness and now I'm further along, so I can go still further. I don't have to play what somebody called a "microwaved" piece forever. I'm not going to play it exactly like I did. I've got all my markings on here and that's helpful so I don't have to start from zero. But, I need to be there. So, I've got to think the Zen thing, right? I'm actually here. I'm actually noticing this. It's as though I didn't know the piece, but I really do. I both know

that I know the piece, and I know that I don't know the piece.

So, that's really what I think we call "the beginner's mind." I read about that in Zen. The beginner's mind is not always for beginners. It's also for advanced people. I think what we lose sometimes is that feeling of starting again. And we've got to get over that and we've got to say I know how I moved to do this, but let me think about it. Let me observe my body. How can I actually move? Do I have to do it in the same way every time? What about a different way? How can I get to a different way? Maybe I'll come back to the first way. It's this constant reevaluation and constant awareness. It's that simple word . . . awareness. Am I aware of what's happening? There is no future. There is no past. I'm just right here doing it.

Before we conclude our time today, is there anything else that you would like to add to this discussion?

Yes. I think that if a person were watching all of this or even a part of it and they think, okay, what one thing could I start with? What could I try by myself? I found this Zen that I think is very helpful and I'll read it. "When hungry, eat your rice. When tired, close your eyes. Fools may laugh at me, but wise men will know what I mean." And I propose that this means, I have to know if I'm hungry. I have to know if I'm tired. I have to know what I'm feeling, and then I have to do what it takes. It says fools may laugh at me. What are we talking about eating rice for? Why are we talking about going to sleep and closing our eyes? It means, are we really there? A person could ask himself that at any time during the day. What do I feel? What

is happening? And then what should I do? That's a beginning concept.

I think it's a wonderful place to conclude our time. I want to thank you for this excellent interview and these wonderful insights, and for continuing to learn after all these years.

Thank you, Robert.

Roberta Gary continues to concertize and teach following her retirement. Future plans include more harpsichord, French, and continued exploration of movement studies.

Robert L. Bozeman is canon musician at Christ Church Cathedral, Louisville, Ky. He holds a DMA in performance from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, is a Bones for Life teacher, an Andover Educator trainee, and is the creator of "Better Movement: Better Music," a somatic workshop for musicians.



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