

# BOOKS

## Uncovering what is already there

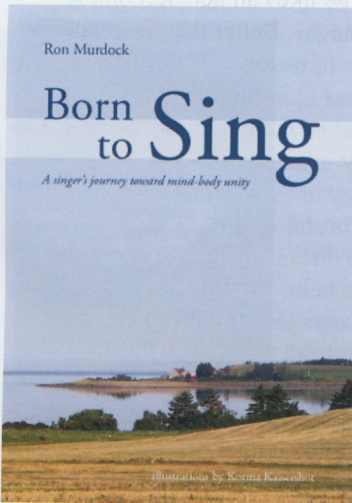
Kate Kelly finds universal and powerful truths in a book by an author with deep roots in Alexander-informed voice work

### *Born to Sing*

By Ron Murdock

Mornum Time Press

Hardback, £32, DVD included.



All suggestions in the book are made with this over riding premise, the desire of the performer to give voice to their expression and find the best way to achieve this.

The author quietly leads the reader through the pages in order to discover what is actually happening when they breathe, speak or sing. The artistic context for the performer or their teacher is established so that any residual antipathy towards a mechanical description of the process is done away with. This is greatly helped by the very refined and clear illustrations by Korina Kaisershot.

Breathing is a hot topic in the voice (and Alexander) world with a bewildering range of techniques available ranging from the old tradition of 'rib reserve' right through to the fairly recent 'accent method'. His singing teacher Frederic Husler, however, never claimed to teach a technique but instead Ron repeats his mentor's maxim that proper, regular training uncovers what is "already there in the singer". A phrase which will resonate with fellow Alexander teachers.

In his chapter illustrating the significance of different muscles in the breathing process Ron reminds us that "The contractions in the breathing out muscles are a *reaction to the stimulus* to breathe out" [my italics].

This very simple phrase says such a lot. It can be the beginning of a practical understanding, an undoing, an unlearning that eventually

brings great relief to someone who has been taught to clench, hold and otherwise distort their muscles inappropriately on the vocalising out breath.

Similarly in a later chapter the reader learns, although they may already think they know it, that stiffening the legs will impede the action of the ribs and an ability to sing or speak well. However in his anatomical description of what happens when leg muscles "gang up" and "stiffen, shorten and pull down" the true effect of interference on the compromised diaphragm is made alarmingly clear.

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Ron's writing style is warm and reassuringly accessible. The book is filled with helpful and thought provoking information. But what is not difficult to read belies the extent of underlying knowledge that has made it possible for the author to describe what for many can still be a bit of a mystery.

It's a mystery that may even be linked to the 'mysterious ways of the human heart'. For, quoting from his singing teacher, Ron reminds us that he believes "the vocal cords are capable of self vibration; meaning that like the heart the vocal cords contain cells which are capable of producing an electric impulse which activates them when the wish to sing or speak is present." This power of intention is well understood by performers and Alexander teachers alike and, as Husler maintained, that which

coordinates all the parts of the singing instrument - the singer's need to communicate.

As much as for the AT professional as the less informed reader what the author elucidates clearly is how we are designed to function both in singing and speaking. He places this in a truly holistic scenario with our feet on the ground "supported by mother earth", and a relevant description of the *psychophysical* support system researched by the late Chris Stevens which continues to be developed by the author and his wife Nadia Kevan.

It cannot be a coincidence that he has chosen as the cover of the book a photo of a beautiful scene where land meets the sea in Merigomish as this is where he first found his feet to sing in family life.

It may be that the deeper your knowledge of the technique the more easily the writing can be appreciated but in fact the recommendations therein can be used not only by AT teachers but singers at all levels of experience and by other voice teachers. A thoughtful pupil of mine who teaches vocal work to actors in the theatre has already found transformative results by applying what he has learned from this book.

Ron's memories of the man and his teaching methods have helped me to better understand the Husler method as described in *Singing, the Physical Nature of the Vocal Organ* by Husler and Yvonne Rodd Marling. Introduced to this book by Walter Carrington in the 1980s we training students benefitted from Ron's occasional visits when he had already been using the Husler method for over 20 years. Husler's "first hear then know" was one of

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One of the more challenging aspects of teaching AT to performers can be to afford them the confidence to look at themselves and their craft from what appears to be an unfamiliar perspective. They may, as the author points out, "be reluctant to begin a process which involves so much stopping and thinking". They will only be persuaded to change if they can see it is to their advantage - both personally and professionally.

In *Born to Sing* these benefits are very clearly stated.

It may not always be an attractive proposition (nor necessary) for a performer to focus on a knowledge of their anatomical workings. By embedding his understanding of the mechanisms of the voice within his own life story and experiences, as both singer and trainer, Ron Murdock manages effectively to draw the reader in. So we find integrated into his chapter on vocal anatomy an account of the *whispered ah* with an emphasis on the importance of communication.



# BOO

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the most important phrases (repeated in 'Born to sing') which he introduced to us at the time, with its implication that no one can sing what they haven't already heard. Eleven years later I was studying the work of Professor Tomatis the French ENT specialist and heard similar words: "You can only speak what you can hear". Universal and resounding truth in simple statements that can change our perceptions in a flash.

The writing in *Born to Sing* takes its time, doesn't rush the reader, encourages us to dwell on the words and pictures, release any held breath and take some inspiration, in both senses of the word.

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My copy of *Born to Sing* bristles with different coloured tabs that I stuck on for easy reference when writing, teaching and speaking about the voice. For anyone who wishes to understand voice production, improve their singing or who works with Voice in Alexander lessons and workshops this beautifully produced book is an excellent resource to keep preparation in tune with whatever you may need to know, experience and impart.

If there is one thing I could ask to change it would be that for any second edition please could we have a paperback version... for carrying to work! ♦

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