

“The Wisdom of Arnold Jacobs,” [The Dynamic Musician Series Blog](#)

When I was studying in high school and later at the University, I often heard the name “Arnold Jabobs” mentioned with an air of reverence. Back then, I couldn’t really imagine why. Later, after my Feldenkrais Method® training and while searching for more information on breathing, I read *Arnold Jacobs: Song and Wind* by Brian Fredericksen and more recently, *Teaching Brass* by Kristian Steenstrup (both available from [WindSong Press Limited](#)). I was immediately struck by the wisdom of Jacobs’ teaching and also realized where much of the brass pedagogy I have learned from other teachers and players had originated. The information presented in these books is so useful that I continue to refer back to them periodically for information on breathing while playing a brass instrument.

One of Jacobs’ ideas that resonated with the teaching of Moshé Feldenkrais is that breathing is so complex that you can study and analyze it but not really successfully consciously manipulate it.

Moshé Feldenkrais said:

“How does one arrange for his breathing to be well organized? It is very difficult. I am generally against breathing exercises in the commonly accepted notion of breathing exercises where I would be teaching someone that they must breathe like this or like that. (I)f you tell someone how he needs to breathe, (t)he instructions usually destroy his breathing.” And continues: “To our delight, inherent in the structure of the human body there is something that permits humans to learn this easily. Something permits humans to improve their breathing constantly without undergoing special difficulties.” (From Alexander Yanai lesson number 17, *Breathing*)

On page 80 of *Teaching Brass*, Arnold Jacobs is quoted as saying:

“So often the students come to my studio and they try to push sideways. The way to get a pseudo-breath is to take the diaphragm and lock it in the high position. The diaphragm is high in the middle and it is attached to the ribs and it goes down so the fibers actually are running somewhat downward. They are attached to the ribs and the finally to the lumbar region of the spine. When it contracts it actually, if you lock it high by tension in the abdomen under, as it shortens, it pulls the ribs sideways. But then the diaphragm does not go down, As a result it is not an inspiratory activity at all. It changes the shape (of the thorax?) and this is maybe what the teacher asks for, but it does not give you the air and this causes lots of trouble.”

Although Jacobs’s ideas were specific to making music, both men to my mind arrived at similar conclusions: That is, that conscious manipulation of breathing can cause the student to do things that are actually counter-productive. As a teacher, if you tell a student how to breathe, she/he could possibly interpret your instructions very differently than you intend. This may lead to the question: “*If I’m not supposed to instruct my students how to breathe, how can they learn to play an instrument?*” This is a valid question and one that needs much further discussion.

On page 164 of *Awareness Through Movement*, Dr. Feldenkrais adds to the discussion:

“Our breathing system is complicated. We breathe in different ways when we are asleep, running, singing, or swimming. The only thing all forms of breathing have in common is that when we inhale air enters the lungs and when we exhale it is expelled, because the entire system is so constructed as to

increase the volume of the lungs for breathing in, and to reduce it for breathing out. This increase in volume can be produced by a movement of the chest in front, behind, or at the sides, or by an up and down movement of the diaphragm. In general, only a part of this system is used, and that not to its fullest extent. All the possible forms of breathing are used simultaneously when breathing must be speeded up, as after rapid and prolonged running.”

Here is one possible answer.

Mr. Jacobs said:

“My approach to music is expressed as Song and Wind, This is very important to communicate a musical message to the audience. This approach is one of simplicity as the structure and function of the human being is very complex, but we function in a simple manner. When we bring it to the art form it becomes very simple.... Song, to me involves about 85 percent of the intellectual concentration of playing and instrument, based on what you want the audience to hear.... The lips cannot vibrate without wind. ...When we combine Song and Wind, the musical message, song, is the principal element comprising 85 percent of the consciousness. The remaining 15 percent is the application of the breath, wind to fuel the vibration of the lips.” (From *Arnold Jacobs: Song and Wind*, p. 139)

From my understanding of this quote and much of the information from his teachings, Jacobs wanted students to concentrate on the musical outcome and not on the mechanics of how to breathe.

I'll add one last quote from Dr. Feldenkrais regarding breathing:

“The human skeleton is so constructed that it is almost impossible to organize breathing properly without also satisfactorily placing the skeleton with respect to gravity. The reorganization of breathing alone succeeds only to the degree that we succeed indirectly in improving the organization of the skeletal muscles for better standing and better movement.” (*Awareness Through Movement*, p. 38)

To wrap up this long post, I feel it is necessary to include posture in the breathing equation, but if you've read my previous posts, this is nothing new. For musicians, as Arnold Jacobs says, the desired musical outcome determines how we breathe. I have encountered so many different explanations of breathing (some that really make no sense what so ever) that I really think it necessary to work on the sound, posture and how the student feels when he/she breathes. Of course we can use exercises to enhance breathing, but such exercises must be ones that stimulate the nervous system to find a better way to breathe and not let the conscious thinking interfere. This is why many of the Jacobs exercises are away from the instrument and also why the Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement® lessons can have such a profound affect on breathing.

For now I leave it at that and list the ISBN numbers of the three books.

Feldenkrais, Dr. Moshé, *Awareness Through Movement* ISBN 0-06-250322-7

Frederiksen, Brian, *Arnold Jacobs: Song and Wind*, ISBN 0-965-24890-9

Steenstrup, Kristian, *Teaching Brass*, ISBN 978-87-988393-3-0