



***The Breathing Book Flute Edition* by Amy Likar**

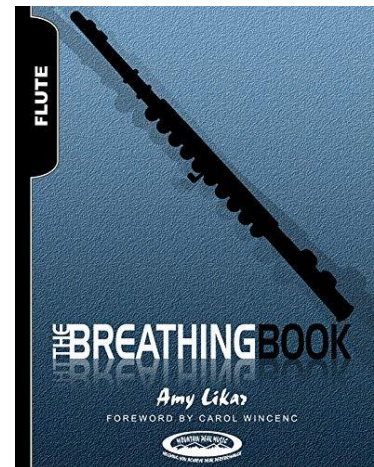
(2018, 36 pages)



Article written by Donna Maebori -- certified Feldenkrais Practitioner, retired physical therapist who specialized in treatment of persistent pain using yoga and Feldenkrais, fellow flutist and GPFS member.

An Invitation to Read *The Breathing Book* by Amy Likar

When one is singing, their body is the instrument. Like air being pumped into the pipes of an organ with organ stops and keyboard determining the pitches being produced at the moment, a singer's body is propelling the air from the lungs into the throat and mouth where the singer produces the pitch and sound clarity using the vocal cords, throat, mouth and more. We flutists take this marvelous corporeal instrument that is each of us into bringing a single pipe to our lips to produce a different timbre and capacity of singing. Our body is no less involved even as we must also pay attention to the mechanisms of playing the flute. We all know, then, that **tuning, caring for, working with, and understanding our bodies is vital to flute practice and performance.**



To help yourself along in this endeavor, please consider, if you haven't yet, getting a copy of [*The Breathing Book*](#) by Amy Likar. Meanwhile, please read on to learn more.

A Little Background on the Author

According to her website, www.amylikar.com, Ms. Likar is a professional flutist, member of the Oakland Symphony, flute instructor at St. Mary's College of California, and teaching artistic mentor for the symphony's Music for Excellence program. She states **her teaching “integrates musical learning with whole body awareness,”** which is an apt description, as she is a certified teacher of the Alexander Technique and a licensed Body Mapping Educator. Indeed, she is the Director of Training for the Association of Body Mapping Education.

Her website contains introductions to The Alexander Technique and Body Mapping with useful links for further learning about these disciplines, along with information of her musical career achievements. **Do check it out!**

With 30 years of experience in the Alexander Technique and Body Mapping, and as a music coach who provides classes and workshops, Amy combines her musical training and performance experience with her training and knowledge of physical function and body sensing to teach others who are “seeking greater ease and embodiment while creating compelling musical performance.” Her website contains introductions to The Alexander Technique and Body Mapping with useful links for further learning about these disciplines, along with information of her musical career achievements. Do check it out!

Some Insights from the Book

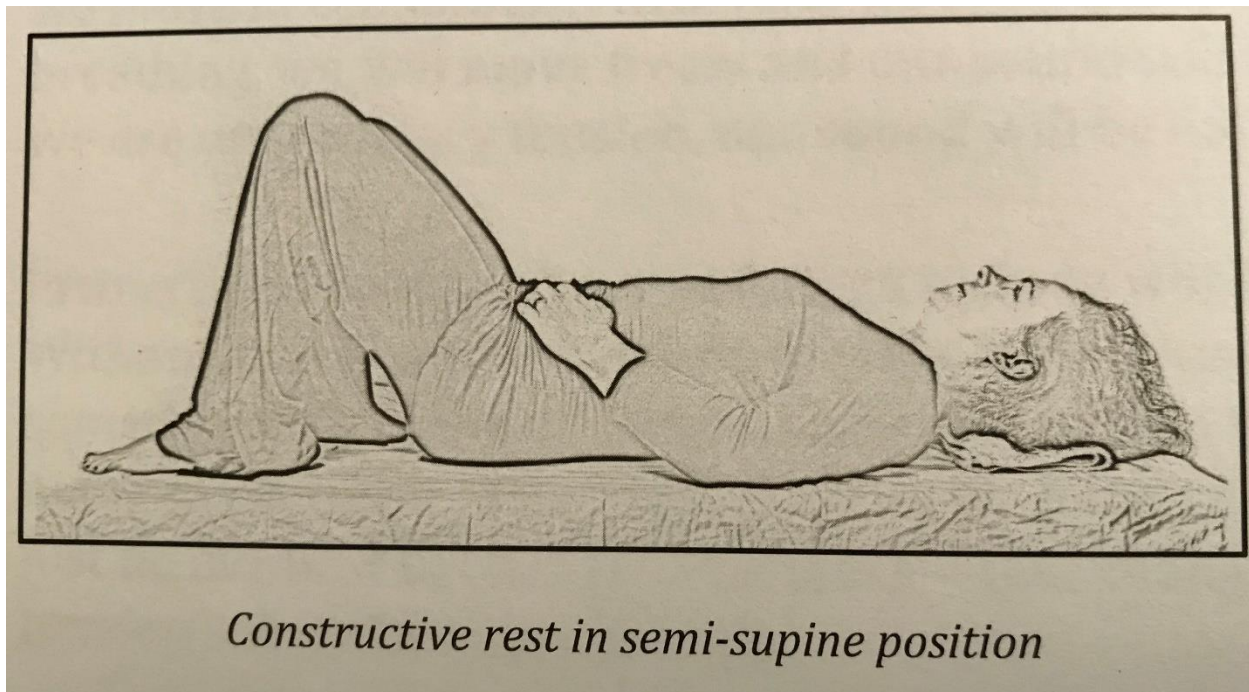
The book is basically a manual on one's body, how to understand, appreciate and use oneself to greatest effect when playing the flute. It is only 36 pages in length. Most chapters are three pages, some two or four. Likar provides short flute practice sections at the end of most chapters for use in applying what one has just read. **It is practical, clear and convenient to put spending a few minutes with her material into one's practice routine.**

The first chapter starts off with the most difficult practice, that being “rest.” In yoga, Shavasana (also spelled Savasana) or Corpse Pose is considered the hardest pose. Resting runs counter to our cultural esteem of productiveness, with resting seemingly so useless to accomplishment. Or is it? Moshe Feldenkrais, who developed a movement awareness system similar-but-different to that developed by Frederick Alexander, stated that one could gain all or most of the benefits of his method simply by lying down and observing oneself thoroughly, but since very few ever would do so to the needed extent, he developed movement lessons. Indeed, Likar refers to the resting described in chapter one as “constructive resting,” with five tasks to do while resting such as developing body awareness, cultivating ease of breathing, and honing into the sense of space and time that one is within.

I am very grateful for chapter one. It had not occurred to me to incorporate rest into my flute practice.

It so happens, though, that I don't remember to start off with the constructive rest, as Likar suggests, probably due to my being quite task-oriented. However, about ten minutes into practice I become aware of a bit of disconnect with my playing and my sense of embodiment. That's when I lie down on the floor for five minutes of constructive rest. It is soothing, affirming and refreshing. Then I get up and carry on with the practice, noting the difference in the sense of myself and my playing because of this rest. Things are more integrated, as I had not just warmed up to my flute, but with rest, also warmed up to my body. Whether one does this practice at the start, or several minutes into the practice, it is distinctly valuable.

Picture from *The Breathing Book*, by Amy Likar

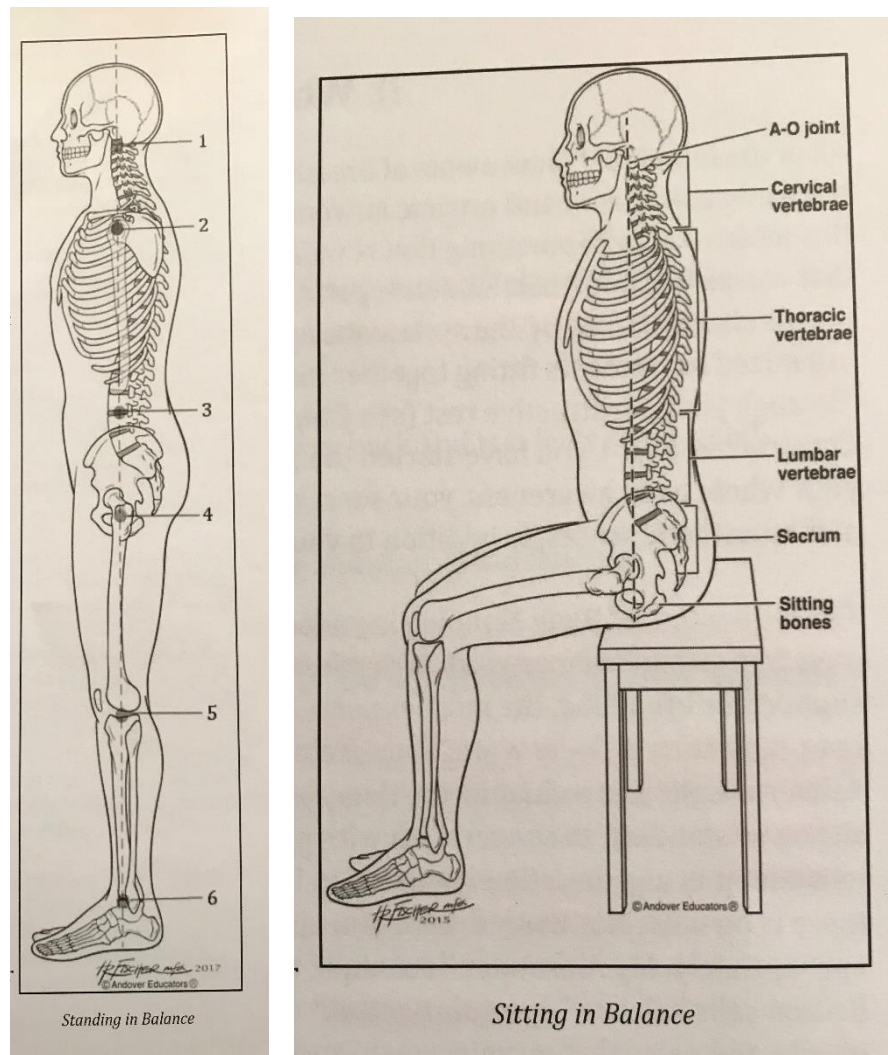


Balance - "...is an internal, lively sensation and NOT the stagnant holding of a position..." (A. Likar)

Chapter Two, "Whole Body Balance" contains many good points about postural balance. Likar states that balance "is an internal, lively sensation and NOT the stagnant holding of a position," which is a very helpful concept. I experience my knees locking and torso and hips

becoming quite stiff at times when playing. **When I become aware of that, I unlock my knees and start moving a little such as shifting my weight or making some small movements with my legs and feet. Then it becomes easier to sense the length of my spine and a fuller sense of dynamic balance. Playing well becomes much more available as I become more relaxed.**

Amy Likar also notes in the same chapter that “When you are balanced, you permit the spine to lengthen up from the pelvis, aware of its curves.” Wise words as, living on this planet, we grow tall in response to gravity. The pelvis is where our center of gravity is, so as we grow tall from there, it can be a fully supportive way of using our full height.



Picture from The Breathing Book, by Amy Likar

In the next two chapters Likar guides us into considering how we hold our heads, shoulders and arms, and use balanced posture to allow the head, collarbones and shoulder blades to be fully supported. From there she shows ways to learn to reduce neck, shoulder, arm and hand tension.

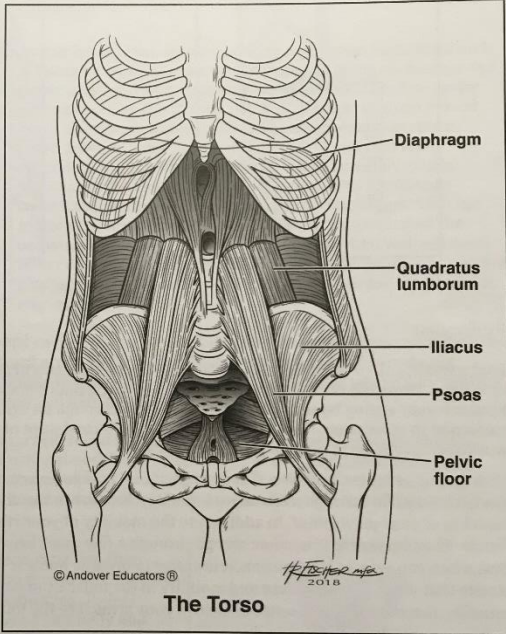
Chapters Five through Ten give an informative tour of the anatomy and mechanism of breathing, ways to increase spinal and rib mobility to allow for efficient breaths, and means of using the abdominals and pelvic floor muscles to support our breathing. She continues to emphasize letting go of tension and using our muscles to good effect at the times muscle contraction is needed. Once having read through these chapters, my appreciation of my lungs, diaphragm, muscles and spine/ribs was deepened along with a resulting heightened sense of strategy around their use in producing sound through the flute.

Chapter Eleven polishes off the body mapping tour with exploration of the jaw and tongue. Very useful take away is, when playing, to open one's mouth to breathe by moving the lower jaw down, rather than tilting the head back to open the mouth away from the lower jaw. This latter action, which can become a habit if we hold the flute tensely against our lower lip, contributes to lower jaw, neck and shoulder tension.

Picture from The Breathing Book, by Amy Likar

X. Exhalation and Elastic Recoil

As flutists we need to make a distinction between the muscular work of breathing and what happens to support the breath. The muscular work of inhaling is done by the rib moving muscles (about 25% of the work) and the diaphragm (about 75%). If this muscular work stopped, you would die. The subtle internal sensations of buoyant support for the breath, by contrast, come largely from elastic recoil throughout the torso accompanied by spinal lengthening on exhalation. The sensations come from a coordinated involuntary action of everything you see in the picture on this page. Unfortunately, some flute players think that intense muscular work in the muscles that have been removed in this picture is necessary to support the breath. These players typically equate making music with an athletic activity and, as a result, feel compelled to "muscle" their way through the music. This is unfortunate because these players are risking serious injury and ruining their chances for real support.



The Torso

Elastic recoil is the tendency of tissue to rebound to its original shape. When your lungs are full of air, the abdominal cylinder, pelvic floor, lung tissue, costal cartilage and diaphragm have moved into a position other than neutral. When you exhale there is elastic recoil in all of these body parts as they seek their former neutral position. Elastic recoil occurs involuntarily every time you exhale and you can use elastic recoil to help support your tone, if you do not overwhelm it with unnecessary abdominal effort.

The abdominal wall is a layered cylinder of muscle surrounding the viscera; front, sides and back. There are four layers of abdominal muscles. During breathing they function as a group to support exhalation. These abdominal muscles play an important role in breath management but only when they are functioning optimally. When misunderstood and misused, the strength of these muscles can disrupt embouchure, tonal control and cause neck muscles to overwork.

Coming toward the end, Chapter Twelve is an encouraging discussion on how our entire knowledge base from the preceding chapters will now allow us to monitor our air more effectively while playing, providing for more nuanced capabilities to color, control, and shape the amount, speed and quality of the air flow.

A Summary is the title of Chapter Thirteen, in which Likar notes how “free movements create free sounds” and suggests to turn to this book “again and again to learn something new about yourself, your breathing, your flute playing and your musicianship.” Good advice.

**You might also enjoy listening to The Flute 360 Podcast with Amy Likar -
[Episode 170 – Heidi Kay Begay](#)**

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