

# Reflections: Valborg Werbeck-Svärdström's *Uncovering the Voice*

Marisa Gray Atha



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## INTRODUCTION

**H**AVING THE COMMONALITY that our daughters attend Waldorf School, one of my voice students lent me a book, *Uncovering the Voice: The Cleansing Power of Song* by Valborg Werbeck-Svärdström.<sup>1</sup> The material in Werbeck's book is heavily tied into Rudolph Steiner's concepts of anthroposophy, which takes an openness to a specific stream of spiritual thinking.<sup>2</sup> Anthroposophy, "wisdom of the human being," is the philosophy of spiritual teaching that underlies Waldorf education.<sup>3</sup> As any Waldorf family attest, one can skim as light as gnomes, fairytales, and wooden toys, or as deep, esoteric, and mind blowing as the bottomless caverns of Steiner's written works, teachings, and all of the anthroposophic thinking and pedagogic theory that followed.<sup>4</sup> No matter the depth of immersion, Waldorf certainly provides a beautiful education using inclusive methods that address the head, hands, and heart.

Of note, although Werbeck's text does present some misconceptions of vocal function, I offer a generous margin for error, with an appreciation for the current tools of voice science that were not available in her time; meanwhile, Werbeck's greater points still stand with mighty poise.

A block excerpt will be presented, followed by reflections upon the material. Selection preference has been given to those sections that link the ideals of Rudolph Steiner to those of Werbeck, as viewed through the lens of their similarly holistic approaches.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Valborg Werbeck-Svärdström was born in Gäble, Sweden in 1879. She studied in Conservatory, performed at the Swedish Royal Opera, and was "hailed as the new Jenny Lind—the Swedish Nightingale." After marrying and moving to Germany, she came into contact with Rudolph Steiner in 1908.<sup>5</sup>

The first Waldorf School was still a decade away from opening, but Steiner was rich into his work in the fields of anthroposophy and educational philosophy, and was lecturing, teaching, and writing.<sup>6</sup> Werbeck was experiencing vocal problems that caused her to question her career as a singer.<sup>7</sup> Through her own internal work, and her ongoing collaboration with Steiner between 1912 and 1924, Werbeck came to an understanding of the voice—her own, and that of others—that inspired her to found Schule der Stimmenthüllung (School for Uncovering the Voice), the first anthroposophic singing school, in 1924.<sup>8</sup>

The book *Uncovering the Voice: The Cleansing Power of Song* was first published in Germany in 1938, but “disappeared under the weight of political events and the Second World War and was not republished until the 1970s.”<sup>9</sup> Spending subsequent years teaching, based on her perspective of a spiritual understanding of the human voice, Werbeck died in 1972, at the age of 92.<sup>10</sup> Her book was first published in English in 1980 by Rudolph Steiner Press, and the edition excerpted in this article was printed by Sophia Books in 2002.

The School for Uncovering the Voice continues today worldwide, with teacher trainings, certifications, classes, and workshops. This method is frequently found in Waldorf teacher training, and a therapeutic branch of the School for Uncovering the Voice is a recognized as Anthroposophic Therapeutic Singing by AAMTA (Association of Anthroposophic Medicine & Therapies in America).<sup>11</sup>

The scope of preparation for this article includes the reading of Werbeck’s book topic-specific research pertaining to Rudolph Steiner’s philosophy and influence upon Werbeck’s pedagogy, and video review of Christiaan Boele instructing in this method.<sup>12</sup> If a greater depth of knowledge and/or experiential practice is desired, teachers and resources are readily available to support further investigation into Werbeck’s method of *Uncovering the Voice*.<sup>13</sup>

## EXCERPTS AND REFLECTIONS

In our soul, the idea of the archetypal human voice must light up—the archetypal sound underlying all the manifoldness of the tonal world . . . [as] the creative ground of all human vocal manifestation. The archetypal sound becomes ideally visible and audible, for it is more than a picture: it manifests itself simultaneously as idea and sound.

When we learn to give ourselves over to the guidance of our inner and outer ear . . . in our own tones this archetypal sound will also slowly begin to glow through in their outer resonance. Thus, as it becomes more and more apparent to the outer ear, it will gradually unveil and free itself from the tones which are bound by the physical body.<sup>14</sup>

Werbeck’s writing style is quite similar to that of Rudolph Steiner. Deeply philosophic ideas are laced with

direct naming of physical structures and forms, while the overall voice is that of late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature—flowery, yet bold in assertions. Coming out of the Romantic period of art, music, and literature, but also, heading into the First World War, Expressionism, and the *avant garde*, these culminating influences project both an honoring of beauty, and a recognition of pain, separation, and illusion.

In these first excerpted pages, Werbeck sets up her overall principle of the voice as an innate essence that exists inside the body’s structure. She calls this the “archetypal sound,” to be unveiled and freed from the body.

Modern-day Uncovering the Voice instructor Christiaan Boele describes Werbeck’s approach as follows: “It is based on the belief that every human being has their own unique singing voice. Through uncovering or unveiling our voices, we can learn to connect more fully to that which wants to speak through our voices . . . Teachers develop the art of listening to such an extent that they can hear the voice not only as it is, but as it could be, in development towards its ultimate form.”<sup>15</sup> Boele is speaking of the “archetypal sound” that exists within each of us.

Observed in the video *Singing Lessons with Christiaan Boele and the School of Uncovering the Voice*, Boele instructs using very little direct anatomic or technical instruction; rather, he calls upon imagery and subtle kinesthetic movement to elicit a clear tone, free sound, and peaceful atmosphere.<sup>16</sup> Singers use an array of semi-occluded vocal tract (SOVT) exercises (although Boele does not use this term) such as [m], [ŋ], [v], and lip trills, in combination with mid-to-back vowels such as [a], [o], [ʌ], and [u]. The movements displayed are sometimes commonplace relaxation techniques, such as gently phonating while rolling the shoulders up and back or rolling the head with a circular motion; while other movements called up the Eastern practices of *Tai chi*, *qigong*, and *vinyasa yoga*—graceful, slow arm motions that serve to gather a centering energetic force also known as *chi*, *qi*, *prana*, or life-force energy. Perhaps from the Steiner/Werbeck/Boele lens, these movements offer a tuning into the presence of the archetypal voice and human spirit. These types of movements are found throughout cultures and time, and are used to gracefully attune to what is the “Great Mystery” within. Observing Boele’s

instruction, it seems the culmination of these exercises presents a well tuned, harmonious, crystal clear, bell-like tone quality sung by individuals who appear quite relaxed within the process. These singers are freeing their instruments and reveling in the joy of the sounds they are making together, rather than pushing, pulling, or trying to forcefully elicit the freedom of tone and body. The singers are meeting Werbeck's wish: "When we learn to give ourselves over to the guidance of our inner and outer ear . . . in our own tones this archetypal sound will also slowly begin to glow through in their outer resonance."<sup>17</sup>

Werbeck quotes her contemporary pedagogue Paul Bruns, author of *Das Problem der Kontra-Altstimme (The Problem of the Contralto Voice)*.

Hearing becomes an art. The purely sensory, outer perception must be complemented by the spiritual perception of the inner ear, if one wishes to really grasp what is essential in vocal sound.<sup>18</sup>

Werbeck continues her narration:

All work, all efforts towards what is called voice-training—basically it is nothing other than a freeing, a clearing away of the obstructive coverings which will not let the voice "come out."

And here we encounter the cardinal error of today's singing pedagogy: the human "voice" needs no "training"—it is already there, finished and perfect as an entity sounding in the ideal world. What it is waiting for is—*liberation!* We should speak of freeing the voice, or better yet *uncovering the voice*, and not *voice-training*.<sup>19</sup>

This excerpt best showcases Werbeck's primary vocation, an undertaking to free and "uncover" the voice. In this passage, and in several others throughout the book, Werbeck uses the word "training" with a negative connotation; however, voice instruction itself is not the issue, if this instruction is done in a context that honors the whole being. Werbeck explores the intentions that lie deeper below a specific exercise or technique a voice teacher may offer; essentially, she asks whether teachers are applying triage to singular aspects of a voice, or whether teachers are addressing the entire picture—the holistic view of the singer's voice as part of integrated body. In Werbeck's verbiage, "training" patches one issue at a time without considering the singer as a whole,

and thus may cause more harm than good, while proper instruction, in the manner of *Uncovering the Voice*, observes the whole being, from surface to the deep and essential voice that lies buried like a diamond in the rough. As a teacher, Werbeck sought to help her pupils find their essential voice, liberate it, and let it shine forth through them and into the greater world.

Werbeck's message here beautifully links to Rudolph Steiner's approach toward educating a child: "The heart of the Waldorf method is the conviction that education is an art . . . To educate the whole child, their heart and will must be reached as well as their mind."<sup>20</sup> Children learning to read in a Waldorf School do not learn only the letters and phonetics of the alphabet; children become immersed in the experience of each letter and sound. They walk in curves and straight lines, using the kinesthesia of the entire body to understand the relationship between written symbols. They witness the shaping of the alphabet letters as mirrored in nature; they paint a majestic mountain to comprehend the mighty, uppercase "M" standing tall and proud. They speak verse and sing to internalize the sound of language, each letter and phoneme explored through story, music, and significance. Reading is accomplished through an integrative, holistic process that accesses the senses, mind, and heart of the child, unveiling a deep relationship to, and affinity for, the written word. Just as Werbeck unveils the singer's voice, Waldorf education, as created by Steiner, unveils the unfolding essence of the developing child.

*The etheric body streams through the physical body and sounds out into the world and cosmos, when it is not held back and hindered in its sound-unfolding by the physical body.* Human beings of all times have known very well of this connection of their sensible manifestation of sound with its supersensible manifestation in the cosmos . . . We have lost this consciousness . . . We have necessarily forgotten what constituted the inner bliss of former times and the otherworldliness of most ancient times, because we live in a time of materialism, a time of a real domination of matter over soul and spirit.<sup>21</sup>

In the anthroposophic language of Rudolph Steiner, the "etheric body" can be described as the subtle body, energy field, or aura. The etheric body exists in the planes between the physical body and the "astral body," or spirit/consciousness.<sup>22</sup>

Watching Dr. Valerie Hunt's iconic video demonstration of measuring the bioenergy field, one can witness the profundity of Werbeck's statement in a way that was not scientifically observable in the early 1900s.<sup>23</sup> Especially observe the clip at 4:05 – 5:00, when a mother is sitting with her child and begins "ohm-ing," an Eastern-influenced monosyllabic form of sung chant. Her radiant energy visually expands beyond her own body and envelops the child in a warm white light. These concepts may seem farfetched, but Dr. Hunt's findings have been validated by a number of esteemed institutions. She was a respected Professor Emeritus of the Department of Physiological Sciences at UCLA, consulted in space biology for NASA, was a field reader for U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare research grants, and instructed courses at twenty different medical colleges and universities.<sup>24</sup> In her early research, she "established the validity of bioenergy fields by measuring vibrations of the field with high frequency electronic instruments and capturing these on video and audio tapes."<sup>25</sup>

The ramifications of this are clearly enormous if one accounts for every thought, belief, word, and action as a carrier of energy. Narrowing the focus and discussion to a specific implication for singing, one could recognize the robust and deeply affecting experience of creating music in community. When Werbeck says, "We have necessarily forgotten what constituted the inner bliss of former times and the otherworldliness of most ancient times, because we live in a time of materialism, a time of a real domination of matter over soul and spirit," she asserts modern culture has forgone an essential connection.<sup>26</sup> On the macroscopic level, perhaps Western culture has indeed become carried away by the lures of materialism; however, every time people gather in community to sing together—whether as a single student to a teacher, or as a choir or congregation—they share that most ancient of "bliss" and "otherworldliness." Hearing and singing music, one is transported into that which lives deep within, and that which connects each person by invisible strands of ether.

In Werbeck's vision, the aura, or energy field, expands outward beyond the physical body, into the "world and cosmos, when it is not held back and hindered in its sound-unfolding by the physical body."<sup>27</sup> So when we free the voice, not only the sound waves of our actual voices project tone outward, but also the innate energy

that vibrates inside each of us—the expandable, contractible, lifeforce energy that permeates our beings.

The Uncovering the Voice method helps Waldorf teachers to release the voice into this free state, shining forth unfettered; the teacher's voice then leads her pupils into daily song, each child journeying back in time to connect with this most fundamental of human connective experiences. Singing is not a disjointed experience, allocated only to the choral room or voice lesson; singing is a fundamental, unifying event that begins each day in a Waldorf classroom and continues to permeate throughout the curriculum. As Christiaan Boele says, "Through uncovering or unveiling our voices, we can learn to connect more fully to that which wants to speak through our voices."<sup>28</sup> In the anthroposophic ideals of Steiner, the voice is a direct avenue to the essence of the human: "The singer [has] the all-engrossing experience of the whole being as a 'resounding column of sound.' The entire etheric organization of the human being—all of his life forces—then becomes involved in the singing process."<sup>29</sup>

The first task, and at the same time that task of most all-encompassing importance for the developing singer, is to master the art of true *listening*, the development of the inner ear . . . When one listens deeply and selflessly to the tone, it reveals a substantial property which before escaped the hearing . . . Once the perception of the objective in the tone begins to set in, one experiences how the slightest subjective influence colours the tone . . .

Whoever penetrates to the objective tone gets rid of the coverings, the hindrances that surround it. He frees it from its prison; he can follow the striving of the freed tone and let himself be borne by it . . .

Once one has attained the objective tone and can bring it forth at will, then it begins to come alive and reveal itself in its true nature more and more. It becomes "essential" . . . The actual contact with the essential aspect of the tones occurs in the toneless silence between cessation and renewed attack in singing . . .

The "voice," after all, is not a material thing that functions only in the moment of tone-manifestation and evaporates into nothingness between the individual tones; the voice has an eternal existence, and therefore one can make contact with it even when it is not manifesting itself.

It is our hearing-organism as a whole which forms the tones by means of the sound; and the throat—along

with its associated organs—is the instrument of the tone-forming organ. Similarly, it is not the fingers that play the violin; rather, the inner listener in us plays the violin by means of the fingers. Perhaps, still more correctly: the soul, through the hearing-organism, plays the instrument.<sup>30</sup>

In this excerpt, Werbeck takes her assertions a step further—it is not only the tone itself that contains qualities of the essential, but also the silence “between cessation and renewed attack in singing,” when the voice is “not manifesting itself.” This concept harks back to the famous Mozart quote, “The music is not in the notes, but in the silence between.”<sup>31</sup>

At this juncture, Werbeck has not only removed the physical hindrances that obscure or interfere with the voice, but also the sound itself. She unpacks layers of essence until she arrives at silence as the ultimate container thereof. And truly, if one reduces the life experience down to its simplest form, one can say: Between the first courageous in-breath, and the last surrendered out-breath, everything in between is just noise. From that grand scale, zooming into the minutia of the moments that make up a life, one can say that the motivation to “inspire,” or breathe, exists as an essential quality inside. Each time one takes in a new breath, a continually renewed yes to life is spoken.

Standing on stage and inhaling before the opening phrase, a singer is absorbing their newly made commitment to living, and engaging the fiery lifeforce essence necessary to prompt the manifestation of voiced air—of sound. Baritone Thomas Hampson says, “Breath is not-yet-heard thought in the language of music.”<sup>32</sup> Werbeck describes the vitality of this moment in which the “soul plays the instrument.”<sup>33</sup> It is the moment before the leap that contains all the necessary courage—the rest is just a scenic free fall.

In translating this concept to Waldorf education, one may examine the nature of the will as understood by anthroposophic thought. An article published in 1932 in the *Anthroposophical Quarterly* states, “If we look for the will in its essence, in the form in which it is distinct from idea, from every element of thought, from every element of feeling, living itself out as pure will, we must turn to the tiny child at an age before his capacity to form ideas has evolved.”<sup>34</sup> When one is enrolled in a Waldorf kindergarten or elementary school, a teacher

will ask for information regarding the age the child first spoke, rolled over, crawled, walked, potty trained, etc.; this history provides the teacher with insight into the child’s will, the lifeforce energy propelling the child into development and experience. As the child moves through the early years in a Waldorf classroom, the teacher will continue to monitor the driving force of the will in a child—how strong is this force of will that initiates every other thought and action of the child, both inward and outward? Just as Werbeck says, “the voice has an eternal existence, and therefore one can make contact with it even when it is not manifesting itself,” one could state the same in regard to the *will*, as well as *thought* and *feeling*. Steiner emphasized these three activities of the human soul as a way to cultivate harmony and balance within the individual, thereby developing higher forms of thinking that were not possible before. He viewed the modern human being as “standing on a threshold.”<sup>35</sup> In his book, *How to Know Higher Worlds*, Steiner says, “The capacities by which we can gain insights into higher worlds lie dormant within each one of us.”<sup>36</sup> Through his founding of the anthroposophic movement and development of Waldorf curriculum, Steiner aimed to awaken these faculties of insight.<sup>37</sup>

If only science could “slip under the skin” of life, in order to conduct its observations *from the inside*—only then could it hope to get close to the mysteries it seeks. However, the representatives of such a future science would have to be artists, too—and not just singers in the usual sense of the word, but singers who can feel their way into the web of the living. Then—only then—very much about the physiology of singing, especially in relation to the larynx, would be unveiled to it.<sup>38</sup>

Werbeck would appreciate the current respect and exploration of the mind-body connection. Yogis have understood this relationship for millennia, and modern science is finally starting to catch up. With the acceptance of neuroplasticity as indisputably proven, researchers are discovering all sorts of untrodden areas of study. Neuroscientists are examining the way in which meditation changes the physical structure of the brain—these changes can begin to occur in as little as eight weeks of meditation.<sup>39</sup> The brain’s left hippocampus, posterior cingulate, pons, temporoparietal junction, and amygdala are all physically altered by the mindful act of medita-

tion, thereby influencing the thoughts and behavior of the individual to be less self-centered and anxious, and more self-aware and empathetic.<sup>40</sup> Mind activity affects brain function, which affects thoughts, which affect actions, which affect self, which affects others—simply put, Werbeck’s “web of the living.”

Singers can practice the intention they bring to their phonation, to their songs, to the sharing of their voice. Their silent intention is contingent upon both their internal essence, as well as their energy body. Walking into a voice lesson, walking onto a stage, if singers intend to coordinate themselves, so that they can release, so that they can open, so that they can share the story of their song with others, they have tuned into their deeper purpose in a way that offers connection within the “web of living”—connection to those receiving their voice.

In his book, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment*, Steiner says,

[t]he student must learn to look danger calmly in the face and try to overcome difficulties unswervingly. For instance, when in the presence of some peril, he must swiftly come to the conviction that fear is of no possible use; I must not feel afraid; I must only think of what is to be done. And he must improve to the extent of feeling, upon occasions which formerly inspired him with fear, that to be frightened, to be disheartened, are things that are out of the question as far as his own inmost self is concerned.<sup>41</sup>

When students bring with them the constructive power of their intentions, their energy-body understands what to do in a way that their thought-centered mind cannot grasp in real time. The mind-body and energy-body move instantaneously, while conscious thinking always trails sluggishly behind. Instead of faulting or judging this time lapse as inadequate, rather, it serves as a catalyst to tune in to the subtle bodies, to “slip under the skin,” and even slip under the veil of our own thoughts. We tune in to the essence of our artistic, creative, and wholly intelligent natures, trusting our alignment with Greater Yes—in this space, exists energy, vibration, connection, and vocal freedom.

The human ear—this delicate, complex structure, built with such infinite wisdom, which in reality should not be regarded *only* as a sense organ, but rather as the focal

point of a “hearing-organism” spread over the whole human being . . .

When the sound stream takes its path through the ear, something very special happens to it. Figuratively expressed, it is as though a wise old “guide” met each and every tone, helping it to a kind of rebirth and giving it a new inner content. For at this moment, inside each tone a radiant nucleus lights up which was not there before.

This shining “something” in fact represents the first faint reflection of the archetypal sound . . . When we patiently teach ourselves to attend to the hidden sound, when we make this tone-principle inwardly audible to ourselves—*then the archetypal sound will slowly light up in the outward resonance of our own tones*. And this silvery radiance will grow and grow, developing into a wonderful band uniting all tones; it becomes the “thread” that goes through the middle of every “pearl,” making them all members of one necklace.

It is this radiant band alone that weaves a *true legato* between our tones, for the simple reason that it bestows *essential likeness* on them . . .

One begins to experience how, more and more, it is the *whole body* that provides the organic basis for the production of tone-sound . . .

Of course the larynx (and within this complex organ, the vocal cord) remains the centre for the production of the sensibly manifest tone; but in the end all organs of the human being form one *integral organ*, i.e. the human body as a whole, in which all individual organs merge into one another functionally.<sup>42</sup>

This passage contains so many deeply robust ponderances in such a compact space: Werbeck addresses the ear as the centerpiece of a whole-body hearing experience, the tone as transformed into radiant energy during its pathway through the ear, the archetypal essence of tone, the nature of legato, and the integral quality of the entire body as related to individual organ function.

As in the previous excerpt that addresses the “etheric body,” here Werbeck is calling upon words to describe the indescribable—something experienced on an energetic soul level, rather than the thinking level. She paints a scene of a pearl necklace, with the thread as the voice. But the voice she describes is not just any vocal manifestation; the voice she describes is one in which hindrances, outer layers, constrictions, inhibitions, and molded artificialities have been stripped away, leaving

the purest essential sound that cannot help but to “shine” and “grow” with “silvery radiance.” She defines *legato* in this context as “essential likeness” between tones.<sup>43</sup> The manifestation of the radiant legato will look, feel, and sound different in every singer, just as each person carries one’s own unique energetic signature and DNA. This is the beauty of diversity on a soul level, as created through a whole-body experience of singing—integrated, free, and energetically moved through the mind, body, and spirit.

The demon of our times dissects that which must remain a living whole if it is to thrive; but we cut it up into individual complexes, which we observe and treat separately. Learning to sing, in the way we mean it here, simply has nothing whatsoever to do with any kind of mechanistic exercises. Artistic singing is a potentised interplay of spiritual, soul, and bodily functioning; yet in the performance itself, *only the creative forces* may consciously be at work.

From an anatomical and physiological point of view, we must regard the human being as a single organic entity, harmoniously membered within itself; the various organs are, as it were, the focal points of its functions. Hence there is no organic function or action that is closed in itself. And so we may also state: the human being does not sing with the larynx alone; rather, the *extended larynx*, reaching over the whole organism, is the real basis for his singing—and this is as much as to say: *the entire human being*.<sup>44</sup>

Rudolph Steiner founded the first Waldorf school in response to the question: “Is there a way to educate children that will help them develop into human beings who will be capable of bringing peace to the world?” Guided by his anthroposophic spiritual principles, Steiner created an education that develops the whole child—“head, heart, and hands”—in reference to the three ideals of “truth, beauty, and goodness.”<sup>45</sup> Valborg Werbeck-Svärdström internalized these integrative and holistic principles when she crafted her Schule der Stimmenthüllung (School for Uncovering the Voice). Throughout her remaining work as a voice teacher, and as an author, she moved ever closer to stripping away that which is not the essence of the voice.

Nearing the end of *Uncovering the Voice*, Werbeck gives a beautiful summary to the overall thesis and purpose of her book. In Werbeck’s method, the singer incorporates mind, body, and spirit into an integrative,

coordinated whole. Werbeck goes on to say, during “the performance itself, *only the creative forces* may consciously be at work.”<sup>46</sup> This notion is grand and glorious, assuring the singer that all the preparatory work has been done; now the only work that remains is to open oneself and hand over the control. The performer is immersed in story, in communication and connection with the audience.

In every powerful and transcendental performance, the same components are included: the energetic nature of the communication between performer and audience. Negating Werbeck’s “demons of dissection,” the singer feels oneself as whole, in communion with the wholeness of others.<sup>47</sup> Singer’s and audience member’s energetic natures vibrate in harmony with their well attuned self-hoods, stretching into and sharing each other’s fields of awareness and energy. This is the moment when performance comes to life, and everything else falls away.

## CONCLUSION

Inward listening carries the key to the mystery of singing in itself.<sup>48</sup>

When I picked up this seemingly esoteric book written generations ago, I had no inkling that it would speak so truly to the contemporary experience. As a companion to all the important technical, anatomic, functional, and scientific vocal work we do as voice teachers, *Uncovering the Voice* offers a poetic reminder of the very soul of music—“the mystery of singing in itself.” In these transcendent moments of music making, we are whole, integrated, natural, and easeful. It serves us well to continually check in, to “inwardly listen,” so that we can tune into the heart center and remember why we sing, and who we are singing for. Let us peel away the layers of constriction, *uncovering* that deeply buried golden thread so it may shine forth with freedom, vitality, and spirit.

## NOTES

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**Marisa Gray Atha** has enjoyed performing and teaching in the genres of Musical Theatre, Classical, Pop/Rock, Jazz, Folk, and World since 2002. As the owner of Three Sparrows Studio, she provides private vocal instruction using a holistic approach that empowers her students to find and free their own natural sound, incorporating voice pedagogy, voice science, performance practice, vocal styling, yogic principles, Alexander Technique, and mind/body integration. Marisa holds a Bachelor of Arts in Music, with a concentration in Vocal Performance, Master of Music in Classical Vocal Performance, Bachelor of Arts in English, and Minor in Psychology. She is a RYT-200 (Registered Yoga Teacher), CMT-200 (Certified Meditation Teacher), certified Core Singing voice instructor, and has 40 hours of Alexander Technique training. Marisa also offers private yoga sessions via MamaYogaStudio.com and is a contributor to *OM Yoga & Lifestyle Magazine*.



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