

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE AND TEACHING MUSIC: CONNECTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES – Dr. Gabriella Minnes Brandes, and Carole Davis

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In this paper, we briefly introduce the Alexander Technique and then focus on its potential, promise and challenge for musicians and music teachers.

WHAT IS THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE?

The Alexander Technique is a method by which a person learns to apply the basic principles of the body's natural coordination to improve the quality of his or her own movement. The basic principles of the coordination of a body, principles which function unconsciously in infants and animals, can be learned and applied consciously to improve the functioning and integration of the whole individual. The new coordination may provide relief of stress and pain, make repetitious tasks easy, and provide a new opening for excellence in performers and others who need to use their bodies for maximum efficiency and endurance.

WHO WAS F.M. ALEXANDER?

Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869-1955) was an Australian actor embarking on a promising career in the 1890's when he began to develop voice problems that failed to respond to any conventional medical treatment. After a particularly important engagement almost ended in disaster because his voice got weaker, he was forced to admit that there must be something he was doing in the act of speaking that was causing his difficulties. He set aside his young career and set out to discover the root cause of the voice problems and find a method of overcoming them. F.M. Alexander considered the relationship of the head neck and back fundamental to the study of improved use of the body, and called this relationship the Primary Control. He examined the ways in which this organizational principle shapes the ways in which we use ourselves. After discovering some key principles that manifest themselves in daily activities, Alexander observed how his use changed. He started teaching others and needless to say did not lose his voice again.

WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF STUDYING THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE?

Alexander lessons focus on the connections between theory and practice as those apply to implementation of principles of the Alexander Technique, to using one's voice, playing an instrument and teaching. Students are encouraged to experiment as they consider the application of the principles of the Technique in their musical interests. Initially, lessons in the Alexander Technique are directed at having the student learn to develop and

maintain Primary Control (the relationship between the head, neck and back) while the teacher gently guides him or her through simple daily movements. In this way, the student is given the experience of easy, fluid movements made possible by attention to the ways the student uses her or himself.

Through simple movements like sitting or walking, the teacher guides the student with vocal and tactile directions designed to promote a mental and physical reorganization. The focus in the lesson is on the awareness of students' habitual responses to stimuli and then the teacher and student send new directions and move with new coordination (Alexander, 1932, 1984, p. 22). The lessons also include real-life situations of particular significance to the student, such as playing a musical instrument or vocal production.

WHAT CAN ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE OFFER MUSICIANS?

The principles of the Alexander Technique “teach us how to use ourselves better and more efficiently. This makes it an excellent tool for musicians who want to eliminate misuse and tension and generally to improve themselves” (Fedele, 2003, p. 7). When discussing the potential of using the Alexander Technique with musicians, Pedro de Alcantara, a cellist and Alexander teacher, compares two paradigms. Most often musicians use a goal-oriented movement paradigm he calls “Think, play judge”. Alcantara applies Alexander's principles and proposes a different paradigm, which is “Think, get rid of wrong thoughts, think again, play” (1997, pp. 36-37). In the first paradigm, the emphasis is on judgment as a lead for movement whereas in this second paradigm, the emphasis is on inhibition of the initial response and thoughtful direction. Alcantara invites musicians to use the principles of the Alexander Technique as a vehicle to explore their thinking and conceptions about playing. That moment of stopping to think provides space for choice, thinking again, and then playing with a new level of awareness.

Musicians often grapple with technique and endless hours of continuous practice. These hours of practice often create undesired muscular tensions and sometimes lead to injuries (Macdonald, 1989 p. 23). Moreover, many musicians tackle various emotional holdings as they consider performances. The violinist Ivanovic (2007) describes the challenges musicians face as they work on their own technique in an article entitled The head should be used for thinking, not holding the violin: “When I was experimenting with different chin and shoulder rests, I mistakenly thought that finding the right ones was going to immediately fix my posture, provide me with good playing, balance and advance my technique. However, I quickly learned this is not true, because it is not the use of ergonomic devices, but our own bodies that accounts for good playing technique and our advancement as musicians and artists.” (p. 2). The Alexander Technique provides students with preventive tools that support them psycho-physically as they play (Carrington, 1999, p. 151). Students are also given insight into the prevention of repetitive use/strain injuries as those currently experiencing problems may find ways to approach their rehabilitation.

Alcantara challenges the commonly held view that technique is “the physical means by which one actualizes one's musical conception” and he proposes that technique is “the

psycho-physical means for actualizing a musical conception” (p. 171). Nelly Ben-Or, a pianist and Alexander teacher adds another dimension to the discussion. She suggests that specific instrumental approaches and ‘schools’ of piano playing are concerned with “particular ways of using one’s fingers, arms, wrists, weight, etc.” (1978, p. 85). All these approaches direct the musician’s attention to “separate parts of the mechanism of piano playing”, whereas with the Alexander Technique the focus is on the pianist in the context of “one indivisible whole. It is precisely the “wholeness’ of the player that should embrace and indirectly modify [the] approach, regardless of what the particular details of it are” (p. 85). Our attention is drawn to the musician as the “instrument” that ought to be functioning at its best, with conscious awareness and choice. Frank Pierce Jones (1997) provides further detail about these challenges for musicians: “a musician’s attention is given almost exclusively to what he is doing with his hands or his feet or his vocal organs, and to the sounds they are producing. Of what he is doing with the rest of his body, he usually knows very little.” (p. 182). Sandra Head, a classical opera singer and a student of the Alexander Technique shares her observations about her vocal training: “most of my classical vocal training from the age of 18 to the age of 32, reinforced in me the notion that the body parts that contribute to sound can somehow function separately from one another.” After almost two years of Alexander lessons, Sandra wrote in her journal: “My awareness is not on the individual elements of how I sing – breathing, breath management, ease in neck, loose jaw, resonance, focus, acting, etc. Rather, I am just singing and enjoying the absolute natural ease of it” (1996, pp. 11-12). Andrea Lynn Fedele (2003) surveyed and interviewed seventeen oboe players about their posture, hands and arms, embouchure and jaw, breathing and support, articulation and practicing. Most of the oboists experienced pain or discomfort while playing and almost all have heard about the Alexander technique and have had some experience in it. Fedele concludes that Alexander Technique lessons can enrich the oboists music making: “playing their instrument becomes easier and therefore more pleasant and they [the oboists] are able to use what they learn through the Technique in facing challenges ... in music” (p. 117).

Ben-Or proposes two starting points for her approach to practicing: a) a thorough learning of the text and b) bringing an awareness of the total use of oneself when practicing (p. 93). Vivien Mackie, a cellist and Alexander teacher reiterates the importance of “knowing the task thoroughly” and then while performing “comes the moment to leave all that” (p. 307), stop the habitual responses and be actively present here-and-now (Tolle, p. 321).

WHAT CAN ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE OFFER MUSIC TEACHERS?

Alexander Technique holds particular interest for music teachers when lessons focus on repetitive movements as well as habits of approaching a musical piece or preparing for performance. Alexander Technique lessons provide tools to stop habitual patterns of misuse, which interfere with vocal technique and artistic interpretation (Head, 1996, Heirich, 2005). The Alexander Technique provides specific and unique tools to explore and change these habits. Through awareness of habitual behaviours on the one hand, and attention to the relationship of the head, neck and back on the other, Alexander students

attain new choices about their musical practice. Alcantara reminds us that the first role of any teacher and music teachers in particular is that of an “objective observer” (1997, p.16). Through observations, teachers can help students learn about their patterns and habits in singing or playing an instrument.

In a recent study of the application of the Alexander Technique in a high school choir rehearsal, the choir conductor, Karen Parent-Dionne, worked in collaboration with an Alexander teacher, Gabriella Minnes Brandes (Parent, 2007). Within the six weeks of data collection the choir had bi-weekly warm up sessions consisting of 20-30 minutes of Alexander instruction. The students, choir teacher and Alexander teacher reflected on their experiences orally and in writing. The students’ perceptions of how they used their bodies as musical instruments grew as they learned to describe what was taking place in their bodies when they sang. The choir’s application of Alexander Technique directions was intermittent but sufficient to release unnecessary tensions in their singing as many students reported positive shifts in their vocal skills.

CONCLUSION

Alexander points out that students often learn through example and imitation of their parents and teachers (1988, p. 31). Therefore, he insists that teachers ought to be “employing the technique of conscious control in their own use of themselves before taking up their teaching work... Their [teachers’] first aim is to be good examples of use to their pupils” (1941, 1986, p. 74). Alexander teachers develop skills of identifying students’ habits and providing them with tools to change their habits that lead to misuse (Feindel, 2005, p. 119). Music teachers often see students’ misuse but comment on it in terms of performance and end-results, sometimes lacking the language to discuss students’ challenges in other ways. Therefore, we highlight the need for collaboration between teachers of Alexander Technique and music teachers. Each brings their own set of skills and expertise that enhances student awareness and performance. Working in collaboration could enhance Alexander teachers’ understanding of performance, and music teachers’ understanding of ways to observe, articulate and offer possible change in habitual patterns of use. Collaboration will provide new venues for conversation about music production and the ways in which musicians use themselves as they produce music. This shared language of the ways in which we use ourselves and how we function as musicians could enrich students and teachers alike.

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Dr. Gabriella Minnes Brandes has taught the Alexander Technique since 1988 after graduating from the Alexander Technique Training course in Haifa, Israel. Since 1990, she has maintained an active practice at the Vancouver Alexander Technique Centre. Gaby has given workshops to musicians, singers, horseback riders and introductory workshops to the general public. She has taught a UBC graduate-level course on the use of voice and AT, given workshops at Capilano College music department, taught the Technique in an experimental elementary school, and worked with physicians who focused on rehabilitation. . Gaby was invited to participate in a couple wellness radio shows and authored two papers published in STAT Newsletter, NASTAT Newsletter and Journal of Sports Medicine.

Gaby is co-director of the Vancouver School of the Alexander Technique, a CANSTAT certified teacher training school. She also holds a Ph.D. in education and teaches in the Faculty of Education at UBC.

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