

Reflections on the Alexander Method

by Ron Dennis

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Author Ron Dennis works with a student in one of his Alexander Technique classes at Juilliard.

Over the past ten years, musicians have been hearing more and more about the Alexander Technique as a resource for performance. In this article, I would like to share some of my experience with this technique, both as professional musician and Alexander teacher.

Briefly, the Alexander Technique is a method for acquiring skill in what F. M. Alexander (1869-1955) called "the use of the self." This concept encompasses our basic psycho-physical activities, such as standing, sitting, bending, walking, manipulating tools and instruments, speaking, and so on — all of our voluntary activity, in other words. Alexander, an Australian, developed his technique nearly a hundred years ago in response to a difficult personal problem: an actor by profession, his voice had begun to fail regularly during performances, and all available medical counsel and treatment had given no relief. Faced with the dilemma of giving up his career or finding out on his own what was causing the problem, Alexander chose the latter course, and over the next several years carried out an amazing self-analysis, his only equipment a set of multiple mirrors in which he observed what he later called his "manner of doing." He came to learn that in all of his activities he was interfering with his inherent poise and flexibility by unconsciously over-tensing virtually every muscle in his body. As he gradually learned to "un-do" this faulty use of himself, the vocal problem improved and eventually ceased. Free to return to the stage, Alexander instead devoted the rest of his life to extending and teaching his discoveries in a career that eventually spanned more than half a century.

The most important aspect of this work concerns the significance of *inhibition* as a key factor in behavioral change. Inhibition in the Alexandrian sense is not the undesirable suppression of activity, but rather the delaying of an habitual response so that a different, directed response can take place instead. "Prevent the things you have been doing and you are halfway home," as Alexander put it, an observation that will be understood by any musician who has ever changed an embouchure or other major aspect of basic technique. The teaching of inhibition on a general basis has remained a hallmark of the Alexander Technique, and in fact is what mainly distinguishes it from other "body-works" that have developed in recent years.

My own involvement with the Technique began in 1972, while I was still clarinetist with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. Those first lessons were a revelation to me, in experiencing the ease and

lightness typical of the Alexander process. Five years later I began the Alexander teacher-training program in New York City, and received my certificate in 1979.

In practical terms as a clarinetist, I found the Alexander work most directly helpful in posture and breathing. Where previously I had done my best to follow advice such as, "relax," or "breathe from the diaphragm," I was now given direct experience in Alexander lessons of what those words really involved — namely, an *awareness* of what I was doing with myself, in order that I could *release* unnecessary tension, to allow a *free response* of my postural and breathing mechanisms to the on-going situation. The words in emphasis — *awareness*, *release*, and *response* — summarize neatly the Alexandrian dimension of potentially every learning process.

Another influence on my musical work has to do with my whole concept of *practice*, the musician's central activity. Practice I had always considered to be dealing with the clarinet, doing the scales, etudes, and other things that lead to musical proficiency. From my Alexander lessons I came to see that another kind of practice was possible, that of trying to use myself well in my other daily activities — walking down the street, waiting in line at the bank, rising from my chair to acknowledge applause, to

name a few. I realized that I was indeed the instrument that played the instrument, and that working on myself amounted to working on the clarinet, in a different but highly significant way.

Learning the Alexander Technique requires definite efforts in definite directions, and there are always implications beyond our knowing when entering into such a process. In my own case, I certainly wasn't consciously looking for a new life when I took my first Alexander lesson, even though things worked out that way. Of course, most people who study Alexander are not moved to such major changes — they go on with their lives, using the Technique for practical help in their particular situations.

Also, the Alexander Technique is a serious study, like music, and as such involves frustration as well as reward. This frustration — the gap between our actual performance and our vision of it — I prefer to call "*creative tension*." An inherent factor in all serious efforts, creative tension requires not reduction or elimination, but rather understanding, acceptance, and the *energy* to deal with it.

Energy seems mysterious enough to most of us, but one thing is clear: energy bound up in inefficient neuro-muscular habits just isn't available for other purposes. Thus, whatever one's initial reason for studying Alexander, the real goal of the Technique is making more energy available for meeting "the stress of life," as Hans Selye so aptly put it.

Musicians assuredly come in for their share of this stress; fortunately, they are well-equipped for dealing with it creatively because of their practical experience in developing skills. In this regard, it is encouraging to report that the Technique is being made increasingly available to music students as part of their formal programs of study. This is presently the case at the Juilliard School, the Manhattan School of Music, and the Mannes College of Music, among others. Unlike even ten years ago, many Alexander teachers are now in private practice throughout the country. A list of teachers is available from the American Center for the Alexander Technique, 142 West End Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10023. I wish to thank all of my own teachers in the Technique, each of whom has contributed uniquely to my present understanding of the art.

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