

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE AND REASONS

FOR ITS INCLUSION IN MUSIC TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Everyone can benefit from the Alexander Technique because it offers us all the chance to re-educate ourselves about the way we use our bodies. We have a choice as to whether we operate with good use or with bad use, and by learning to differentiate between the two we can discover a new awareness of ourselves. Performing artists have sought the benefits of the Alexander Technique in search of greater freedom and poise in their professions, and now more and more music institutions are including it as part of their music programmes in recognition of its long term benefits for musicians.

The Alexander Technique was developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869-1955), an actor from Tasmania, in response to trying to find out why he had vocal troubles when he performed. After many years of self-analysis, made by observing his movements in specially positioned mirrors, Alexander discovered that his problems were due to the faulty use of himself and that he was unconsciously overtensing virtually every muscle of his body. Not only did he do this when he was reciting, but it also occurred when he was walking, bending, sitting and so on. He began to work on improving the way he held his head and neck and in so doing he came to discover that the quality of the head/neck/torso

relationship was of fundamental importance for co-ordination in human beings.

Alexander found that if he prevented the shortening of his neck muscles, which resulted in the pulling back of the head, his condition did not occur. To achieve this he devised a set of 'directions', that is free the neck, allow the head to go forward and up and in so doing enable the back to lengthen and widen. These he would consciously 'will' rather than attempt to 'do' directly.

As Alexander continued to experiment he began to realise that his patterns of misuse were not simply physical but involved both his mind and body and that it was impossible to separate the two. Willpower alone was not enough to change himself and his old habits were very hard to break, often winning over his desire to change. The only way to overcome this was to dissociate himself from the sense of what felt right and to learn new habits by conscious effort.

'Inhibition' became the key factor to this and in Alexandrian terms 'refers to the delay of an habitual response so that a different, direct response can take place instead'.¹ By paying attention to the quality of his action rather than to his specific goal, Alexander gradually began

¹ Reflections on the Alexander Method, Ron Dennis, American Ensemble, Summer 1983.

to free himself from the domination of his habits and in the process developed a new method of learning based on 'psychophysical' awareness. He had learned how to replace unconscious habits by conscious control and the actual process of becoming consciously aware was equally as important as the end result.

Eventually, Alexander's voice problems disappeared, and although he returned to the stage for several years, he devoted most of the rest of his life to extending and teaching his discoveries. He wrote the four books, the third 'The Use of the Self' published in 1932 being his best known work about his technique. The Alexander Technique has continued to grow in popularity throughout the world since Alexander's death in 1955 and it has been revived recently over the past 10 years with the popularity of alternative therapies, new body/mind disciplines and rediscovery of philosophies.

In Australia there is a growing number of qualified Alexander teachers and in 1985, AUSTAT INC (Australian Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique) was established. These teachers have trained either overseas or here at one of the two teacher training schools in Sydney and Melbourne. The role of Alexander teachers is to use guidance with their hands to undo tensions in the body of their students and to encourage the release of the neck and a lengthening of the spine. This is done whilst the student undergoes a series of movements such as sitting, standing,

bending, lying down etc. The students are also made aware of their own patterns of misuse through verbal instructions. Lessons are usually on a one to one basis and the most immediate benefit reported by students after having them in a new feeling of lightness and freedom of movement.

The emotional and physical benefits experienced after faulty posture is corrected are numerous and the Alexander Technique has helped people with all types of physical problems, breathing difficulties and tension problems. For musicians, performing and practising can be exhausting as well as stressful, and too often musical lives are cut short because of musicians lack of understanding about the most important instrument of all - their own selves. Many qualities of poor posture, e.g. round shoulders, slumping, forward-jutting chin, can contribute directly to performance problems, loss of control, fatigue, restricted volume, poor tone, etc. Musicians can gain a lot by understanding how they misuse themselves and following are descriptions of some aspects of musicianship which could be corrected if the principles of the Alexander Technique are applied.

Whenever musicians are involved in teaching or learning skills required to play a musical instrument, great demands are placed on co-ordination. Often a single part of the body dominates the way that it usually functions as a whole and this is when problems begin, because everything in the body is interconnected and nothing works in isolation.

For example a pianist, in trying hard to achieve what he or she wants, gives attention exclusively to what his or her hands are doing whilst neglecting what is happening to the rest of the body. This can often result in misdirected tension which can then cause the performer to become musclebound. Alexander showed that all movements are made by contraction of muscle. This is instantaneous, whereas decontraction which restores the muscle to its normal resting length takes ten times as long.

When musicians practise, a great deal of repetition is involved and long hours are involved. Often movements are performed repeatedly at short intervals involving a progressive shortening of muscles. How many musicians take frequent breaks to enable their muscles to rest and hence avoid permanent shortening of muscle groups, e.g. round shoulders? Long hours of practice may not be as necessary as musicians think if they could work with greater refinement and economy.

Control of nervous tension is a well known area of concern for musicians. Most people experience some 'nerves' before a performance which becomes apparent as muscular tensions. Using the self directions of the Alexander Technique before and during a performance can help a performer prevent this preoccupation from taking over because control of muscular movements corresponds to a lessening of nervous tension.

Another common reason for muscle misuse is due to ignorance about how the body works. The head, neck and back constitute the nerve centre of the body and any tension, mental and physical, is referred to the back. Fingers are stiffened without understanding that their length really begins from the neck, not from the wrist, and that wrists have to remain flexible and arms extended if the flow of energy and movement is to pass through them. Feet and hands are sensorily connected and therefore tension in one is bound to affect the other.

All musicians would benefit from a better understanding of how their body functions as a whole and correct postural balance is essential for this, because the mastery of any instrument will involve patterns of distortion in the body if this is not kept in check. The Alexander Technique stresses the importance of head balance and avoidance of head retraction for shoulder and arm freedom and better breathing. This is because the neck has so many muscles (more than 80) and it is here where most muscle distortion and restriction begins. Alexander believed that if the shortening of the neck muscles could be prevented then the patterns of muscle distortions could not proceed any further. Balance in sitting is of crucial importance too for musicians as is

dealing with the 'pulling down' effect of holding instruments. The maintenance of 'lengthening of stature' can ensure that both these activities have no negative side effects.

The Alexander Technique ought to be available to all musicians, especially those who will take up professional playing as there is no doubt that it provides a defence against the great demands of this job on the body's natural abilities and strength. In Australia as is happening all over the world, more and more music institutions are expressing interest in it. The Western Australian Academy of the Arts has two full time lecturers who are Alexander teachers, and both the Brisbane Conservatorium and the Newcastle Conservatorium have included it in their syllabuses as an elective subject.

In Victoria it is offered as an elective subject for 1st to 3rd year students at the Institute of Education and in 4th year it becomes a core subject. The School of Music, Victorian College of the Arts also offers it as an elective subject to postgraduate students. The Faculty of Music at Melbourne University offers occasional lectures and has now included an elective unit called Physiology for Musicians in their curriculum which will perhaps pave the way for more Alexander Technique lessons.

Presently Vivien Mackie, visiting British Cellist and Alexander teacher is working with musicians at the Trinity College, Alexander School, at Melbourne University. This is a three year training course for musicians only and in this respect it is unique. There are 14 musicians taking part in the programme which involves 1,600 hours of Alexander Technique classwork and they hope to graduate at the end of 1992.

Certainly in the future it will be most desirable for music students to have music teachers who also teach them how to apply the Alexander Technique to their playing. Presently many children are being taught to play or sing, not using the right ways of sitting, standing and breathing, because their teachers themselves do not know. There can be no doubt that the Alexander Technique will slowly continue to become more widely known. The earlier it can be included in a musician's training the better - after all prevention is the best cure for most ills.

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