

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE: FROM PUPIL TO TEACHER

JOHN NAYLOR

Most readers will probably have heard of the Alexander Technique although it is only comparatively recently that it has been taught as a Foundation subject in the major Music and Drama College. It has a wide application both to performing arts and as a helpful discipline in connection with various postural and coordination problems and, over the last few years, articles have appeared in an increasingly wide variety of publications.

The processes by which we can learn to achieve and maintain a better general standard of co-ordination and functioning are best learned from a specialist Alexander Technique teacher, and I do not propose to describe them here. They are basically the same whether one wishes to apply this principle to playing the piano (or any other instrument), or golf, or merely peeling the potatoes. What I am concerned with here are the effects, in the longer term, of applying the technique of F. Matthias Alexander (1869-1955) to playing and teaching the piano, and some of the benefits I have experienced.

I started Alexander lessons in 1973 and wrote an enthusiastic article about my early experiences in *Music Teacher* (June 1977). My increasing interest led me to move to London in order to train as an Alexander teacher, and since 1980 I have pursued a dual career as a piano teacher and accompanist and as a teacher of the Alexander Technique.

As pianists and teachers what problems do we find in ourselves and in our pupils in the way we 'use' ourselves in playing the piano? What about the 'instrument that plays the instrument'? What factors do we need to consider if we want optimum functioning and the best possible, most sensitive, control of the piano key?

Alexander's answer would be to say that if we allow use of a single part of ourselves to dominate the way the organism functions as a whole then we land ourselves in trouble, and that we have to pay attention to the primary organisation of our postural mechanisms (as controlled by our habitual use of our head-balance in relation to our neck and back). Alexander's work brought a new understanding of the dynamics of sitting balance which is very relevant to playing the piano.

An important aspect of Alexander Technique lessons is helping the student to develop a more reliable sensory awareness from receptors in

Do your pupils complain of backache? Or pain in the arms and wrists? More to the point, do you know how to help them?

joints and muscles. Sometimes called 'proprioceptive information', this feedback tells us something about the amount of 'work' going on in various muscles, and where different part of our body are in relation to each other. Tuning up our sensitivity to muscular responses in a particular way enables us to improve our capacity for greater precision of movement, but without a corresponding rigidity of control - ideal prerequisites for a sensitive awareness of key resistance and a delicate response to the effort we have to employ in that extension of our fingers comprising the lever and hammer system of the piano mechanism.

Many problems experienced by pianist are connected with failure to allow the muscles in the arm to lengthen out from the shoulder when supporting the arm. This is noticeable when, for example the RH is playing below middle C (as in the beginning of the third movement of Beethoven's Op 13 Sonata). Many pupils squash up their R shoulder in attempt to give themselves the necessary control over their fingers. A greater awareness of the resting poise of the arm, and the ability to allow the necessary lengthening of muscle, will permit a greater outward turn to the wrist in this situation and give much more ease and precision of key control.

In situations where a projected melodic line (usually with the RH little finger) has to be combined in the same hand with some fast-moving accompanimental figure, tightening may be experienced in the muscles in front of the armpit which, in an extended passage, 'jams up' the arm and fingers. I had an example of this recently while playing Schumann's *Romance* Op 28 no 1. It just so happens that I had not played this particular piece for nearly 18 years. Stiffening up had then been a great problem, but now, by being aware of the nature of my 'tightening up' and being able to inhibit this (thanks to my more reliable sensory feedback and Alexander 'directions'), I played it through with much more ease and freedom. (Another example of a similar difficulty occurs in

Schubert's *Impromptu* in G flat Op 90 no 3.)

As the general use of the muscles in my neck and shoulders became freer through Alexander work, I also found that my ability to stretch large, awkwardly-spaced chords improved without my doing anything about this directly. This confirmed my understanding of how the flexibility of the hand is dependent on the way the muscles in the arm are functioning and this in turn is dependent on a good general co-ordination being maintained.

As an Alexander teacher, one works by physically giving students new experiences of co-ordinated movement, and this principle has influenced my piano teaching more and more. I find myself often saying to pupils 'Let me borrow your hand/arm', and getting the pupil to allow me to bring about a better use of hand or fingers. Ability to do this successfully requires the special kind of 'muscular tuning-in' that is part of the Alexander teacher's training, and I have found this ability useful in helping to increase a student's awareness of how much excess muscular effort they were employing.

Another of Alexander's important working principles was that the 'end' is affected and, to some extent, determined, by the means employed to achieve it. In attempting to execute one of the rapide *floritura* decorations which occur in some of the Chopin *Nocturnes* for example, most pupils try to get to grips with this problem on a trial-and-error basis without having the component shapes clear in their head before trying to translate it into action with their fingers. They try to grab at the 'end' without a firm mental grasp of the constituent processes (or what Alexander called the 'means-whereby'). Learning to focus one's attention in a 'non-endgaining' way is a useful skill taught in Alexander technique lessons.

Learning a better use of oneself (in a general way) involves wrestling with the demon of habit, and in Alexander lessons one learns to exercise some choice over responding to a stimulus. Learning to stop in this way and project a clear idea of the new pattern is a useful procedure that can facilitate changes in the muscular learning of music already practised. This can become a practical way of re-thinking music.

The effects of performance-anxiety

can sometimes seriously affect muscular control and, whilst I consider that there are some problems which benefit from being tackled on the psychological front, I have found that the ability to prevent stage-fright taking over has been greatly enhanced by my experience of Alexander technique. A more reliable feedback enables one to recognise and to inhibit the undesirable responses, and the knowledge that one has more reliable control over these states of mind helps to prevent them occurring.

Finally, as a piano teacher, I've found my Alexander work very useful in countering the effects in myself of frustration at a pupils' difficulties and stumbles. The more my awareness of myself increased, the more I was aware of how I responded during a lesson by producing quite unnecessary muscular tension in response to the difficulties a pupil was having. Being able to recognise this and not go along with it helped me to feel less tired when teaching, to maintain a more objective relationship with pupils' problems, and to take prompt, more effective action to bring more clarity into pupils' thought processes.

John Naylor is a member of the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique. Further information can be obtained from the Society at: 10 London House, 266 Fulham Road, London SW10 9EL Tel 01-351 0828



John Naylor helping a student to find correct postural balance

RECORDER MUSIC

A SCOTT JOPLIN ALBUM

£9.75 score & parts
arranged by Alan Davis

Davis has arranged the piano music of Scott Joplin for recorder sextet (sopranino, descant, treble (alto), 2 tenors and bass). The collection includes *The Entertainer* and these five arrangements may be played 'one to a part' or by larger ensembles.



DIXIE BLOSSOM (TWO-STEP)

£3.95 score & parts
Percy Wenrich arranged by Alan Davis

This arrangement for recorder ensemble (sopranino, descant, treble, 2 tenors and bass) is based on a version of Dixie Blossom that appeared in *Ragtime Rarities*, published in the USA in 1906.



FIVE 17th CENTURY PIECES

£3.50 set of parts
arranged by Denis Bloodworth

These five anonymous pieces have been transcribed for recorder ensemble (descant, treble, tenor and bass) from a manuscript book of music for virginals in the British Library. Each piece may be played either as a solo, a duet, a trio or a quartet.



SONATINA

£3.25 score & parts
Alan Davis

This original work is in four movements and written for recorder trio (descant, treble and tenor/treble II).



ALSO AVAILABLE

TREBLE RECORDER TECHNIQUE

£9.50
Alan Davis

A book intended primarily for recorder players who wish to attain sufficient technical ability to explore the large repertoire of solo and chamber music for the treble recorder.



Registered office, trade orders, mail orders and hire library:
Borough Green, Sevenoaks, Kent, England TN15 8DT. Tel: 0732 883261
Showroom, editorial, performance promotion and retail sales:
8 Lower James Street, London, England W1R 4DN. Tel: 01-734 8080