

The Alexander Technique: the skill to make music

by David Langstroth

The Alexander Technique has been endorsed by top musicians from Sting to Yehudi Menuhin, and is taught at the best schools of music, from Julliard in New York to the Guildhall in London. It has been taught for most of the twentieth century and is used by musicians all over the world. Indeed it would be difficult to spend time in musical circles without ever hearing about it. However, it is a terrible waste of potential that a skill which is so indispensable is also so often misunderstood or neglected. This article will clearly explain what the Alexander Technique is and how it can benefit the musician.

The Alexander Technique is a technique for improving your coordination and developing greater conscious control over everything that you do. Musicians move to perform their art, and require the most refined and sensitive control possible in those movements. Whether you are concerned with the use of your breathing, your embouchure or your arms and your fingers, your success will be directly determined by your standard of coordination. Years of experience as a double-bassist in professional orchestras and as a teacher have only reinforced the conviction in me that this is the most important skill of all. The frustration of not being able to make the sounds we want is a nearly universal experience. We all have endured this frustration and have seen it in our students. We have all noted how only a few rare students can play or sing an effortless legato or produce an easy open sound whilst the majority cannot, no matter how hard they try. All too soon the successful are labelled "talented" and the others come to see themselves as "untalented" and are discouraged. But this difference has nothing to do with musical talent and everything to do with coordination.

F. M. Alexander, the founder of the technique, was a performer who discovered the basic principles of human coordination and evolved his technique in the quest to improve his own performance. Interestingly, the basic principle holds for all vertebrates and has been documented by scientists working with various other animals. Alexander's discovery was

that optimum coordination is obtained by establishing a certain dynamic relationship between the head and the neck which then allows a certain relationship between the head, neck and torso, allowing a certain relationship between the head, neck, torso, upper and lower limbs. This he called the primary control. It sounds complicated but a good Alexander Technique teacher can demonstrate it to you. This relationship, or primary control, is characterised by lightness and ease. It is working in the effortless fluidity of the cat, the alert sensitivity of the young child, and in rare cases in the masterful performances of a few adults. Heifitz and Rubenstein are good examples of this.

But for most of us the primary control is not working well and we need to learn to get it working well again. For a variety of reasons we have developed habits of interfering with this natural coordinating organization, habits which result in too much tension in some parts and too little in others, making it more and more difficult to improve in our activities no matter how hard we try. We habitually stiffen our necks which interferes with the larynx and with the singing voice. It also throws the torso and arms out of coordination making the simplest movements difficult and laboured.

All of this malcoordination is known as misuse. We misuse our arms in trying to play the piano, we misuse our jaw in trying to play the flute, we misuse ourselves as a whole. Not only does misuse limit our performance, but it also has serious consequences for our health. The prevalence of tendonitis, joint problems and repetitive strain injuries amongst musicians attests to widespread coordination problems, and gives warning of the actual dangers of making music without giving attention to your coordination. It's a bit like driving with the hand brake on: eventually something's going to give. And, although I am focusing primarily on musical issues here, misuse will affect negatively your performance in all aspects of your life and can affect all areas of your health, from asthma to depression.

With all this at stake, lessons in the Alexander technique are obviously a good investment. But there are a number of important points to be made about lessons.

First, the Alexander Technique cannot be learned from a book. It would be like thinking you can become an opera singer by getting a good "how to" guide from the library. Learning to get your primary control working well again is a complex activity and needs to be done absolutely correctly under expert guidance. If you set off with the wrong idea you could waste a lot of time, or even cultivate habits that are worse than the ones you started with.

Second, although it may seem economical to study the technique in a group, the old law about getting what you pay for applies. Lessons in a group may have some merits but the chief drawback is a lack of individual attention. I would advise everybody to have private lessons. See the group as an introduction only.

Third, although it may seem like a little instruction in the use of the head, neck torso and limbs could be quickly picked up and put to use, it is advisable to think long term about your lessons. As in music, once you have started you will make gradual improvements year after year, and these will feed into your music making and all your other activities. The time scale reflects the fact that habits of coordination are established over many years and take time to change. This is because your wrong habits actually feel right to you, and to make an improvement involves doing something that feels wrong, unfamiliar and unnatural. The technique succeeds by teaching students to use their reasoning instead of relying on their feelings. As we are so unused to using our reasoning in this way, it takes us time to develop the skill.

Fourth, to help you to overcome the nearly universal inclination to follow the sense of feeling in trying to do something, the teacher of the Alexander Technique uses their hands to guide you in your lessons. This helps you to gain a new experience in improved co-ordination and moves you away from your established habits. At the same time the teacher is teaching you the reasoning skills to direct your own coordination without guidance. The similarity of a hands-on approach to a variety of physical therapies should not be misunderstood. The Alexander Technique is not a therapy and in a lesson you are learning a skill, not just having something done to you. Your success will depend on how you attend to the development of this skill. If you follow the procedures,

success will be assured. For this reason, the students who are active in understanding what they are doing and how the technique works will make more progress than those who are passive or disinterested. Reading the four books written by F. M. Alexander is an essential part of studying the technique.

Finally, the technique is a general skill. In the lessons you will be given simple activities such as rising from a chair or lying on a table. In learning to coordinate yourself for such simple activities you will be learning exactly what you need for singing in a chorus or conducting an orchestra. It is not necessary to have your lessons with your instrument.

There is a great deal more that could be said about the Alexander Technique. The limits of a short article however mean that the explanations are necessarily brief. Those who wish to learn more or investigate in greater detail would be well advised to read any of the books by F. M. Alexander or to get in touch with a teacher of the technique. Music is a great art, and it is a great tragedy that so much potential goes unfulfilled due to ignorance of the principles of our own coordination.