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Musicians and the Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique is not about "good posture for bad backs". It is one of the most subtle ways of taking responsibility for our continuing growth and development as human beings. In this article I will attempt to introduce the ideas that F. M. Alexander discovered and explain why so many musicians find the study and practice of them beneficial. F. M. Alexander was born in Tasmania in 1869 and, as a young man, pursued a career in the Theatre. Severe vocal problems almost forced him to give up his chosen profession, but an absolute determination to find the cause of his difficulty led him to the discovery of certain fundamental truths about human reactivity, co-ordination and movement. He was advised to bring his work to London where he taught until his death in 1955.

Movement and music-making.

The physical aspect of playing a musical instrument involves a complex series of movements. The movements are, however, essentially no different from those needed for other activities; they are movements of the arms, hands, fingers and respiratory mechanism. Although complex, they are not complicated; not complicated because the body's capacity to repeat learned movements is very efficient. It can function well in spite of excess tension or poor muscle tone, although there is often a price to pay for this. Given the fact that the body can

learn to carry out movements efficiently, what is the problem? For many, there is no problem, but for others they are myriad.

The difficulty experienced by most people, not only musicians, who suffer from a complaint related to repeated movements is often caused by the fact that these movements have been learned while unnecessarily contracting certain groups of muscles. This happens just below the sense register and one is not usually aware of it. Each time the movement is repeated then, by association, so is the contraction; the two have become so linked in our sensory awareness (the feedback mechanism by which, through sensations, we are aware of what is happening in the body at rest or in movement) that it is no longer possible to separate the necessary movements from the unnecessary contractions. How, one may well ask, is it possible that we have got into such a state?

Separation of mind and body - a modern disease.

It is Alexander's contention that in modern "civilised" society we have created an artificial environment in which we are not required to use awareness and co-ordination at more than a minimal level in order to survive. Just as predator or prey which is not in sound physical condition, with fully functional senses and, above all, attentive to the situation, did not survive, men and women were under the same demand to use all their faculties. With civilisation, agriculture and a more secure environment we were able to develop mentally and

emotionally, but the demand on our capacity to attend and on our intuitive, sensory and physical capabilities lessened. In time, people realised that this was the case and various mental and physical disciplines were - and still are - developed to try to counter the debilitating effects of the new life style. These attempts have only ever been partially successful as they separate physical and mental functioning; one set of exercises for the mind and another for the body. This, of course, further compartmentalises that which needs to be unified. Physical exercise focuses on muscular effort, often with a competitive element; efforts at mental concentration and the like are often accompanied by physical collapse. Both fall into the same trap of dealing with parts of a pattern rather than the whole. Indeed, that which could bring the two together is completely ignored and hardly even acknowledged to exist.

Largely as a result of this compartmentalisation of our functioning, our "sensory awareness", or "kinaesthesia", has become unreliable. We have no accurate internal measure by which to assess whether or not an exercise or any physical movement, is being carried out in an efficient or inefficient manner. Clearly what is needed is to recover satisfactory sensory awareness and to reintegrate it with our other functions. In order to allow this to happen we have to rid ourselves of a great deal of "baggage" in the form of habits. In Alexander's language, the way we "use" ourselves needs to be re-educated

Stimulus, response and habit: the obstacles preventing

change.

These habits exist somewhere in the area in between stimuli and responses. Looked at from this point of view, it can be said that, in the case of the musician, the stimulus is the wish, desire or intention to play their instrument and the response is a mixture of necessary and unnecessary muscular activity and movements. Alexander teachers frequently find, with their musician-students, that, after working for some time to bring about a more open and responsive state, when asked to play their instrument then, immediately, before even moving, the pattern of unnecessary tensions comes back. Just the thought of playing is enough to trigger a whole series of habit patterns: shoulders lock, arms tighten, jaw clenches, abdomen pulls in or pushes out - the list is endless.

Like a computer programme, or worse a computer virus, once activated it obediently, ruthlessly and blindly follows each stage of its preordained obligatory path. This is, however, a key moment: when the student sees that he or she is actually doing these contractions and, moreover, doing them in response to the stimulus to play, it is as though light is suddenly illuminating the hitherto unknown. Within what had seemed to be a closed circle, viciously and endlessly repeating the same mechanical and destructive response every time the "play" button was pressed, there now appears another factor: awareness. The realisation that it is all one's own doing can be a difficult one to swallow. At the same time, however, it starts to show one the way out of the maze of reactivity: the "monkey trap".

Learning to say "no", or "keeping one's options open".

Ironically, perhaps, the way out is very simple; simple, but not easy. Instead of trying to "rewrite the programme" (to continue the computer analogy) while it is being run by saying to oneself "relax the shoulders, do this with the hands, that with the arms, breathe like this, move like that" etc., what is needed is to refuse to run the programme. When the stimulus to act is experienced one simply has to say "No" and, by means of this conscious decision, one has liberated oneself from all one's conditioned responses. In terms of our computer analogy, there are two ways of responding to the stimulus: the first way, the most common one and requiring no conscious decision, is that the programme is run and certain circuits are closed according to a predetermined pattern: the second way, which can only be a conscious one, is to respond to the stimulus by initially keeping the circuits open. This demands a high degree of inner activity. It is experienced as a state of readiness without a definite objective: a kind of flux of possibilities - as if one were prepared for anything, not just the task in hand: keeping one's options open. In this state it is possible to make a link between one's mental alertness and sensory awareness in such a way that one has a sense of one's own presence; to oneself, to the environment, to the pull of habit and the possibility of the new. Such experiences have to be earned through a process of work on oneself.

This is not to say that one does not do anything. On the contrary, it liberates one to do what one has never done before, if one so chooses, or to do something in a new way. And, extraordinarily, we find that underneath all those accumulated layers of tension and habit, like so many layers of old paint, the new, the unspoiled, the "right" is already there and "it" knows how to walk, to sit or stand, how to breathe and how to move arms hands and fingers. As one pianist put it, "I don't have to think about what to do with my arms and hands, I just play". The challenge is to find this kind of responsiveness not only within the parameters of one's music but in front of one's own life.

How does it work?

So far we have covered three important aspects of Alexander's work: the need to expand awareness - towards oneself, the environment and the task in hand; the need to loosen the grip upon us of our habit patterns; the possibility of having a new response to a stimulus. I would now like to look at two other points: firstly, what are the mechanical and psychological aspects which contribute to what Alexander called "good use" of oneself. I say "aspects" in the sense that they are different ways of looking at that which is not really separate: they are parts of a whole, albeit a not well integrated one.

Alexander was to say in later years that he was lucky that his own particular difficulty was in the area around his head and neck (he had developed the habit of

depressing his larynx when speaking and thereby causing a shortening and narrowing of his back) as this led him to the discovery of a very important principle. The body is subject to expansion and contraction depending on many factors, some mental, some emotional and some physical, which inter-relate in a very subtle way. Some of these factors can be brought more under the control of our consciousness. One particular factor which has a great deal of influence on the activation of a natural tendency to expand is the way the head is carried on top of the spine. If it is held in a locked position then the weight of it - some 10-12lbs. in an adult - begins to bear down on the cervical spine. This then has a "knock-on" effect down the rest of the spine, thereby causing a general collapse. In order to counter-act this collapse the body, as ever, has various back-up ways of finding support: muscles start to become rigid in certain areas such as the abdomen, lower back, chest, neck and shoulders. If, on the other hand, the head is allowed to have its natural poise then the spine finds its natural length and begins to support the body. Once the body is supported the muscles which have been substituting can relinquish their grip and a general sense of release, lightness and freedom of movement is experienced. With a good teacher, such an experience can happen almost immediately. However, one cannot depend on a teacher to always make it work for us and sooner or later we have to work something out for ourselves.

A new way of thinking.

The shift in attitude which is necessary to allow these changes to take place is, I would say, the most difficult of all Alexander's ideas to put into practise, even though it is easy to understand as a concept. It has to do with what Alexander called "end-gaining". End-gaining is where the main focus of one's attention is on achieving a result in any given activity at the expense of attending to the process (the means) by which the end is achieved. The late Professor John Dewey, the American philosopher and educationalist and a pupil of Alexander, wrote:

"Means are means; they are intermediates, middle terms. To grasp this fact is to have done with the ordinary dualism of means and ends. The 'end' is merely a series of acts viewed at a remote stage; and a means is merely the series of acts viewed at an earlier one. The distinction of means and ends arises in surveying the course of a proposed line of action, a connected series in time. The 'end' is the last act thought of; the means are the acts to be performed prior to it in time. To reach an end we must take our mind off from it and attend to the act which is next to be performed. We must make that the end. The only exception to this statement is in cases where customary habit determines the course of the series. Then all that is wanted is a cue to set it off.

.....Until one takes intermediate acts seriously enough to treat them as ends, one wastes one's time in any effort at change of habits. Of the intermediate acts, the most important is the next one. The first or earliest means is

the most important end to discover." 1

Alexander's concept of "end-gaining" and "attending to the means-whereby" expressed here by Dewey in a very Western way, is very close to certain Eastern ideas such as Mindfulness, or "being in the moment". It is quite striking to see the similarities with, for example, Zen Buddhism or Taoism. However, this is not the place to expand on such parallels.

(1. From Professor John Dewey's "Human Nature & Conduct " (1921) (Henry Holt & Co., New York), an extract of which was reproduced in The Alexander Journal No. 2 (Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique, 1963: ed. Dr. Wilfred Barlow).

The application to music.

I would now like to look in more detail at the question of playing a musical instrument in the light of what has been discussed above, with reference to some specific difficulties and their possible causes.

Each instrument makes its own demands on the player. Violinists and flautists, for instance, are required to hold their arms and heads in unusual positions while playing and frequently suffer from pain and stiffness in arms, shoulders, neck and back. The inherent pattern is that of "holding something up" and they often lose their, as it is called, "grounding", whereby support for the body and whatever weight it is carrying (back-pack, suitcase, shopping etc.) is experienced as a natural upwards

response to gravity. (This is an experience which a teacher can give quite easily to a pupil, although it is not so easy to find it on one's own.) When this natural upwards response to gravity is not working, muscles which are not meant for postural support begin to tighten in an attempt to, so to speak, brace the body. The result is pain and stiffness.

Double-bass players, on the other hand, have a tendency to become very heavy in the chest and shoulders. The pattern is one of being pulled down by gravity and failing to find the necessary upward response.

Wind instrumentalists and vocalist, as may be expected, often have problems with respiration. Although there are subjective variations, according to the individual and the instrument, the general underlying pattern is that of trying to "do" breathing with excessive tension rather than allowing breath to move freely in and out of the body.

What other factors specifically affect musicians?

Poor Teaching.

In teaching any skill there are a combination of factors, but high on the list is Technique. Many teachers have successfully assimilated or worked out for themselves an effective technique. In teaching this to another, however, unless one is especially observant or trained in this

specific area, it is very difficult if not impossible to know whether or not the pupil is, in fact, carrying out the teacher's instructions in the way they were intended. In many cases where there is normal co-ordination and aptitude, the pupil is able to find an approximately correct response to the instructions and there is no great difficulty. However, in those cases where the instructions are not carried out correctly (or the wrong instructions are given) there is often a high degree of distortion and compensation which may not be easily visible. When young and supple one can often get away with this kind of compensation depending on the amount of time spent in a day or week engaged in that activity. With musicians it is often the extra demands which come with a full-time course at a Music College which expose the underlying faulty technique.

An example of this is a trumpet player who was suffering from pain and tension in the abdomen. In fact he was generating so much tension in his lower abdomen that he was at risk of giving himself a hernia. It transpired that he was attempting to carry out instructions given to him by a teacher many years earlier with regard to breathing. However, in his attempts to find abdominal breathing and support he was actually pushing, with as much force as he could muster, down onto the pelvic floor. The sensations which came from this useless and harmful effort were, for him, associated with playing his instrument. If they were not there, he did not know how to produce sound.

In Music Colleges one finds, hopefully, highly skilled

teachers who can help correct such problems. However, if, as was said earlier, the pupil learned to play the instrument with certain patterns of muscular tension it is extremely difficult to get rid of these habits. They are in the "neural network"; they are intricately associated with playing or even holding the instrument.

Emotional Factors.

The link between Mind, Body and Emotions is extremely subtle. A badly co-ordinated body is more susceptible to the ups and downs of emotional states than a well co-ordinated one: a sensitive person with delicate emotions can be more susceptible to physical tensions than others; an over-active mind can lead one to neglect the body. There are many permutations. There is a high demand on musicians to function well in all areas, but it is the ability to express emotion, often these days sadly relegated to second place after technical virtuosity, which gives a musician their special quality.

It is not the purpose of this particular article to explore all the factors, psychological and other, involved in what makes someone a musician. Undoubtedly certain types of people are drawn to music and performance: a refined nervous system, high motivation, the need to express emotion are some of the most common factors. Such people are, however, also more vulnerable to nervousness, mood swings and over-sensitivity. It is important for them that they learn some basic principles about human functioning so as to be better able to look after themselves. At a more advanced level the benefits

offered by working on the Body/Mind connection include the possibility that emotion can be expressed with less "interference": a more open, free body and a head which is clear, quiet and attentive are less inclined to "get in the way" of the expression of emotion.

What is the learning process?

Both teachers and pupils vary enormously in their approach and their needs respectively. The basic teaching method, however, is a combination of observation, explanation and "hands-on" work, in which the pupil is given directly certain new experiences. Whether this is done with the instrument or well away from it depends on the circumstances. For many musicians their habits and tensions are so intricately wound up with their music-making that at some point this must be addressed. At the beginning, though, it can often be more helpful to keep the lessons completely separate from music so as to remove a stimulus which may be causing so much reaction that it is almost impossible to try something new.

In a way one has to break a movement down into its component parts and then reconstruct it according to new principles. At first this demands a high degree of focused attention. In time it is necessary to let go even of the learning process and "just do it".

Alexander saw efficient human co-ordination as functioning according to a definite hierarchy: a stimulus

to act is received by the brain; the stimulus is processed and a decision is made - whether or not to act; if the decision is made to act, this becomes an animating force (in its "mental" aspect called "intention") which flows downwards through the head, neck and back into the limbs, as required, and brings about movement. This animating force (in its energetic aspect called "direction") often gets blocked or hardly flows at all

In Alexander lessons these pathways are clarified and re-established - sometimes painstakingly slowly and sometimes so quickly that the habitual part of the conscious mind cannot check it. Beginning with the head, neck and back a flow of energy is established which can then be channelled into the limbs. However, because energy, like water, tends to follow the path of least resistance, impulses to act tend to generate habitual reactions. This returns us to Alexander's idea of "saying 'No'" or "keeping one's options open" at the moment the stimulus is received, in order to prevent the animating force from activating unnecessary muscular activity. Energy is then consciously projected along the correct pathways. In time - and it does take time - the new pathway will become the preferred one. The whole process of stimulus, choice and response becomes more fluid and, in fact, much quicker than the old, habitual one. The potential is there for a true spontaneity, which is of a different order to the whimsical self-indulgence which is often meant by that word. It is the teacher's role to guide the pupil through this change from reactivity to conscious choice; to show what the tools are and how to

use them. Only the pupil, however, can decide to put these principles into practice and to accept change.