

# Movement, Music, and the Alexander Technique

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**P**oor support? Weak tonguing? Inconsistent rhythm? Choppy phrasing? Tendinitis? What do all of these items have in common? They all are affected by the physical state of the body.

I have been wanting to write this article for quite a while and share with you what I have learned about the relationship of music, movement and the Alexander Technique. The following information might surprise you, coincide with your own personal philosophies or give you food for thought.

While I was in the middle of my Masters Degree, studying at Temple University with Bernard Garfield, I began to realize that something was lacking from my playing. It seemed to me that I had better performance habits at 19 than at 22! I remembered having more breath control, greater ease in performance, and, to a certain degree producing a better sound than I was getting at the present. The more I thought about it, the more of a challenge it became to search out answers to those questions in my mind, i.e. "What had happened to the ease (fun) in performance?". This article is a result of my investigations into the process of music-making.

While attending Temple University, one of my friends, Melisa Knoll, began to be interested in something called the Alexander Technique. As her curiosity grew, she began to become committed to exploring the Technique and enrolled in the Alexander School of Philadelphia. We spoke about it and I dutifully went to a session at the school to see what she was learning. I could see some value in the process but I was not convinced until Melisa was involved in a serious car accident, Thanksgiving weekend, 1985. Rear ended and pushed into a headlong collision, she fractured her leg into 18 pieces and ended up with 2 pounds of plate in her leg for almost two years. After about a month at home, she eagerly returned to

Philadelphia to resume her studies in the Alexander Technique. During this time, I was her chauffeur, [one of many], and ferried her to and fro. One day, I had to take her to the bank. We were walking back to the car and I was chiding her about putting too much weight on her leg too soon (which is what I perceived her to be doing). She promptly issued a challenge to put my hand down on the pavement and she would walk on it! Trusting her, I did. To my surprise, as she trod on my hand, I hardly felt the weight of her leg at all! As long discussion ensued, my interest in movement was greatly intensified and I became very excited about this being a key to use in solving my performance problems.

What is the Alexander Technique? Officially, the Technique is a body movement therapy specializing in movement re-education, but I prefer to think of the Technique as quoted by my teacher, Marjorie Barstow, " [It is] having fun while conserving energy." To give you a little background on the Technique, Frederick Matthias Alexander (hereafter referred to as F.M.) was a young man born in Tasmania, Australia. An aspiring actor, he made his way to London to seek his fame and fortune. Blessed with a beautiful voice, he began to be known as an orator and after much study, began a career as a Shakespearean orator. All was well for several years until he began to have performance problems. He sought medical help and experienced success, the intervals between the successes gradually decreased and his condition became so serious that his hoarseness culminated in a complete loss of voice from time to time. During this time he was offered an important engagement. He accepted the engagement on the advice of his doctor who told him if he rested his voice for two weeks before the performance, all would be well at the performance. Indeed, F.M. found his voice free from hoarseness on the night of the

performance but by the last act, his hoarseness had grown so acute that he could hardly speak! This incident created a "search for a means whereby faulty conditions of use in the human organism could be improved".

As I learned more about F.M. Alexander through his writings, I discovered that all I was wanting to do was to improve my performance habit. The question still remained, "Can I accomplish this through the Alexander Technique?" Of course the best way to find out was in experience the Technique first hand. I choose to spend a month of the summer of 1986 attending the workshop given by Marjorie Barstow in Lincoln, Nebraska. (Melisa had already preceded me and was living in Lincoln at the time.) In attending this workshop, 26 hours a week of extremely intensive work took place. The psycho-physical relationship between the mind and the body was explored using hands-on teaching of Marjorie and her assistants. I discovered that I approach the activity of producing music from a primarily mental viewpoint, sometimes shutting down the physical awareness in order to achieve my goal (or end gaining as P.M. put it) of making the notes, tuning, rhythm, and sound **occur**. Music, for me, had become an intellectual exercise, originating almost entirely from the mental plane. No wonder I was having problems producing what I knew I was capable of creating! I was using only part of myself to produce the product, music. After this startling discovery, I began to explore the psycho-physical relationship of "the human organism", using the Alexander Technique as the starting point for the exploratory process.

The Alexander Technique is a means of using your constructive conscious control, (the mind), to make a very subtle change in your body. F.M. discovered that whatever the head does the body follows. For instance, ever try turning a corner with your body leading and your head following? Not only does it feel strange **but it** looks equally as strange! Specifically, F. M. speaks of the relationship of the head to the body and what this relationship can mean if it is altered in such a way as to improve the alignment of the body. He noticed that his head moved in a manner he described as down and back into his body. This direction became quite pronounced in performance. Alexander's own research indicated that this was a way to make a change in his own physiology, changing the direction of his head, subsequently changing the relationship of his head to his body. Simply by allowing the neck to be free, the head to move

away from the the body, in a forward and upward manner, and allowing the body to follow this movement of the head, the human organism is able to attain ease and flexibility of movement as a result of a change in alignment. This movement, started by a mental order, results in a virtually simultaneous change in the physical body. Thus movement, created in this manner, results in unification of the human organism.

I guess the nicest thing about the Alexander Technique is that it is simple and you can apply it any time without having to have anything special. If you are having problems in performance, during a rest you can quickly change your performance **by** applying the Technique or, when you are able, during the actual performance itself.

My experiences with the Technique have made tremendous changes in how I approach the process of making music. Rhythmic inconsistencies are a result of being unable to internalize the rhythm. Some possible solutions for this are: Make a movement which reflects the rhythm. It does not have to be specifically the same one for every time you run into the rhythm. Start with being able to feel the distance between the beat in your movement. After you feel your body working smoothly, incorporate the rhythm by clapping or chanting the rhythm over the beat. You will be able to tell when the rhythm is in the proper place **by** the naturalness and smoothness of the beat overlaid with the rhythm. This is a great technique to use for coaching, I have used it many times to solve ensemble problems and while improving the collective mind-body coordination of the ensemble. Having the students get up and establish a group beat before overlaying the rhythms, helps to establish another level of nonverbal communication. When the ensemble is able to feel and see the beat together, this rhythmic communication remains with them, stored in the physical plane, even when they are seated and unable to actually do the movement.

Poor support or lack of it is caused by less than efficient breathing habits. The 'slump' which we practice on a daily basis has a lot to do with being unable to produce the breath capacity which we could have. To slump, the head moves backwards, disturbing the balance of the head on the spine, causing the spine to collapse. With the collapse of the spine, a visual display of downward movement can be witnessed (slumping). This downward movement adds tremendous tension by causing the body to work harder to produce the same

product without the benefit of alignment. The act of slumping compresses all the major organs in your body and gives you less space to breathe. In effect, you are placing yourself in the way of a successful experience. A simple exercise that I often incorporate with my own students is to have the individual seated and ask them to bend over, utilizing the hip joint, while lengthening the back. (Lengthening is creating space between vertebrae by gently allowing the head to move away from the body). When they are about 3/4 of the way over, I ask them to rise back up, continuing to lengthen the back and allow the head to move delicately away from the body. When they arrive at an upright position, the alignment is improved until our habit (slump) takes over again. Of course, if you have access to an Alexander Technique teacher, this is the best way to investigate and improve your own habit. The teachers become a means of extending your own kinesthetic experience, thus making more efficient use of your time.

Choppy phrasing is linked to the ability to create smooth, efficient movements. If a phrase is giving me difficulty, I will create a movement, usually with my arm and either sing the phrase or pace the phrase in my mind. After experiencing the phrase as movement several times, I will sit down and play the phrase, still visualizing the movement. For combination of the phrases, nothing short of dance will do. After working each phrase, I then combine them into a "dance". Combining the phrases creates a logic in my movements; in return the cohesion of movements is reflected in the musical phrases. This kind of synthesis of movement and music makes a wonderfully liquid line. When the movement begins from a position of mechanical advantage, by incorporating the Alexander Technique, the music has power, intensity and flexibility. If you want to try this process, be sure to find an area where you can have room to move and the privacy to do so. Take the group of phrases which you are working on and tie them together into any kind of movement sequence, always remembering to monitor the quality of the movement. Jerky motions generally produce jerky or fragmented

phrases, if the phrase is angular in nature and you wish to do harsher movements, make sure that the movements are as "full" as possible.

Lastly, tension problems are a direct result of misusing the body. Currently the medical profession is starting to tell us that stress injuries are caused by a lack of circulation. This lack of circulation does not allow the muscle/tendon to discard the wastes produced by activity. The wastes then accumulate in the body until they reach a level of toxicity in the body; the resulting pain is our warning signal that we need to notice the area and seek relief from the pain.

In the past seven years, I can say that I have experienced more stress yet the stress has not manifested itself in the body as tension. By keeping an ongoing evaluation of the movements used to create music and employing the Alexander Technique as a means of creating that movement, I am able to recognize when I am not using my body efficiently. This greater sense of kinesthesia has proved instrumental in maintaining an awareness of movement and its relationship to stress. What is physically locked will not move, no matter how much effort/force is applied to it. With movement, flexibility occurs and with flexibility, choices occur. I now have a choice about how I move and as a result, what I am able to produce.

In conclusion, I have come to realize that what and who I am, physically, mentally, and emotionally, is what my music is. Through my exploration of movement, I have been able to offer myself choices which were not available to me through an intellectual path, but rather a psycho-physical path. The Alexander Technique did provide the key I was looking for, a means of exploring my performance problems. As a result of my study, I am able to produce a product which captures audiences and students alike with its versatility, intensity, and ease. My teaching has expanded to include the addition of performance solutions for my students, through movement. Most of all, I have recognized that movement, music and the Alexander Technique have an integral (and ongoing) part in the education of this musician.