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The Alexander Technique and Performance

Tension, according to the strict definition of the word, is a disruptive unwelcome element in performance. On the other hand no artistic performance should lack intensity. Unfortunately the two concepts — tension and intensity — only too often get confused and misunderstood. There is a tendency to believe that intensity cannot exist without tension but this is disputable.

Visible signs of 'strain and stress' in a performer may give a deceptive impression of intensity which may actually be lacking in the essence of the performance. Ferocious movements of the arms, 'impressive' shaking of the head, facial and bodily contortions in the performance of any artist — whether singer, instrumentalist or actor — do not mean that there is a real inner intensity in the artistic expression. Conversely some of the finest artists do not convey any impression of strain, even in performances of the highest intensity. This is a point I would like to take up in the light of practical experience as a concert pianist and as a teacher of both piano playing and the Alexander Technique. Although I am a musician it was from the work of a complete outsider to the world of music that I have learned much that has influenced my approach to the art of piano playing and performing.

After many years of formal training as a pianist and having gained experience of several different but well established methods of piano playing, I came across

the work of Frederick Mathias Alexander — an educator in the widest sense of the word — who directs one's attention to the person as a psycho-physical whole. Alexander's work (known simply as the Alexander Technique) bears no specific relation to performance, whether of music or anything else. It has, however, a great deal to offer in the development of any individual's potential, often enabling him to increase his ability in various fields of activity and certainly has much to contribute to the art of piano playing.

I have always found it a challenging, yet somewhat frustrating task to speak or write about the Alexander Technique because the greater my experience of it the more I feel inclined to agree with the ancient saying: "the way that can be told is not the real way; the word that can be spoken is not the real word". Yet I have learnt the Technique and have been teaching it to others for many years now. Perhaps to say one "teaches" the Alexander Technique is not quite accurate. I would rather say that one guides a pupil towards a gradual but direct personal experience of the essence of it.

What I have learned from the Alexander Technique is not yet another specific instrumental method — one more to add to the many existing 'schools' of piano playing for instance — with their various approaches and exercises concerned with particular ways of using one's fingers, arms, wrists, weight, etc. All these direct the player's attention to one or more separate parts of the mechanism of piano playing without him considering these details in the context of himself as one indivisible whole. It is precisely this 'wholeness' of the player that should embrace and indirectly modify his approach, regardless of what the particular details of it are. If for example a piano method depends on curved fingers, another on them being kept flat, or on the hands being positioned in any particular way —

with the learning of the Alexander Technique each of these details will acquire a new quality, another dimension of freedom and unity of the whole person playing. It is therefore possible for a pianist of any technical schooling to gain much from the application of the basic principle underlying Alexander's teaching. May I add that this principle is equally valuable and applicable to other forms of artistic performance, whether in music, dance or drama, although as a pianist I will understandably stress its relevance to piano playing.

Before explaining what is Alexander's teaching it may be of interest to learn who the man was and what led to the evolution of his Technique.

Frederick Mathias Alexander was born in Tasmania in 1869 and died in England at the age of 86. From early childhood he was intensely interested in poetry and by his late teens had established a considerable reputation as a reader of poetry and professional status as an actor. It was while engaged in this work in Melbourne at the age of about 19 that he encountered the problem which was to occupy him through the next ten years or so and which would ultimately determine the direction of his life. The difficulty he developed was a tendency for his voice to fail during recitals. When the trouble began he went to doctors for help. But the medical treatment afforded only temporary relief. In time his condition became so aggravated that Alexander often could not bring himself to accept engagements as he felt uncertain of being able to get through a full evening of reading. The climax was finally reached when he lost his voice halfway through an engagement which he regarded as particularly important to his career. Since his doctors found no medical reason for his loss of voice, Alexander concluded that it must be something he was doing which brought about these disastrous results. It was that idea which

prompted him to embark upon a period of most careful and exacting observation of the way in which he used himself, particularly in the act of speaking. In the end he found this out and a great deal more besides.

Alexander discovered in the course of years of painstaking trial and error, through observation of himself and others, that there is a certain interaction between the head, neck and back, which determines the quality of our functioning as a whole. He termed it the Primary Control. He also observed that this Primary Control has a direct influence on the quality of any activity we engage in. Simple routine movements such as walking, sitting, or standing as well as more complex activities, as for example dancing or playing an instrument become infinitely more effortless and light when one learns to do them without interfering with the subtle freedom in the head, neck and back interaction: the Primary Control. Alexander has pointed out, that after early childhood, there develops in almost each one of us an accumulative tendency to the wrong use of ourselves in the following way:

We generally tend to pull our head down and back into our neck (each individual in his own characteristic way) initiating a downward pressure, a collapsing influence on the rest of the spine and the whole body structure connected to it. For most of us this pulling down is so habitual that it does not feel wrong and usually becomes even stronger when we 'do' something — in other words we misuse ourselves most of the time, but particularly badly during any activity.

Alexander found that it was this habitual unconscious misuse of himself that caused him to lose his voice, and that a change and improvement in his use eradicated the problem completely. He also found that this downward pull and collapsing can be the cause

of a variety of symptoms such as headaches, backaches, asthmatic conditions or a general lack of suppleness and lightness (which is so necessary for instance in playing an instrument). It is also a potent factor in states of depression and tension.

To eradicate these faults Alexander evolved a technique which initiates a process of freeing the neck and releasing the head away from the neck — slightly forward and up to encourage in turn a lengthening and widening effect on the torso. This results in a progressive releasing of accumulated, unnecessary tensions, and brings about an effortlessness and lightness in one's use, which one has hitherto not experienced.

Since this technique aims at changing fundamental habits of behaviour and reacting, one is taught first of all the ability to stop one's habitual reactions and gradually to replace them by new consciously directed ones. In a lesson of the Alexander Technique one does not learn how to do something (such as for example to get in and out of a chair, or to walk) but how to refrain from doing it and yet allow it to happen.

I know this sounds very mistifying to anyone who has never experienced it. But to those who work in the Technique (teachers and pupils alike) it is an everyday occurrence. This involves first of all learning how to leave oneself entirely in the hands of one's teacher. I mean it literally, because the teacher actually places his hands under the pupil's head and, gently releasing it from the neck, brings about a subtle freedom in the Primary Control, (i.e. in the head-neck-back relationship). One is then shown how this freedom is lost as soon as one attempts to do even the slightest thing. So, the next step is of course learning how to do something in a way that does not disturb the freedom of the Primary Control. It is possible to learn to do anything in this new way. Then throughout the activity the neck will remain free, the head will be released from the

neck — so that there is no fixing or locking between them — and as a result of this the torso opens in length and width rather than collapses and contracts. Inevitably this has a positive influence on one's mental state too. An eminent doctor who became acquainted with the Alexander Technique once remarked to me that it made him acutely aware of the fact that no mentally disturbed or ill person shows any signs of good use or balanced bodily co-ordination.

The openness and freedom within the whole structure of the body is maintained by means of a conscious awareness, or 'thought directions' (to use Alexander's term), which brings one to realise the 'unity' of body and mind and so to experience a freedom of the whole self. The Alexander Technique points to a way of seeing oneself as a whole living being in whom details of use are inextricably bound up with a total pattern which functions best only when considered as a whole. The basic difference between Alexander's teaching and various other methods for improved co-ordination lies in the fact that through Alexander's approach one learns first of all how to eliminate habitual reactions and so discover within oneself new, quite different, ways of functioning. Lessons in the Alexander Technique are concerned with helping the pupil to learn how to stop 'doing' things and yet let them 'happen' through new unfamiliar means. The teacher is trained to communicate a change of alignment in the pupil's body through very gentle and skillfully guiding touch, but only when the pupil has understood the meaning of remaining quiet, or 'non-doing'. He may for example be asked to stand and only mentally project 'directions' to himself: "to let the neck be free, to allow the head to be released forward and up from the neck in order to let the back lengthen and widen."

While the pupil turns his attention to these 'directions' the teacher's hands bring about the corresponding effect

in him. All this happens on a very precise but subtle level of sensory experience. When the meaning of mental 'directing' as opposed to physical 'doing' is understood and experienced, the pupil may be guided through a chosen activity while maintaining the same 'directions' so that the freedom which they produce is sustained throughout the activity. In other words the quality of openness and lightness does not give way to the strain habitually involved in 'doing' things. If for example one is sitting in a chair and mentally projecting the correct 'directions', the teacher will guide one from the sitting position into the movement of getting up in such a way that the effect of these 'directions', that is the freedom of the head-neck-back alignment, is not disturbed so long as the pupil's attention remains with the continuity of 'directing' not only before, but also during the act of getting up. Anyone who has experienced this will invariably react with amazement at the effortlessness of such a movement. I am of course trying to put into words a direct experience and this is attempting the impossible. No one can know the taste of wine without drinking it. A description can only tell us about the existence of something. What it really is can only be perceived by personal experience.

The practice of the Alexander Technique is based on three stages: inhibition, direction and activity (the terms used are Alexander's own).

i) *Inhibition of habitual reactions*; that is, stopping one's habitual responses and ways by not 'doing' the chosen activity. Instead:

ii) *giving mental directions*; that is, focussing one's awareness on "letting the neck be free, to let the head be released forward and up, to let the back lengthen and widen". These directions gradually replace the immediate habitual response towards doing things in the

usual, often strenuous and mal-co-ordinated way. Then:

iii) *proceeding with the chosen activity while continuing the "directions" without interfering with them.* This is not easy at first because here one comes up against the most deeply ingrained habits of reactions. It may be relatively simple for anyone to let the Alexander 'directions' come into effect in himself, but the moment he is faced with having to do something his whole attitude changes. Just a mental readiness for an activity such as the thought "I am going to get out of the chair" results instantly in a locking of the head and neck, often also a tensing and hollowing of the back.

In some people these reactions may be only slight, but even the smallest degree of interference with the Primary Control alters the quality of one's functioning. That extra freedom in one's co-ordination disappears and varying degrees of strain and effort accompany whatever one does. I realise that much of what is taken for a normal level of tension and effort appears to be quite natural. However, when one experiences the possibilities of great freedom and ease inherent in ourselves, but dulled and distorted through wrong habits of use, one becomes aware of a new dimension of living and working without the commonly accepted level of strain.

In a lesson of the Alexander Technique the teacher may choose simple daily tasks (getting in and out of a chair, walking, etc.) as a background against which to illuminate the principle of Alexander's teaching. That principle relates however to the whole person and therefore to everything in his life. The physical and mental use of himself is affected and changed by it.

It takes a course of lessons to guide one towards a clearer awareness of the way in which one uses oneself as a whole in any situation of daily living and in relation to any activity. Walking, sitting down, getting up,

moving an arm, speaking — in fact the whole range of automatic or semi-automatic activities — improve their quality when the Primary Control of the person is functioning well. Every aspect of the use of oneself gains mental and physical subtlety and is relieved from undue tension which is conventionally accepted as being unavoidable.

Turning to piano playing, it soon becomes apparent that much of the playing is bound up with strain, effort and undue waste of energy. This can bring about physical and mental fatigue and discomfort, which are obvious hindrances in performance. It is quite common to hear from even very accomplished performers, complaints of physical aches and discomfort as well as of mental strain in practising, and indeed performing.

By learning to incorporate into the mechanics of piano playing an improved use of the whole person, one gains freedom and ease in playing. In practical terms this means that everything in piano playing, from the movement of the hands towards the keyboard right through to the activity of the fingers in playing, can happen in such a way as not to interfere with the state of freedom between the head, neck and torso, so that a balanced co-ordination of the whole player is undisturbed. This can only be achieved through a thorough change in one's attitude towards ways of doing things generally. Such a change can take place gradually after one is shown to what extent we are governed by habits which influence all our psychophysical functioning.

The Alexander Technique helps us to recognise our own fragmentation and dis-co-ordination in most things we do. This happens because we do not relate details of our activity to a total pattern of co-ordination. It comes as an amazing discovery to most people confronted in practice with Alexander's principle to realise

that even simple activities such as for instance picking up a pen or walking a few steps invariably produce an instant stiffening and locking of the head, neck and back. An Alexander teacher can show a pianist for example that merely moving his hands towards the keyboard can cause this 'locking' which then increases when the playing begins. Part of the reason for this may often be that the player has insufficient knowledge of the text of the music he is playing. This, combined with so called technical difficulties which sections of the music may present, will become a real stumbling block in practising and build up totally avoidable tensions and problems.

In view of these facts, encountered by any practicing musician — student and professional alike — one can conclude that there could be two main starting points in the approach to practising which should lead to a clear and fluent performance: a) a thorough and clear learning of the text and b) bringing an awareness of the total use of oneself into practising. (I speak here as a pianist, but the same applies to any other player or performer).

a) The first point means getting to know the musical text preferably away from the instrument, learning it in the way a conductor studies his score or an actor his script. An inexperienced learner may begin by doing this in very short sections. The preliminary learning of a piece in this way without actually playing it may save time and prevent the player from getting into unnecessary difficulties, which often arise from attempting to practice a text with only a vague knowledge of it. It is surprising how much better one can understand and memorise a composition through such detailed quiet study. This kind of preparation is particularly useful if one wants to apply the Alexander principle to one's playing as a clear knowledge of the text which one wants to practise will automatically remove that part of

disturbing tension which arises from the anxiety and uncertainty in practising a vaguely learnt piece.

b) The second point means incorporating in practising that extra awareness of the overall co-ordination in one's use. I must emphasise that this can only be learnt with the help of a skilled Alexander teacher who corrects and guides one into becoming aware of undue tension and distorting interferences in the head, neck and torso alignment; and so brings about an improvement in one's entire co-ordination. This is of vital importance in maintaining a freedom in the use of the player as a whole, adding a quite unusual degree of flexibility and ease in the use of his arms, hands and fingers. If one can experience in daily practising a greater simplicity and ease of playing one can complete the learning of a piece of music without any feeling of awkwardness or difficulty. I believe that one can only give a fluent performance of any piece of music when it does not 'feel' difficult; and this stage can, and should, be reached in any work one chooses to perform. Thus the destructive aspect of tension in performance can be eliminated to a very large extent and the Alexander principle, encompassing the whole person, will indirectly influence the details of his preparation for a performance.

A performer whose use of himself is well balanced, will not be disturbed by undue tension of the kind which is the result of effort and strain. He can, of course, choose to create tension deliberately, but that can be controlled and released at will. This kind of tension is not disruptive to performance because it does not just happen, but is used for a specific reason. I would prefer to call it intensity, or an increase in the flow of energy. However the term here is immaterial. What is important is the fact that within each one of us there exist sources of energy which can be used constructively and can be channelled so that a great deal

of usual mental and physical stress and strain can be avoided, not only in artistic endeavours but also in all aspects of daily living.

This seems to be a daring claim, I know. But then so would be for instance the description of a radio, television or jet plane to a person living two centuries ago. Yet we take these 'miracles' for granted now. There are apparently miraculous possibilities within the depth of our own existence which Alexander's genius led him to discover. I say "apparently miraculous" because the changes in oneself which can be wrought through his Technique are of a very uncommon kind and may seem quite extraordinary. The Technique however is basically simple and points to a direct uncomplicated integration of a person. It is its very simplicity and directness which elude us at first because we are burdened by and dependent upon so many confused, disjointed and conflicting ideas and habits, without realising that it is possible at least to be shown a way of seeing them for what they are. The degree to which anyone will absorb Alexander's principle and function according to it will differ with each individual. It will depend on the extent to which he will be willing to give himself to a change of basic psycho-physical habits.

For any artist the self-knowledge which one can arrive at through the Alexander Technique would seem to be of inestimable value. And the freedom from disruptive tensions which the Technique affords can bring great relief and technical help.