

A Technique for Musicians

Malcolm Williamson

In a sense, learning to play a musical instrument is a simple matter of working out what to do. Once you know what to do, then it's easy! A musician is repeatedly asking herself, "How should I hold the instrument?" "Where do I place my fingers?" "How do I do that?"

In the best of all possible worlds we would have evolved to "know" instinctively how. But, as Alexander realised, we live in a world and culture largely of our own making. In order to learn new skills and to adapt to fast-changing technologies we cannot simply leave it to evolutionary processes to find an answer. We have to reason out what to do for ourselves. And, as the American philosopher, Richard Shusterman, wrote, "If we really know what we are doing (and not what we *say* or *think* we're doing), we can better do what we want [what we intend]" (Shusterman, 168).¹

The most usual way of teaching music is by the "do as I do" approach. But by watching the teacher demonstrate, you have to guess how it's done. You watch carefully and then, mostly by hit-or-miss, you have a go and hope for the best. Even the teacher cannot tell you exactly how she did it. And, as for you, not only are you unaware of your teacher's past experiences and mental preparation, but your own preconceptions condition what you observe and recognise as relevant. There is a whole area of hidden 'know how' that is brushed over and tacitly assumed. Attention is focussed on the where-with-all of the task itself. Yet there are many other things happening that contribute to what your teacher intended to demonstrate; the organisation of activities Alexander referred to as "all those parts of the organism required for the activities incident to the act of reciting, such as standing, walking, using the arms or hands for gesture, interpretation, etc."² Such incidental activities are mostly taken as read. ("You can work that out for yourself. Let's get on with the main business as we don't have much time.") The ubiquitous 'end-gaining' attitude soon takes over. We end-gain when we attempt something without adequate preparation; without making sure that the pre-conditions necessary for accomplishing the task are securely in place. To a large extent, the standard of a student's manner of using himself determines how much aptitude he shows for learning successfully, or what we identify as (musical) "talent". The pianist Harold Taylor thought that what makes the piano virtuosos' ability extraordinary is not a superior physical or psychological make-up, but their "discovery of an exceptionally simple means which allows them to use their faculties simply and naturally." So-called natural talent is determined principally by an individual's "capacity for co-ordination" (Taylor, 18).

A well-coordinated – Alexander preferred the term "integrated"³ – general functioning or manner of using oneself forms the basis for learning and mastering any specific skill. When I began teaching at the RNCM in the 1980s, the preferred violin teaching method was the one developed in America by Paul Rolland, outlined in his book, *The Teaching of Action in String Playing*. Rolland regarded good use and physiologically healthy movement patterns as the basis for playing an instrument:

"The Alexander study supports the rationale of every part of this book. Until physical education will successfully teach young children the correct use of the body, the teachers of special skills (whether dancing, music, or sports) should incorporate in their teaching fundamental principles that will result in the better use of the body" (Rolland, 202).

Thomas Hemsley makes a similar point about singing. Specific technique must be built on a foundation of reliable use of the body:

“A high proportion of the exercises that singing teachers recommend to their pupils are in reality attempts to compensate for bad postural habits. These tricks themselves frequently result in tensions, which are then in their turn compensated for by new tricks, and so on *ad infinitum*” (Hemsley, 27).

In 1998, the Society of Teachers (STAT) held its annual conference at the RNCM in Manchester. Many first-generation teachers attended. Mindful of the fact that he was addressing musicians as well as teachers, Walter Carrington noted that whenever someone is asked to do something they invariably stiffen their arms and legs. These few insightful words have guided my approach to teaching ever since. Whether it’s a matter of getting out of a chair, getting ready to play the violin, or getting ready to play the flute or to sing, we are all inclined to get ourselves ready by inappropriately stiffening. This stiffening inevitably causes “thoracic rigidity” or diminishes the ribs’ breathing movements, as Alexander warned.⁴ Unchecked, the reaction becomes a stereotypic habit that jumps in without our realising whenever we get ready to play or to sing. Extra arm or leg stiffening is not only inefficient but it also interferes with the integrated functioning of the torso. As we say, the tail wags the dog instead of what should be happening; a dynamic, energised torso providing the conditions for free and easy limb action.



FIG. 1.—Delpech's apparatus for keeping the back straight and head erect. It is a modification of an invention by John Shaw.

So, attention must first be given to what Alexander called the ‘primary control’ of the way we use ourselves.

“There is a primary control of the use of the self, which governs the mechanisms and so renders the control of the complex human organism comparatively simple.

This primary control... depends upon a certain use of the head and neck to the rest of the body, and once the pupil has inhibited the instinctive [habitual] misdirection leading to his faulty habitual use, the teacher must begin the process of building up the new use by giving the pupil the primary directions towards the establishment of this primary control.”⁵

This preparatory stage of our response pattern – sometimes referred to as a postural ‘set’ – is typically given scant attention when learning a new skill. It is simply left to our usual, habitual ways of doing things that over time have become automatic and

unconsciously familiar. However, it’s not usually enough to begin from where you’re at. You need first to regain your poise, and if we are to have any choice or control over what we are doing we need to be aware of the steps that lead to the intended, overt activity.⁶ As John Dewey wrote (Dewey, 36):

“As soon as we have projected [an end] we must begin to work backward in thought. We must change what is to be done into a how, the means whereby. . . . Only as the end is converted into means is it definitely conceived, or intellectually defined, to say nothing of being executable.”

Making a similar point, some wise person said somewhere, “Eighty percent of what a singer has to do happens before she opens her mouth.” In AT terms, the appropriate relativity of the parts of the body is not organised by direct anatomical adjustment as it’s much too complex and changes from one moment to the next. It happens by applying what Alexander called the ‘means whereby’, i.e. inhibiting (the “too quick and unthinking response to stimuli”⁷) and giving the directions that ensure

the operation of the primary control: Let the neck be free (from added tension), so that as the head is directed 'forward and up', the spine lengthens and the back 'widens'. It's worth explaining that the spine lengthens principally because there is a reduction in habitual 'pulling down' in front. The forward/backward curves of the spine can then readjust. Walter Carrington used to demonstrate the springiness of the spine by comparing it to the spring and flexibility of a riding crop.⁸

In a nutshell, the Alexander Technique requires observance of two principles:

1. Appreciation of the human organism (i.e. you) functioning as a psychophysical entity. And,
2. Giving priority to prevent the wrong (inappropriate) things from happening. In practice this usually means not stiffening and 'pulling down' unnecessarily.

Changing longstanding habits takes time and forethought – the examination of deeply held attitudes and cherished beliefs about why we do things the way we do. It can trigger unsettling or defensive thoughts and feelings that get in the way of our thinking calmly and rationally. We also have to deal with other people's unsympathetic behaviour towards us; such as making us feel rushed and not being allowed sufficient time, our worry about getting it wrong and being thought slow or stupid, or fearful of how a teacher (read also 'parent', 'significant other') might react.

Instead of blindly hoping for the best (a horrible feeling like skating on thin ice) you can reliably develop conscious, adaptable habits. This is how Alexander distinguished between conscious, adaptable habits and unconscious, automatic habits:

"In the first place it is essential to understand the difference between the habit that is recognized and understood and the habit that is not. The difference... is that the first can be altered at will and the second cannot. For when real conscious control has been obtained, the "habit" need never become fixed. It is not truly a habit at all, but an order or series of orders given to the subordinate controls of the body, which orders will be carried out until countermanded."⁹

The American Alexander teacher, Frank Pierce Jones who wrote several papers on the relevance of the AT for musician had this to say about habit:

"In my view the chief disadvantage of automatic performance is that without awareness it cannot be changed. Socrates when asked whether it was better to do wrong knowingly or unknowingly shocked his listeners by replying that it was better to do it knowingly. If you know that it is wrong, he explained, you can change. Otherwise you cannot.

Even if a habit is good, it loses something if it becomes unconscious and stereotyped. People grow older, circumstances change, fashions change and a manner of responding or a style of performance may cease to be appropriate. (...) You have to know yourself what you are doing in order to change it."¹⁰

By "sticking to principle", as we say, we gradually and surely develop new ways of being true to ourselves, responding each time in ways that (re-)affirm the integrity of you as a person. A well-founded confidence develops, essential for all performing artists, whereby you possess a strong sense of agency and control and the self-assurance and playfulness to take risks and try out new things.

So, instead of the unreliable do-as-I-do approach, Alexander developed a technique to enable us to take more conscious guidance and control of our manner of use by working from first principles.

Margaret Goldie once said to me, "Read the [Alexander] books. It's all in the books and the Bedford Lecture." That may be true, but it's often difficult to extract the essence of Alexander's teaching

method from the mass of verbiage. Alexander was not keen on speaking in public when he didn't have the opportunity to give a practical demonstration of what he meant.¹¹ A rare exception is the talk given in 1934 to students and staff at the Bedford Physical Training College:

'I am going to assume the position of the teacher for the moment, and imagine that there is the pupil. For the moment we are going to stick to the old plan, and so I say to the pupil, "This is what is wrong with you, and this is what I want you to *do* in order to help yourself to put it right."

I want to try and make you see what we are assuming when we do that. We are assuming that we know what will actually take place in the changing of the activity of the different reflexes that are at work and are going to be at work in the person who is standing, stooped over, like this, in order for him to be brought up to what you would call "standing straight."

It is bad enough for the teacher to believe that we know this but what about the pupil? The pupil is assuming that he or she knows what will take place. And—follow me closely here—how can any of us make the extraordinary physical and mental change which this involves, unless we get a new experience? Don't you see that such a change would mean a new experience? An experience we have never had. How could we have had it?

Therefore this is practically what it amounts to. We are saying to ourselves, as it were, "All we have to do is to use words." For the pupil may be able to conceive of what the teacher wants, so far as words are concerned, but how in the world can the pupil conceive of the sensory experiences, which would be necessary to take him from his old point to the new point of change? It means entering a new sphere. It is an experience which we have never had, and yet, here we are, all of us, depending upon our old past experiences, which are associated with our wrongness, to help us, and substituting them for that new experience which must accompany any real change which takes place in us.'¹²

The basic problem with learning to do something new is that we don't know what it feels like until we've done it. Alexander was well aware of the debt he owed the great American philosopher William James in giving him the idea of 'ideo-motor action' that he needed to develop his technique on a scientific basis (Lamont, 27).¹³ The sensations or feelings produced by our muscles, joints and ligaments etc. as our body moves gives us a subjective sense of what we are doing or, more accurately, the feeling of what happens. Only when we have had the experience can we form an idea from which we are able to repeat the action intentionally. This sensory perception or idea is used to judge what we are doing and whether or not we are carrying it out successfully. This is all well and good in general, but when we are learning something as complex as playing a musical instrument, we cannot assume that our habitual feelings, based on past experiences, are the best, most relevant, or appropriate to the new and highly specialised skill. Habits of poor use that are perfectly adequate in less demanding or exacting situations may be transferred and perpetuated into how we perform the new skill. By involving extra stresses and strains these habits will, sooner or later, cause problems and be a hindrance or stumbling block to our continuing growth and development.

William James regarded each of us as a bundle of habits.¹⁴ Most are acquired unconsciously as we go through life and they define our character – who we are. By learning to guide and control our manner of use consciously, by "thinking up" and engaging the 'primary control' of our integrated functioning, we are developing what Alexander called conscious habits that, when necessary, can be countermanded. This brings us back to Shusterman's point quoted at the beginning: "If we really know what we are doing (and not what we *say* or *think* we're doing), we can better do what we want." The difference between an amateur and professional musician is that the professional knows what he is doing and has that command of himself to produce something acceptable on demand. He does not

have to wait for the ideal conditions or until he feels in the right mood. When the red light in the recording studio goes on, he is there ready to perform at will.

Finally, a major issue for many musicians is how to make the transition from the experience of improved use in an Alexander lesson to the real-life situation of playing and performing. I often remind students that they are using the same body to do their daily round of activities as when they are performing on stage and that it's unreasonable to expect a body that is being regularly misused to suddenly function like a high-performance vehicle as soon as it is called on to perform optimally! Apart from anything else, you would have to behave like two different characters. There must be some degree of continuity between the person you are in the supermarket and the person on stage. So, if you can think about the 'means whereby' as you get dressed each morning, walk along the street, sit on the train, stand at the checkout, wash the pots, etc. the process will become more familiar and accessible at times when it really matters.

That is, perhaps, for the longer term, but from the very first lesson, Walter Carrington gave the advice to alternate your practising with lying down in the familiar Alexander 'semi-supine' position. Before you begin to practise, get the instrument set up and ready (with singers the 'instrument' is already out of its case!) and place it somewhere handy while you lie down for ten minutes, or so. Go through your usual routine of appreciating the supporting surface, taking note of your surroundings and gently asking for 'letting go' ('doing less') to allow lengthening and widening in the back and openness along the collar bones and across the upper chest. Then get up and proceed with your practising initially for a short time, staying mindful of the 'means whereby'. *Most importantly* (Walter would emphasize), then put the instrument down somewhere safe and immediately lie down for another 5–10 minutes allowing the lengthening and widening and the movement of the breathing – maybe introducing a few whispered 'ahs'. You can then decide to repeat practising and lying down or go and do something else. This is how I remember Walter telling me at the start of my training. I found it very helpful and I have recommended it to my music students ever since. I hope you also find it helpful.

© M Williamson 5/02/2022 (2)

- The illustration shows an apparatus designed (c.1820) by the Scottish anatomist John Shaw for keeping a pianist's back straight and head erect (Keith, 214).

References

Alexander F. Matthias (1996). *Man's Supreme Inheritance*. London: Mouritz. (Original work published in 1918.)

Alexander F. Matthias (2004). *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*. London: Mouritz. (Original work published in 1923/1924.)

Alexander, F. Matthias (1985). *The Use of the Self*, London: Gollancz. (Original work published in 1932.)

Alexander F. Matthias (2000). *The Universal Constant in Living*. London: Mouritz. (Original work published in 1941/42.)

Alexander, F. Matthias, Fischer, Jean M.O., ed. (1995). *F. Matthias Alexander: Articles and Lectures*. London: Mouritz.

Dewey John (1922). *Human Nature and Conduct*. New York: The Modern Library 1957.

Hemsey, Thomas (1998). *Singing and Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- James, William (1950). *The Principles of Psychology*, Vols. I & II. New York: Dover Publications Inc. (Original work published in 1890.)
- Jones, Frank Pierce. 'The Organization of Awareness'. A paper read at a conference on "Co-ordination in Music" in Michigan State University, May 18, 1967. In *Freedom to Change*. 1997 (1976). London: Mouritz.
- Keith, Arthur. (1975). *Menders of the Maimed*. New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Co. (Originally published in 1919.)
- Lamont, Corliss (1959). *Dialogue On John Dewey*. New York: Horizon Press.
- Maisel, Edward (1969). *F. Matthias The Alexander Technique: The Essential Writings of Alexander*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Rolland, Paul, Marla Mutschler (1986, 1974). *The Teaching of Action in String Playing*. Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.
- Shusterman, Richard (2000). *Performing Live*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Taylor, Harold (1982). *The Pianist's Talent*. New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc.
- Vineyard, Missy, Jean M.O. Fischer, editors (2020). *F. Matthias Alexander: Letters Volume I & II*. Graz, Austria: Mouritz.
- Williamson, Malcolm (2011, 2016). *A Handbook for Musicians Learning the Alexander Technique*. Teaching Award project for the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, UK. Contact: Malcolm.Williamson@rncm.ac.uk

¹ Compare the Alexander aphorism, "All the damn fools in the world believe they are actually doing what they think they are doing" (Maisel, 5).

² *UOS*, 32

³ *Letters*, 450

⁴ *UCL*, 42

⁵ *UOS*, 65 original italics

⁶ I call this 'restoring your factory settings'.

⁷ *UCL*, 80

⁸ Compare *MSI*, 138 note

⁹ *MSI*, 54. Also in the 1910 edition, pp. 74–5

¹⁰ Jones, 175–6

¹¹ *Letters*, 178

¹² In *A&L*, 169–170

¹³ In December 1958, a group of John Dewey's friends and colleagues met to reminisce. Horace Kallen recalled Alexander telling him many years earlier that "he had gotten the idea by reading James". See James II, 521–6

¹⁴ James I, 104