

The Alexander technique in relation to practising, performing and teaching

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Abstract: *The F.M. Alexander Technique is valued by musicians worldwide as a method for dealing with the various physical and mental challenges which are frequently encountered in performance. Nevertheless, the Technique remains little known in Romania, though interest in what it has to offer is steadily growing. The aim of this paper is to summarise the basic principles of the technique, with a focus on what relevance these may have to the practise, performance and teaching of music.*

Keywords: *Alexander Technique, education, performance*

1. Introduction

This paper does not aim to provide a detailed description of what the Alexander Technique is and how it was developed². Nevertheless, it will be useful to define some terms, and readers with little or no knowledge of the subject will benefit from some information about who F.M Alexander was and how he developed his technique. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of technique in general.

1.1. F.M. Alexander

Born in 1869 in Tasmania, F.M. Alexander moved to mainland Australia in 1889 where he had initial success as a Shakespearean actor and reciter, before developing vocal problems that caused him to gasp for air on stage and often left him hoarse after performances. Advice from doctors and voice trainers brought little help, so Alexander embarked on a period of self-examination, using mirrors to investigate his vocal habits and determine the cause of his speaking problems. It was during this period that the principles of his technique were crystallised: conscious control of one's actions rather than reliance on habitual modes of

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² This is outlined fully in Alexander, F.M. 1932. *The Use of the Self*. London: Methuen.

behaviour; “inhibition” of wrong movements rather than trying to “do” correct ones; focussing on the “means whereby” rather than the “end to be gained”. Having overcome his vocal and respiratory problems, Alexander returned to acting and began teaching his method. As interest grew, he moved to London where he established a teaching practice wrote a number of books and spent the rest of his life teaching and promoting what became known as the Alexander Technique.

1.2. Technique

Technique refers to the manner in which we use a tool to produce a specific result: it is a means to an end and has no absolute meaning in itself. The Alexander Technique is a general technique: it deals with how we use ourselves, regardless of what action we ultimately wish to perform. A basic feature of the Alexander Technique is the concept of proceeding from the general to the specific. We start by considering the use of our core - the relationship of head, neck and back – and pay attention to our breath. From there we create the conditions which tend to lead to success in the performance of whatever goal we have set for ourselves, be it singing, performing on an instrument, throwing a javelin or simply brushing our teeth.

2. Practising

It is often said that practice makes perfect. More precisely, perfect practice makes perfect, and what we should be doing is practising perfection³. The closer we come to perfection in our practice, the more likely we are to achieve it in performance. Therefore, we must look for ways to create the conditions to achieve perfection in our practice.

2.1. Positions of mechanical advantage

Alexander uses the term “position of mechanical advantage” to describe the optimal position of the body in the performance of any given action. A position of mechanical advantage allows the neck to be free, the spine to maintain its full length, ease of breathing and requires a minimum of muscle tension to hold the body in position. It is a dynamic position that allows for movement, rather than a fixed pose. The concept of positions of mechanical advantage is not exclusive to the Alexander Technique; in fact, anyone with a basic knowledge of anatomy can deduce which positions are advantageous and which are disadvantageous to the mechanical performance of the body. It is however an important starting point,

³ Thanks to Paul O'Dette for introducing me to this concept.

since the chances of being able to use yourself well in a position of mechanical advantage are higher than otherwise.

2.2. “End gaining” and the “means whereby”

Practice is a process: during practice we are more interested in the process than we are in the results. We are interested in creating the conditions for good results to emerge in performance. It is tempting to blur the boundaries between practice and performance: we often play through pieces repeatedly, even when we know that it would be more useful to practise scales and work on exercises. We thereby attempt to “gain an end” while neglecting the means whereby that end may be gained successfully. To practise with knowledge of the Alexander Technique is to shift the focus from the “end” to the “means”, and to give priority to the general rather than the specific. Thus, we seek a position which puts us at a mechanical advantage, give attention to how we use ourselves in that position (let the neck be free, allow the back to lengthen and widen etc.) and only then, whilst maintaining that attention, do we attempt to play or sing the passage we have intended to practise. From an Alexander Technique point of view, keeping an awareness of one's core is more important than playing all the right notes. To most people this feels positively counter intuitive.

2.3. Unreliable sensory perception

We are often told to trust our feelings and to go with our instincts. While this might be good advice on an emotional level, on a physical level we have good reason to mistrust the information which our bodies give us. This is due to the phenomenon that what is habitual tends to “feel” right, whereas what is new tends to “feel” wrong, regardless of whether it serves our purposes better or not. A reliance on bodily sensations precludes any advancement in practice, so we must remain open to that which “feels” wrong.

2.4. Conscious control

The ultimate goal of the Alexander Technique is what Alexander calls “conscious control”⁴. This is effectively the ability to free oneself from the influence of past habits and consciously decide on and employ the correct means whereby an action can take place most effectively. This is not to say that habits are undesirable per se – without them it would be impossible to get through daily life – it is more about

⁴ See Alexander, F.M. 1923. *Conscious Control of the Individual*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

developing a degree of control over which habits we wish to cultivate and which ones we no longer wish to rely on.

3. Performing

The goal of musical performance is nothing less than to move the audience, to transport them to another spiritual or emotional plane. Only a performer who is absolutely immersed in the music will have the ability to do this. For that reason, all elements of practice and technique must be discarded in performance, and that includes Alexander Technique. If the performer is thinking about Alexander Technique or any other kind of technique in performance, that inevitably has the indirect effect of focussing the audience's attention on technical aspects of the performance, rather than the music itself. Thus Alexander Technique must be seen as preparatory to performance, rather than actively present within it.

4. Teaching

The consequences that Alexander Technique has for teaching are profound. The following discussion draws on my experiences of teaching the Alexander Technique and how this might inform the way we teach music.

4.1. Teaching is working on oneself

The way in which Alexander Technique is taught is fundamentally different to conventional methods of teaching. Students usually go to a teacher to be told what to do and how to do it. The focus here is on the student, and whether what he does is “right” or “wrong”⁵. This tends to produce students who are lesser copies of their teachers, often lacking real knowledge and understanding of their manner of playing or singing. A good Alexander Technique teacher turns the focus away from the student and focuses on her own manner of use, and this informs the manner of her teaching. Coming into contact with someone who is actively working on herself is usually a new experience for the student and often has a profound effect. The “whats” and “hows” of doing are put into a broader perspective: within the boundaries of good use, “right” and “wrong” become irrelevant, and creative possibilities are opened up.

⁵ For the sake of clarity, the teacher is assumed to be female and the student male.

4.2. You never know why someone comes to you for lessons

As a teacher it is tempting to focus on what you think it is that the student wishes to achieve in his lessons. Some students will be very specific about their goals and motivated to achieve them. Others may take lessons for years and make seemingly little progress. You may wonder why they continue taking lessons! It is important to remember that you can never know why someone comes to you for lessons and what those lessons really mean for him. Learning is a process of transformation. We set out to learn one thing, only to find out that we actually needed to learn something else. Our goals shift as understanding grows. As a teacher it is important to recognise this. By working on ourselves as teachers, by being examples of good use, we allow learning to be opening ended.

4.3. There is no need to make lessons interesting

What makes learning interesting is not primarily the subject itself, it is the process of self-discovery which accompanies and influences the learning process. This is something over which the teacher can have no direct influence. The procedures used in learning the Alexander Technique are deliberately simple and of little interest in them: sitting and standing up from a chair, lying on a table etc. The student is encouraged to look inward, to expand his awareness and observe what he is doing with himself in these situations.

4.4. A situation that puts you wrong

F.M. Alexander was more interested in unlearning rather than learning, and non-doing rather than doing:

Everyone is always teaching one what to do, leaving us still doing things we shouldn't do.⁶

Recognition of bad habits should be seen in a positive light, as an opportunity for progress. On the purpose of an Alexander Technique lesson, Alexander stated:

"You are not here to do exercises, or to learn to do something right, but to get able to meet a stimulus that always puts you wrong and to learn to deal with it."⁷

⁶ Alexander, F.M. 1995. *Articles and Lectures: Articles, Published Letters and Lectures on the F. M. Alexander Technique*. London: Mouritz.196.

⁷ *ibid.* 203.

5. Alexander Technique and health

The Alexander Technique is often treated as a form of therapy, even by some of its proponents. This deserves some clarification. A good technique in the most general sense will always tend to a healthy manner of use and an avoidance of injury; the Alexander Technique is no different. As such it should be seen in a preventative rather than curative light. Because of the indirect nature of the technique, it cannot be used to “cure” specific ailments. For example, a musician with wrist pain might be surprised that his Alexander Technique teacher works mainly with his neck, head and back and does not address the issue directly. The teacher is working from the general to the specific: if the head neck and back are in harmony, there is the chance that the specific problems of the wrist will sort themselves out.

6. Conclusion

In the music world today there is an ever increasing pressure on young musicians to attain technical perfection, perform virtuoso pieces, win competitions and achieve success on the international stage. The desire to gain these ends as fast as possible often comes at the expense of doing so in a healthy and sustainable manner. Now more than a century old, Alexander's Technique gives us a method for doing just that, and we need it today more than ever before.

7. Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thanks must go to Ruth Gysin who was my Alexander Technique teacher and director of the Basler Schule für Lehrerinnen und Lehrer der F.M. Alexander-Technik. Also to Noemi Karacsony for suggesting I write this paper and for her help with organisation and translation. I am most grateful to John Hunter for introducing me to the Technique almost 20 years ago, and for his work in promoting it in Romania. Last but not least, warm thanks to my partner Mária Fülöp for her endless support and patience.

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