

MEANS TO MEANS: THE ROLE OF THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE IN MUSICAL TRAINING

Malcolm Williamson

Talk given at the Royal College of Music, London, 31st March 1998 to 3rd conference for Alexander teachers working in music colleges.

In lessons my aim is to create a situation in which music students can make reliable choices regarding their own manner of use. The more years I teach, the more I understand that, in Alexander terms, saying ‘No’ (inhibiting inappropriate habitual reactions) is paramount. This involves much more than simply repeating words. It includes the establishment of an inner calm and ordered observation described by Jones as an “act of attention” (Jones, 1954). The Alexander “directions” can then be understood as both preventive and a clear wish for what has to happen - i.e. an “*increase or lengthening in stature*”. (Alexander, 1932: 13 footnote.) Once this is mastered the pupil must then learn to move into a particular activity without compromising the basic advantageous conditions. Alexander teachers are not concerned primarily with results but with developing satisfactory means; helping pupils to un-learn inappropriate habits and laying down reliable ground work that allows talent to flourish.

It strikes me as significant, just how easy it is to “sell” the Alexander Technique to musicians. Musicians can seem almost predisposed to the Alexander way of working. That same inner voice which talks us through our practising and performances can also oblige with giving our Alexander “directions”. The Technique provides performers with a tool to develop much needed self-reliance and control but I suspect the attraction of the Technique goes much deeper.

Philosophers throughout the ages, from Plato to Nietzsche, have regarded the arts - and music in particular - as a potent force for bringing order and meaning to our lives.¹ The psychiatrist, Anthony Storr, has suggested that “music may be especially important to people who are somewhat alienated from the body, because playing an instrument, singing, or simply listening to music puts them in touch with their physical [self]...” (Storr, 1992: 149) “[A]nything which enhances our feeling of being securely balanced and in control of our movements enhances our sense of physical well-being. Marching soldiers swing their arms symmetrically as they march; and also march better to music. Music can order our muscular system.” (ibid.: 41) Storr believes “that it is also able to order our mental contents.” If one accepts the phenomenon of “psycho-physical unity”, then it could hardly be otherwise.

It is clear that musical training and personal growth should develop in parallel. Again, quoting Storr, “Becoming what one is is a creative act comparable with

¹ “Musical training is more a potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the secret places of the soul.” “He who mingles music with gymnastics in the fairest proportions... may be rightly called the true musician.” Plato (c.428-c.347 B.C.) *The Republic*. (Shapiro 1978: 251, 267.)

creating a work of art. It is freeing oneself from the tyranny of one's upbringing... from all the social constraints, prejudices, and assumptions which prevent one from realizing one's own nature in its totality." (ibid.: 153)

If music is such a powerful agent through which many of us discover who we are (quote), then the Alexander Technique can speed us on our journey! Jones wrote that, Alexander discovered "a practical means by which the individual can... organize his feelings and beliefs about himself into a coherent system." (Jones, 1951) No wonder musicians and other performers are drawn by the glimpses of unseen horizons it offers.

Wilfred Barlow's work with RCM singing students in the 1950's strongly suggested that those who had had Alexander lessons were more responsive and retentive in their studies. (Barlow, W., 1954) When the appropriate means are employed tutors find their students are more able to follow their teaching. Teachers in general assume that their students have the necessary means to understand and carry out their instructions. (Compare Alexander, 1932: 18-9) Decisions about exactly which aspects of a person's behaviour should be imitated, and precisely how depend on the observer's own manner of use. Yet the way in which the actions and intentions of others are perceived is influenced by the motor capacities of the perceiver. (Jeannerod, 1997: 191) Learning how to play or to sing involves many processes that call for sensitivity and discernment; such as, watching somebody's action with the desire to imitate it, anticipating the effects of actions, preparing or intending to move, refraining from moving, or remembering an action. (Jeannerod, 1997: 95). Mastery in these skills is more fundamental to musical accomplishment than auditory and visual skills.

A sub-text to our teaching is the prevention of pain and injury due to personal misuse. A large proportion of professional musicians are forced to take extended periods of time off work at some stage in their careers because of health problems associated directly with their playing. By the time students get to music college, many have inappropriate habits associated with their playing that are deeply entrenched and strenuously defended. Students commonly regard a sense of effort - "trying harder" - as a virtue. Aching shoulders and tiredness provide them with tangible evidence that they have been practising hard. Even some teachers concur with this view. Though this may be one's own personal experience, it is not inevitable that it should be so, either for ourselves or our students. Practising "hard" is not the same as practising *well*. Students often believe that they must hold onto the "right" feelings and sensations experienced during practice sessions, or they will forget what they have learned. Also, they can confuse muscular tension with musical expressiveness and conveying intense emotion. Quite apart from the constraints this kind of crooked thinking imposes on movement, muscles habituated to working at a shortened length

for long periods do not easily release to their optimum resting length, a reason for many chronic tension-related problems.

Training institutions are beginning to realise that, unless they take health issues more seriously, they will continue to send students into the professional world with the potential to harm themselves. Society inclines towards more litigation and to the assumption that all personal misfortune must be caused by the fault of others. If music students begin to hold such fatalistic views (and on the whole they don't), then it is only a matter of time before someone attempts to sue his college for a ruined career. This attitude is a far cry from the ethos of self-responsibility engendered by the Technique and from Alexander's own comment that, if he had singing lessons, it wouldn't matter what he was taught, the teacher couldn't injure him! (Maisel 1969: 12)

This is my 13th year teaching the Alexander Technique at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM), Manchester. For most of that time I have been quietly working each week with the students, giving hour-long lessons in groups of three... The new Principal wished to see wider exposure of the Technique, starting with introductory talks to all 120 first-year undergraduates.

It was understood that each group needed to be small enough for me to work individually with students but of sufficient number to keep within our budget. The necessity for reliable, personal knowledge of the subtleties of movement control often seems difficult for administrators to appreciate, even in such a practical field as the training of musicians.

There are obvious financial considerations. Practical work requires one-to-one teaching which is expensive. Teaching in larger classes, on the other hand, is less so but is more suitable for presenting factual information. Our work does, of course, include this. In her book on learning the Technique, Barbara Conable claims that with good 'body-mapping' (so-called), "the information alone improves body use as soon as it is comprehended" (Conable 1995: 62) and she lists common structural and functional misconceptions students have about their own bodies. (ibid.: 83-93) But, anatomical and physiological information is best presented within the context of practical work where the implications can be fully appreciated by students. The unique contribution we can make as Alexander teachers by employing our informed 'hands-on' teaching skills is indispensable. Alexander teachers need not overly concern themselves with their student's goals. The teacher's foremost role is not to tell his students how to play or to sing (even if qualified to do so) but rather to teach students a reasoned means by which a norm of good Use may be "progressively and endlessly achieved". (Dewey 1932, xix) Students need to be shown how to make, and to continue to make, "appropriate movement choices"² for themselves.

² Clifford Hicks, Alextech #52 Feb 14, 1998.

It is, therefore, vital to focus lessons on acquiring the mental skill for Inhibiting and Directing. Unless the student is familiar with these, he is liable to misunderstand the nature of Alexander work and to regard it as something else he must do in the usual way, or even something that is done *to* him!

I often introduce the Alexander Technique to music students by saying that, during their time at music college, they ought to discover and develop easier, more enjoyable, ways of playing - that they should aim to end their practice sessions feeling refreshed and invigorated, rather than tired and worn down by the stresses of mental concentration and accumulated muscular tension. “Seemingly effortless playing” (Lister-Sink, 1996), both for oneself and one’s audience, should be an ideal.

In his book, *The Pianist’s Talent*, Harold Taylor wrote that what makes the 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.” (Taylor 1987: 82) Taylor thought that talent was determined principally by an individual’s “capacity for coordination”. (Taylor, 1987: 23) Whether, smooth “co-ordination” in Taylor’s sense is the same as “good use” is not entirely clear, but others have linked good Use with musical talent. (e.g. Langstroth³)

Experienced musicians who use the Technique, frequently express the view that much of what is taught as instrumental or singing technique is, in fact, “a collection of ways around the obstacles thrown up by faulty coordination.”⁴ Once the aspect of a satisfactory manner of personal use has been addressed, then the amount of necessary technical work specific to the activity “seems dramatically reduced” (ibid.) and many technical preoccupations, such as breathing ‘support’, tend to take care of themselves.

There is obviously more to musical talent than good Use, but there is no doubt that a satisfactory manner of use makes for greater proficiency, and everything is much easier. Moreover, the more advanced one becomes, the more critical is the part that personal Use plays in the refinement of skills and artistry.

When our manner of use is unsatisfactory, not only do we have to perform the activity itself but we also have to engage in extra activity to compensate for our poor functioning. (Richmond, 1994 and Matthews, note 4.) Playing becomes more complicated and more tiring than is strictly necessary. (de Alcantara, 1997: 157-8)

It is worth reminding ourselves that musicians rely on skilful control of body movement to perform and to earn their living every bit as much as, say, dancers or

³ “When a beginner shows an aptitude to be able to reproduce the sounds and gestures his teacher makes on an instrument he is said to be “talented”, rather than that “he uses himself well”. Alextech #48 Jan 17 1998 David Langstroth, ‘bass with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales.

⁴ Andrea Matthews, “Alextech” #48 Jan 17, 1998.

athletes. For this reason it can be instructive to read what is written in other areas of performing pedagogy. Phyllis Richmond⁵ writes of dancing:

“‘Trying to get it right’ is... a physical state with its own set of psycho-physical manifestations... The thought of an action alone elicits the anticipatory pre-set for the action in the neuromuscular system. When the subconscious response to the thought of dancing creates conditions of bracing and anxiety, the dancer must work harder to overcome the self-created disadvantage. *The preparation is the seed of the problem*; we work too hard because we interfere with ourselves before we even begin. We learn to superimpose an extra muscular and mental ‘doing’ in response to the stress, instead of simply performing...” (Richmond, 1994: 31. My italics.)

Preparation may be the “seed of the problem” but it is also where the solution or prevention lies. Neural activity shows a similar pattern when we think of, or prepare for, an action and during the actual performance of the same action. (Jeannerod, 1997: pp 109-110,121) If we are to change our habitual reactions, then inhibition of the old response-patterns must come during the preparatory stage when the intention is framed.

True change requires re-programming the neuro-muscular patterning. Following exercise regimes to strengthen certain muscles tends to encourage existing habitual misuse and incoordination. When a movement is performed in a hurried and ill-considered manner the brain pathways that carry signals concerned with the more automatic muscle activities for postural support, balance and breathing are under employed. (Ballard, 1997)

The Alexander Technique is the only method of which I am aware that comprehensively addresses the problem of the influences of unwanted habit and “unreliable sensory appreciation”. The slow thoughtful teaching allows the re-framing of intention and the achievement of smooth co-ordinated movement.

Any instruction concerning musical technique should have a sound scientific basis, though this need not necessarily be ‘off-loaded’ onto the student. “Artistic interpretation flows freely from a well-functioning, well-understood technique.”⁶ As teachers we cannot excuse ourselves from debate by saying the Alexander Technique is “too difficult” to explain. Science is concerned primarily with *describing* and then explaining and understanding the natural world. Though there will be inevitable gaps in our understanding, we also have to find ways to describe our work that are intelligible to non-“Alexandrians”, even if for no other reason than it helps us to clarify things for ourselves.

⁵ Alexander teacher at the Arts faculty Methodist University, Texas.

⁶ This point was made by vocal coach, Karen Sell, in an article, “A question of choice”, *The Singer* magazine Dec. 1995 / Jan. 1996, Rhinegold Publishing, London.

The new field of Cognitive Neuroscience emerged in the mid-1980's, bringing together work on the planning and performance of movement. Early this century, Sherrington described actions in terms of chaining sequences made up of simple, innate, reflex-organised reactions. More recently this hypothesis has been modified by the idea of "action plans". (Jeannerod, 1997: Chapter 1) Rather in the same way that a CD holds the information to reproduce a piece of music, an action plan contains all the information for organising a complex movement sequence. As with Sherrington's classical model, the information is built up of building blocks, but it is now thought these 'motor schemas' "can be acquired through experience and learning, [and] they can be improved, changed [or] destroyed." (Jeannerod, 1997: 5) Moreover, the selection of schemas for the intermediate steps is influenced by the long-term goal of an action. (Jeannerod: 126, 131) From our perspective of developing appropriate means it is, therefore, imperative not to "jump the gun" but attend to each incremental, preparatory 'next step' in the sequence.

John Dewey (*Human Nature and Conduct*, 1922) describes this attention to the Means Whereby Principle thus:

"The "end" is the last act thought of; the means are the acts to be performed prior to it in time...⁷ We must change *what* is to be done into *how*... The *end* thus re-appears as a series of 'what nexts' and the what next of chief importance is the one nearest the present state of the one acting. Only as the end is converted into means is it definitely conceived, or intellectually defined, to say nothing of being executable... Aladdin with his lamp could dispense with translating ends into means, but no one else can do so."⁸

Whilst no two students can be taught in the same way, nearly all my teaching is done away from the instrument (except singers!). Of course, there is a lot that can be done with the instrument. In fact, if you don't make it clear to students at some point that they must relate the Alexander Technique work to their playing, they will simply enjoy the feeling of relaxation and still be doggedly determined not to let it interfere with their normal over-tense practising regime!

Working away from the instrument is more effective - the main reasons for which I would give as:

1) Established habitual anxiety and unnecessary tension associated with playing will most likely defeat the student's observation of subtle proprioceptive signals. And

-

2) Alexander Technique is primarily thinking, brain work (Barlow, M., 1997: 16). If students also have to think about how and what they are playing, there is too much to attend to all at once and it is impossible to learn the salient aspects of the

⁷ Quoted in *John Dewey and F.M. Alexander*, NASTAT: 24

⁸ Quoted in *John Dewey and F.M. Alexander III*, NASTAT: 28, and Jones, 1976: 102-3.

Technique. Strongly reinforced habits and an end-gaining approach interfere with the opportunity to learn a strategy for improvement; and failure to inhibit results in more effort.

When specifically asked to work with the instrument I take students through self-observation procedures that they can follow for themselves during their practice time. [E.g.'s I work with the student as he gets the instrument out of its case making sure he doesn't go into a getting-ready-to-play 'set' but, instead attends to each incremental step of the operation; attending to the quality of 'monkey', etc.; taking the instrument to the mouth (or on to the shoulder) without compromising the basic "up" Direction and "pulling down". Because most instrumentalists hold their breath, and even singers are liable to fix their chests, I teach the whispered 'ah' almost from the beginning.

At the RNCM with two terms' of lessons available for each student (on average) my teaching is directed, firstly, to establishing an inner calm. This requires "hands-on" contact to impart a direct experience of better Use and "ordered nervous system"⁹ in combination with teaching the thinking skills of Inhibiting and Directing. It involves what Jones calls an "act of attention", "an extension of the field of consciousness from the head as a center, so that time-space relationships within the self and the environment can be directly perceived and evaluated... The experience carries with it a peculiar sense of detachment - of being able to see the causes and the consequences of the reaction while it is going on." (Jones, 1954: 181-2)

By training ourselves to separate the cause (stimulus) 'out there' from our reaction we begin to notice when our habitual, preparatory muscular set is about to disrupt the "equilibrium of the organism" (Jones, 1954: 182). This is what has to be inhibited and the primary "directions" (with the smooth working of the "Primary Control") securely established. Then, and only then, can a decision be taken to proceed into the activity in a new and improved manner.

In a moment of "contemplation"¹⁰ time is created in which one becomes conscious of other possibilities that are usually disregarded during the brain's preconscious "search". (Lancaster, 1991: 36)¹¹ This is the point of lying-down work; to develop disciplined self-observation and the basic tools for orderly learning.

In a contemplative fashion, And a tranquil frame of mind,
Free from ev'ry kind of passion, Some solution let us find.
Let us grasp the situation, Think of *how* instead of *what*,¹²
Quiet, calm deliberation / Disentangles ev'ry knot.

⁹ This expression was used by John Nicholls in his Introduction to Walter Carrington's book, *Thinking Aloud*, 1994 (Mornum Time Press), page 11.

¹⁰ Compare "meditation", i.e. "dwelling upon something". (Armstrong, 1994: 24) I prefer "contemplation" which for me is less mystical. Def. "to look at thoughtfully; to have in mind as a possibility" Collins Dictionary (1987).

¹¹ "Contemplation... retraces the path of this preconscious search. Quite simply, during the moment of contemplation the inhibition of competing [neural] representations is suspended as we become conscious of material brought forward by this search through our memory store."

¹² Not really! Gilbert's words were, "Solve the complicated plot".

W. S. Gilbert (1890) Quartet, Act II. *The Gondoliers*.

In conclusion, Alexander teachers have an important and unique contribution to make to the training of musicians. With all the stimulation, hype and pressure of a music college environment Alexander lessons provide order and meaning to the lives of often stressed and over-anxious students which helps them to learn and perform (Valentine, 1995) and to gain the full benefit from their time at college.

Acknowledgement:

The author wishes to thank Kathleen Ballard for helpful comments and suggestions, and for introducing him to the book by Marc Jeannerod.

Bibliography

- Alcantara de, Pedro, 1997: *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Alexander, F. M., 1932: *The Use of the Self*, Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- Armstrong J., 1994: "Directing and Ordering: A Discussion of Working on Yourself" (1988), STAT Books, London.
- Ballard, K. J. *et al*, 1997: "Understanding and Preventing Misuse in Musical Performance by Employing the Alexander Technique". Talk given at a conference on *Health and the Musician* in York, 24th March. BAPAM/MU
- Barlow, M., 1997: "The Essence of F.M.'s Teaching". *The Alexander Journal*, **15**: 13-20
- Barlow, W., 1954: *More Talk of Alexander*, Camelot Press Ltd., Southampton (1978). 190-95.
- Conable B.H., Conable W., 1995: *How to Learn the Alexander Technique*, Andover (Third Edition).
- Dewey, J., 1932: "Introduction" to *The Use of the Self*, op. cit.
- Jeannerod, M., 1997: *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Action*, Blackwell.
- Jones, F. P., 1951: "F.M. Alexander and the Re-education of Feeling", *General Semantics Bulletin*, no.'s 6 (Spring) and 7 (Summer).
- Jones, F. P., 1954: "A Mechanism for Change", Reprinted from *Forms and Techniques of Altruistic and Spiritual Growth*, a symposium edited by PA Sorokin, Boston. 177-87.
- Jones, F. P., 1976: *Body Awareness in Action*, Schocken Books Inc. Reprinted 1997 as *Freedom to Change*, Mouritz, London.
- Lancaster, B., 1991: *Mind, Brain and Human Potential*, Element.
- Lister-Sink, B., (video) "Freeing the Caged Bird", Wing Sound 1996. PO Box 10912, Winston-Salem, NC 27108, USA. (Available from STAT Books.)
- Maisel, E. (ed), 1969: *The Alexander Technique*, Thames and Hudson, London.
- Richmond, P, 1994: "The Alexander Technique and Dance Training", *Impulse*, **2**, no. 1: 24-38.

- Shapiro, N., 1978: *An Encyclopaedia of Quotations about Music*. David & Charles.
- Storr, A., 1992: *Music and the Mind*. Harper Collins.
- Taylor, H., 1987: *The Pianist's Talent*. Long Beach, CA. Centerline Press.
- Valentine E. R. *et al.*, 1995: "The Effects of Lessons in the Alexander Technique on Music Performance in High and Low Stress Situations", *Psychology of Music*, **23**: 129-41.

© 1998 Malcolm Williamson