

The Alexander Technique: Knowing where to begin

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'The beginning is the most important part of the work.' *Plato*

It is ten years (1997) since the Staff Conference focussed on musicians' health. The World Health Organisation's classic definition of health gives a positive spin: "A complete state of physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."¹ To a large extent, our quality of health makes us who we are and determines how well we are able to function. Health and personal performance go together.

When musicians experience pain or discomfort, it's essential that they get checked out by their doctor without delay, in case they need medical treatment. However, I'd say that most of students' so-called "health problems" associated with learning to play an instrument or to sing are being caused by *something they're doing* with misguided efforts to achieve what they think is required of them.

The last time I spoke at the staff conference I quoted the pianist, Harold Taylor, who studied at the Royal Manchester College. He wrote: "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."

Now, I'd say that all our students have loads of natural talent and all but a few have the necessary motivation and perseverance to develop an adequate musical technique. However, a significant number of students feel that they never achieve what they're truly capable of, no matter how hard they try. Mostly, these are students whose performance is being hampered by the way they're using themselves in general.

Over the years, I've seen how many students come to the College with long-standing habits that interfere with the basic mechanisms for postural support and balance. Balance is fundamental for us humans in every skilful activity carried out during waking hours.² When the mechanisms for postural support and balance have been put out of kilter, then we have to compensate and so make things unnecessarily effortful and complicated.³ Automatic postural co-ordination cannot happen freely and appropriate breathing function is restricted. Learning a skill is a complex business but, in practical terms, the pre-requisite of balance happens automatically and does itself, *if we allow it*. Making sure that we don't compromise the smooth operation of our systems for postural support and balance is a vital part of skill-learning.

We need to avoid habits of extra bracing, stiffening (and over-relaxing, for that matter), breath-holding, making over-hasty assumptions, engaging in repetitive mind-chatter, thinking distracting thoughts – all of which take us further away from where we need to be, and from what we actually need to be focussing on.

¹ Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19-22 June 1946, and entered into force on 7 April 1948.

² "Balance is essential for every activity carried out during waking hours and skilled movements are dependent upon the ability to maintain equilibrium in a variety of positions and under many conditions." (Davies 1985, quoted in *Human Movement*, p.229)

³ "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.

Importantly, we are not striving to add something extra but to rediscover a universal quality of alertness, spontaneity, gracefulness and ease that each of us is born with and which somehow gets flattened out of most of us.⁴

The American lawyer, Earl Warren,⁵ identified the basic problem with ‘how-to’ learning, and suggested a deceptively simple solution: “To get what you want stop doing what isn’t working.” Until the student can *stop doing what isn’t working* then they can’t discover what *does* work! Our bodies are, on the whole, well designed and obedient to our wishes.⁶ As we work to avoid our habitual ways that aren’t working, then the right things can happen.

The Alexander Technique originated from the life’s work of a Victorian actor, Frederick Matthias Alexander. Persistent hoarseness and noisy breathing dogged his early career. He tried every approach to find an answer (so the story goes) – medications, therapies, exercises – but nothing worked.

Eventually, he concluded that he must be causing his problems by *something he was doing* and he set about finding out what this might be, and how to stop doing it. He took an original approach. He focussed on how he was using himself to perform. “The Use of the Self” is the title of one of his books. The concept of “self” is left purposely vague to include every potentiality: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and any other divisions you can think of or have yet to be recognised. Like any “instrument”, the way that we use our ‘self’ affects how well we perform in every activity.

As teachers, we are all aware of the variety of responses we get from students when they are given a practical instruction. Some students infer what’s required with comparative ease; others struggle and make things unnecessarily complicated for themselves. The ones with a satisfactory standard of use are the ones who make the best decisions about what they actually have to do, in practice.

Students need skills of awareness and self-monitoring, observing (which includes *truly listening*) and a reliable sense of their own muscular effort so as to be able to interpret verbal instructions successfully into practical know-how. They can’t, as usually happens, rely solely on familiar ideas or sensory feelings associated with old habits. So, to begin with, the process is more often a matter of *re-education*. He or she must be able to bring themselves to a quiet state of balance and readiness in order to work out afresh how to do something based on first principles. This is where learning the Alexander Technique can be useful. It is often described as a way of *Learning how to Learn*.

Sometimes I feel there’s a danger of neglecting the importance of “generic” personal learning skills. In a conservatoire, consideration of such things may be regarded as too elementary. But, as musical technique is refined and challenges are more demanding, then the importance of building and developing a reliable foundation to skills is increasingly apparent.

It’s a false economy, for instance, when students aren’t able to make the most of their time at college because they’re stuck in old habits. We have to address the mechanical, task-oriented approach to practising that is really quite common.⁷ One’s main enjoyment has to come from the daily process of practising: the challenge of learning a new routine without creating inefficient patterns of tension throughout our bodies, of exploring the possibilities for ‘good use’ and making

⁴ Rodenburgh

⁵ Earl Warren (1891 – 1974) chairman of the Warren Commission formed to investigate the J. F. Kennedy assassination.

⁶ Carrington, W, *Thinking Aloud*, Mornum Time Press: p.17

⁷ a “mindless repetition of proper body moves” (Leiberman, p.20)

a satisfactory standard of use the foundation of musical expression and daily life. Practising has to be considered as an art in itself with qualities of fun, self-discovery, grace, flow, economy and sensuousness and not simply as the means to an end. The way we use ourselves is not only vital to our health and wellbeing, it is also vital to our means of livelihood. Once students know how to build and develop a satisfactory standard of their own use and functioning, then they experience greater ease and enjoyment in whatever they are doing and, through repeatedly successful experiences, gain a powerful sense of control and self-confidence.

So what can be done?

Working out how to use something as complex as ourselves is made much easier if we know where to begin – and this was Alexander’s main contribution to the field of personal education.

There will always be a place for a technique of prevention in dealing with old habits whether they have outlived their usefulness for health reasons or because our ideas have moved on, and we no longer wish to do things in the same way that we always have. Some years ago, an advert for *The Economist* said we can only be truly spontaneous if we are well prepared. I’m not clear what is the best way of ensuring every student is well prepared and has the basic self-learning skills, other than by learning the Alexander Technique. This may not be feasible or necessarily the ‘right’ thing for everyone. But there is an immediate challenge with ‘prevention’ in its primary sense: Prevention is better than Cure. There’s not a quick and easy solution that can be ‘bolted on’ to what’s already there. Personal use is fundamental to performance and the principle of prevention needs a mind-set in which ‘good use’ is woven into the fabric of all our teaching.

Over the years, I’ve suggested that we adopt principles of good use as a basis to our teaching and learning strategy.

The principles might be expressed as on this list (below). Might I suggest that this be used as a starting point and maybe it will stimulate some further ideas.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

- Any method for re-education needs to take account of the integrated functioning of the whole person
- Learning what not to do, is an essential first step in learning new skills and developing others
- People develop habits that interfere with the way they function as a whole, but may be unaware of them
- Optimal co-ordination and functioning requires freedom of head poise, avoidance of overworking neck muscles and an extended, lengthening spine
- With a teacher’s help an individual can learn to attend to these matters, become aware of unwanted, harmful or unnecessary habits and learn how to stop doing them
- Reduction in the frequency and strength of such habits brings widespread benefits for co-ordination, balance, postural support, motor (movement) control, and breathing and vocal functioning – health and wellbeing.

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