

Alexander Technique Helps Musicians to Change Harmful Habits and Enhances Expression

By Mari Hodges, Nov. 27, 2019

“... the most valuable knowledge we can possess is that of the use and functioning of the self...” – The Use of the Self, by F.M. Alexander

Practice makes perfect, right? Actually, how you practice is important, because if you're practicing with tension, you'll get better at creating tension! Excess tension not only gets in the way of making music, it can also lead to frustration, injury, pain, or worst case scenario: a career cut short. Practicing ease in the body, however, enables musicians to access their innate inner coordination for greater fluidity and freedom of movement. The problem is that tension is usually unconscious and habitual, meaning it's so much a part of you that you don't notice it.

How do you get rid of tension you don't even know you have? Musicians the world over have found the answer lies with the Alexander Technique.

The Alexander Technique is a tried and true method developed by a performing artist that improves self-awareness and self-control so that unconscious habits of tension and thought don't control what you do. The Alexander Technique is endorsed by a myriad of musicians and other performing artists, including Sting, Yehudi Menuhin, Paul McCartney, Julian Bream, James Galway and Sir Adrian Boult.

Throughout life, human beings develop habits that may not be conducive to producing sound through an instrument or voice. For example, in our modern society, a downward collapse of the throat and chest combined with compression of the spine has become fairly ubiquitous. On the other hand, you may find yourself pulling your shoulders back or pulling yourself up straight, but that leads to more habitual tension. You take your habits into your musical practice because your habits feel normal to you. That makes them hard to change. Postural habits and habits of movement become particularly ingrained.

Musicians can “unlearn” these patterns of misalignment and excess tension that get in the way of coordinated movement and clarity of thought with the constructive thinking skills learned through the Alexander Technique. The method offers a way of coordinating mind and body in order to respond consciously to situations that trigger reactions of tension, rather than be controlled by your habits and automatic reactions. The work is invaluable to musicians for developing the ability to let go of, and redirect, habitual tension that is interfering with freedom of movement or sound production as they play or sing.

How Alexander Technique Helps Musicians

By practicing the Alexander Technique, musicians can prevent--and support recovery from--tendinitis, repetitive stress injury, pain and other conditions. Habitually contracted muscles often become the norm for numerous reasons, such as anxiety, self-criticism, attempting to control movement with

muscular tension or misunderstandings of biomechanical design. Without an understanding of how to use the whole body in an efficient way, musicians tend to use excess effort in an attempt to get things right. That leads to compression of the spine, muscles and joints, which is often followed by more effort and further tensing in order to compensate, which in turn can lead to pain and injury.

In Alexander Technique lessons, musicians learn to “undo” inefficient habitual patterns of effort, freeing up the body for easier movement and breath. For example, a pianist may experience tendinitis or other injury due to prolonged playing with a poorly coordinated use of the whole body. Rather than focusing on just the injured part, an Alexander Technique teacher would guide the pianist to release excess tension throughout the body, in particular in the head-neck area, and redirect energy in an efficient manner to allow improved alignment and overall coordination. In this process, the pianist discovers unconscious reactions of tightening that may have led to the injury and learns to play without it. As a result, healing can take place and the pianist prevents a recurrence of the injury.

The pianist may also discover that he can practice more intelligently by prioritizing his use of his body, making better use of his valuable time. He will be practicing flow instead of practicing compression. Once he has learned to pay attention to how he is using himself, he can make much more efficient and healthy use of his body.

For musicians, recognizing that the whole self is the primary instrument can be transformative. The Alexander Technique is like the user’s manual you never got for that instrument. How musicians use their mind-body self will affect the sound they produce. Learning the Alexander Technique skill of paying attention to your use of your self while you play opens the way to be more authentically yourself in the expression of your music, unfettered by habits.

A violinist preparing for an audition or important concert may put in hours each day practicing, but her approach to her practice can create a profound difference in her sound. Fear of being wrong, overeagerness or mindless repetition can all lead to excessive tightening. If she tightens in her neck, as most people do in reaction to stressful situations, her back will tighten so that it doesn’t give support to her arms. Her arms will have to compensate with more effort in order to move. That extra effort can block fluidity in the arm and wrist as well as contribute to tightly gripping fingers. The whole-body patterns of tension block her ability to fully express herself.

However, if the violinist learns to pay attention to her thinking and her use of her body--first without the added stimulus of her instrument and then *as she plays*--she’ll improve her ability to *get out of her own way* and consciously choose what she’d like to do rather than it being hit or miss. She won’t be dependent any longer on “good days” and “bad days.” She’ll notice when she is beginning to react by tightening to her idea of getting it right, and she’ll be more able to nip the reaction in the bud. She’ll probably feel more confident, connected and comfortable, so stage fright will become less of a problem. As a result, her body will be more at ease and her playing will be much more fluid. She’s likely to enjoy herself more as her heightened awareness gives her a multifaceted connection with the music, including rhythm, clarity, expression, evenness, resonance and intonation rather than just accuracy and speed. Her improved coordination of her whole self will allow her to produce sound that isn’t tense or strained, and her body will not have to strain, either. And she’s more likely to enjoy a long and productive career.

Music teachers benefit from learning the Alexander Technique by enhancing their skills of observation and providing clear guidance in line with biomechanical design to their students. By incorporating the

principles of the Alexander Technique, teachers model self-care and coordinated use of the body for their students.

[How Can Montana Musicians Learn It](#)

Lessons with a certified Alexander Technique Teacher are the best way to experience the benefits of the technique. The teacher usually uses hands-on contact to guide the student to have a new experience of movement without habitual tension. Lessons often involve simple movements as the teacher helps the student to allow ease and expansion instead of tightening. The teacher may recommend that you work without your instrument, first, so that you learn not to activate habitual contractions before adding the additional stimulus of the instrument.

Mari Hodges is an Alexander Technique Teacher certified by the Society of Teachers of Alexander Technique (STAT) and the American Society for the Alexander Technique (AmSAT). She has recently moved her practice to Montana where her family lives after teaching for many years in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She also plays the violin and has been a member of Orquesta Típica La Reserva of La Academia Tango Club group of tango orchestras in Buenos Aires.