

The Alexander Technique – a brief introduction for musicians

What would you say if I told you there was something you could learn to use - a technique, a tool, a set of ideas - which has the power to change and transform your musical performance?

Furthermore, what if that “something” had the power to transform your life for the better?

Sounds good, doesn't it!

Let me introduce you to the Alexander Technique.

Alexander's work has been around for a very long time – well over 100 years - and in that time has helped countless people from many walks of life. It is taught at all UK music conservatoires and major drama schools.

It all came about when an actor called Frederick Matthias Alexander developed a problem. He suffered from a most distressing loss of voice during performance. Acting was his profession and clearly very important to him and when medical treatment didn't help, he decided there was no alternative but to try to solve the problem for himself.

After a great deal of work, experimentation and observation over a number of years, he not only solved his vocal problem, but also discovered a number of scientific truths about how human beings are designed to move in a co-ordinated way allowing the natural mechanisms of the body to function freely in the way in which they were intended. He discovered that we are designed to move in such a way that the head leads and the body follows, so what you do with the poise of your head in relation with your body as you move can make a profound difference to the movements you make. This was just the first step in a number of further discoveries.

As time went by and with more work and experimentation, Alexander realised that he had discovered principles that not only made a difference to his life, but that those principles had the potential to make a difference to other people's lives as well. He realised that by engaging with his ideas, people could learn how to change, how to find a more efficient and effective use of themselves, together with more success and lasting improvement.

So how can we make use of these ideas and discoveries as musicians?

When we study musical performance, we work hard at improving technique so we can make a great sound, play or sing the notes accurately and well; we work on dynamics and phrasing, listening, playing in tune, playing fast, playing slowly - all of the things which we need to perform in our chosen style.

But there seems to be one big thing in our study which often seems to be ignored. It's like the elephant in the room; it's always there just as it was with Alexander himself when he started working out his ideas. It frequently holds us back and causes problems, frustration and discomfort or even pain, but rarely do we give any attention to it.

That one big thing is **HOW**. How we 'use' ourselves in the course of performance.

Rarely do we focus on how we lift our instruments in order to play. Rarely do we ask ourselves what we need to do or how we need to move in order to play. What do you need to do to lift your hands to the keyboard, or bring your guitar up to play? Where are you moving from? In the most simple terms, which muscles are involved and where are those muscles located?



The next time you play or sing, why not try what Alexander himself first tried? Take a bit of time to observe yourself as you move. Put some of your focus on yourself and how you are moving. Ask yourself the simple question; what movements are necessary to play my instrument? If you have to lift your instrument to play, where is movement taking place? Do you notice anything else happening as you raise your arms to give an upbeat. Singers and wind players can think about the simple natural process of taking a breath. Can you allow this to happen deeply and freely? These are really good, simple first questions to ask yourself to help you begin to build up more knowledge of yourself and how you move.

In an Alexander technique lesson, musicians are often surprised by how easily and freely they can move after working with a teacher. It's not unusual to hear an improvement in sound quality as players discover they have more freedom to move with ease, or are able to breathe more deeply with less restriction. This is brought about by using a simple reasoning process and by developing the mental discipline necessary to not interfere with the movement. With the help of a teacher, you can begin to understand that just by making a different decision about how to move, and by not interfering with that movement, you can make lasting improvement and a very real difference to the way you perform, using just as much effort that is necessary and no more.

Just think for a moment, what would your playing be like, or even more importantly, what would your life be like if you only used just as much effort as was necessary and no more.

Alexander's work can help you train your thinking to take advantage of the physiologic truths he discovered to bring about lasting improvement not only to your musical studies, but to the whole of your life, helping you fulfil your potential in anything you choose to do.

And that is what Alexander's work is for. That's the very reason why he developed his ideas; to allow nothing less than realising all of your potential.

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