

PRINCIPLES OF THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

and their Relevance to Music Education

Jennifer Roig-Francolí, M.AmSAT
www.BalanceandHarmonyAT.com
11/18/09

1. MIND-BODY UNITY AND USE OF THE SELF

It is imperative that the act of making music include the whole person. Our primary instrument is the psycho-physical self: the body directed by clear intention of the mind. Playing an instrument begins with learning to “use” the psycho-physical self in a constructive, consciously controlled way. Only when the self is used well can the musical intention be clearly communicated through the body and then through the instrument. Students and teachers need to understand that playing an instrument is a psycho-physical activity; it is not purely mental, nor is it purely physical. The mind and body cannot be separated; they are interconnected and interdependent. Everything in the mind affects the body—every single thought, whether conscious or unconscious; and everything happening in the body equally affects the mind. It is extremely important to pay attention to mental attitude when approaching the instrument and act of making music.

2. THE FORCE OF HABIT

We are not always conscious of what we are thinking or doing with our bodies. When we are not aware, we act automatically, falling back on our habitual ways of doing things, many of which were learned long before. Some habits may be beneficial, but many habits are harmful. For instance, habits of excess tension and imbalance in muscle tone, as well as compression in the joints and shrinking in the spine, interfere with the optimal use and therefore functioning of our systems. It is necessary first to become aware of what we are doing, so that we can stop and change these habits for the better.

In order to learn to react appropriately to stimuli (for instance, the teacher’s instruction, or performing on stage), the student needs to learn how to replace the instinctual and unreasoned use of the mind-body with a conscious, reasoned use of the self.

3. INHIBITION AND NON-DOING

Teachers and students normally have a habit of “endgaining”, which is an Alexander concept indicating our habit of impatience or over-eagerness in seeking instant gratification. It is important to have a motivating goal (end) in mind, but then the student (as well as the teacher) needs to let go of that idea completely in order to pay attention to executing the small steps, in sequence and then together, required to arrive at the goal.

“Inhibition” is the term used for the stopping of our psycho-physical reactions to stimuli, in particular the habit of wanting to arrive at our goal immediately. Instead of pushing ourselves and our students forward, we need to STOP (inwardly, in both mind and body), pause, and give ourselves time to THINK through the means whereby we can achieve success.

Our habit is to constantly “DO” in reaction to a stimulus. When we cannot achieve what we want (for instance, a complicated musical passage just won’t work in our practicing), our

habitual reaction is to *try harder*, or *do it again*, over and over. This is like banging our heads against the wall in futility! First we need to STOP and actively get ourselves into the calm space of “Non-doing”, where we can begin to see more clearly what it is that we are doing wrong. What is it that the student is *doing already* that is preventing him/her from achieving success? If he can pause, STOP what is interfering, have a clear intention, and use his mind/body well, the right thing will then simply do itself.

4. FAULTY SENSORY AWARENESS

Sensory awareness and a quickening of the conscious mind are necessary in order to change habits, and our kinesthetic and proprioceptive awareness must be re-awakened (re-educated) in order to improve general balance and well-being. Our sensory awareness has become less reliable over time, and our internal “compass” is off, needing to be re-set. Our interpretation of our feelings often does not correspond with objective reality, so we must learn to rely on the reasoning processes (and concordant skills of inhibition and direction) instead of our feelings. We must learn to allow and experience feelings, but not rely on them. Our field of attention and awareness of what is happening within us and without, needs to be expanded and unified.

This concept is so important to teaching or learning an instrument. How many times do we ask a student to do something and the student is convinced that he/she is carrying out the instruction, but we can see clearly that they are not actually doing it? This is frequently due to an inaccurate registration of the kinesthetic, “felt” body sense, or proprioception. The body sense has become skewed, and we no longer know accurately where our body and body-parts are in space. We no longer know what it means to “stand up straight” or “lower the shoulder” or “hold the chin up” in an integrated way. As teachers, we can see and sense that something in the student’s posture is unhelpful and getting in the way, but we do not have the knowledge or skills to be able to effectively communicate to the student how to permanently affect the overall, whole-body pattern that will lead to the specific change we’d like to see. And the student does not understand what is asked, either, because of a disconnect between the brain and the body. This can lead to endless frustration, on the parts of both the teacher and student.

5. SENDING DIRECTIONS

With the Alexander Technique, the student learns to become more aware of the mind-body connection, and how to direct the body and body-parts in space, as well as how to release overall excess tension and find a better overall balance and well-being.

The word *direction* has two related meanings in Alexander Technique: (1) the orientation of the body in space, and (2) the sending of messages/impulses from the brain to parts of the body. The sending of messages from the brain to the body is something that we can become more conscious of, and we can learn to improve our mind-body connection for better overall coordination and constructive conscious control of ourselves. The four basic, beginning Alexander directions for an improved use of the psycho-physical self are:

1. Let the neck be soft and free (*in order to...*)
2. Let the head be forward and up (*in order to...*)
3. Let the back (*and torso*) lengthen and widen (*in order to...*)
4. Let the knees go forward and away.

Directions are thoughts only, not muscular “doings”! Every thought (conscious or unconscious) has a corresponding effect in the body. The word “let” implies a gentle giving of permission and freedom, not the placing of a body-part into a certain position by doing an action. The effective sending of conscious directions/thoughts depends on simultaneous non-doing and inhibition. These directions are best learned from an experienced Alexander teacher, because the habit of trying to *do* those directions instead of just *thinking* them is so terribly strong. Practicing them without a teacher’s guidance will most likely lead to increased overall tension, stiffening of the neck, and possibly pain or discomfort.

6. PRIMARY CONTROL AND MOVEMENT

The dynamic head-neck-torso relationship is primary to all movement. *“The head leads; the body follows.”* It is imperative to our well-being and to successfully accomplishing our goals with mind-body integrity that the atlanto-occipital (AO) joint (where the skull meets the spine) not be fixed, but free and available for spontaneous movement. This freedom, combined with greater freedom in all the joints of the body, results in the efficient working of the postural and reflex mechanisms throughout the organism, bringing about graceful poise and well-coordinated flow. Optimal use and functioning depends on the freedom of the primary control (dynamic head-neck-torso relationship).

When a student is “endgaining” (over-concentrating and fixing by narrowing focus on obtaining a specific goal) with his/her instrument, the AO joint becomes locked, and *all* movement is thereby impeded, becoming awkward, unnatural, and less coordinated. This also happens when a student is experiencing any degree of mental or emotional tension, including performance anxiety. (See www.BalanceandHarmonyAT.com for a link to my article on how to deal with performance anxiety.)