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Initial Experience with the Alexander Technique
For a Classical Guitarist

Since beginning my journey with the Alexander Technique I have had changes in ideals large enough that they could arguably be called paradigm shifts in a few areas of thought: my conception, perception and understanding of my body, my mind, and music. At times these realizations may overlap and it may be difficult to define them, but, as Michael Gelb says in his book, *Body Learning*, “The Alexander Technique eludes precise definition because it involves a new experience – the experience of gradually freeing oneself from the domination of fixed habits.”¹

I believe it is advantageous to begin with the most tangible and easily definable areas of change and enlightenment that have occurred: the physical. I previously knew that being a musician is an athletic endeavor that involves training muscle groups to react in a coordinated way as to manipulate an instrument, but I did not realize that all areas of the body must be addressed and given attention. I am a classical guitarist and have spent a good deal of time considering the way that my fingers move, the way that my wrist approaches the fret board, the arch of my palm as it supports my fingers to change position and sound different harmonies. It was not previously apparent to me that the position of my spine was of utmost importance, or the alignment of my feet, or if my neck was crooked or not. It is advantageous and necessary to become increasingly more aware of body use to

¹ Gelb, Michael J. *Body Learning*. Pg. 1

operate naturally and efficiently, but for this paper I have narrowed down my findings to a few areas that relate especially to classical guitarists: the head and neck, the spine, and the wrists.

In her book, *How to Learn the Alexander Technique*, Barbara Connable states that “Habituated tensing of the muscles of the neck result in a predictable and inevitable tensing of the whole body. Release out of the tensing in the whole must begin with release in the muscles in the neck.”² Many accomplished virtuosic classical guitar players keep their head cocked to the side, tense, and staring at the fingers on their left hand as they move up and down the fingerboard. As the classical guitar has not long enjoyed the elevated status of being an instrument studied in conservatories or music school, there is still much research and discoveries to be done in technique. Since experimenting with allowing my neck to float on the A.O. joint I have noticed that my breathing has become easier and my ability to practice for a long time has increased. Before I would be exhausted after finishing an etude because my neck would be tense from staring at my hand, and I would concentrate so hard that my breathing would also be stifled. It was quickly apparent that freeing the neck is essential to freeing the entire body, including internal organs, from tension and allowing them to function optimally and sustainably.

Many classical guitar players have experienced back problems due to the fact that they have trained themselves not to react to the tension and strain that accumulates in their back after hours of practice. Until recently, the last decade or

² Connable, Barbara. *How to Learn the Alexander Technique*. Pg. 2

so, classical guitarists have been forced to place their left leg onto a small footstool which lifts up the guitar to a position which allows more freedom for the hand to move up and down the fretboard. The problem is that, in lifting the leg and placing it on the stool, the lower back has a tendency to compress, the legs are not allowed to move out of the pelvis freely but are confined to an unnatural bent position, the left shoulder has a tendency to hunch over in order to make difficult reaches, and the spine is stuck in a slightly crooked position bending to the left. Now there is a device, an appendage, which lifts the guitar up to this position without the use of a footstool and allows for a freer spine, free leg movement, and no need to hunch over for difficult reaches. With the appendage the guitar is more mobile allowing the player to shift their weight on their sits bones and bring the guitar to them rather than force their body to adapt to the immobile guitar.

Awareness of the spine is a necessity for guitar players. Connable mentions four laws of the spine: 1. The head must lead, 2. The vertebrae must follow in sequence, 3. The spine must lengthen in movement, and 4. The movement should be equally distributed among the joints of the spine.³ After thinking about my spine more often during practice sessions I was able to eliminate pain in my lower back that I had accumulated from bad practice habits. I sat up what I thought was “straight” but really was resting the weight of my upper body on the back layer of the spine, the part that is supposed to protect the nerves, rather than letting the weight fall on the lumbar core which is meant to provide support. I believe that all

³ Connable. Pg. 14

guitar players should use one of these appendages that lifts the guitar up rather than a footstool which inhibits freedom of movement.

Andres Segovia, the 'Father of the Modern Classical Guitar,' made so many advances for the classical guitar repertoire, technique and status. He elevated it to the status of a concert hall instrument where it previously had been confined to the living room or tavern. Of all of the good techniques that he applied to the classical guitar, there were a few that are not as sustainable for future generations of players. One of these is his right hand technique. He played for a while with what is called the "French Style" where his hand dangles down from the right wrist which allows the fingers to be basically in a fixed position having access to only the strings that they play. In this style there is excess tension being put onto the tendons in the right arm, also into the wrist and nerves that run through the hand. Like some organists and pianists, guitarists can have a tendency to over-stabilize their wrists.⁴

Next I shall address the ways in which studying the Alexander Technique has shifted the way that I conceptualize the role of my mind in the process of learning music and every day activities. I believe that changes in the mind are what cause long term changes in the body. In fact, the sustainable changes are ones that are anchored in the habits of the mind. It is not merely changing the way that I sit, or the way that I hold the guitar, but becoming aware of how my body works by using my mind. My conception of my body, Body Mapping, has been integral in my development this past semester.

⁴ Connable, Barbara. *What Every Musician Needs to Know About the Body*. Pg. 65

Filling my mind with the correct thoughts of how my body functions has served in identifying places of tension, bad habits, and acknowledging when I am using myself well. Also, emptying my mind has been very helpful to me. Concentrated rest has been something that has in fact revolutionized the way that I structure my day. I find myself being much more rejuvenated when I give my body a few moments to rest and my mind to be still.

In his book, *Sacred Hoops*, Phil Jackson mentions a few good bits of advice that he learned from one of his colleagues on the New York Knicks: 1. Don't let anger cloud the mind, and 2. Awareness is everything.⁵ These are keys to being able to function optimally in a physical sense as well. When anger is present in the mind it will surely come out in the body. If, during the middle of a performance, a musician gets angry at their self because of a mistake, that anger will only hinder their ability to move on and perform the next few measures well. But first the battle is to be aware of what is happening in the mind. Just as there are bad physical habits such as slouching there are bad mental habits like getting habitually frustrated without realizing it.

At times it seems much harder to 'free my mind' than to allow my body to move freely. One of the biggest hindrances of the mind is to be stuck in the past: past mistakes in life or in performance. Jackson says, "I no longer felt compelled to run from my past or cling to it out of fear. I could take from it what worked for me and let the rest go."⁶ Every musician must have a list of ways in which their development could have happened more smoothly or efficiently. Perhaps they

⁵ Jackson, Phil. *Sacred Hoops*. Pg 35

⁶ Jackson. Pg. 46

didn't start early enough, or their first teaching taught them bad habits, or they didn't care about their instrument for a while and didn't progress as much as they could have. It is important to recognize these thoughts, realize that they are not helping in any way and to let them go.

This leads me to how the Alexander Technique has changed the way that I think about music. John Squadra says, "When you die to what you thought was true, everything in your life catches fire. You are the instrument, not the music. If you think you are the music you will stop at the final bar."⁷ I have realized that my idea of music will always be changing throughout the course of my life. There will be times when I discover that I may have developed an incorrect or unhealthy view of what it means to make music or be a musician, and I will have to die to what I previously thought was true in order to learn and progress.

It is not a flawless performance that creates a moving musical experience; it is someone that has approached their music with freedom and integrity, allowing themselves to be captivated by the power and importance of their craft. Even though the instrument will make mistakes, the music will still have its full power. Through studying the Alexander Technique I have discovered that music is much more than a series of sounds in time, it is a manifestation of beauty in a moment made possible through the cultivated practice of good virtues such as balance, discipline, freedom and good use. I hope not only to be proficient on my instrument, but also to treat my mind and body with care so that my instrument will be a more natural extension of myself. I cannot imagine progressing as a musician without paying homage to

⁷ Squadra, John. *The Compass of the Rose*

Alexander, and that his findings and philosophies will be affecting others and myself long into the future.