

Sing your voice and body well

A new approach to singing and to playing a music instrument using a century-old technique: The Alexander Technique.

There are musicians, some say there were more of them in the past, who get as much pleasure from a performance as they give, who always perform easily and well, and who use themselves so efficiently that their professional lives and their natural lives coincide. There are others, however, with equal talent and training, to whom performance and even practice are exhausting, and whose professional lives are cut short because they lose the mastery of the skills they have acquired. They put forth more effort in solving technical problems than the results warrant, and ultimately discover that they have used up their reserves of energy. If they understood the use of themselves as well as they understand the use of their instruments, such breakdowns would be far less frequent.

An excerpt from the article ['A Technique for Musicians' by Frank Pierce Jones](#)

Despite playing different instruments or music styles, every musician goes through the same challenge: how to play their instrument without losing energy, and how not have the familiar musicians' pain. To mention a few of the common musicians troubles: singers and wind instrumentalists suffer from back pain and breathing disorders; contrabass players developing the so called 'frozen shoulder', back pain hand and finger problems; piano players with their knees and back trouble; drummers just about the same... I even know the case of a violin player breaking his lower arm due to, over the years, creating too much muscle tension whilst practicing. That is how far musicians can go, and for one reason only: to be able to master their instrument because of the love and satisfaction of music playing.

If only they knew this is all so unnecessary, by finding the root of the problem the solution will be so much simpler to find. As Mr. F.M. Alexander said: "*when you stop the wrong the right will do itself*".

Musicians simply have to learn how to master their primary instrument before getting to play their music instrument. With 'primary instrument' I mean to say: the body.

The body is the instrument we all use in order to play any music instrument. Musicians do need to master their instrument and their music, I do not mean 'blindly exercising' when I say this. Most of the times this is actually the root of the problem, not the solution.

To understand the root of the problem we need to understand that every thought is translated into muscle activity. This is one of the major discoveries of Mr. F.M. Alexander, more than a hundred years ago. And this is so easy to see it working with our modern technology. Yet, we tend not to trust our thinking and keep on relying on muscle effort, somehow we wrongly believe that we will be able to master the working of our muscles in our short lives, and that is something nature took care of, in its millions of years of evolution. We might as well trust it!

We only need to understand how the body works, our inner support, and we need to direct our thoughts and energy towards a better use of ourselves, and of our activities, including the playing of a music instrument.

Also we must go back to the root of why we started playing music at the first place. I know the answer of that will be the same for all musicians: for the love of music and the need of expressing themselves.

When we play or sing we feel alive, communicative, interacting with our fellow musicians, and all problems are simply non-existent, all there is it is music itself. That is what we can call life!

Life

The smallest particle of life is the cell. Looking through a microscope it is possible to see the functioning and operation of a whole organism in one simple cell. Several elements working independently and together to ensure the cell and its environment keep on self-regulating, maintaining an optimal homeostasis¹

A cell has its 'directory board', its 'components assembly room', its 'power plant' and even a 'post office' where information is carried to the cell itself and to different places in its environment.

And a neuron... a neuron is also a cell, a brain cell.

The brain coordinates muscle activity

Our brain has several centres that receive information from our sensors. These centres work together in order to evaluate images, sounds, to calculate weight of an object so that you are able to pick it up: chairs, books, a glass of water, or for you to keep breathing even when you fall asleep, through self-regulation via the 'vegetative system' or autonomic nervous system.²

Such information is processed in the different centres of the brain (lobes), the brainstem³, the limbic and nervous system.

This happens at the cellular level. Cell messengers carry information on what and how much of each element, of every molecule that will be necessary for the whole system to keep on self-regulating and for the proper functioning of the desired operation (walking, sitting on a chair, running, playing a music instrument, breathing...).

¹ Homeostasis: the tendency toward a relatively stable equilibrium between interdependent elements, esp. as maintained by physiological processes.

² The autonomic nervous system (ANS or visceral nervous system or involuntary nervous system) is the part of the peripheral nervous system that acts as a control system, functioning largely below the level of consciousness, and controls visceral functions. [1] The ANS affects heart rate, digestion, respiratory rate, salivation, perspiration, pupillary dilation, micturition (urination), and sexual arousal. Most autonomous functions are involuntary but a number of ANS actions can work alongside some degree of conscious control. Everyday examples include breathing, swallowing, and sexual arousal, and in some cases functions such as heart rate.

³ Brainstem: the central trunk of the mammalian brain, consisting of the medulla oblongata, pons, and midbrain, and continuing downward to form the spinal cord.

The limbic system ^{Fig. 1} in the brain forms the bridge between the frontal lobe⁴ - Fig2, which takes care of cognitive functions⁵, and the brainstem ^{Fig. 3}, which **regulates muscle tone**, amongst others.

Fig. 1

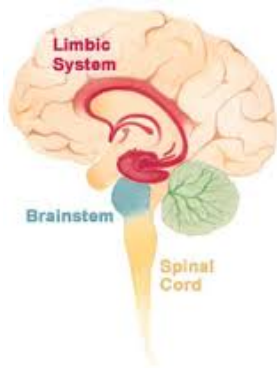


Fig. 2

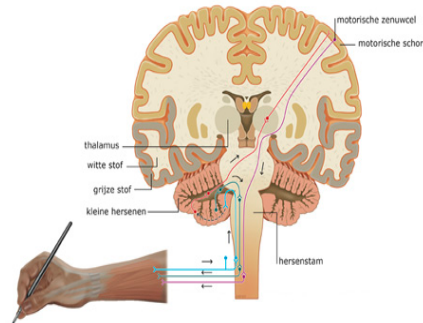
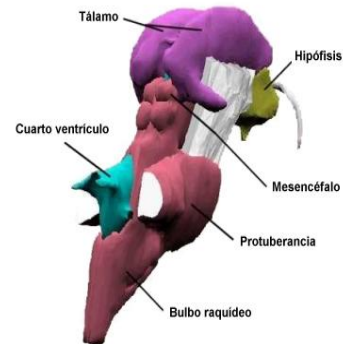


Fig. 3



Neurons form a network to supply information to the nervous system and vice versa. For example: 'I am hungry' = the system is sending the information of 'I need power', and your interpretation of it is: 'I must eat'.

On the other hand the system is influenced by the demand of the moment, for example: 'I will pick up my contrabass'. In this case you are sending the information of what you want to do to your system, your intention will be sent to each tiny section of each fiber of each muscle and muscle group, to provide that you carry out the desired movement.

Muscular action at cellular level

Muscles will provide you the balance of your body, and you have an influence on the way they do it. Mostly we try to do the work for them, we must simply learn how to allow the body to do it for us.

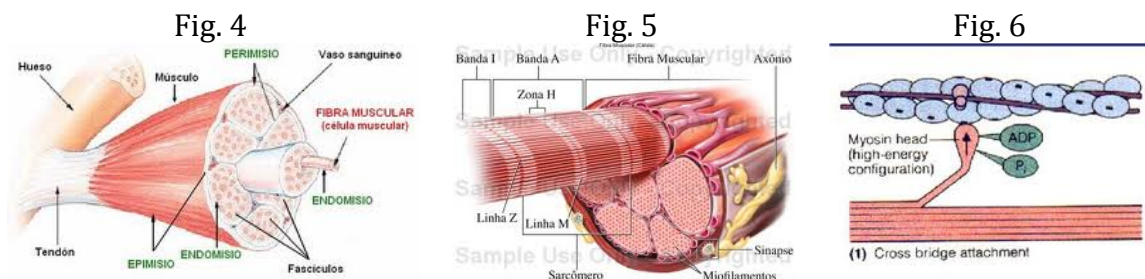
Each muscle of each muscle group makes an agglomerate formation of thousands of muscle fibers^{Fig. 4}, they all work together, interacting in a large muscle web.

Each fiber acts as a sort of elastic ^{Fig. 5}: they will shorten or lengthen. The changes in length of the muscle fiber are due to a molecular process between two components: actin and myosin.

⁴ Frontal lobe - that part of the cerebral cortex in either hemisphere of the brain lying directly behind the forehead

⁵ Cognitive functions (sometimes known as mental functions) are defined as different ways of perceiving and judging the world

Actin and myosin make contact on thousands of points on each tiny section of the fibers, producing the displacement of the fibers Fig. 6 to lengthen or shorten the muscle.



Thinking in activity

When the brain knows exactly what your intent is, even if it is only to speak or to sing a phrase, it will know exactly how much air and muscle tension is needed in order to provide that specific movement. Oh yes, breathing is also movement, lots of it.

One of the things we learn through the Alexander Technique is how to activate the thought and power of intention, in order to allow the body to carry out the chosen activity with the minimum amount of muscle effort.

We learn how to work through the lengthening of the muscles, instead of the habitual unconscious shortening, giving the body much more space and possibilities to choose in order to perform the chosen activities.

By working with the tools of the Alexander Technique you will gain the consciousness of how you are using your body, preventing pain whilst practicing and performing. In the meantime you will have much more time and energy for your music and for your audience.

The Alexander Technique is a learning method. Like any learning process we need to give it time and follow regular lessons when possible.

You can discover a lot by following a workshop or short course as well, it will give you enough tools to start the process of thinking in activity, however it is quite useful to have a qualified teacher of the Alexander Technique to show you a few new things on a regular basis.

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