

Poise in Performance: Alexander Technique for Musicians

By Joan Arnold

About 14 years ago, when I was in training to become a teacher of the Alexander Technique, a friend took me to a lovely quartet concert at Carnegie Recital Hall. As we listened to the music, I watched the bodies of the performers fight with their customary tensions - the cello player tightly curving over his cello, the violinists tilting up their instruments, clenched between shoulder and chin. But the violist's look was different. She was poised in her chair, effortlessly upright. Her short haircut highlighted the delicate forward balance of her head over her spine. Though the music was fast and demanding, her instrument seemed to float in her hands. Her bearing was elegant, her body expressive. When we met the players backstage, I complimented her on her posture. Excitedly she said, "I've been studying the Alexander Technique!"

It was a visible example of the difference this mind/body method can make for a musician. Playing music is a complex coordination of body and psyche: sitting, standing, holding an instrument for long hours, managing breath and stress level, attuning to subtleties within a band or ensemble, being receptive and inventive, hardworking and free.

The Alexander Technique is an approach to movement that helps you meet those demands, a reliable way to reduce or eliminate tension, nervousness or pain. People in every profession have used it to prevent or recover from injury, end tension headaches, overcome repetitive strain and a range of disparate problems. A set of guiding principles you keep in mind as you work, it can promote endurance and help you access new reserves of power and expression. The Technique is a means to finding inner balance so that the music can flow, without effort. Today, it is taught and used in many prestigious institutions - the Juilliard School, the Aspen Music Festival, major orchestras - and has helped musicians and singers of every kind, from Yehudi Menuhin to Sting. Whether you're playing a string bass or a piccolo, an Alexander lesson is an opportunity to see how you, with your own body type and temperament, interact with your chosen instrument and style. Musicians can bring their instruments to lessons or, when the instrument is less portable, the teacher visits their studio. I spoke with several musicians who have studied with me over the years and have used the Technique to resolve physical problems and access more creative resources.

Kevin Bents now produces albums and writes music for television (for which he's won an Emmy), but when he came for lessons 12 years ago, he was primarily a sideman, playing keyboards in clubs and on the road. "The age-old thing with me," he says now, "is that my terrible 'jazz' posture was affecting my playing." While studying classical piano in college, he recalls struggling with difficult Beethoven passages. "I would freeze up in my forearms. I felt I had this weird problem I carried around that no one was going to be able to do anything about."

When he came for lessons, Kevin's posture was typical of many musicians who curve over their instruments. His neck tension pulled his chin forward and created some compression in his spine. Though this common posture may look cool or easygoing, it's really the result of muscular over-activity. Learning to free his neck and release downward pressure on the spine enabled him to sit more comfortably upright at the piano, with less tension in his shoulders, arms and hands. After two years of study, he says, "I felt a lot better. At that time, I was playing regularly at a club, and the carriage of my whole upper torso shifted appreciably. A lot of physical issues I had with the piano cleared up. I felt able to relax more as I was playing. Things that had been difficult for me became easier."

He also acquired a new way to solve problems. "One of the biggest lessons I learned," he says, "was the notion of intent and direction. Rather than forcing a change, I could progress and achieve goals through a process."

The Alexander process is comprised of three interlocking skills: 1) body awareness, 2) the ability to undo excess tension and 3) the use of thought rather than muscular resolve to engender more efficient movement. The teacher promotes these skills with a unique touch that elicits awareness, muscular release and the body's capacity to find its own inherent balance. Young kids begin with ideal posture: they effortlessly support a large head on a little neck; their spines are long, their joints flexible. Acquired tension habits suppress this natural postural support system, and the

teacher's role is to re-awaken it - through soothing touch, adept observation and coaching in specific skills that help you promote freedom in all of life's daily activities.

"I can remember walking home and feeling very light," says Randy Reinhart, a freelance jazz and swing trumpeter for 30 years. After his first Alexander lesson, he found, "It was easier to walk. When I got to my front door, my wife said, 'Wow, you look so tall!' " Though he would like to study more, he has been able to apply the fundamentals he learned in three sessions. "I travel a lot, doing around five gigs a week," he says. "Holding the trumpet in the same position for four to six hours can be a very tense thing." While playing, he now keeps in mind that his shoulders can be released, his legs grounded and his torso buoyant. Efficient movement distributes effort throughout the body and, rather than having his shoulders do all the work, his improved alignment creates a better support for holding the horn.

David Weintraub came for a specific problem. He couldn't get through a two-hour rehearsal without nagging lower back pain. He plays with two bands for 10 to 15 hours a week and supports himself by writing, which requires hours of sitting at a computer. Now 28, he writes songs and plays rock and roll on electric guitar. "My tendency is to bend forward a lot when I play," he says. What he gleaned from the Alexander session to which he brought his guitar was "the concept of not crouching over and focusing too hard on what I'm doing. I let myself float back and up, let the guitar hang instead of forcing it into some position I'm used to."

After six months of study, he now can balance himself to relieve pressure on his lower back. "It used to be a big deal for me to stand and watch a band for an hour. Now that's no problem at all. And I can stand with the guitar through a rehearsal or a performance. If I'm tired and have been at the computer all day, then I'll have a little bit of pinch or pain, but I know how to come out of it. I can leave a rehearsal feeling no worse than when I went in, which is a major improvement."

Pain and tension are the ultimate distraction. A more comfortable body is a freer vessel for the creative spark. Bents has observed how the degree of physical comfort on one's instrument can actually determine the course of a musician's career. "I've always loved to explore and shift between musical styles," he says. "But when posture and movement interfere, a physical block can become a creative block. It's good to create within limits, but much better to be the one in charge of setting the limits." As the Alexander Technique helped him unravel his own restrictions, he says, "My range and abilities on piano expanded and gave me more creative tools to work with." He continues to apply what he learned to singing and guitar.

He describes playing as "an act of physical coordination with a musical outcome," and says his expanded range gave him more freedom to improvise. "The lesson for me was: you're more tied to the body than you think. Ideas I wouldn't have come up with just presented themselves. When you're improvising, half the time you're really trying out a new physical move. What if I do this with my wrist instead of something else? What if I go for this gob of notes up here that I've never tried? Now I do it because I feel able to. Then, lo and behold, something new comes out and you grow."

The Technique is a kind of alphabet of movement and function. Once you learn more about the body's logic, you have a new lens through which to view how it can work best in a variety of situations - at the gym, in yoga, aikido or running, in rehearsals or on stage. All musicians manage the constant interplay between control and abandon. In the melange of failures and breakthroughs that comprise an artist's life, the Alexander Technique is a way to regain poise, clear the system for fuller expression, to keep your body free and comfortable, and to keep playing music a joy.
