

## 4 Practice and Alexander Technique

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### 4.1. The project

Alexander Technique (AT) is taught at many conservatoires and music colleges, including the Norwegian Academy of Music (NMH). It is offered at the NMH as an elective subject between October and February, involving five group sessions each lasting one hour as well as seven 30-minute individual sessions for each student.

AT provision can be organised in a number of ways. As far as music academies are concerned, it would be pertinent to ask whether the benefits of teaching AT to students would increase if it is somehow linked to teaching on their principal instruments. In autumn 2014 plans got underway for a project involving teaching AT to a select number of students and their teachers. The aim of the course was to establish a collaboration between the AT teacher, the students and their principal instrument teachers. The idea was that such teamwork would enhance the transfer of learning between AT teaching, instrumental lessons and individual practice. The project ran from early January to mid-May 2015.

### 4.2. What is Alexander Technique?

AT is a method for changing bad habits in mind and movement in order to prevent tensions that restrict functionality. AT aims to equip us with methods for replacing automatised physical habits that affect the flow, quality and expression of our playing with conscious, controlled behaviours. These habits range from the way we stand or sit to how we hold the instrument and control our breathing.

Awareness is a key concept of AT, and two of its main principles are *inhibition* and *direction*. “Inhibition” means preventing undesirable behaviour from manifesting

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<sup>1</sup> The project was conducted by Alexander Technique teacher Stephen Parker in collaboration with Professor Isabelle Perrin, Professor Julius Pranevičius and Senior Lecturer Matz Pettersen. Project manager was Harald Jørgensen, who also authored the report.

itself, e.g. a horn player tensing her throat muscles in a way that restricts the sound quality, or a harpist tensing his neck and shoulder muscles, thus stopping himself from making full use of the body and causing injury to himself. The first step is to stop the habit from being set in motion in the first place before replacing it with functional thinking and movement. "Direction" concerns how we approach the stretching and contraction of the body, how we think "upwards", "downwards" and "outwards" as well as "extension" and "compression" and how to achieve stability and mobility. With these thought patterns in mind, the aim is to achieve an economical use of energy and balanced distribution of tensions in the body.

### **4.3. The objectives of the course**

For the students the aim of the course is to help them take control of their practice and music making in order to improve the quality of their playing. They will do this by:

- Adopting the thinking and main principles behind AT,
- Being able to identify habits that impede the co-ordination of awareness and body while practising and playing (bad habits),
- Being able to limit or eliminate the effects of bad habits while practising and playing by applying solutions based on AT.

For the institution the goal is to try out a model for AT teaching based on collaboration between the AT teacher, student and principal instrument teacher in an attempt to maximise the benefit to the student.

### **4.4. Participants and hours**

Nine students participated in the trial: four harpists, one horn player, one viola player, one pianist, one violinist and one oboe player. The viola, violin and piano students attended a two-hour large group session with the AT teacher involving all the students (not all of them turned up), and they received between 11 and 15 45-minute sessions of one-to-one tuition in AT. The others (one horn player, one oboe player and four harpists) participated in a large group session, received

between 6 and 15 hours of one-to-one tuition in AT and attended AT instruction in class lessons as well. These lessons were timetabled and at the principal instrument teacher's disposal. All or most of the students as well as the principal instrument teacher were present in these class lessons. In addition, a small number of horn and oboe students attended AT classes or small groups with their principal instrumental teacher present without receiving one-to-one AT lessons. The first group of nine make up the "trial group", and it is they who have provided assessments of their experiences during the project.

The students were selected by the principal instrument teachers. There were no particular criteria for the selection. Two of the participants had some previous experience of AT as an elective subject at the NMH.

Three of the teachers also received AT lessons: horn, oboe and violin. They did so in order to gain some first-hand experience and to get a better insight into how the students can adopt AT practices.

The project began in January with teaching AT in a large group, followed by another seminar in February. General information about AT was provided, and the students demonstrated how they behave while playing and practising. The AT teacher offered guidance and drew the participants' attention to their mannerisms and bad habits. One objective was to acquire an understanding of the principles behind this approach and to improve the students' observation skills while also introducing a vocabulary for use in the one-to-one sessions. Basic information about anatomy was also provided. It was difficult to gather all the students due to timetable complications. After two seminars the project manager and AT teacher therefore concluded that the available time would be better spent on additional classes and small groups with AT teacher and principal instrument teacher present.

The one horn student receiving one-to-one lessons also participated in six classes and 10 small group sessions with the other horn students. During these sessions the students worked on topics raised by the AT teacher, e.g.: "How can non-constructive habits have an impact on factors such as breathing, support and the role of the back when preparing to play?" There were also questions posed by the students, such as "How do I make sure I have enough breath for long phrases?" The AT teacher would then link this to the students' playing. The teaching emphasised student involvement through observation and interaction and focused on evaluating the effects of the measures on breathing, sound quality, embouchure etc. Half-way through the semester these sessions were supplemented with teaching in small groups, where

2–4 students would play excerpts from their regular “homework” and their fellow students provide feedback. The students also got involved in observing each other’s behaviours and habits, and relevant issues were raised on the spot. One recurring question was whether there was any change in the students’ playing.

The seven harp classes were initially conducted as thematic lessons, just like the horn classes. The harp students received a practical introduction to the importance and functions of the main joints during practice and performance. Again, changes were made half-way through the project, whereby a small group of students performed their “homework” and received feedback from their peers and AT teacher. One topic was the significance of the back on freedom of movement in the wrist and fingers, which in turn affects sound production. The students also worked without their instruments, for example by standing with their backs against the wall in order to increase awareness of their surroundings and become more conscious of direction (“upwards”, “downwards”, etc.) and concentration.

During three oboe classes, the students worked on issues such as breathing and articulation, especially during staccato play. The participants performed and observed each other to establish which factors affect the mouth and jaw, for example (useful and needless tensions in the neck and back), and what may be conducive to a freer jaw movement. The principal instrument teacher was an integral participant in the group.

All the groups received some form of interactive guidance from the AT teacher, where verbal information was complemented by hands-on experience. AT is not a form of treatment or therapeutic manipulation; rather it involves gentle touching to draw the person’s attention to important parts of the body.

The one-to-one AT lessons were always based on something the students had been working on during practice or issues they had discussed with their principal instrument teacher. The AT teacher would choose a topic if the students had no suggestions. For example “How do you get ready to play?” with the accompanying question: “Is there anything that prevents you from doing what you want to do?” During the classes, the students would first perform, and then the class would pick up on issues that emerged along the way. Extemporaneous issues dominated these classes, in the contextual setting with fellow students and a teacher. Their shared experiences determined the content of the classes.

Both individually and in the groups, the emphasis was on identifying unconstructive habits, labelling them, and applying AT principles in order to change them.

As mentioned previously, the one-to-one lessons for the principal instrument teachers were intended to give them practical experience of the principles of AT and prepare them for understanding the processes that their students would be going through. They therefore performed and received guidance in the same way as the students. Occasionally the first few minutes would be spent commenting on a student's circumstances and development, but primarily these were "the teachers' lessons". When they needed to exchange views on a student, they did so via email or during brief meetings.

#### **4.5. Documenting the process and outcomes**

The AT teacher and project manager kept in regular contact. The AT teacher submitted monthly reports on his activities, and there was communication in the form of meetings and email. Any need for adjustments was discussed, and the AT teacher's ongoing experiences with the project were presented. The AT teacher was interviewed at the end of the project and has provided additional written comments.

The students were encouraged to provide written feedback to the AT teacher after each one-to-one lesson, based on a set of questions. This did not work well; only three reports were submitted from the one-to-one lessons. Eight of the nine students provided a written final evaluation.

The three most involved teachers (harp, horn, and oboe) have also submitted written assessments.

#### **4.6. The students' assessments**

The idea behind AT

The students have provided comments which show that they have grasped the idea behind AT, using phrases such as "observing my habits", "changing habits", "become more sensitive and correct in our perception of the body, and better co-ordinate and distribute the necessary muscle tension", "more consciously correct body balance, position and movement", and other characteristics of AT. They note that

this takes time to get used to, making comments such as “my understanding of AT has increased, but it is still difficult to achieve the correct state of consciousness on my own”, and “when I was learning the process, the first thing to do was accept that I had adopted bad physical habits. Becoming aware of and identifying these habits takes time”. The need for guidance from the AT teacher is clear to see.

### Identifying mannerisms and bad habits

When attempting to identify mannerisms and bad habits, the students point at how some of their habits had been hidden and were therefore difficult to do something about. One student writes that “taking part in the AT lessons allowed me to observe my habits which, before these lessons, seemed to be a part of me that could never change.” Another student writes that “sometimes I think that I’m able to deal with these habits while playing and sometimes not, but I feel I have improved a lot since we started. At the beginning I wasn’t aware that my habits were as ingrained as they were”.

In terms of signals from the body, potential problem areas for most musicians include the head, neck and back. Depending on the instrument, some may also suffer problems with their hands and arms, wrists and fingers, and other parts of the body. One of these students wrote: “As a harpist I have a tendency to contract my neck and create tension in my shoulders and back.” Another says that “my back is fine, but my chest and arms are tense. This obstructs my breathing and my contact with the instrument while playing”. Tension and breathing were issues that affected all the instruments involved and were raised during practically every class and one-to-one lesson.

Tension was described in a number of different ways. One writes that “I have gained a better understanding of my own instrument. Now I’m able to locate possible causes of any technical difficulties that I encounter and damaging habits that can cause strain or injury if they are not addressed”. Another states that “in the end I feel calmer because I have begun to learn how to stop when I perform movements which turned into habits that created tensions everywhere”.

A couple of students also mentioned how important it is to acquire some knowledge of anatomy and body functions in order to understand how various physical factors trigger movement. One student wrote: “After starting AT I feel that I know my body much better, and I know how to conduct myself in a more natural and appropriate way both during practice and in life in general.” The relationship between body and awareness was also commented upon, for instance by the student experiencing

tension in the chest and arms: "Sometimes the problem is not a technical one to do with your instrument, nor musicality or articulation, but the tensions inside you. This is a major problem, but with AT it is possible to change or control it."

### Seeking solutions based on AT

When trying to find AT-based solutions the students broached the subject of how to adopt the notion of "direction" and using the terms "upwards", "downwards" and "outwards" along with "extension" and "compression" in order to explore issues such as "balance between stability and mobility". The student experiencing tension in the shoulders and neck because she was contracting her neck now feels that her "posture is much better now that I'm thinking <upwards> towards the sky and <downwards> towards my feet". The concept of direction appears to have become embedded as a practical, useful device. It is mentioned by many of the students, including this one: "Understanding that you only have to think about a specific body part and steer it in a particular direction is a revelation, even though it may sound simple. For example, the ability to focus your attention on the shoulder and then expand the openness in that area without physical effort and reduce the level of tension in the body."

### Does it affect the quality of playing?

As mentioned above, the objective is for the students to take control of their practice and music making in order to improve the quality of their playing. One student writes that "I'm very aware that my habits affect my playing in various ways". This acknowledgement seems to be shared by all the students. The impression of improved quality in their music making is also evident in these statements: "My sound has changed completely after the AT tuition because my body is relaxed and my breathing deeper. I feel that I can create the sound I want without too much effort", and "a better understanding of AT has improved my understanding of my instrument because I started to become more particular about the sound I was making, the musical lines that make the music breathe, etc.". Tension and stress and the effects of tension on the students' playing were commented on by most of them. Here is one example: "After the lesson before the weekend I felt a growing awareness of my habits along with a heightened presence. Afterwards we had a class that I hadn't really properly prepared for, but instead of getting stressed I took a relaxed approach, and the response was that they had never heard me play that well before."

### Conclusion on the students' accomplishments

The students unanimously describe a process in which all the four student objectives have been acknowledged and are being addressed; to adopt the thinking and main principles behind AT to allow them to identify habits that impede the co-ordination of awareness and body while practising and playing, and to limit or eliminate the effects of bad habits while practising and playing by applying solutions based on AT. All with one main goal: to influence their practice with a view to improving the quality of their playing.

At the same time, the students' statements contain an acknowledgement that using AT is a process whereby you cannot easily "resolve" a problem or fully master a certain way of thinking; rather it is an ongoing process.

## 4.7. Teaching AT individually and in groups

As mentioned previously, one key objective of the project was to trial an AT programme that involved interaction between the AT teacher, students and principal instrument teacher. The idea is that such communication can maximise the benefits to the students.

The six students who received both one-to-one lessons and AT classes were asked to compare the one-to-one sessions with the classes where both the AT teacher and their instrumental teacher were present and then evaluate their strengths and any weaknesses, similarities and differences, and the balance between them. Only three students responded to this request, but they were fully in agreement:

It was important to have both one-to-one lessons where they could apply AT to their own habits as well as group sessions with their peers where both the AT teacher and their instrumental teacher were present. They argued that it was the one-to-one lessons that provided the greatest insight into their own practice and playing habits. But at the same time it was useful to be present during the classes where their fellow students performed and were given guidance, as this harp student writes: "Most of the time it was a real eye-opener to see the changes in the body [of a fellow student] before and after applying AT. Most of all, it was a shock to hear the changes in the sound." The learning aspect was clearly present: "During the classes it was really interesting to learn to understand and compare all the different habits of your fellow



students, because this better enables you to know what to do while you play and to try to change things that aren't good for your body." The balance between one-to-one lessons and classes was deemed to be good.

The students also commented on the instrumental teacher's role during the classes. They describe the teachers as being active by asking questions and (to some extent) participating in the same way as the students. One of the students also describes how the two teachers together made her understand something she had failed to grasp during the one-to-one AT lessons.

Having the teachers observe the students while they receive AT-based guidance also enables the students' mental and physical habits to be addressed during the one-to-one instrumental lessons. Only one of the students mentioned this: "We have occasionally discussed issues raised during AT lessons in my one-to-one instrumental lessons. That was good, because I'd got one of the principles slightly wrong, and my instrumental teacher was able to spot it."

One of the wind students also describes how a teacher, who also received one-to-one AT tuition, joined in one of the student's one-to-one AT sessions: "... and that was a breakthrough. That was when I really started to apply the ideas of rotation and mobility in my playing in earnest. It is the one thing that has helped me the most. The AT teacher had the ideas, and my instrumental teacher repackaged them slightly with more practical instructions: rotate your torso back and forth a bit while you play."

These statements suggest that the combination of teaching AT in both one-to-one and class settings where the AT teacher and instrumental teacher were present had a good effect on learning.

## **4.8. The teachers and their evaluations of the project**

The instrumental teachers conducted the project with different levels of involvement in the AT lessons and tuition:

- Two received individual AT lessons and were present in their role as principal instrument teachers in the classes and small groups where the AT teacher was also present. Both had one student receiving one-to-one AT lessons.

- One did not receive individual AT tuition but was present during the classes where the AT teacher was also present. This teacher had four students receiving one-to-one AT lessons.
- One received individual AT tuition but did not attend the classes with the AT teacher present. He had one student receiving one-to-one AT lessons.
- Two did not receive individual AT tuition and did not attend AT classes. Both had one student receiving one-to-one AT lessons.

The last three were so little involved in the AT project that they are not part of the evaluation. The evaluation was therefore carried out by three of the teachers.

The teachers describe the students as being interested and proactive during the AT classes, how they have “involved themselves a great deal in the process through asking lots of questions and undertaking extensive individual practice”, and how the students were “good at providing feedback on how things were going both verbally and in writing”. They also describe students who have become “much more aware of the importance of performing with the whole body, not just the fingers. Understanding the body and how to play better by making a few physical changes has become a big issue and a major revelation”, and how they have “gained plenty of new experiences that have helped them reflect on what they are doing. For some of the students their goals have become clearer, some became more conscious of their bodies and different relationships that affect their playing. Generally speaking they have become better at articulating things, especially thanks to the group lessons”.

The same teacher also asserted that “all this has affected the students’ practice, but in a slightly indirect way. It has provided a framework for the students within which constructive practice can take place, where they themselves can ask questions about how to accomplish things and begin an exploratory journey into the world of music”. Such changes were noted by all three teachers with students receiving both one-to-one lessons and classes with the AT teacher present.

Were the students’ experiences from the individual AT sessions raised during the one-to-one principal instrument lessons? One of the teachers only had one student receiving individual AT tuition, and “during the one-to-one [instrumental] lessons I would ask her how she found the lessons. The response was positive. I didn’t go into detail since I felt that her problems were linked to her personality”. Another of the three raised an aspect of the posture of one of the students “because I felt there was something she hadn’t quite grasped [during the AT lessons]. The matter was

later discussed with the AT teacher”. The instrumental teacher’s own understanding of AT can of course be put to use in this way. The third teacher says that “it was very important that I had some knowledge of AT”. He had received several lessons with the AT tutor, and during the instrumental lessons both he and his students raised issues from the AT lessons. The teacher then tried to follow up on how the students incorporated their AT-based knowledge and to further relate it to their instrument. “If I had any questions, I asked the students to bring it up during the individual AT lessons or classes. This worked well, and I also think it was useful for the students since we worked together on asking and answering questions.”

The other two teachers also describe how their knowledge of AT has had an effect on their own teaching. This could involve identifying misunderstandings on the part of the students and increased confidence in teaching breathing, articulation and other techniques. More fundamentally, their comments relate to how they had gained a new perspective on how the body works and how important it is to music making. One of them also mentions the time aspect: “What also became clear was that this kind of work takes time and is not a quick fix. Although I had a general idea, it took several months before I really got those principles of the body – and I’m not even certain that I have gained a full understanding of them. There were a few things that I thought I’d worked out a month ago but then realised that I had actually misunderstood them after several one-to-one lessons and individual practice, both with and without my instrument.”

## 4.9. Conclusion

As mentioned, the students state that they have acknowledged and are working on all four student objectives, with beneficial effects. At the same time they admit that applying AT is a process in which it takes time to master a problem or way of thinking.

Can we be certain that AT has the effect we are looking for? There is some research into AT which with a reasonable degree of certainty has proved how AT can influence breathing, posture and use of the body, for example. This project has also sought to help find answers in that it was a relatively systematic process limited to only a few students and teachers. The positive experiences cited by both teachers and students tell us that these participants at least have seen the usefulness of AT tuition and teaching. There is also a possibility that their reactions are

a consequence of the participating teachers' being open, receptive and positive, and that other sceptical and perhaps reluctant participants would have arrived at a different result. It is difficult to infer any conclusions from this, since even sceptical participants could conceivably change their minds. Some of the students also started off being sceptical but ended up feeling positive.

One important outcome of the project, however, is that exploiting the potential of AT requires:

- The students to be given an adequate number of one-to-one lessons over time with guidance in the use of their bodies based on AT.
- The teachers to also receive tuition in body use based on AT.
- Individual AT lessons being supplemented with classes where all (or some) of the teacher's students are present along with the AT teacher in order to give the students a broader experience of AT by observing their peers perform and work on mannerisms and bad habits under the guidance of AT principles.

## Relevant reading

Elizabeth Valentine: Alexander Technique. In: A. Williamon (Ed.), *Musical Excellence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, pp. 179–195.