

# Inspiration and Practicality

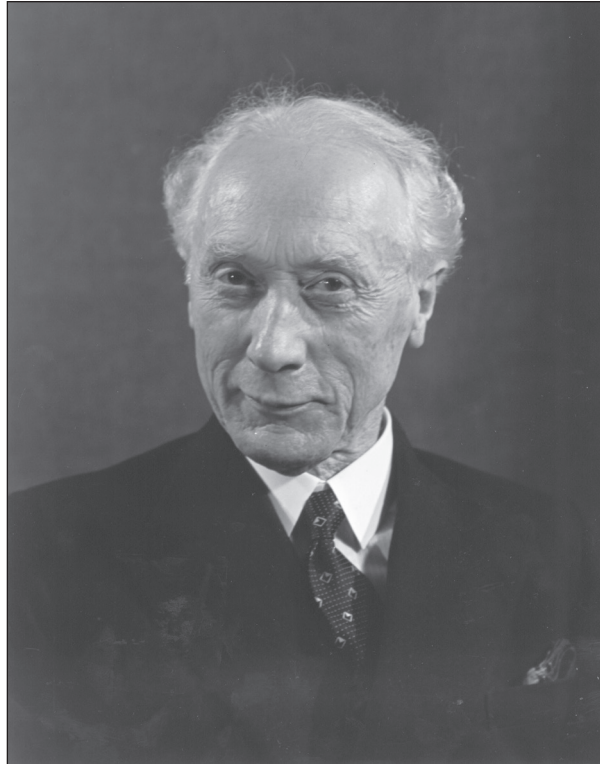
*How the Alexander Technique allows me to play my best!*

By Lorna McGhee, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

*“A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new.”—Albert Einstein*

This elegant observation of Einstein’s speaks directly to our greatest fear as musicians, the fear of making a mistake. No matter where you are in your musical development, whether you are performing professionally in public, or auditioning for a youth orchestra, or college, this fear can be, quite literally, disabling. The effects can range from simply a block in expression to full-blown stage-fright, or from stiff, slow fingers to the devastating debilitation of tendonitis.

Frederick Matthias Alexander, the founder of Alexander Technique, was himself a performer, and experienced first-hand the toll that public performance can take on one’s body and mental state. As a successful actor, he experienced the terror of losing his voice mid-performance on many occasions. The doctors could not diagnose the problem and simply prescribed rest. This did not solve the problem. Alexander therefore concluded that he himself, through misuse of his body and ‘over-efforting’ in performance, was responsible for creating the circumstances that brought about his vocal problems. Through many years of intense self-directed study, Alexander developed a technique that allows one to regain a sense of choice in how we respond physically and mentally to any stimulus, be it simply picking up one’s instrument, walking onstage to do an audition, or getting in and out of a chair. It is possible to move with lightness, balance, ease, and freedom in any circumstance. The Alexander Technique offers one a sense



F.M. Alexander

of agency. It is an invitation to take responsibility for the way you move, and for the way you respond to stressors. It offers a way to deal with unhelpful habits that build up over the years. In and of itself, the Alexander Technique offers both the lightness of freedom and the discipline of responsibility. With this ‘opposition’ comes stability.

## My Experience

I started Alexander Technique lessons in London when I was a student at the Royal Academy of Music [in the ‘90s]. I was motivated (as many people are) to have lessons in the first place because I was in pain, specifically shoulder pain. Not only did the lessons free me from pain,

but as Alexander Technique is a form of re-education, not a therapy or relaxation technique, the lessons really helped me understand how to practice constructively. With Alexander you’re dealing with habits. There are all sorts of traps you can fall into as a performer—being incredibly judgmental or self-critical, or mindlessly repetitive in the way you practice. Alexander helps bring a mindfulness about the quality of the work itself, the quality of the way you can use yourself physically, and the quality of the way you approach things mentally as well. These initial lessons allowed me to get the most out of my college training and set me off on a good footing.

Many years later, in Vancouver, I started to have Alexander lessons again as a result of problems with my left hand. I realized it was not simply a question of lack of practice, or failing technical abilities. My earlier Alexander Technique experience allowed me to consider that the problem might instead be one of my own personal ‘misuse’—i.e., my patterns of behavior and movement could have something to do with this problem. I started having AT lessons again, and in a

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very short time the problem with my left hand disappeared, as a result of the mindfulness we brought to my overall ‘use.’ Now my hand works fine but more than that, the new-found physical freedom overall improves my playing and especially my sound, dramatically. This has led me into a whole new line of inquiry in my own playing and teaching, in which I can apply what I learn and experience in the Alexander lessons to my own work as a flute player and teacher, finding the lightest of balance points between effort and effortlessness at any given moment. It offers a wonderful, life-long exploration that has greatly informed and enriched my life as a musician. We function best artistically when we are not in survival mode. We are best coordinated when we are not stressed. The nervous system is like a horse—it spooks and shys easily. Our profession is full of stressors. The physical quietness and the mental ease and alertness that come about through studying the Alexander Technique can be of great benefit.

### **Alexander Principles**

Here are some specific Alexander Technique principles that I hope will be useful:

In Alexander Technique, one of the principles is to be aware when you are “end-gaining.” This means that we can be so focused on achieving a specific result, or ‘end’ that we neglect the means. An example of this would be to be so focused on getting through a difficult passage without making a mistake (i.e., to be so attached to the end result of having played it cleanly), that one neglects to notice that the fingers might be gripping the keys much too tightly, or that the wrists are locked or that you have stopped the free flow of the airstream. Being so mentally dominated by the attachment to a certain end result (playing cleanly), and neglecting the ‘means’ (fingers, wrists, air, overall ‘use’ etc.) directly decreases your ability to actually achieve the desired end! As you can see, this type of practice is antagonistic. It is like accelerating and braking at the same time.

In Alexander Technique, another principle is “inhibition.” The Alexander use of this word does not refer to being inhibited psychologically. Instead it simply means stopping or inhibiting habits that are inefficient or harmful. It is being aware that we have choice at any and every moment in how we conduct ourselves. For example, if I have to come in on a quietly on a very high note in a solo, let’s say the high A in the slow movement of Prokofiev’s Classical Symphony, my hab-

it might be to tense up the embouchure, tighten the neck and shoulders, and stick my head forward, all in an effort not to be too loud. However, none of these actions will be helpful. In fact they will lessen my chances of being able to accomplish the task. Therefore, I can choose to inhibit or stop my habitual responses. Simple as that—just say no! This is inhibition in the Alexander Technique terms.

A third principle of the technique is direction. This is also to do with moment-to-moment choice and taking responsibility. Having inhibited inefficient habits, we can invite constructive and efficient direction, such as ‘lengthen and widen the back, let the neck be free, etc. So to go back to the example of the high A in Prokofiev’s Classical Symphony, the direction could be to keep the back of the neck soft and free, feel the soles of your feet on the floor, feel your seat bones on the seat, send the crown of your head up towards the ceiling, let your jaw be relaxed, etc. Then you can just do what you need to do to be efficient, without getting in your own way or defending against disaster. No fuss.

### **Applying the Alexander Technique to Flute Practice**

Here are some basic applications of Alexander Technique Principles with regards to different aspects of flute playing:

#### *Fingers*

Keep your physical equanimity in the midst of activity—i.e., take the physical quietness and balance you can find in slow practice into speed. No need for any more effort when playing fast.

Let your fingers alight on the keys like a butterfly on a leaf. No need to press or grip the keys. What is the minimum movement of the hands and fingers? Find balance in negotiating the weight of the instrument. Let the arms be balanced, not rigid. Let all the joints be full of air, not concrete.

Practice confidence—i.e., practice fast micro movements until you find ease. Fast playing is just a series of masterful, easeful micro movements, nothing more. Practice away from the piece—i.e., practice the individual ingredients and then combine them gradually—like a great golfer, practicing and perfecting all sorts of shots separately, in order to be able to combine them on the course in real life. Separate out the different skills, like fingers or articulation or air flow, then combine. Take as long as it takes. Rome wasn’t built in a day. Be satisfied with steady progress. Do not sabotage your-

self by getting frustrated and trying to bite off more than you can chew or run before you can walk (classic end-gaining)! Match your skill with the challenge at all times. Find your edge. Stay there a while. Say something kind to yourself—be your own best teacher. At all times in your practice with difficult passages, neutralize the charge. Everything you practice reinforces, therefore do not under any circumstances reinforce stress or panic—that is inviting failure. Make everything steadily manageable, and no cause for fear or freezing. Do not create negative triggers for yourself. Practice patience and develop trust in your ability. Technique is only co-ordination. We are less co-ordinated when we are stressed, so create the conditions that allow you to flourish. Choose how you respond to the stimulus. Technique is kinesthetic memory, therefore create a positive, healthy memory bank. Again—no fuss!

### *Sound*

The bones provide the resonating, reflective surfaces for the air to bounce against and interact with. We can house the air in the beautiful resonating spaces of the body, like a great singer. Any excess muscle use acts directly as a mute. Freedom of the air translates directly to freedom of expression. Remember: the faster, more dynamic the airstream, the more space it demands in order to resonate freely without bouncing off the walls (of the body). Therefore, the Brahms 1 solo, for example, requires the greatest degree of spaciousness in all the resonating spaces of the body, and absolute freedom of the neck and limbs. Try not to push or pull the airstream, but instead release the air and allow it to replace itself. There is a natural elasticity. No need to be tight in the ribs or the stomach muscles. No steel girdle!

### *Dealing with Stressful Circumstances*

I think one has the right to be open and free and poised and balanced. To bring a quality of awareness to what you're doing, is a discipline and a very interesting challenge. I find it's a hundred times more difficult to keep that poise, balance and equilibrium in the orchestra as opposed to alone in the practice room. Even from a purely physical standpoint—you have to watch the conductor, you have to wait for the cues, and you have to respond to what other people are doing around you. When you're in your practice room you're in so much more control of what you're doing, whereas in the orchestra there are so many more different stimuli coming at you. For example, when waiting and watching for a cue to come in on a really

high note, it's almost impossible to not shorten your neck, or pull up out of your seat bones or lean forward. In terms of mental pressures, there's an audience you don't want to let down, a conductor who's judging you, and your tenure committee sitting around you, etc. (all those opportunities for end-gaining, and attachment to a specific result!). It is nevertheless possible to be free and poised in that situation. With AT, you can actually mentally and physically practice your reactions to the stimuli, because it's so easy to get pulled off your center. It's psycho-physical. Sometimes, in the heat of battle, you try too hard. What is the practice? Inhibit and direct. Release the singing quality in the sound no matter what the circumstances, and have the courage to come in on that high quiet note without over-efforting! It's almost like a willingness to practice trust, and surrender as well. You have to trust that that high note is going to come out, instead of playing in a defensive way where you buffer yourself against possible catastrophe—because usually that's what leads to catastrophe, all that extra *stuff* that you don't really need. I would describe that as a defensive way of playing—it's not generous. Instead, play positively, and remember the constructive directions that allow you to do your best (free the neck, back lengthened and widened etc). The Alexander Technique provides a logical, psycho-physical roadmap to help with all of this. Don't end-gain, stop doing what doesn't work, invite what does work and get out of your own way!

### **In Conclusion**

I once asked my Alexander teacher in Vancouver, Gabriella Minnes Brandes, to tell me, in her own words, the purpose in studying the Alexander Technique. Her response: “to fulfill your greatest potential for expression.” It doesn't get much better than that! Suddenly those mistakes are not the focus anymore.

### **Additional Resources**

Gelb, Michael J. *Body Learning: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2nd edition, 1996

Alcantara, Pedro de. *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

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