

Music Making: Communication and Creativity

By Gabriella Minnes Brandes

Making music is a psychophysical and communicative activity that involves both art and skill in a complex, ongoing and ever-changing manner. Similarly, applying Alexander Technique requires the use of a set of skills creatively.

As I reflect upon my Alexander Technique teaching practice of thirty years I realize that many of my students have been performers. I have often wondered why so many musicians find the Technique appealing. Musicians' injuries, stress and performance anxiety are well documented¹ and often lead them to seek help from the Alexander Technique. Musicians are well versed in analysing how they make music and they continuously evaluate the quality of sound that they make. Musicians have intensity and commitment as they seek ways to overcome challenges that arise from many hours of practice, and also from the particular pressures of performing in front of an audience. Though musicians are not always aware of the ways in which they use their bodies when they play, they know when they are able to achieve what they are aiming for musically. Musicians look for the "means-whereby" to achieve their goals with efficiency.

In this paper I explore the connections between Alexander Technique and music making through the analysis of interviews I conducted over a period of two years (around 2010-2012) with twenty of my Alexander students who are musicians (see Appendix A). At the time of the interviews, some of the participants were finishing their music degrees, others had been professional musicians for many years, and some were both teaching their instrument and performing. Three of the participants played guitar, three were flutists, three professional singers, three pianists, one violinist, one viola player, one cellist, one oboe player, one clarinet player, a drummer, a saxophonist, and one French horn player. Their experience in Alexander Technique ranged from six months to 15 years of private lessons with me. As I write this article in 2015, six of the participants in this project have completed their training as Alexander teachers and are teaching Alexander Technique in addition to their careers as musicians.

In the interviews I asked each of the musicians what brought them to take Alexander lessons, how they understood Alexander principles and applied them in their playing, and if they saw tensions between focusing on music and focusing on Alexander Technique. Ultimately I was interested

in exploring the connections between Alexander Technique, music making and creativity. I wondered if the structure of Alexander Technique provided a set of tools for musicians to explore and enhance their creativity. (Due to the large number of interviewees I have used first names only with their instrument in brackets)

All of the musicians I interviewed started Alexander Technique lessons when they were looking for solutions to injuries and pain. Only a few were also explicitly seeking to improve their efficiency in their playing. As the musicians' experience with Alexander Technique grew, they articulated more explicitly the connections they saw between Alexander Technique and music making.

Improving the quality of sound: "I can instantly hear the difference in the freedom and flexibility of my tone"

Musicians use sound as their medium for expression. Lorna (flute) expressed the essence of playing as, "resonating with another person's experience and bringing that to life in a convincing way through sound". She noted that all sound is created by movement and Alexander Technique provides the musician with tools not to interfere with the production of their sound. She commented:

Alexander Technique helps me with expression because it quietens my mind and nervous system. The phrasing therefore, has more clarity and is less obstructed by habit or "over-effort" and "end-gaining".

Kate (viola) explored a different connection between music making, her self-expression and Alexander Technique:

Playing the viola is merely a way of expressing myself, my body, mind and spirit. We don't play instruments because we like the way our fingers feel when they hit the fingerboard. We play the instrument because it helps us express our selves, because we find meaning in music.



Musicians often gauge their performance through the sound they are able to produce. Guido (guitar/ukulele) explained that making music is a process of creating bridges between what he hears in his head and what he is able to execute on his instrument and what he shares when he performs. Alexander Technique provides the tools to make that bridge possible. Erika (clarinet): "I can instantly hear the difference in the freedom and flexibility of the tone." Mark (guitar): "I believe Alexander Technique principles offer me the particular means for facilitating spontaneous moments in my music-making allowing me, at times, to shift from my habitual patterns."

■ "Our body is the most immediate instrument of our mind"

Once the musicians were able to identify their habits, they could inhibit them, and that opened the possibility of thinking in activity, as one commented: "One of the challenges in

playing music is that it happens in real time—you are not able to stop and make a plan and then execute it, you have to think in action."

Ron (oboe) summarized how he integrated Alexander Technique into his playing: "I was able to think while I play. I am able to re-imagine the process of creating the music with my body in a much more efficient and pure manner."

As the musicians learned to identify their habits, inhibit them and think while playing they experienced less pain and more ease. In our Alexander Technique lessons we worked on applying Alexander Technique principles in order to achieve efficiency and ease in playing. Heather (cello): "I hurt less, had better attention in general, and found it easy to play!" Erika (clarinet): "As I apply Alexander Technique principles it helps the air stream work more efficiently, and my sound to be better."

When musicians play with more ease, they often exert less effort and play with less pain. They struggle less with habits that may hinder sound, and they are more available to try out new and unfamiliar ways of expression.

The musician as the instrument: “I am the instrument that will vibrate and make a more beautiful sound”

In the Bedford lecture Alexander said: “We ourselves are the instrument—each one of us is the instrument—by means of which whatever we are going to do is done.”²

Many of the participants in the study elaborated on seeing themselves as the instrument that is honed and tuned with Alexander Technique, as they become aware of their habits, inhibit unnecessary tension and make new conscious decisions.

Domagoj (violin): “Our body is the most immediate instrument of our mind. Every musical instrument is therefore an extension of our primary instrument (ourselves). If the primary instrument isn’t functioning properly, how can we expect the extensions to work?”

Erika: “Alexander Technique is the cornerstone of a successful relationship with my instrument. Because there is so much physical connection between the air column and the performance of the clarinet, understanding the head, neck, back relationship changed my attention to the air stream completely”.

Lorna: “The only way you can make musical expression, whether you’re a singer or instrumentalist, is through your movements and how you use yourself.”

“Alexander gives me the tools to physically use my body”

Carole (voice): “When I sing I want to rid myself of unnecessary tension which blocks vibration. So if I am aware of tensions and I consciously direct them to be released, then I as an instrument will vibrate and make a more beautiful sound. I want to sing with freedom and with a sense of total involvement of my whole body.”

Jennifer (piano): “Through Alexander lessons I have developed more awareness of mind/body unity, and more ability to choose how I sit, stand, walk, and play the piano. Competing tensions are gradually being replaced by a sense of balance.”

Diane (voice): “I’m not just vocal chords, breath, lungs. All of the body plays a part in the production of singing. I’ve realized that I have blind points in my body awareness. I have habitual tensions that play a part in inhibiting the musical sound I create. It is incredibly empowering to know that through Alexander Technique exploration it is in my power to invite and direct my body to a more alive, active, intentional sound.”

Erika discussed the correlation between her awareness of herself and becoming more attentive to the musicians she was playing with in her quartet. “The Alexander Technique provides me with the ability to be so self aware so that I am no longer worried about myself, and therefore I am able to support those I play with.” Increased awareness, which includes peripheral vision, auditory and kinaesthetic attention, is enhanced with the application of Alexander Technique principles.

A focus on practice: “With the Alexander Technique there is a template of constructive self-education”

Beyond discussing the sound they produced, the musicians spoke about using Alexander Technique principles to approach their practice. Heather (French horn) remarked that musicians often have experience with “self analysis in activity” as they look for ways to improve the sound they produce. Alexander Technique then serves as a lens for discovery of habits that leads to choice and potential for change.

Heather (cello): “My work is to get my mind to stay free so that I can tell my body how to do it. I have to get all the patterns and habits out of the way. Some of those patterns are physical, but some of them are mental. I thought a lot about freeing my neck at opera last night before I picked up my bow and it really helped!”

Lorna also described how she used the Alexander Technique to overcome a challenging passage: When I’m struggling with a passage that is very complicated for the fingers, if I focus on the fingers directly I will most likely fail. If instead I direct my attention to the primary control I am able to fly through the same passage with ease. Similarly, if my jaw is too tight the sound will be caged in and the tone quality severely compromised. If the jaw is hanging loose on its hinges, which we worked on in our Alexander Technique lessons then the sound comes out like a dream.

Ron: “Alexander Technique gives me the tools in order to physically use my body in order to master the instrument,



which therefore allows me to create beautiful music in the easiest way possible.”

Lorna: “Alexander Technique provides a template of constructive self-education. It completely changed the way I practised. It teaches you to be totally uncompromising. You don’t waste any time on inefficiency. For me, Alexander Technique is a whole outlook in terms of continuous development and continuous self-education, with the ‘psycho’ part of the psycho-physical leading the way. In my experience, Alexander Technique offers more than just re-education, and is a template for on-going education too.”

Teaching music: “Alexander Technique has radically changed the way I teach”

Since many musicians often teach their instrument as well as perform, teaching can become a fruitful setting for the exploration of the application of Alexander Technique. The musicians spoke about learning from their students as they reflected both on their own habits and those of their students. They used Alexander Technique as a paradigm to teach about change.

Nancy (piano): “I get students thinking about using the whole self in the activity of playing. Another constant theme [in my teaching] is to do less, in order to gain more. Each time the students play, I ask them to allow more ease, first addressing muscular tension, then attending to mental tension. At each repetition I ask them to notice something different either in themselves or in the music.”

Sandra (voice) commented on how through learning the Alexander Technique she learned to observe her students and to pay attention to the relationship of their head/neck/back. Jennifer started observing her students noticing their physical and mental habits at the piano: “In observing my piano

students, I am becoming more attuned to the relationship between the whole body and the instrument.”

Domagoj said: “Alexander Technique has allowed me to depart from my existing habits and create new ones which improved my playing technique and allowed me to produce better results by being more efficient with the use of my body.” He used Alexander Technique lessons to explore efficiency of his use and the quality of his sound and those insights shaped his teaching. Similar to Alexander’s investigation, Domagoj set up mirrors in his studio and methodically observed himself, learning his own habits. He traced his preparatory set with the violin, and then explored new ways of picking up and holding the violin with less tension and better coordination. These insights in turn became teaching tools to observe his students’ habits and suggest new choices to them.

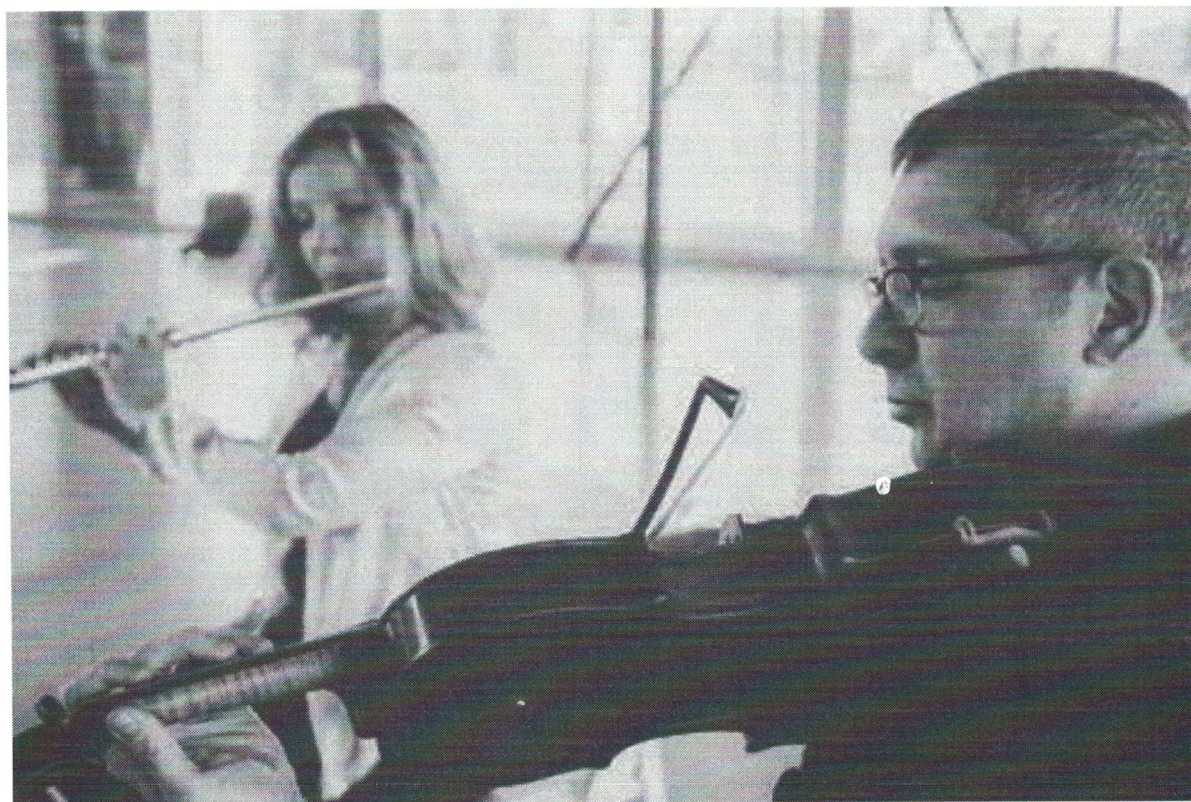
Challenges and tensions in performance: “In performance it becomes difficult to think of everything at once”

The musicians often noted that it was much easier to apply principles of Alexander Technique in their practice studio than in performance. Many found it challenging to be consciously sending Alexander Technique directions on top of all the other tasks that they attended to while performing (e.g., notes, rhythm, other musicians, the conductor, performance anxiety).

Ron (oboe): “I use Alexander Technique principles mainly while preparing for performance. In performance it becomes difficult to think of everything at once.”

Leo (piano): “When I practise I can maintain the Alexander Technique thoughts and I still pay attention to the piano and the notes. When I perform it is too much to think about. I think that it is a matter of time that eventually I will be able to play the piano and think Alexander Technique as I perform and that is my goal.”

Though Domagoj made significant changes in his playing he also realized that in performance, when the music was challenging he was reverting back to his previous habits. “If I had a month to work on the new ways of playing, I could create the desired change, but now I can only spend short periods of time exploring it every day and the rest of the time continue with the habitual way, which is now quite frustrating.”



© Leigh Righton

Lorna McGhee and David Harding

Guido highlighted the connection between how a musician practises and how he performs: "What we get [on stage] is an amplification of our reactions. Being on stage really shows what you have rehearsed multiplied several times. It is a reflection of what and how you have worked."

Colin (guitar) described his process of shifting from the practice room to a performance: "If I apply Alexander Technique when practising, this is going to carry over into my performance whether it is done consciously or unconsciously."

|"Creativity is found in playful experimentation"

Mark (guitar): "It is largely my work with Alexander Technique principles outside of the performing context that has allowed me to simply stay more present in the performing arena". Although Mark saw a decrease in pain while applying Alexander Technique principles in performing, he raised a particular challenge that he faced: "My conscious directions during performances, though enabling me to play with

decreasing amounts of pain, actually inhibited my musical interaction by creating an artificial division between my self and the music I was making. By directly taking care of my own use in the moment I was greatly limiting much of my natural ability to 'naturally' create music." Mark acknowledged the use of muscle memory in playing but was seeking awareness that led to new choices in communicating his ideas: "Alexander Technique has given me more space to create and react in musical situations, as I am more aware of the mental state I am in when playing my instrument. This awareness helps me be present in performance, bringing choice and breath to moments that were previously determined solely through muscle memory."

Lorna added to the discussion of the continuum of rehearsal to performance as she looked at the high stakes often involved in performance: "Alexander Technique is a way of learning to stay in your body, in the present moment, regardless of the pressures. Alexander Technique helps me be more courageous because through it, I acknowledge all the possibilities and I can hold all of them at the same time."

Creativity: “An exploration, a curiosity, a constructive way to approach the unknown”

Creativity engages the human imagination using an authentic voice through spontaneous expression while unblocking obstacles to our natural flow.³ Our unconscious habits often serve as invisible but powerful obstacles to change. When applying Alexander Technique principles, performers learn to identify their obstacles and stop them from interfering with their creative process.

The musicians who participated in this study shared the ways in which Alexander Technique enhanced their ability to concentrate, practise, learn from mistakes, and take risks as they stopped their habitual responses, finding new means-whereby to approach their music, and paying attention to their use and function. Nachmanovitch identifies similar prerequisites for creativity: “playfulness, love, concentration, practice, skill, using the power of limits, using the power of mistakes, risk, surrender, patience, courage and trust.”⁴

Creativity is found in playful experimentation, “having nothing to gain and nothing to lose, working and playing around the limits and resistances of the tools we hold in our hands”⁵ Lorna spoke about being creative as a process of moving from the known, familiar and habitual to the unknown: “Alexander Technique provides us with a framework for encountering the unknown. I often ask my students to work at their edge, rather than working in their comfort zone. I feel like the Alexander Technique provides a very good framework for doing that in a way that is safe. It is an exploration, a curiosity, rather than anything else. It is a very constructive way to approach the unknown, whether it is learning a new piece or learning new techniques.” Similarly, Nachmanovitch describes creativity as a state of “cultivating a comfortable attitude toward not-knowing, being nurtured by the mystery of moments that are dependably surprising, ever fresh.”⁶

■ “Musicians are the instruments that make sound”

Alexander Technique provides a paradigm and language for exploration and discovery through play that focuses on inquiry. The Alexander principles encourage artists to become aware of their habitual patterns, observe these habits, and

make choices about efficiency of use, thus providing new and creative venues that enhance authentic, artistic expression. Lorna explained the connections between skill and art and the role of Alexander Technique:

Most musicians are under the illusion that they only have to think an idea and it will automatically be expressed in their playing. This is indeed the case when the body is free and open, but for most of us, it is wishful thinking. The body is so often a storehouse of tension and memories of past failures, which we try to defend against, and plain old bad habits that don't serve us very well. Even when one can achieve a state of physical freedom, the mind can interfere with all sorts of negative self-talk when we find ourselves in high-stakes performance situations. Alexander Technique offers us constructive tools to deal with all that. For a musician, Alexander Technique greatly increases the expressive possibilities and also greatly decreases the stress on the body.

Alexander Technique as a framework for creativity, beyond efficiency

In my first years of teaching Alexander Technique, my goal was to have musicians consciously send directions as they were performing. However as I watched my students perform and listened to how they articulated what it meant for them to apply Alexander Technique principles in activity, and specifically in performance, I reframed this goal. I now see Alexander Technique as a tool to improve use and function. I currently work with students on enhancing thoughtful choice, coordination and good use in the practice room so that these elements will shape and inform the performance.

Alexander's focus on the “means-whereby”—focusing on the process of achieving a goal and not just attending to the goal—is very helpful in considering this continuum of rehearsal to performance. When an artist views her rehearsal as a performance, and her performance as a rehearsal, she has many opportunities to be fully present, aware of her habits, inhibiting them and making choices, as she practises using Alexander's principles in activity. Performance brings occasions to work with these same principles in new, high-stakes contexts, focusing on being present and aware, and continuously making choices.

When I teach the Alexander Technique I look for ways to enhance students' awareness, coordination and the efficiency with which they use themselves. In order to do that, I observe my students and analyse their use and movement, discerning their habits and assessing if and how these interfere with good use. As I work with students, using my hands to teach, I am able to support their explorations of new ways of using themselves efficiently. I want students to discover their habits as they examine their responses to stimuli. Once they uncover their habits, they can choose to consciously inhibit them and direct, using the relationship between the head/neck/back as an indicator of improved use. As they attend to their use, students improve their functioning and are able to focus on playful explorations of new and unfamiliar ideas, sounds and narratives.

Musicians are the instruments that make sound. A piano, guitar, violin, cello or drum does not make sound until a musician plays it. The ways musicians move and breathe determine the quality of contact between themselves and their instruments, and thus determine the quality of sound that is produced. When artists see themselves as the vehicle for their expression, as the instrument through which they express themselves, Alexander Technique can provide them with specific ways to work on themselves: they hone their observation skills and increase their awareness so that they can identify their habitual responses to stimuli, creating spaces for new and creative explorations to capture unique expressions of human nature.

I see the role of an Alexander teacher to teach focusing on process rather than the end result. The teacher encourages her students to move beyond what they already know, to embrace mistakes as opportunities to move out of habitual patterns. This reciprocal teacher-student relationship is a nuanced process that calls on learners to make sense of their experiences, develop a language to capture their learning, and create bridges between theories and "real life" applications with the guidance of their teacher. It allows learners to take these new explorations and put them in new contexts.

Alexander Technique provides a safe, non-judgmental environment for such explorations. Alexander saw his work as

"re-education." It is a paradigm for learning that is psycho-physical and engages the whole self of the learner in a lived experience. It provides a language to discern the embodied experience of artists, performers and audience members alike who participate together in making and sharing art. Alexander Technique encourages the development of new tools to observe and describe both internally and externally the process of learning and creating. Therefore, Alexander teachers hold a unique set of skills that allow them to work with performers to enhance their skill and art.

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge all the performers who have worked with me over the years and as I developed the ideas discussed in the paper, particularly those who participated in the interviews. I also want to thank the organizers of the Pender Island Flute Retreats, Gwen Klassen and Lorna McGhee, and the artistic and managing director of Opera Nuova, Kim Mattice Wanat, and all the performers for inviting me to explore these ideas with them. I particularly appreciate the thoughtful comments that Sandra Head and Lorna McGhee have made on an earlier draft of this paper.

ENDNOTES

1. Klein, Bayard and Wolf, The Alexander Technique and Musicians: A systematic review of controlled trials. *Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, (2014) 14:414.
2. Alexander, Bedford Physical Training College Lecture (1934); *Articles and Lectures*, Mouritz: London (1995) p.170.
3. Nachmanovitch, *Free play: Improvisation in life and art*. Tarcher, Penguin, New York: (1990) p.5.
4. *ibid.*, p. 12.
5. *ibid.*, p. 87.
6. *ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

For a fuller discussion of the relationship between performers and audience see Mark, T. C., (2012) *Motion, emotion, and love: The nature of artistic performance* Chicago, GIA Publications.

About the Writer



Gabriella Minnes Brandes teaches at the Alexander Technique Centre, Capilano University (Theatre department), Vancouver Opera, Opera Nuova, Edmonton, Pender Island Flute Retreat, and the Human Theatre Collective. Gaby is the co-director of the Vancouver School of the Alexander Technique. She researches creativity in the performing arts using Alexander Technique as a framework to explore embodiment and choice. Gaby holds a PhD in education, informing her practice and research. www.alexandertechniquecentre.ca
Please see Appendix on next page.

Appendix A

Table of participants

Name	Instrument	Alexander Technique experience *	Current Occupation
Bae Leo	Piano	2 yrs	Performer
Barron Laura	Flute	5 yrs occasionally	Flute performer Flute teacher
Block Erika	Clarinet	2 yrs	Clarinet teacher at Western Washington University. Fifth Inversion Woodwind Quintet.
Cashin Colin	Guitar	Alexander teacher training**	Alexander teacher
Condie Jennifer	Piano	5 yrs	Pianist / Piano teacher
Davis Carole	Voice	Alexander teacher training** 18 yrs	Alexander and voice teacher
Hay Heather	Cello	4 yrs 10 yrs occasionally	Assistant principal cello, Vancouver Opera Cello teacher Instructor, Capilano University,
Head Sandra	Voice	12 yrs 5 yrs occasionally	Singer, Vancouver Opera Voice teacher
Heistek Guido	Guitar, ukulele, harmonica, voice	Alexander teacher training**	Performer Music teacher Alexander teacher
Hutchinson Chris	Flute	3 yrs occasionally	Performer, flutist
Ivanovic Domagoj	Violin	4 yrs 5 yrs occasionally	Violinist Vancouver Opera Violin teacher
Mann Ron	Oboe	1.5 yrs	Performer Oboe instructor, Yale College
McGhee Lorna	Flute	4 yrs 3 yrs occasionally	Principal flute Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Flute teacher
Scherk Emlyn	Drums	1 yr	Professional drummer Drum teacher
Sicsic Nancy	Piano	Alexander teacher training**	Alexander teacher Piano teacher Church musician
Parnell Kate	Viola	6 months	Choral director and college instructor
Speirs Diane	Voice	6 months	Singer, Vancouver Opera Voice teacher
Vasak Mark	Guitar	Alexander teacher training** 5 yrs 6 yrs occasionally	Performer Guitar teacher Alexander teacher Occupational therapist
Walker Heather	French horn	Alexander teacher training**	Alexander teacher Professional musician, French horn, Vancouver Opera, Vancouver Island Symphony
Ward Adam	Saxophone	6 months	Music educator

* Indicating the time studied with me

** Teachers were all trained in the Vancouver School of the Alexander Technique