

ENHANCING MUSICAL PERFORMANCE VIA ENTERPRISE

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Introduction

In common with the other performing arts (dance and drama) music can properly exist only when it is performed; the performer's task is to communicate the creator's message to an audience as effectively as possible. Dancers and actors, however, use their bodies more directly than do most musical performers who (unless they are singers) also have to cope with an extraneous instrument (the piano, violin, trumpet, etc.) which can form an extra barrier between composer and listener. This extra problem for the instrumentalist may result in the feeling that there are great physical obstacles to overcome, and this in turn often leads to an undue emphasis on acquiring a strong technique through mechanical practice. Many indeed are the books of exercises written for this purpose in the case of the piano, for example.

Although such athletic drill may produce an improvement in this or that small area of technique – it may, for instance, strengthen the pianist's weak little finger – it tends to lessen the overall musicality of the resulting performance, since it concentrates too narrowly on the part at the expense of the whole. Prolonged use of such methods may well blunt the sensitivity of the performer: playing a musical instrument can easily become a purely muscular pursuit, no more musical than

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typewriting, instead of the total involvement with the music that it should be. The truly great performers on any instrument are those who are wholly at one with the composer's thoughts and the instrument's sounds – pianists like Horowitz, violinists like Heifetz – and usually such musical giants seem hardly to exert themselves at all: they sit or stand still, avoiding exaggerated bodily gestures but putting their whole selves into the music so that the listener feels drawn into the performance.

It is not by simply copying great performers that a young musician learns to make a piece of music his or her own, i.e. to communicate its essence with conviction. This applies both to the student who listens to a celebrity broadcast or recording and then tries to reproduce it, and to the student who watches a famous artist performing and then imitates his or her mannerisms. The actor, teacher and writer Frederick Matthias Alexander (1923) states: "... most of us are aware that if a pupil in some art is sent to watch a great artist, as is so often done, in order that he may learn something which will assist him in his particular art, the pupil is almost invariably more impressed by some characteristics of the artist that may be classed as faults than by his 'better parts'. These characteristics are seized upon by the pupil as factors essential to his own improvement in performance, but experience constantly proves this belief to be mistaken."

The Alexander Technique: History and Analysis

How then is the student performer to improve the standard of his or her performance and gain the necessary confidence to impart the music's message to an audience? The title of Alexander's book, from which the above words are quoted, may provide one clue: *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*. The story of his life and work supplies another.

Alexander was born in Tasmania in 1869 and died in London in 1955. His early interest in acting led him to embark on a career as a reciter, but he encountered progressive difficulty with his voice, which tended to be hoarse and eventually gave up altogether during an important engagement. As a result he decided to study how he used himself in the act of speaking. As he describes (1932), he observed himself minutely with the aid of mirrors, and analysed all the muscle movements he made whenever he spoke. He discovered that various strange movements took place in the neck and head region, the commonest being a tightening of the head backwards on the neck and downwards into the chest. It was, he believed, this

stress-inducing movement which affected his voice, and he considered the proper relationship of head and neck so important that he termed it the Primary Control. His later teaching in New Zealand, Australia, England – and, for a short time, America – was based on this belief, and on the further belief that use affects functioning and the more we improve our total use of ourselves, the happier we shall be in all that we do.

Nelly Ben-Or (1983) describes the technique Alexander evolved: it “initiates a process of freeing the neck and releasing the head in a slightly forward and upward direction from the neck, to encourage in turn a lengthening and widening effect on the back. This results in a progressive releasing of accumulated, unnecessary tensions and brings about an effortlessness and lightness in one’s performance not hitherto experienced”.

We have only to examine the way we sit down and stand up to see that even in such everyday activities our use of ourselves may be defective: instead of simply bending or straightening our legs, we tend to make various other quite unnecessary movements which, if indulged in over a long period, are bound to affect the way our bodies function. Instead of rushing into action, therefore, Alexander taught that we should first of all stop our habitual responses to a given stimulus. He used the term INHIBITION to mean this and not, as psychotherapists do, to mean the suppression of painful experiences from the past. The next step is to give mental DIRECTIONS which will allow the central neck-head-back alignment to be maintained while the body is doing other things, such as the simple movements involved in sitting down and standing up, or the more complex movements involved in playing a musical instrument.

The difficulty, of course, is that we are so used to doing things the wrong way that this wrong way ‘feels right’. Alexander believed that primitive man’s use of himself was generally good, since he was able to keep pace with the very gradual changes in his environment. As soon as civilization began to increase the pace of change, however, man could no longer rely on instinct in responding to the demands made on him. If he did, his use of himself would suffer, which in Alexander’s (1932) view actually happened. In order to correct centuries of misuse, therefore, modern man must learn ‘constructive conscious control’ of himself through a process of re-education. Only thus will his feeling of what is right correspond with what really is right.

Such an evolutionary argument may no longer be acceptable, but this does not disprove Alexander's hypothesis about the importance of neck-head-back alignment for efficient functioning in every kind of human activity. Wilfred Barlow, a disciple of Alexander who was also a medical practitioner, declares (1973) that in his experience "over 99% of us pull the back of the skull down into the back of the neck as we sit down and stand up." He goes on to say: "This whole region at the base of the neck, both back and front, is a veritable maelstrom of muscular co-ordination", since so many activities are centred on it (e.g. use of the shoulders and upper arms; breathing; speaking; swallowing) and that since "it is here that mis-use most frequently starts, it is here that we have to start if we are to correct the multitudinous misuses which the rest of the body can throw up. In terms of the Alexander Principle, it is only when this primary mis-use is dealt with that we shall see the answers to an expanding range of questions". In Barlow's opinion the Alexander Principle "is not a fringe-medicine, a neo-progressive education, a religious escape, or a quack science. It is a difficult disciplined approach to personal living which leads, through discipline, to a personal freedom and health which is possible to some extent for most people at most ages."

University of Ulster Programme

Rationale

So far as the performing arts are concerned, the value of the Alexander Technique in freeing and enhancing performance has been recognised in the theatre world since early in the century, when Alexander came to London and taught celebrities like Lily Langtry and George Bernard Shaw. Nowadays most major music and drama colleges have Alexander teachers on their staff. In order to get the fullest possible benefit from the Technique, however, one must have a series of individual lessons spread over a period of time, so that the new and better use of oneself which one learns from the teacher not only is right but comes to feel right and therefore to stay.

Obviously with a whole music college or even (as in the University of Ulster) a whole Music Department of some 60–70 full-time students, it is impossible to provide such a course of lessons for each individual student. Early in 1984, however, Nelly Ben-Or (Professor of Piano and of the Alexander Technique at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London) conducted a series of practical sessions with music students at Ulster Polytechnic and showed

how the Alexander Technique could be applied to musical performance. In the meantime several students had suffered from problems caused by tension in performance. Since the practical component of the BMus degree at the University of Ulster is important for all students on the course, the Music Department staff felt that a more prolonged exposure to Professor Ben-Or's very positive approach would help.

Organisation

It was Enterprise in Higher Education that enabled the Music Department of the University of Ulster to develop an Alexander-based initiative in 1991–92. The Project Leader (who is also the present writer) attended two short courses in London run by Professor Ben-Or with the assistance of another Alexander teacher (Peter Ribeaux). Professor Ben-Or came to Jordanstown for two days of coaching with students and full-time staff in May 1991, and paid a further two-day visit in February 1992, working with a different group of students and with full-time and part-time staff. Building on this work, a system of regular 'performance seminars' for students and tutors was operated on a trial basis during the academic year 1991–92, and still continues.

Application of Alexander's Idea

Why was the programme based on the Alexander Technique? As Nelly Ben-Or (1988) has stated: "Unfortunately the physical relief is too often considered to be the performer's main benefit from the Alexander Technique, and the fact that behind it there is a conscious mental process at work is somehow unacknowledged, or at best only vaguely understood. When that is the case, the view of the Technique remains limited by the idea that it causes improvements in posture, for which it has indeed become so popularly known". In fact, the Technique is no mere postural aid but "a real, total way of working, applicable to the entire process of preparation of music for performance." Essential to this process are several concepts which derive from Alexander's own teachings:

First, the concept of INHIBITION and DIRECTING mentioned above. Both in getting ready to perform and in actual performance one may unconsciously be using many involuntary movements and creating excessive physical and mental tension thereby. One must INHIBIT these habitual reactions so as to free oneself to serve the music's demands. The next step is to give precise DIRECTIONS to one's body to carry out one's musical intention. As Wilfred Barlow says (1973): "Giving 'directions' is like setting the focus and speed of a camera. If the focus is

wrong, a blurred picture will result, which can be misinterpreted in many ways. Time spent in directing is never wasted. A far more appropriate response is possible if the focus of perception has been sharpened by directing.”

A further concept of Alexander’s is useful in this connection: that of the ‘means-whereby’ as opposed to ‘end-gaining’. So often we tend to rush into action in music-making as in everyday life, ignoring the fact that really detailed mental preparation will produce a much better result. In other words, attention to the correct ‘means-whereby’ an objective may be achieved is more productive than the single-minded pursuit of a specific ‘end’. More than this, ingrained ‘end-gaining’ can negate the influence of re-education based on sound principles of use. As Alexander (1932) says: “ ... when a person has reached a given stage of unsatisfactory use and functioning, his habit of ‘end-gaining’ will prove to be the impeding factor in all his attempts to profit by any teaching method whatsoever.”

The mention of a specific ‘end’ leads on to yet another Alexander concept, that of the human organism as a psycho-physical whole. The danger of concentrating on a specific ‘end’ is that it encourages misuse of the human organism as a whole, whereas concentrating on ‘means’ enables us to get more out of ourselves than we thought possible. For example, as soon as we think carefully about how to produce a big sound on the piano, we realize that only the tips of the fingers are in contact with the keys and make them go down more quickly or more slowly, so there is no point in directly using, or rather mis-using, the rest of our bodies for this purpose. If, however, we do exert excessive force (via the use of ‘body-weight’) in our attempt to achieve a bigger sound, we are liable to create extra – and quite unnecessary – physical tension in ourselves, not to mention impairing the sensitivity of both our own ears and those of our listeners.

If we act on these principles in our approach to musical performance, we shall put much more emphasis on CONSCIOUS ATTENTION and CLARITY OF PERCEPTION which, as Nelly Ben-Or (1988) says, are “the most important factors in the preparation for music-making” and “the finest means for acquiring a creative performing technique: a technique in which one’s musical intention is instantly manifested in sound by means which rely on clear awareness and conscious directions.”

Implications and Outcomes

The implications of this approach are clear: we will apply our minds just as much as, if not more than, our bodies both to preparation for performance and to the act

of performing. We will save considerable time and effort by first learning our music thoroughly away from the instrument, paying attention to such features as harmony, structure, melodic line, fingering, breathing places. An improvement in musical expression is bound to result, since mechanical repetition has a deadening effect on the performer's response to musical content. When actually performing after this rigorous mental preparation, we will from the start be listening for what we want and checking what we hear against this. 'Practice' thus becomes a creative process instead of note-learning drudgery, and indeed many so-called 'technical' problems disappear once the performer has absorbed in fullest detail what the musical score contains. The music itself may be complex, but because of one's clear perception of it, one's internalization of the text, so to speak, one will experience no strain or difficulty in performing it.

All these matters were raised, discussed and illustrated by Professor Ben-Or during her two visits to the Department of Music, University of Ulster at Jordanstown. In May 1991 she coached 19 students in performance on their main instrument (8 pianists, 6 string-players, 3 wind-players and 2 singers), and in February 1992 she coached 21 students (6 pianists, 5 string-players, 6 wind-players, 2 singers, 1 guitarist and 1 percussionist), showing in each case how a better neck-head-back alignment and a more economical use of the body can produce greater ease in performance. Judging from the response to a questionnaire, the overwhelming majority of students who attended the sessions either as participants or as observers found them thought-provoking, interesting and potentially useful. Staff discussions during and after Professor Ben-Or's first visit resulted in a detailed schedule of performance seminars involving all BMus student performers and covering all three terms of the 1991-92 academic year.

Among the relevant objectives discussed by students and staff in the seminars mentioned were the following:

- a more thorough preparation for performance involving all aspects of the music, e.g. phrasing, structure, harmony, articulation, dynamics, texture and sonority;
- a more sparing use of the body both in rehearsal and in performance;
- a more thoughtful approach to practice, stressing one's critical self-assessment through concentrated listening rather than one's achievement of mechanical efficiency or one's development of muscular prowess;

- a more careful selection of music to be publicly performed, avoiding unnecessary difficulty;
- a more spontaneous approach to the act of performance, the underlying aim of all the previous objectives being to free the performer so that he or she can communicate the essence of the composer's musical thoughts to an audience with the utmost directness, unimpeded by physical, mental or emotional obstacles.

Conclusions

The close scrutiny of teaching and learning methods generated by this whole programme of visits, seminars and practical sessions is already helping students and tutors to re-think their attitude towards the performance component of the BMus degree. The system of 'performance seminars' is expected to continue as an integral part of each BMus student's schedule and as a means of enabling him or her to perform in public as efficiently and confidently as possible.

The attraction of the Alexander Technique as a catalyst in this process is not that it makes everything easy – it is in fact, as Barlow (1973) says, "a difficult disciplined approach" – but that it makes us realize the truth of Cassius's words: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves ..." (Shakespeare: Julius Caesar, I. ii).

It focuses our attention, that is, on ourselves: how we use ourselves now, and how we could use ourselves better. As Wilfred Barlow (1973) says, the Alexander Technique "is not a method of manipulation in which the subject is a passive recipient and goes out none the wiser about how to stop himself getting into a tension-state again. It is a method by which he is taught to work on himself to prevent his recurrent habits of mis-use, and by which he can learn to build up a new use-structure."

In the context of musical performance, the Technique frees the performer from a reliance on unconscious mechanical responses and enables him or her to assume full responsibility for the way the music is transmitted from composer to listener. By supporting an Alexander-based training scheme in the University of Ulster's Department of Music, therefore, Enterprise in Higher Education is helping student performers to take greater responsibility for their actions, to show more initiative in deciding how music should be interpreted, and to become more enterprising in every way.

References

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