

Marshaling Your Body's Intelligence:  
Alexander Technique for Musicians  
by Joan Arnold

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In a memorable performance, we know when there is a sense of rightness and ease, when we're buoyed up by the rhythm, the feel of other musicians or the responsive pulse of the audience. But when we don't have that ease, how do we get it? When we lose it, how do we get it back?

The Alexander Technique is a way to return to the kind of balance that invites a consummate performance. It is based on the idea that our bodies possess a natural poise. This poise can be disrupted by unconscious tension habits.

Instrumentalists and singers know when excess effort can interfere with their best work, disturbing their sense of pitch or timing, constricting the breath or making intricate fingering cumbersome. Though they might hear the instruction, "Just relax," they really don't know how.

When Anne Mette Iversen wheeled her acoustic bass into my studio, I was struck by how her delicate 5'4", 108 pound frame managed her gargantuan instrument.

The habits she had developed while playing led to stinging pain in her left shoulder and caused numbness in her fingers. When she sat at the computer to correspond or the piano to compose, she felt eye strain and extreme back fatigue. She knew her posture was a problem, but didn't know how to change it.

In order for the arms to function without pain, the torso must be upright and the shoulders relaxed. In our first lesson, I noted that Iversen's torso was collapsed and her shoulders were tight. We worked on allowing for a complete breath -- one means to achieving dynamic, upright posture. Recalling her first lesson, she says, "We talked about how my chest was totally sunken, so the main thing I had to do was fill it up again."

There are several aspects of an Alexander lesson that help you learn how to change harmful habits. Part of the lesson is on a bodywork table, another is in activity. The gentle, instructive Alexander touch invites your body to release the muscular tension underlying inefficient movement habits and gives you the feeling of easier breathing, more space in the joints and power without strain. You then recognize the contrast to your habitual movement style, and can aim to replicate that feeling when you're on your own. Rather than bracing yourself, you learn how to use your thought process to engender effortless upright support.

In the more active part of a lesson, hands-on guidance in simple moves such as standing and sitting give you the experience of more freedom in ordinary actions.

You then apply the new learned pattern to an activity – at the keyboard, on a wind or stringed instrument or while singing. You vocalize or play, guided by the teacher’s intelligent, informed touch. We also use visual cues: looking in a mirror to observe inefficient posture and observe how that posture can change. We look at a skeleton model and anatomical illustrations to arrive at an understanding of how the body is meant to work.

“The images of how the body works really helped me,” says Iversen, a 32-year-old native of Denmark. She now composes and plays jazz gigs in New York and Europe as a sideman and leader, and has been playing bass for 7½ years.

“Before, I didn’t know that the lungs go all the way up to your shoulders,” she says. “Now, just by thinking about it, my body automatically starts filling the lungs up all the way. From that day on, I haven’t had that pain in my shoulder. After my first lesson, I came home and had to raise my end pin. I pulled it out more because I had gotten a little taller.”

Practicing an instrument is all about building skill through repetition. But repetition with excess tension breeds uncomfortable or debilitating habits. For this reason, many musicians find that learning the Alexander Technique can bring the relief of chronic pain or recovery from a career-threatening hand condition. It can mean the end of nagging neck pain or the resolution of a longstanding back problem. They learn how to manage the challenges of their instrument by better managing their bodies.

Frederic Mathias Alexander’s instrument was his voice. As a young actor at the turn of the 20th century in Australia, Alexander became hoarse and unable to recite the Shakespeare soliloquies he loved. Frustrated in his ambition to achieve renown as an actor, he turned his efforts to restoring his lost voice. He discovered that his problem was excess muscular tension constricting his vocalization. Through an astounding process of self-observation and experiment, he evolved a set of body/mind skills anyone can learn to solve physical problems and clear the way for freer creative expression.

One of Alexander’s discoveries was the body’s capacity for effortless poise. Our neuromuscular system is designed to work in concert with gravity. Within the body are anti-gravity reflexes that can give us lightness and freedom in function.

We can elicit those reflexes by allowing ease between the head and the neck – the relationship that Alexander considered primary in determining the quality of movement. When the neck releases, the head rotates forward at the top of the spine; rather than compressing, the spine lengthens. You can apply this newfound poise to any motion – cutting vegetables, singing an aria or playing an instrument.

When you learn the Alexander Technique, you spark the postural reflex by

learning an interlocking set of mind/body skills Alexander named awareness, inhibition and direction.

- \* Awareness is a sense of where the body is in space, the effort quality and mental attitude you bring to your endeavors.

- \* Inhibition – the skill he called the key to his work – means catching yourself in over-exertion or collapse and pausing to undo it. It also means staying with the process rather than over-focusing on the goal.

- \* Direction is an ability we all have and can develop further: the capacity to envision a new way to move with the neck released and the head easily balanced.

When we use these skills, the body can perform an action imbued with a new sense of flow.

Thomas Buckner, a 63-year-old vocalist and producer of contemporary music, has been a long-time student of the Technique. When he first studied it in the 60s, he was thwarted by overall tension. “My physical uptightness came from my upbringing,” he says. He absorbed the parental rebukes I often hear from students: Sit up straight. Pull your shoulders back. Don’t talk back. “Restriction became a real obstacle for me,” he says, “and the Alexander Technique was a way to deal with it.”

Buckner has a challenging schedule of international touring, producing New Music concerts, administering his own recording label and continuing his vocal study. He has found that the Technique helps him to implement his teacher’s instructions. “Learning to inhibit, release the neck and let my head go forward and up enabled me to do what my voice teacher taught me,” he says. “Say you tend to tighten your throat. People can talk to you about changing that till they’re blue in the face, but you keep doing it. The idea of inhibition – undoing rather than doing, then starting over with the new direction – is so concrete.”

When I first met Buckner six years ago, he was taking frequent voice lessons but had not taken Alexander lessons for some years. He recalls that, in his voice lessons at that time, “we were making progress, but it was extremely slow.” His voice teacher noticed that resuming his Alexander work “increased the speed with which I was able to apply what I was learning. He noticed my rate of improvement go way up.”

When prospective students inquire about Alexander lessons, they often ask, “How long does it take?” The short answer is that 12 lessons will give you some basic skills in understanding the Technique and how it can help you. The longer answer is that your course of study depends on the nature of your problem. Iversen got pain relief in six lessons. Buckner has studied on and off

for forty years. Kevin Dorn, a 26-year-old drummer jazz drummer, has been working with me for four years.

Dorn was annoyed at how early in his career he was plagued by pains that migrated around his back as well as tendinitis in his wrists and right ankle. “At first, I figured it was an occupational hazard – that if you sit for that long doing repetitive motion, you’d get pain no matter what,” he says. “A normal gig is four hours. It’s a long time to sit there and move your limbs.” He iced his aching joints and did some stretches offered by a physical therapist. When pain became the ultimate distraction, he says, “I knew there was something missing, but I wasn’t sure what. It wasn’t until I started the Alexander Technique that I realized that it’s not just doing these things. It’s the way you do it.”

Now Dorn plays four hour gigs with no pain. He has toured and appeared at jazz festivals and plays four to seven nights a week in New York. As he continues to work on his tension patterns and his playing, his discoveries echo the experience of many performers who work with this method.

“Before I started the Alexander Technique,” says Dorn, “I would have moments without tension that felt good, but it was mysterious. I never knew what I could do to get it back. I practiced blindly, thinking if I just kept practicing, I’d get there. But if you practice with tension, it leads to more tension. This technique gave me a way to control that. Rather than have it happen accidentally, I could actually work on getting into that state.”

Releasing tension can seem risky. Trying on new ways of moving, says Dorn, can “feel awkward at first – sitting or walking correctly for the first time. If you’re used to having this tension, you depend on it.” Dorn sometimes practices in front of a mirror to catch and correct imbalances. He watches for “anything that looks unnatural, that doesn’t look relaxed. My big realization was that you can play with a lot less effort than I thought.”

The unraveling of constricting movement habits invites the release of fully focused musical expression. When encumbrances are shed, music and musician can freely soar.

Joan Arnold has been a certified Alexander Technique teacher for 16 years and maintains a private practice in Brooklyn, Manhattan and upstate New York. In her 25-year movement career, she has been a dancer and dance teacher as well as personal trainer and exercise teacher. Currently, she is a certified yoga instructor teaching regular classes on Union Square. Also a freelance writer, her features have appeared in national magazines. Her articles on the application of Alexander Technique to a range of conditions can be found at [www.alexandertech.net](http://www.alexandertech.net).

