

Musicians and the Alexander Technique

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After experiencing discomfort and sometimes pain after practicing piano and performances a few years ago, I suspected that I had a repetitive strain injury (RSI). I went to my family doctor, and his diagnosis was RSI. The problem was, he didn't know how to treat it except with anti-inflammatories which are ineffective. They reduce inflammation and sometimes help deaden the pain, but do nothing to cure the condition that caused the injury.

Ironically, my wife Susan Hlasny is also a pianist suffering from RSI and she went through the whole miserable experience before I did. Obviously, I didn't learn to avoid the injury from her experience but I did learn from the amount of difficulty, frustration and heartache she went through getting an accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment. After trying a couple of dead end avenues of treatment, I cut to the chase and went to New York to consult with Dr. Emil Pascarelli, an expert on diagnosis and treatment of musician's injuries. I got a precise diagnosis and while I was there, I also met with Dr. Pascarelli's associate Professor Vera Wills, founder of the Biomechanics/ Ergonomics program for the prevention and treatment of musicians injuries at The Manhattan School of Music. Dr. Pascarelli sent a detailed medical report to my family doctor and Ms. Wills pointed out flaws in my movements at the piano and suggested what I should do about it. Susan and I are working towards bringing these experts to Calgary in early 2002 to present a conference on RSI, which will also feature the expertise of Dr. Kelley de Souza and physiotherapist Lou Petrash of the Panther Sports Medicine Clinic here in Calgary.

For the past three years, I have been practicing piano following Prof. Wills' advice as well as working with Lou Petrash. He has helped me get to the point where the injury is under control, and for the past year or so I have been on a "plateau". I would practice and for a while it would be fine. Things would then inexplicably go wrong, and I would be back seeing Lou. He would fix me up, and I would practice again. I went through this cycle a couple of times when I realized that I could ride this roller coaster indefinitely and eventually get discouraged and give up playing, or get to the root of the problem. Call me a lunatic, but I really do not want to stop playing the piano!

A few months ago, an advertisement for an Alexander Technique workshop appeared in my mailbox at Mount Royal College Conservatory. It was arranged by Sharon Janes-Carne through the Calgary branch of ARMTA and given by local Alexander teacher Trevor Allan Davies. I had already done some research on a number of techniques, including Alexander and Feldenkrais (which I did some time ago with Rob Black, and it helped) and I decided to enroll. The workshop was interesting, and Trevor touched on some concepts that had already occurred to me as a result of my own re-training. He also introduced new concepts which helped me go further. At the time of writing, I have

been taking private lessons from Trevor for about two months, and find at least one new and useful piece of my puzzle at every lesson.

Although people tend to think of Alexander Technique as posture training, it goes far deeper. There is a link between our thoughts, our bodies and how we use our muscles. As we age and as a result of learned patterns of thought, we develop habits of thought. These determine how we use our bodies. For example, we think of soldiers as being “ramrod straight”. Soldiers are trained to stand straight whether or not their back actually is physiologically straight (it’s not!). They get accustomed to this position and it soon starts feeling normal. However, in order to maintain that military straightness, they must tense up muscles to keep the position. This tension becomes habit, and soon they don’t notice it. If they return to a physiologically aligned position, they feel like they slouch and are forced to straighten up by their own sense of guilt and the sharp edge of the sergeant’s tongue.

Musicians are no strangers to this. Early in life, everybody has been ordered by a commanding voice of authority to sit up straight. The person snaps to attention in their seat, and the voice of authority approves. What they both overlook is that their idea of being straight is often to sit with back arched, head forced down and back a bit, chest tightened up, and jaw clenched in determination. The idea that this position of extreme tension is good is reinforced until either the person gets in the habit of forcing themselves into this position, or they get into the habit of feeling guilty about not forcing themselves. Interestingly enough and without exception, my younger students sit very well. Perhaps they have not yet received enough training in poor posture! I tried an experiment with a student who is just about to turn six. I snapped out, “Sit up straight, Marisa!”. I almost fell out my seat with helpless laughter as she galvanized herself into a human banana, back arched, head forced back, jaw set and eyes bulging out like a startled fish. On my command, a lovely, well-aligned child had transformed herself into a little troll before my very eyes! I looked over at her mother who was also stifling a grin and said, “This is certainly not what I meant!”.

Musicians spend a lot of time analyzing and worrying about technique. We spend years learning to put ourselves into certain positions that we or our teachers have thought best for playing. We get into the habit of playing in a certain way and once we make it work, we live by the old saw, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!”. I have no quarrel with this saying, depending on the definition of the word “broke”. I thought that if I could play a passage and have it sound the way I wanted it, that was good enough and the passage wasn’t “broke”. If I really paid attention, however, I could hear a tiny voice in my mind saying, “There has got to be a better way”. Whenever I had the time and inclination to listen to the voice, I would work out whatever was bothering me. My playing would become surprisingly effortless for a time and my sound was more beautiful. But old habits die hard and because I was playing so much, I soon went back to simply getting through music. Drowned out by modest success, the voice of reason got fainter. It returned with conviction when I began to experience painful discomfort while playing.

For technique to be effective, the musician needs a stable, relaxed and reliable platform from which to work. Although I had been working on posture since I was diagnosed with RSI, it took a while for me to admit that even though I had done some research and read many descriptions, I still had no idea what good posture was. I spent a lot of time and effort trying to sit “straight”. My diligence was rewarded with an assortment of aches and pains that migrated around my back and neck, depending on the version of “straight” I chose that day. Trevor connected the concept of posture with the phrase “ready to move”. A light bulb popped into existence above my head (I’m surprised that nobody noticed - perhaps they were blinded by the radiance of their own light bulbs) and I realized that despite my research, I still on a habitual level considered posture to be a single ideal position. That “single ideal position” concept is fine for refrigerators and telephone booths because they rarely move around. However, musicians must move to produce sound. As soon as movement begins, posture must adjust. In other words, posture is not a position that one moves into and out of. It is a dynamic situation where the body automatically and effortlessly adjusts to aid any movement. If the body does not adjust appropriately, muscles must tense up to compensate. Tension directly affects movement, and since sound at any instrument depends on movement, tension affects sound.

Alexander Technique provides the means to learn to effortlessly maintain good posture, whatever one is doing. Since the state of one’s muscles depends on the way one thinks, a large part of Alexander training is in giving oneself appropriate directions and observing the results. Awareness of subtle sensations and thoughts is essential. People usually prepare themselves to move by unnecessarily tensing various muscles. Through retraining, it is possible to inhibit this habitual tensing up and move by adjusting posture rather than bracing muscles. Although any movement requires some muscular effort, it rarely requires the amount we habitually use. Shortly after beginning training with Trevor, I was practicing piano while giving myself Alexander directions (or giving myself Alexander directions while practicing piano; I’m not sure which!). I noticed that during the left hand ostinato in Gyorgy Ligeti’s *Musica Ricercata # VII*, my forearm (where the muscles controlling finger movement are located) was getting tense. I spent about ten minutes observing the movement my thumb and paying close attention to the sensations in my hand, and found that merely thinking about movement triggered a sensation in my second and third fingers. I took a break, walking around my studio while giving myself the directions again and noticing various sensations. I then went to the piano and feeling unusually comfortable, played Beethoven’s *Sonata Op. 28 (Pastorale)*. I watched in astonishment as my hands, feeling like limp dishrags, made their way through the first movement effortlessly, accurately and beautifully. I made no discernible physical effort to control them, yet voicing and subtleties of nuance that had so far eluded me were there. In retrospect, I had the sense that I could have done anything I wanted and that freedom was intoxicating. Nothing existed but the music and in a way I “became” the music, a state of mind that I am familiar with when composing. I tried again but to my acute disappointment, the simple act of trying made the whole thing fall apart. However, the same thing has happened several times since then and I believe that it comes about as a result of Alexander training.

In my teaching, I am finding ways to help my students play better without focusing all attention on activity at the keyboard. Through my work on myself, I find myself becoming more sensitive to their posture problems. As I try to help students make adjustments, I find that their ease of movement and sound improves dramatically. This is very exciting because it provides immediate confirmation that I am on the right track. My experiences playing, practicing and teaching after beginning Alexander training suggest that this was a good decision coming at the right time for me.

I studied Alexander Technique with Trevor Allan Davies, and I am very grateful to him for all the help he has given me. To contact Trevor, please visit his website at www.trevorallandavies.org. You will also find this article posted on his website.

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