

Alexander Technique Diary

Monday: First of all I thought about how to approach this diary; I decided to spend a week noticing 'inhibition', 'direction' and recognition of habit in my everyday life, and then think about these things in relation to my instrument. I noticed that in my everyday life I did things which I knew were not good for the body, for example sitting with my spine curved outwards and tensing my shoulders almost constantly. I noticed this in a study plan meeting where we had to sit for about an hour, once I noticed that my spine was curving outwards I thought about my head going upwards and freeing the neck and back. It felt very strange to sit like this.

Tuesday: As I was on the bus going to the college I thought just before I sat down about what I was just about to do. Then instead of adopting my usual way of sitting I sat down thinking of direction and primary control. At college there was a string band rehearsal during which I noticed my habits of sitting whilst holding and playing the viola. I think I am more likely to arch my spine inwards and therefore not allowing freedom in the back. Maybe this is why I sometimes get back ache in the lower back when there is a lot of orchestral work. I found it more difficult to change this habit since I was concentrating on the music.

Wednesday: Today I decided to concentrate on walking. I tried to recognise my habits, the first I noticed is that when I have to walk somewhere quickly I tend to lean forwards and take short strides. But when I walk slowly I fold my arms, taking more normal strides. It must also be said that most of the time I walk with a viola case on my back which is on one strap. I think this is also why I take short strides since the viola case bangs into one of my legs every time I walk causing me to take shorter strides. It is quite strange that I have never noticed that before. To try and change

these habits I have tightened the strap on my viola case which brings it up stopping it banging my leg all the time. I am also considering getting another strap since this will make the weight more evenly distributed and will help to allow me to walk more balanced.

Thursday: Today I lay down on the floor with my knees bent pointing towards the ceiling and a book under my head. I tried to notice the balance of my body and thought about freeing my neck. I thought through all the parts of my body thinking about my feet and what they were doing, and seeing if my weight was distributed evenly. I also thought about body mapping and where my joints were, thinking about this made them feel less tight and more free. It is also strange to think that I had never really thought where any of my joints were before. While in semi-supine I allowed my shoulders to rest as I became more relaxed. I also felt where on my body was in contact with the floor, and I thought about the floor supporting my back. I stayed in this position for about 15 minutes and then got up slowly trying not to undo any of the benefits gained.

Friday: I had 6 hours of orchestra scheduled today and since for one of them I was seated quite far back and everyone was sight reading I thought more about Alexander. I thought about how my body was balanced and tried not to arch my back inwards, I found it helpful to think about each spinal block sitting on top of the one below it in a free way. This meant that I couldn't arch my back inwards as this would not be natural if each block was to be free. Occasionally I also found that I leaned in towards the music as though to see the notes since we were sight reading. However this was not necessary since my eyesight is fine. As soon as I realised this I attempted to correct it as much as possible. Since I had been playing my viola for six hours today, when I got home I did some semi-supine work to try and release any tensions that had built up during the day.

Saturday: When I was practicing today I noticed that my shoulders were a little raised and my

head was to one side. However I only noticed this when I looked in the mirror and saw what I was doing. I read a chapter in 'Indirect Procedures' by Pedro de Alcantara called 'Sensory Awareness and Conception', it was really interesting and explained why I hadn't noticed my bad technique earlier in the day. It explained that our sensory awareness e.g. knowing whether or not we are tilting our head or raising our shoulders, can be faulty. This explained why it was only a few weeks ago I realised that I raise my shoulders when I play sometimes, this was only because my teacher pointed it out to me.

Sunday: Today I went to Oxford Street to shop, but before I went I did some semi-supine just to check whether my body was balanced and free. This time it was rather strange because when I got up afterwards I had a bad headache which lasted all day, this must be something I am doing wrong but I am not exactly sure what this is. This has happened quite a few times before when I have done semi-supine. While I was shopping I thought about how I was walking, it is much easier to think about this without a viola case on my back. I thought about my body being balanced and not folding my arms when I walk, and also thinking about the head going upwards keeping my neck free. I also found that I became gradually more tense as I continued walking around probably because of the amount of people so I began thinking about relaxing.

Monday: Today I had a string band rehearsal and then a concert, in the concert I began to feel a lot of pain both in my lower back and in my left arm. The pain in my lower back is probably caused by the arching of the back which I do when I sit down in orchestra, and the pain in my arm was probably just from having to hold the viola up for so long. The pain in my arm went away if I put it down but unfortunately there was not many opportunities to do this. I therefore tried to think about releasing the tension which had built up. I found that when I really thought about it it went away but not for long because I then had to concentrate on playing the right notes etc and the pain came

back. But maybe I just think I have to concentrate on the notes so much, and maybe I should be able to be just as aware without becoming tense.

Tuesday: Today I thought about how I practice the viola. I try to do about five hours a day however I realise that it is not just the time you put in but also the quality. I found a passage in 'Indirect Procedures' by Pedro de Alcantara which I thought was very interesting. It was about Heifetz who was taught by his father when he was young. It says that Heifetz

' was never allowed to play one note out of tune. He was never allowed to hold or use his bow, even for a fraction of a second, in the wrong way. When his practice time was over, the violin and bow were immediately taken away from the child and locked out of his reach. The consequences were, of course, that he never had an opportunity to undo any benefits he had gained from his practice time. The upshot also was that he never took a step backwards; and each step being steadily forward, he progressed by leaps and bounds, and by the time he was nine years old (having started at three), he was a finished virtuoso.¹

I thought this was really interesting showing the sort of results that have been produced with really efficient practice. It must be very difficult to practice this way since it is almost impossible to not play a single note out of tune. I tried to practice today not making any mistakes, I found it almost impossible. I was learning a new study so instead of playing it faster with some wrong notes I played it slower but making sure all the notes were right and as in tune as possible and then sped it up gradually.

Wednesday: When I practiced today for my viola lesson I felt very uncomfortable, I also felt that I had done quite a lot of practice for my lesson and yet not very much progress had been made. I was also a bit confused as to why I had been able to play one of the pieces two days ago, and yet now I

¹ P.de Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures* (Oxford, 1997), 191

couldn't. This made me think that I really needed to change the way I practice in order to make more progress so that this sort of situation where I don't know what has happened to my practice time won't happen again. When I went to my lesson my teacher told me that I played the piece to him exactly the same as I played it a few weeks ago even though he had asked for improvements. I found this very frustrating since I obviously wasted quite a lot of practice time with no results. This has taught me to seriously think very carefully about efficiency when practicing and not just repeat bad habits.

Thursday: Today I noticed that my hands and arms were becoming very tight. So whilst I was practicing I paid particular attention to freeing the left hand fingers and especially the thumb which tends to grip the side of the instrument. This felt very strange since I had practiced the piece with a tense arm for so long. It made my arm and hand feel really weak as though I couldn't find the notes. But in actual fact I could I just wasn't forcing my arm and hand so that I would think my arm was strong enough. My whole body felt pretty tense whilst practicing so I did some semi-supine work during my practice thinking about noticing any areas of tension and trying to free these. I also thought about my practice, how efficient it had been, and what now needed improving.

Friday: Whilst I was writing this project up onto my laptop I noticed how I was sitting. One side of my back was longer than the other so my weight was not even on both sitting bones. This was because the laptop was to the left of the direction my chair was pointing. So I moved the laptop in front of me and then concentrated on distributing the weight evenly onto the sitting bones. I also noticed what was happening with my feet and concentrated on pointing them in the direction of my knees. Even though I had changed my position I started to get back ache in the left side of my back which had been compressed. So I tried to concentrate on freeing the lower back in case I was holding it too tight.

Saturday: Today I did some reading and thought about the way I was sitting. I tried to make sure my body was in balance as much as possible and that my head was not forwards towards the book. Instead I brought the book upwards so that I could read while keeping my head going upwards. I also thought about Alexander whilst I was doing my washing up and I noticed that I had my knees locked backwards and was bending down to the sink which is obviously not necessary. So I changed this as soon as I noticed by thinking about keeping the direction of the head upwards and unlocking the knees. Today along with my practice I went through the pieces which I would have to perform the next day in my head without stopping as though in a performance thinking about how I would feel and trying to think about feeling free especially in my left hand.

Sunday: Today I had a viola class which is where we perform to the other viola students. Often before performances I get very stressed out. Everything becomes tense starting from about a week before I have to perform. I also tend to over practice before a performance meaning that when I perform my arms are very weak. I get nervous before but not too serious and the last two times I performed I had bow shakes. This time I tried to think about relaxing my body and I did some semi-supine work thinking about where in my body I am tense. I also tried to do only productive practice. However it is the mental stresses of performing which affect me most and I do not know how to go about changing these. I think this is the main factor which affected my performance.

Overall I have really enjoyed making this diary, I have found it really interesting and useful especially thinking about efficient practice and Alexander technique in direct relation to the viola.

Question: How can I make direction and good co-ordination of the body become habit?

Bibliography

P.de Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures* (Oxford, 1997)

M. Gelb, *Body Learning* (London, 1981)