

The Alexander Technique and its impact on learning to play music on an instrument

By Eirian Lewis

Introduction

For musicians, learning is an integral part of everyday life, where hours of study and physical labour result in the performance of a new piece of music on an instrument. In the *Science and Psychology of Music* by R. Parncutt and G. McPherson, the authors claim that “a purpose for practicing for all musicians is to learn new music”.¹

Learning is important for musicians as the study of new music keeps practice fresh, allows development for new concert programs, gives rise to exploration of new styles, encourages creativity, diversifies expression and provides an overall sense of progression.

Learning new music on a musical instrument involves many senses.

Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development states that in the key stages of learning, the sensory motor stage, senses and movement are of most importance. For example, if one is learning a piece from a score the vision sense plays an important role in translating written notation into physical direction. Often one will then have to decide the most efficient way to navigate physical directions through fingerings/bowings or

¹ Parncutt, Richard, Mc Pherson, Gary, *The Science and Psychology of Music Performance*, p. 156, Oxford University Press, 2002

breathing, involving a highly attuned kinaesthetic sense. Physical movement might then be assessed in their relation to specific musical goals, where the musician will be required to balance tone, timbre and volume by focussed listening.

Many musicians find that they will use a combination of visual, kinaesthetic and aural senses to aid their learning. It is therefore suggestive that learning to play music is a very embodied experience.

This essay sets out to explore this relationship between embodiment and effective learning practices, asking the question whether or not the Alexander Technique can be used to assist a musician's learning. This will be judged using key principles of the Alexander Technique such as psycho-physical unity, inhibition/direction, panoramic vision, breathing, primary control and semi-supine. These elements will be explored in conjunction with fundamentals that constitute a musician's learning, such as sight reading, instrumental technique, listening and rest.

What does learning to play music involve?

Learning to play music can be achieved in many different ways. Some might prefer to learn music by ear whilst others feel more comfortable reading from tablature or from a score. Whatever the preferred method of learning, there will always be multiple senses involved.

Vision

For many musicians, learning new music is often assisted by a written out part of some kind. This could be chord diagrams, tablature or notation. A musician must be comfortable recognising patterns and visual cues and applying them to their instrumental technique.

The eyes work to break down familiar chord voicings, motifs and structures, instructing the brain to conduct the necessary movements required to play the chosen piece of music. The more experienced the musician the faster this process will be, as there will be a better baseline familiarity of particular patterns in music due to the synaptic pathways already existing. Below is an example of a perfect cadence. A visual pattern a pianist will be very familiar with.



A musician must also be visually of what they are doing on their instrument. Author Diana Deutch states that “visual feedback can have quite striking effects on the

² Spinditty.com/learning/thefunctionofcadencesinmusic, accessed 19th February 2019

acquisition of technical skills”.³ An awareness of complicated shifts and specific finger movements must be carefully observed to ensure correct execution.

Another type of vision is mental visualisation. This kind of vision often involves mentally picturing the score, specific physical movements, emotions, colours or places. It is highly personal and is often influenced by a musician's individual experiences. Aaron Williamson claims that visualisation is a kind of ‘elaborate rehearsal’ that creates new meanings and links between new pieces of information.⁴ This can have dramatic effects on assimilating information during the early stages of learning.

Technique

For all musicians, learning music requires an acute awareness of movement and coordination. Aaron Shearer states in his seminal guitar technique guide that, “the most desirable time to start the development of a correctly relaxed technique is in the early stages of study”.⁵ Whether a player is advanced or just a beginner, all new pieces of music contain technical demands that are unique. In order to facilitate these demands, it's important that the musician has a sense of how the music feels kinaesthetically. For example to play a fast solo passage in Vivaldi's concerto in D major for guitar, an awareness of fast picking technique in the right hand, in combination with placement of specific fingers on specific frets, allow for legato scales to be played.

³ Deutch, Diana, *Psychology of Music*, p. 489, Elsevier, 2013

⁴ Williamson, Aaron, *Musical Excellence*, p. 127, Oxford University Press, 2004

⁵ Shearer, Aaron, *Classic Guitar Technique, Volume 1*, p.4, Alfred Music, 1985



Specific techniques and their difficulty can vary. As a musician gains experience they will explore more complex techniques and develop a deeper sense of physical movement as the brain develops quicker neural pathways.

Listening

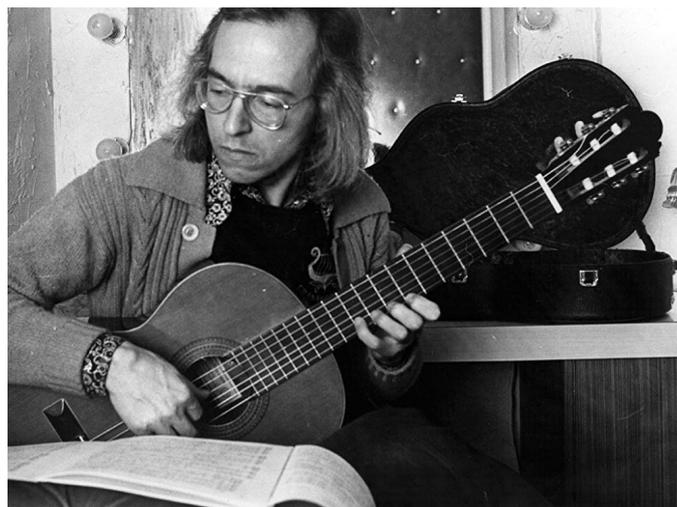
A large part of learning music is determined by how well a player listens. In order to develop convincing musical ideas, careful attention must be paid to sound production. Daniel Barenboim claims in his book, entitled *Everything is Connected*, that “the art of playing music is the art of simultaneous playing and listening”.⁶ Small details such as articulation, dynamic range and timbre can all be effected by the way in which a musician listens and acts upon what they hear. Below is an illustration of Daniel Barenboim reacting to Jaquelin du Pre whilst simultaneously playing.⁷

⁶ Barenboim, Daniel, *Everything is Connected, The Power of Music*, p. 32, Hatchett, 2010

⁷ <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/feature/jacqueline-du-pr%C3%A9-interview>, accessed 20th February 2019



Another aspect of listening which has an effect on a players ability to learn music is listening to the body. Similar to aural listening, listening to the body means that you maintain sensory awareness. If the body is experiencing stress or pain in a particular passage then only by listening to the points of tension can a way be found to release it and accommodate a more controlled manor of playing. It is of great importance that unfamiliar music is navigated in a way that doesn't put unnecessary stress on the body. Observe the natural hand positions John Williams maintains when reading new music.⁸



⁸ <https://www.google.com/search> - john+williams+guitar, accessed 20th February 2019

Rest

Learning music effectively is a fine balance between activity and rest. Dr Noa Kageyama states in his blog, *The Bulletproof Musician*, that equal emphasis should be placed on the recovery part of training as the active part.⁹ Whilst what a musician does in the practice room has an important role in the learning process, the time spent away from the instrument helps the brain and the body organise the information it has just been exposed to. In the Sui Lan Tan's book, *The Psychology of Music*, she states that "several studies show distributed practice to be more effective than massed practice".¹⁰ This is the case as the brain requires large amounts of energy to develop new neural connections in the learning process.¹¹ Steady levels of processing power in the brain are best achieved through rest. This is why regular breaks between practice sessions and sleep are of great importance in increasing the rate and quality of learning.

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⁹ Kageyama, Noa, *The Bulletproof Musician*, <https://bulletproofmusician.com/4-signs-you-may-be-practicing-too-hard/>, accessed 20th February 2019

¹⁰ Lan Tan, Siu, *Psychology of Music: From Sound to Significance*, Distributed Vs Massed Practice, p.45, Psychology Press, 2010

¹¹ Harris, Julia, *Neuron*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0896627312007568>, accessed 20th February 2019

¹² <https://www.wildmind.org/posture/lying-down>, accessed 20th February 2019

Can learning to play music be improved through the Alexander Technique?

Learning music for the purpose of playing and performing is very much about the player and their relationship to themselves and their instrument. It's a process that involves a fusion of mental and physical processes in different parts of the body. Pedro de Alcantara stresses that in music making, the connection between different parts of the body must be sensed and nourished.¹³ In this way, a connection to music can be achieved through a connection to the body. It is therefore important that the mind and the body are treated with as much (if not more) care and attention to the content of what we are trying to learn musically. This is where the Alexander Technique can prove to be very useful. As the Alexander Technique places emphasis on the body as primary to the musical instrument, its principles could help in learning in a way that is more embodied and may lead to deeper learning. A quote once heard, "you cannot play a composition until you yourself are composed" springs to mind. This section will explore fundamental principles of the Alexander Technique such as psycho-physical unity, inhibition/direction and the primary control and their relation to phases of learning such as reading, instrumental technique, listening, and rest.

¹³ Alcantara, Pedro, *Integrated Practice*, p.211, Oxford University Press, 2011

Psycho-physical unity

All of the main principles in the Alexander Technique place emphasis on a common theme. The union of the mind, the body and the emotions in allowing activities to be carried out with greater ease. The underlying principle here is called psycho-physical unity.¹⁴ Psycho-physical unity can be applied to learning. If we consider learning to play music as a process that requires a deep knowledge of sound, emotion, movement and vision, where the body and the mind have to work in a way that supports ones musical intentions, then the Alexander Technique might help us understand this connection. Alexander practitioners emphasise that, the way in which we use our bodies effects its functioning. If one chooses to consciously direct learning strategies through good use, then our functioning as active musicians will also improve, enabling us to learn and perform music with more ease. By developing a strong sense of psycho-physical unity in knowing how use effects function, will healthy learning habits be promoted.

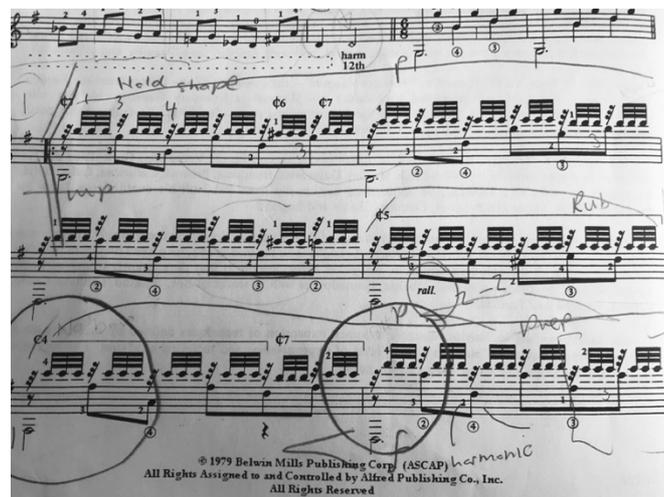
Inhibition and Direction

There are two main principles in the Alexander Technique that can improve use and psycho-physical unity. They are inhibition and direction. These two elements of the

¹⁴ Kleinman, Judith, Buckoke, Peter, *The Alexander Technique for Musicians*, p. 17, Bloomsbury, 2013

Alexander Technique are the beginning of embodied learning. Pedro de Alcantara states that inhibition “unlocks the entire process of self-discovery we call the Alexander Technique”.¹⁵ The process being ‘direction’.

When a musician reaches musical material that might not be familiar to them, or a new technique in a piece, the means where-by they execute it on an instrument is key. This is where an mindful learning is important. In order to function well as a player and not to develop any negative playing habits, the way we use our mind in relation to the body is critical. This first part of developing good use is a musicians ability to spot negative habits. For example, in the figure below, if we take a passage from Agustin Barrios’ ‘Un Sueno en la Floresta’ for guitar which uses an advanced technique in the right hand called tremolo, an immediate response to this might be flatten the hand and over curl the fingers to compensate for the physical exertion tremolo requires:



¹⁵ Alcantara, Pedro, *Indirect Procedures*, p.54, Clarendon, 1997



Once the negative playing pattern has been identified then we must stop it. This is called inhibition. We can then consciously replace it with a more positive habit. This is called 'direction'. Here many options are available. It is what Alcantara refers to as the 'process of self-discovery'.

For example, instead of flattening the hand we can choose to arch the wrist and allow the fingers to suspend naturally over the strings. This in turn promotes more freedom in the tendons, which improves the functioning of the fingers and makes the speed in tremolo possible:



This type of thinking can transform any technical challenge. As long as awareness of use is present, approaching technique like this, means that the musician learns in a way that is targeted to solving problems. It ensures a musician learns to recognise when something isn't working and to correct it to suit their unique natural playing postures. By thinking deeply about the way in which we use ourselves to play music, we also come to learn music on a much deeper level. It means thought has been put into how we play rather than playing in a unconscious, habitual manner. In the long term, inhibition/direction can save a musician a lots of time in the learning process, as positive playing habits are instilled the first time around.

Panoramic Vision

In the early stage of learning, when the music is unfamiliar, often a musician will have to be attentive to one or more objects of focus. This could include looking at what a teacher is doing, looking at a score or observing their own technique. All three of these visual points of focus might change at any one point in a lesson, in practice or a rehearsal. It is therefore important not to over fix the vision as to be slow to change our object of focus. Instead it's important to maintain a soft focus which allows us to maintain a wider peripheral vision, allowing for easier observation in more than one area. This is called 'panoramic vision' in the Alexander Technique.



The eye is designed to see spatially. In the retina, 95% of the photoreceptor cells serve to give a perspective view whereas only 5% for crystal clear focus.¹⁶ Furthermore, the optic nerve attaches to the part of the brain responsible for movement, so the during the early stages of learning where the kinaesthetic sense might be less developed its essential that we are able to observe what we are doing with perspective.

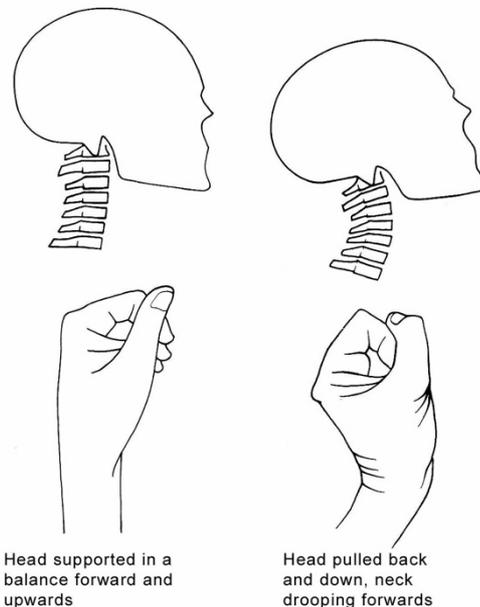
Panoramic vision can be maintained through inhibition and direction. If a musician realises they are over fixing on something then they can direct a new habit by thinking “vision - widen”. Just by thinking about the words, the musician will realise that they begin to notice their peripherals more. This in turn will help them absorb visual information from multiple sources, giving clarity to the associations of what they see and what they do.

¹⁶ Kleinman, Judith, Buckoche, Peter, *The Alexander Technique for Musicians*, p. 120

Primary Control

Learning to play music is greatly impacted by the functioning of our bodies in relation to the functioning of the mind. F.M Alexander believed that the mastery of the primary control was “the preconditioning of good overall functioning”.¹⁷ In a musician's learning, where the transformation of thought into action on an instrument, is most vital, it is important that electrical messages that pass from the brain to the muscles, are free to move. The area responsible for co-ordinating movement is the central nervous system (CNS). This consists of the brain and the spinal cord.

In the Alexander Technique, the organisation of this area is called the ‘primary control’. This is: the head, neck, back relationship. Good primary control that allows the head to balance freely on top of the spine. This allows the back to return to its natural curve and gives room for all of the muscles in the shoulders, neck, jaw and arms to relax. This can be achieved by directing head up and back lengthen.



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¹⁷ Bloch, Michael, *F.M, The Life of Frederick Mathias Alexander, the Founder of The Alexander Technique*, p. 48, Hatchett, 2011

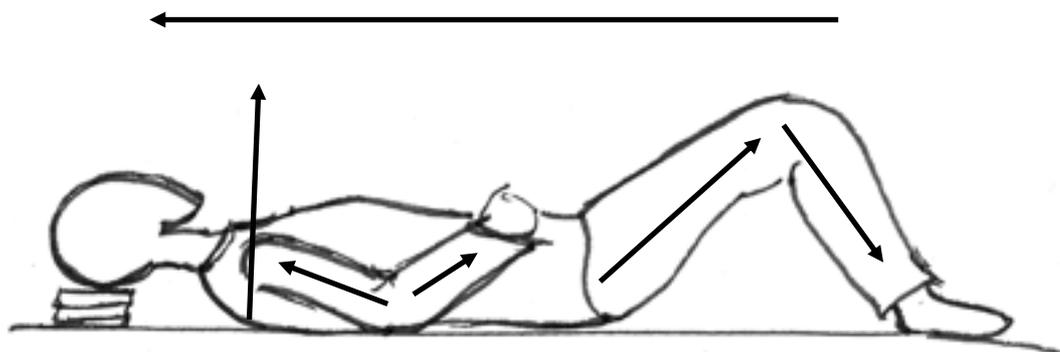
¹⁸ Drawings taken from 'The Alexander Principle', Wilfred Barlow

By correcting the primary control, any misalignments in the CNS will be returned to their natural state allowing electrical signals responsible for movement, to flow most efficiently. As the use of the head neck and back becomes improved, so does the functioning of the CNS, meaning that absorbing visual information, fine motor movement and listening will all be improved. This is crucial to efficiency and the rate at which we learn, as information passing to and from the brain will have much less resistance.

Semi-Supine

As the brain and the body have a finite amount of energy, it is important that musicians rest in-between periods of intense learning. In order for information to be properly organised in the neurons of the brain and the muscles, a period of recovery is crucial to the assimilation of information. On average adults can only focus for around 20 minutes before concentration starts to diminish.¹⁹ It is therefore important that concentration is topped up frequently by resting. The Alexander Technique promotes lying in semi-supine as a way of enabling recovery of the neck, back, shoulders:

¹⁹ Elsworthy, Emma, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/attention-span-average-british-person-tuned-in-concentration-mobile-phone-a8131156.html>, accessed 22nd February 2019



It's a time where the muscles and tissues of the body can reorganise themselves.²¹

By resting the head on a book and directing thought to lengthening the back and widening the shoulders, the primary control is restored.

This allows the proper functioning of the CNS. It does this by allowing the vertebrae in the spine to part from each other, giving space for the vertebrae tissue to recover. Semi-supine can be an invaluable way of resetting the nervous system by allowing parts of the body responsible for thought and movement to recover. In learning, this is important as it raises overall concentration, reconnects the mind and body, allowing us to assimilate new information with greater ease.

²⁰ <https://www.poisealexandertechnique.com.au/articles/2014/10/9/guide-to-semi-supine-practice>, accessed 20th February 2019

²¹ Chance, Jeremy, *The Principles of the Alexander Technique, What it is, and What it can do for you*, p.155, Singing Dragon, 2013

Conclusion

From the points explored in this essay, the argument that the Alexander Technique can have an impact on learning to play music on an instrument, is a valid one. This is the case as learning new music requires a strong connection between a musician's thinking and their 'doing'. As learning music is a process that requires multiple senses such as visual, aural and kinaesthetic, it is important that the use of the body in relation to the mind allows for better functioning. This approach to learning can be best explored through the Alexander Technique. Through key Alexander principles such as psycho-physical unity, inhibition/direction, panoramic vision, primary control and semi-supine, there is the possibility of learning with much less physical and mental resistance. This is because key aspects of learning such as visualisation, reading a score, observing a teacher, problem solving, listening and concentration can all be addressed and improved with the Alexander Technique.

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