

## **Some Thoughts on Practicing**

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The dread with which music students approach the hours of practice is legend. We are told by those who we assume know that practicing is the necessary pain we must inflict upon ourselves in order to become a musician. Most often no reasons are given for this distinctly unpleasant ritual, nor does anyone give us much guidance in how to go about it. The four-word complete method of musical pedagogy chiselled into our minds remains: Go home and practice!

But does it have to be this way? I once heard a friend remark that he always likes a piece of music until he has to practice it. What are we doing during our practice hours that kills our initial love for the music we are meant to be studying?

When the student is given some guidance about how to practice, it may be of dubious merit. In most cases a student will be told to keep at it until he gets it right. And then to see whether he can get it right again, and again, at least ten more times in a row. End-gaining is the name of the game, and it is largely considered the only way to go about it. Drudgery is made virtue.

As teachers of the Alexander Technique, we have the means to help the unfortunate student who may very well be practicing himself into difficulties and even injury. Alexander's own path of discovery offers a paradigm on which to base our work. Viewing his Australian story in two parts, the first being his discoveries of what he was doing wrong, and the second his intense struggle to maintain inhibition when he tried to recite, we need to first begin working with the student away from his music, and then provide a transition to his work while playing at an instrument or singing, whichever the case may be. However, if our work is to bear fruit, the student, alone in his practice hours, must consciously choose to apply the work and not all students will choose to do so.

The first stage, working with the student away from his music, must restore a sense of fluid muscular quality to all his movements. One of the most difficult challenges for an Alexander teacher is the task of disengaging movement itself from a well-practiced state of muscular contraction. Understand if you will that the precision, accuracy and control demanded of the student have produced a contracted state of muscular rigidity in his use while making music. And, when control involves a habitual contraction of the muscular system prior to movement, then all movement becomes in itself the stimulus for the habitual state of contraction. The Alexander teacher has the primary task of lessening the intensity of muscular contraction and thereby gradually bringing about a changed, calmer state of being.

In connection with this changed state, we need to present a new idea of control to our students before making the transition to actual practicing. The generally accepted view of 'control' is one based on force, rigidity, and suppression of movement. It is a punitive attitude based on the fear that our physical being will betray us unless we coerce it into obedience. But could we not simply replace that idea of control by understanding that control is the ability to do what we wish to do at the moment we wish to do it? It would

seem a very practical and helpful concept for a musician.

Now in order to transfer what is learned in the Alexander lesson to the student's practice session, the student must be slowly and gently prepared. Let us not forget that the instrument is in itself a very strong stimulus and the ability to inhibit a response to it needs to be practiced. We must keep in mind that the student has spent a significant portion of his life with the instrument, and that it occupies a central role in his existence. A sense of self-worth, achievement, and reputation is at stake every time he plays. It is not easy to put aside the powerful temptation to end-gain, to succeed at any cost.

Therefore, practice time must be devoted to teaching ourselves how to practice inhibition. Or, from a perhaps more practical point of view, it is the time during which we practice changing priorities. How difficult it is for a singer not to focus on the sound of his voice, but rather on the state of his hand or foot, or back, etc! The primary question needs to be: what kind of state am I in while working? Which is simply another way of asking how am I using myself while I play at an instrument or sing. It is Dewey's phrase 'thinking in activity' being applied to the musician's profession.

Of course we cannot expect the musician or music student to come to this on his own. He must be prepared during his lesson time and shown how to go about it. Can the studio teacher of voice or violin teach the student how to practice in this way? Possibly, but not very likely. Can the teacher of the Alexander Technique do so? Indeed yes. The ideal is the Alexander teacher who is also a musician and has put himself through just such a way of practicing as well.

The final piece of the total picture is the student's willingness to work in this different way. In the end, each individual teaches himself whether it be music or the AT or archery. A teacher's role is to provide a useful direction, to open up a door leading on to a true path, and in our case to give the student a direct and new experience. If the student does not take on board what he has been shown, there is nothing anyone can do. There are in fact music students who are happy to have AT lessons for the relief of cramped muscles they have created through over-exertion but take nothing from the Technique to their own work. (Miss Goldie once remarked that most people see the Alexander Technique as just another form of physiotherapy.)

The rewards of working in this way are both muscular and musical. If we acknowledge a psychophysical unity, does it not follow logically that better use leads both to easier facility and more resonant quality of sound? Greater muscular fluidity and more supple rhythmic pulsation? In fact, does not better 'direction' (inner flow of movement) produce a freer musical flow? A more spontaneous shaping of the contour of a musical line? If our use is less heavy, less pressed downward, will we not be relieved of the burden of *espressivo*? I do believe the answers to all of these questions may be found to be 'yes.' But we each have to find it out for ourselves to be convinced. The most touching musical experience comes from a state of restored innocence. That is the real aim of Technique.