

The Development of the Technique at the RCM

Wilfred Barlow had a very large influence on the development of the Alexander technique in the important years towards the end of FM's life. He gave evidence in the libel trial brought against the South African government in 1949. His status as a qualified medical doctor gave his evidence added authority. Unfortunately his advocacy of Alexander's work put him in a compromised position with the British Medical Association. He wrote in 'More Talk of Alexander', "I myself had seen a medical career totally destroyed by the South African case, even though in every respect our evidence had been vindicated."¹ FM was successful in the court case and Wilfred felt it was a cause worth the aggravation.

On their return to London, Alexander wanted Wilfred and his wife, Marjory (Alexander's niece) to work with him at Ashley Place but Wilfred felt he needed to distance himself from Alexander to re-establish his position in the British medical profession. The Barlows took rooms in Albert Court near the Albert Hall and the Royal College of Music. They struggled to make ends meet with a little Alexander teaching and some private medical work. A young singer, Andrew Downie, who had trained at the Royal College of Music, visited the Barlows to find out about the Alexander technique. After the visit he met his old singing teacher, Joyce Wodeman, at the RCM. Joyce soon made an appointment for her first Alexander lessons with Marjory Barlow.

The outcome was an experiment, giving Alexander lessons to the singing students at the RCM. The results were very impressive and a scientific comparison was made with a control group from the Central School of Speech ². The RCM singing professors produced written conclusions as follows.

In each case there has been a marked physical improvement, which was usually reflected vocally and dramatically. It was a revelation to discover that tricks of behaviour could be eliminated in a comparatively short space of time once the student learned to control his tensional balance from the head-neck region.

In all cases students, since re-education, are easier to teach and can take and carry out stage directions with greater ease. The students seem to become aware of themselves in a new way. Each student reacted in a different characteristic way. For example, those who had been over-anxious to please authority discovered that they could be themselves with impunity, ceasing to be such model students, but becoming better performers. One student, a girl hampered by angular stereotyped movements, and a curiously 'spinsterish' quality of personality, has acquired considerable warmth and gracefulness. Another, with originally a very mediocre 'drawing-room' voice, is now considered by her

¹ More Talk of Alexander, Wilfred Barlow, Gollancz 1978 London, p191

² The comparative data is published in More Talk of Alexander, Wilfred Barlow, Gollancz 1978 London, p.98-9

original teachers and critics to have developed the qualities of voice and personality that go to make a really great singer.

The time it takes to get result varies greatly between one student and another. The utilization of the approach depends largely on the student himself.

Eight of the fifty re-educated students entered last year for a singing prize which is competed for by women singers every four years. It is open to all amateur and professional singers under thirty years of age in the British Isles, and is considered the highest achievement possible for students. The total entry was over one hundred. Of the eight students who entered six reached the semi-final, in which there were fifteen competitors. This is quite out of proportion to what one might expect.

In our opinion, this approach is the best means we have yet encountered for solving the artist's problem of communication and should form the basis of his training.

That inspirational final conclusion was followed up with the introduction of Alexander lessons at the RCM, not as the basis of the education but at least it was made available to music students at a major international conservatory. The lessons were given as an extra-curricula activity for students 'who needed them.'

Wilfred Barlow's stock in the medical world went up after reading a paper on this experimental research to the Royal College of Surgeons. It is interesting that the issue of artistic performance was the basis of the paper that gave Barlow his way back into medicine with a teaching hospital appointment followed by a consultancy in the National Health Service.

In 1989 I was invited to become a professor of double bass at the RCM, around the time I was finishing my Alexander training with Eleanor and Peter Ribeaux in London. I was very happy to take up the offer and started to develop a way of passing on Alexander influenced advice to my bass students without them necessarily knowing that it was Alexander orientated. In fact I could not have done otherwise as my whole approach to the instrument and life in general had become enlightened by the technique. The following year I decided to approach the college about giving all students an introduction to the technique as part of their course. I attended all the various faculty meetings and after making my advocacy at each meeting met with approval of the technique from a large portion of the professors. They would recount, how useful they had found their experience of the technique when they had taken lessons. I described the experiment that Wilfred Barlow had carried out at the college and suggested that I ran a new experiment to assess how useful it might be as part of the students' core studies. The woodwind professors could see that, if there were resources available for lessons, the woodwind students would gain most. The string profs. could see that the string students would gain most, the singing profs. could see that the singing students would gain most, etc. I was invited to talk to the Dean, who had been the chair at the various faculty meetings. He

said he could find the funding for ten students to take part in the experiment but that the best way to find the students for the experiment was to ask professors to nominate any students with 'problems'. I said that was not the experiment that I had in mind. I wanted to have a random sample of students, with and without particular problems. We argued about this over the next few months and eventually, when the next financial year's approach meant the money available would disappear, he blinked and I got my way. The experiment was a conspicuous success. The students answered a questionnaire and gave a short appraisal of the influence of the lessons on their playing. The feedback was almost embarrassingly positive and the college management was prepared to take the idea of an introductory course for all 1st year students to the degree planning committee. We ended up with an increase in Alexander provision, including an introductory course for all 1st year undergraduate students. That was a very significant development as the funding for the introductory course was from the degree budget rather than extra money to be found outside the core expenses. There has been continuous development of provision inside the curriculum and we now have level 5 and level 6 courses. These are funded within the degree budget as 'Academic' course options; they are available to year 3 and year 4 students. There is an encouraging take up of these courses and some very interesting written work gives a great insight into the efficacy of this 'Academic' group work.

Level 4 is our introductory course, it is compulsory for all 1st year undergraduate students. They receive ten weekly lessons. The lesson is taken in a group of five and lasts 30 minutes. The course covers a broad spectrum of Alexander appropriate topics; recognition of habit, inhibition, direction, primary control, semi-supine, body mapping, the connection between the back and the hands, breathing, reading and writing and performance anxiety. In the final week each student asks a question. The idea is for them to ask their deepest Alexander orientated question that implies knowledge of the technique.

Questions are a very useful element of a teaching/learning situation. They inform the teacher where the student has got to with their understanding of the subject. The question will tend to show how the lesson should be pitched. Students should be encouraged to ask good questions. The question is written down by the student and it is submitted with their self-observational diary for assessment. The diary is about 1000 words, made up of 14 daily entries, revealing their Alexander thinking. We make the point that when you are involved in any academic work the whole process is influenced by your 'use'. If you are slumping unconsciously when reading or writing it is indicative of switching off mentally and physically. So, 'if you don't think about working on yourself when you are writing your Alexander diary it will not be such a good diary!'

One favourite topic, students describe in the diary, is how they use semi-supine in relation to practice and rehearsals. We recommend reducing the playing element of practice. Twenty minutes of intense, aware playing can be very productive. One hour of intense playing tends to progressively lose effectiveness. We recommend a break from playing after about 20 minutes for about 10 minutes semi-supine. Whilst lying in semi-supine consider the effect of gravity on the body and sense any playing induced tension –

employ direction as appropriate to find 'neutral'. Then review the playing, did you stick the plan for the last 20 minutes, 'was it a good plan, what should you be able to achieve during the next 20 minutes playing?' Students usually report that they achieve more progress with this pattern than something less structured and with fewer breaks. Students spend more time practicing than doing anything else with their time, except sleeping. Some professors do give some advice on how to practice efficiently but some leave the student entirely on their own. The Alexander technique has a great deal to offer any music student in this area. Psycho-physical barriers need to be surmounted by all musicians whether they see it that way or not. We work on clearly identifying the barriers then lowering the barriers and finally supporting work on the other side of the barrier. It is now quite ordinary at college to see students lying in semi-supine in practice rooms and during the breaks of rehearsals. One student told me she had got her whole quartet to lay down in semi-supine and tried to get a sense of being together before a concert. They felt very good on stage after that.

It is an important thought that the way a musician uses their mind and body **is** the way they play their instrument. Very few musicians will have that belief without the help of an Alexander teacher. They might think that their 'posture' is significant so we should start there and discuss what they mean by 'posture'. If they can include movement and balance in the concept of posture, it makes a huge difference.

The introductory course includes a small amount of hands on experience and sometimes we can accommodate students with a very strong interest in the technique with individual lessons as well. When we started running the 1st year introductory course we were not sure how practically useful it would be for the students although we felt confident we could communicate the potential of the technique. When we started to read the self-observational diaries we began to realize that the group classes were extremely useful and an effective way of teaching the technique to musicians. I will now include a few days from the diaries of two students written at the end of their introductory course.

Phoebe Haynes

DAY TEN

Today I realise that I cannot separate the way I think from the way I use myself. I cannot separate the way I speak from the way I sing. I see more than ever before that my use affects my instrument which is my voice. For a singer perhaps more than for instrumentalists, the body *is* the instrument, and regardless of all the goodwill and practice in the world, distortions in the body will ultimately lead to distortions in the voice. Practice, in fact, can be a fairly counteractive measure, if all we are doing is reinforcing a faulty habit over and over again.

DAY ELEVEN

Today I turn my attention to my use when I am practising. As I begin warming up, I notice that (due to a conscious effort on my part) my use is not bad. However, when I start going through my repertoire, I see that I become alternately so preoccupied with my singing technique and so caught up in the interpretation of the song that I tend to lose sight of what my body is doing. My new aim is to coordinate interpretation and technique with postural awareness- no mean feat!

DAY FOURTEEN

I have worked on my Alexander Diary over the Christmas break and have learned much. I welcome (and now feel that I can fully appreciate) the guidance of my teacher which I have missed during the writing of my diary. I believe that the greatest personal benefit in writing this diary is that now I will approach my lessons in the right frame of mind. My singing teacher always tells me that it is once I have learnt a song from back to front that the real work can begin, and so it is with the Alexander Technique: now that I have familiarised myself with the principles and precepts of the technique and how they relate uniquely to me, I can begin working on myself in a way that will be conducive to my general well-being and also greatly helpful to my progression as a singer.

Level 5 students regularly play to each other in the classes then we discuss our observations and consider relevant practice strategies. The groups tend to become very supportive and the possibility of change is facilitated by students choosing to work together in practice sessions outside the lessons. The concept of faulty sensory perception seems to be easy to convey in the group format, five observers noticing the same thing when you are feeling something different is very powerful.

One of the written assignments is set up with all the students playing for 2-3 minutes. The other students observe the player and jot down observations from an Alexander perspective. They then have about 8 minutes to make notes about Alexander practice strategies that they think would be useful to improve the playing of that student. Many students start the course feeling very unsure about their ability to complete this assignment but by the end of the course they are confident to make critical 'use' orientated observations that inevitably inform any instrumental teaching they might undertake. This observation of others makes it much more likely that they will notice what they are doing themselves and so improve their own work.

Level 6 is available to undergraduates that have taken level 5 and postgraduates with experience of the technique. We usually find that the students with level 5 experience are very committed and advanced. Postgraduates, who are of course a few years older, seem to always be very committed even if they are not so advanced. The course is centred around performance and in particular communication in performance. We use video recordings on three occasions. The first lesson includes each student playing a 2-3 minutes piece. We discuss the effect of having a video camera in the room and having to perform to one's peers. Students are encouraged to look at the video and assess their own use from the outside. This is often the moment when faulty sensory perception is accepted completely as a home truth. We run mock auditions in the second half of the

course, this again is videoed. Mock auditions include a short interview. The students make up the panel and each student takes the chair for one of the auditions. The way they communicate and the impression they give when talking is another eye-opening moment for many students. We have had the comment from many students that this video really helped them prepare for the real life audition more than anything else at college.

The marked assignments start with a research project relating to music and the Alexander technique. They work collaboratively with one or two of the other students on the course, creating a questionnaire and collecting data. They are encouraged to gather responses from at least 10% of the college student body to make the data valid. They focus on a particular element of being a musician, e.g. technique, co-ordination, practice, performance anxiety, pain etc. Once they have identified the most significant result from the gathered data the students write an individual essay looking at the Alexander technique's solutions to that particular challenge.

The research project is considered a very appropriate assignment by the management of tertiary academic institutions. When we were negotiating setting up the course the head of undergraduate studies accepted the suggestion of a research project very happily.

The final assignment is a self-reflexive statement, similar to a diary but referring more to the course content and in particular to the usefulness of the video recordings. We prepare the students for this written assignment by getting them to make a presentation to the group, showing clips from their video recordings that they choose. The group then discusses what has been said in a very supportive atmosphere.

The final week of the course is used playing chamber music with the members of the group, looking at how to apply the technique to ensemble skills. It is useful to be able to join in and play but it is definitely not necessary. I usually enjoy joining in with my students. A central idea to get across is the 'expanded field of attention'³. The possibility of seeing visual cues from other musicians is acknowledged at starts and pauses by all musicians but there is a continuous stream of information available. Eyes that are not over focussed on the music can connect easily with other players. Gestures are more accurate and communicative when they are small and not effortful and that can be worked on in this situation. It is definitely worth working on starting from silence. Often, the technique used is; one person leads, the others follow. It is worth experimenting with everyone moving as if they are leading, this requires all players to get out of the music and communicate.

String players can sense the quality of the bowing gestures of other string players to get a better blend. It is a good experiment to rehearse the same passage a few times asking the string players to emulate each of the other string players' style of bowing in turn. We point out that the primary control and balance of the player will be part of the character of each player's bowing. Panoramic vision facilitates individual freedom and good ensemble. Wind players can do something similar with the way they breathe and move before they play, as they start the sound and how they move during rhythmic unison passages. On all instruments it is worth considering how accents are achieved, it is a moment when the 'means whereby' can make a big difference. Loud playing or loud accents can illicit more effort than necessary, discussing the best techniques for creating accents and relating them to primary control, balance and economy of effort is often productive.

³ Freedom to Change, Frank Pierce Jones, Mouritz, London, 1997

An all important discovery came from a level 6 student. She played to the class and I asked what she was thinking about whilst playing. The answer took some time and was a great long list of ideas that we had covered on the course. We discussed this in the group and eventually agreed that the detailed work on different aspects of the work is valid and suitable for practice. What we need in performance is a unifying trigger, something simple and familiar to pull everything together. It is also ok to not think about Alexander if you don't have the conscious space to do so. The process develops over months and years but the thinking should remain simple in performance or it can easily get in the way, especially in the early stages of development. The awareness of 'use' develops like the awareness of rhythm and intonation. Musicians do not have to remember to play in tune; it is simply part of being a musician.

We have a dedicated course for Postgraduate singers. It is a low tariff course created because so many singers would like to include Alexander in their course yet they do not have spare credits in their academic choices. This course is 5 lessons of one hour each. We concentrate on recognition of habit, sensing the use through identifying with the vocal resonance, primary control, balance, inhibition, direction and semi-supine. We discuss breathing and communication with the audience; singers have a lot to say about those subjects. We have found that many RCM singers take Alexander very seriously and quite a few of the most successful singing students, including some winners of international prizes, have made excellent use of the technique.

We have a new course under construction at college for postgraduates. The idea is to have students look at the main treatises written about their instrument, collect all the psycho-physical advice and compare that with their idea of the Alexander technique, looking for congruence and contradictions. They will write a dissertation making observations from the treatises and writing their own treaties on how to play their instrument from an Alexander perspective. These treatises will be collected over the years and become a body of work available to students in subsequent years.

Working in an institution that is populated by internationally famous professors and students of exceptional talent requires a certain amount of humility. There are some professors who encourage students to 'play through the pain'. It is very likely that we have nothing to offer to professor or student in those circumstances because they will not be able to take on our suggestions. We do, however, believe that it is ideal to be comfortable rather than in pain, we believe that good primary control and free balance improves coordination and playing in general but if someone is out in the profession performing at the highest level we must acknowledge that it is excellent playing, whatever we think of their 'use'.

There are some students who develop pain and poor coordination that get to a crisis situation. They might well look for an answer in Alexander lessons. This situation gives us a wonderful opportunity because in our experience it is more often than not that these students have something very strong to say musically. If we help them re-establish comfort, they will be open to the potential of the technique.

The biggest worry of students and some professors is that the Alexander technique is too passive and the student's playing loses spontaneity. It is vital that we get the message across, "***that is the wrong impression!***" We stress early on that real spontaneity is one of our main aims. Our level 5 and 6 courses work at improving spontaneity. One of the first students to take the level 5 course wrote her final essay on spontaneity; here is a brief extract from the end her essay.

Alexander realized however that he was unable to change his habitual response, simply by 'doing something else', he had to 'stop off at its source' the message from his brain to his body in order to allow a real freedom to change to occur. Inhibition is not then a suppression of spontaneity but is a conscious refusal to respond in a habitual way, therefore allowing a truly spontaneous response.....

This inhibition can be applied when performing a piece of music. Instead of playing in a way that has developed through repetitive practice, we can make the choice to feel and listen to the space between the notes and obtain a freedom to respond in a way that aids the flow of phrases instead of impeding them. We can choose to be aware of certain technical aspects which are necessary, whilst all the time considering the ultimate goal, of phrasing and shaping the structure of the entire piece.

I have found that Alexander's work has had a profound impact on my levels of musical perception and spontaneity. My development of the ability to make choices has not only affected my musical freedom in practice and performance but has affected how I learn from my violin teacher. Instead of concentrating on the specific advice I have been given in each lesson, I now have the ability to translate it into my own psychophysical language and consider my technique as a whole.

Alexander Technique, without doubt, is a way towards finding true musical freedom and spontaneity. I believe it is a vital part of any musical education.

Kate Robinson (Violinist RCM)

We certainly do not believe that a musician's playing should lose one gram of emotional intensity. That, after all, is what music is about, not technique for its own sake. We don't think that 'you should not move very much' because you have to move to make any sound on any instrument. All the movements should have the appropriate energy and sometimes that is high intensity energy. As Alexander teachers we remember that musicians are coming to see us to improve their playing and performing. If that happens we must see it as a success and not give them any reason to feel guilty if they are not perfect examples of the Alexander technique in action. If you ask a young student how much practice they do each day, most will say, 'not as much as I should'. We can help them move in the direction of quality and progress rather than clocking up a worthy number of hours. We do our best to make sure that we do not replace guilt about not enough practice with guilt about not enough thinking about the Alexander technique. We take students as we find them, acknowledge their skill and help them take the next step. Some students will take the technique very seriously, some will get just a few useful

ideas, and both scenarios are good. We have had about a ten students going on from the RCM to train as Alexander teachers in the last 20 years, so their lives will definitely be changed forever as a second career path develops that continuously informs their career in music. Hundreds are using their experience of the technique, gained at the RCM, while they pursue successful performing careers in countries all over the world.