The Alexander Technique and Flute Playing

by Alexander Murray

I spent the war years 1940-1946 at school in South Africa. When I returned to England I had the good fortune to meet a "natural" flute-player, Stanley Farnsworth, who was a visitor to my home town on the occasion of his niece's wedding. At that time he was in the orchestra for "Song of Norway," a London musical, playing to packed houses. I was about to go to London for my Royal College of Music audition and he invited me to stay in his home.

Stan was an all-round musician, played the cello, accompanied me on the piano and composed and scored tuneful salon pieces. He had a photograph of himself at age five, sitting on top of an upright piano, playing the piccolo. He couldn't remember when he first acquired one. Training as a boy apprentice at Kneller Hall School of Military Music, he served his time in the army before becoming a free-lance musician.

I have never heard sweeter flute playing (on an old Rudall Carte ebonite flute). Unambitious, he accepted the London Theatre scene as his main source of income. His last engagement was in the Drury Lane Theatre orchestra for "My Fair Lady" after which he, his wife, daughter, and son-in-law emigrated to New Zealand.

To Stan, flute playing was as natural as talking—even more natural as he was by no means loose-tongued. What do I mean by "natural" flute-playing? It is easier to say what it is not. Many distinguished flute-playing artists appear to be fighting with the limited number of stereotyped movements which accompany whatever they are playing. If you are watching a TV performance, turn off the sound and see if you can infer the music from the gestures. If they were truly fitted to the music, it might be possible. I have never found this to be the case.

If you did not have the good fortune to learn to speak with the melodious tongue of the flute by the age of 5, how can you become a "natural" player?

I can't pretend to know the answer. The best advice I can give is that proffered by John Dewey in 1918 in his introduction to the first book on the "Alexander Technique" to appear in the United States:

> The spontaneity of childhood is a delightful and precious thing, but in its original naive form it is bound to disappear…true spontaneity is henceforth not a birthright, but the last term, the consummated conquest of an art—the art of conscious control to the mastery of which Mr. Alexander's book so convincingly invites us.[1]

Alexander was born in Tasmania in 1869, ten years after John Dewey. As a young man he was a successful actor and orator until afflicted with recurrent

hoarseness. Failing to find a medical solution to his problem, he set about studying what he was doing while reciting using mirrors as a visual guide. Early in his self-study he realized that he had discovered principles applicable to cases other than his own and he progressively evolved a technique for communicating these principles to other individuals.

Alexander had been teaching his technique for a quarter of a century when he met John Dewey whom he helped recover from a stress-induced breakdown. During the earlier part of his career he had worked mainly with actors and voice users and was initially known as the "breathing man." As he gained more experience in helping alleviate vocal and respiratory problems, he realized that these were symptoms of mal-coordination which he subsequently called "mis-use." In 1932 he wrote a retrospective account of how he had dealt with his own problems. *The Use of the Self* was written for the benefit of his first Teacher's Training Course which had begun the previous year. By the time of his death in 1955 he had trained about 50 teachers some of whom in turn trained others. There are now several thousand Alexander teachers worldwide. The Alexander Technique, like the flute, cannot be adequately taught by the written word. That being said, I will do my best to explain its value to us as flute players.

Alexander realized that what he initially conceived of as a "physical" problem with a "mental" aspect must be treated as a "psychophysical" unity and that his approach was "re-educative," restoring conditions that had been changed for the worse by subconscious bad habits.

One of the first bad habits Alexander dealt with was noisy breathing—sniffing and gasping. When the nostrils are flared and not narrowed, the air can come in through the nose noiselessly, unless the nasal sinuses are blocked. Similarly, if the jaw is released and the mouth allowed to open, the air will enter soundlessly and easily through the mouth as in swimming. Noisy breathing means that the air is being impeded—subject to friction as it enters. "Natural" breathing is taking place all the time. If you exhale deliberately (whether playing, or whispering) then close the lips and wait, the air will return in its own time. This is a useful experiment when practicing—play a phrase of moderate length, close the lips and notice how long it is before you have recovered the breath expended.

What Alexander discovered is that there is a certain optimal condition of the organism, which if maintained, brings about a natural recovery of breath. This condition is present normally in healthy young children but is lost as they grow and develop under "civilized" conditions.

The flexibility and mobility of our bodies is affected by our day-to-day habits. Slouching in schoolrooms for long periods of time changes the natural capacity of the organism. Healthy activities in the open air can mitigate conditions to some extent, but very often even the best coordinated athletic youngsters will return to the classroom and to a "slumped" attitude.

The alertness which is taken for granted on the court or field is the sort of alertness we need to bring to our practice as flutists. Long periods of boredom in band or orchestra while the conductor deals with problems of blowing or bowing hardly encourage lively habits of mind. The Alexander Technique can help the student utilize these lulls in activity to promote personal alertness and readiness to play when the time is appropriate.

The most counterproductive habit is one of anxiety. The most exaggerated form of this is what is known as the "startle" pattern. We have all experienced "startle" when a sudden loud noise causes us to contract. This contraction is often present in a small but noticeable (to others) degree when we are anxious about the success or failure of our efforts. Learning to recognize this behavior

and neutralize it is one of the ways in which an Alexander teacher can help.

What can you expect if you decide to have an Alexander lesson? Your teacher may ask if you have any particular problems—holding the flute, breathing, embouchure, double-tonguing or any of the categories of problems into which we analyze our flute playing activities. You may be asked to demonstrate the difficulty. But what the teacher is interested in is the way you move and approach whatever you do—your pattern of "use."

The most important factors in any experimental situation are awareness and observation. An Alexander lesson is an experiment in which the pupil and the teacher are both observing and becoming aware of the process. Whatever the activity—lifting the instrument, playing a note, playing a technical passage, or making a simple movement from sitting to standing or vice versa—the teacher and pupil will be organizing their perceptions of what is going on. And this organization will not be focused on the "end" to be gained, but on the way in which it is accomplished—the steps which lead to its accomplishment.

The first step in any activity should be "Stop," and then, "Consider." If you lift the flute as soon as you think of lifting it, you will lift it in your habitual way. If you wish to change this you must first stop. Then think of the "means" or the way in which you will pick it up. Before you make a move there are other matters to be considered. These are the responsibility of your teacher. With the hands appropriately placed, the teacher will notice the way in which you are responding to the idea of moving and will encourage you to become aware of a certain relationship of the head, neck, and torso and the way in which you may be interfering with this. This relationship, which is a dynamic one, becomes part of the organization of what follows. The whole of you lifts the flute, not merely the hands and arms.

As musicians we are accustomed to "thinking-in-activity," a phrase Dewey applied to the Alexander Technique. We note key, time signature, and tempo and maintain this information at a more or less subconscious level while playing. With the Alexander Technique the relationship of the head, neck, and back is primary in every activity. Just as we pay little attention to key, time signature and tempo until there is a change, so in the Alexander organization of awareness, when something changes, we reconsider our total pattern.

There is no activity of the fingers, lips, or breath which does not involve the whole organism: the head (with our wonderful brain), the neck (through which flows food for thought), and the torso (the engine, driving the whole unit). How to intelligently involve the *whole* self in one's flute playing, naturally and spontaneously, is the purpose of studying the Alexander Technique. Try it, you might like it. An authorized summary of Alexander's books is a good starting point.

This article only briefly describes the technique and philosophy of F. Matthias Alexander. For further information you may contact:

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They offer information on teachers of the technique, as well as a free catalog of books on the subject.

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ENDNOTES

[1] F. Matthias Alexander, *Man's Supreme Inheritance: Conscious Guidance and Control in Relation to Human Evolution in Civilization* (New York: E.P. Dutton, January 1918)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALEXANDER MURRAY is Professor of Flute at the University of Illinois. Formerly principal flute with Covent Garden Opera and the London Symphony, he has taught at the Royal College, Royal Academy, and Royal Northern College in England, the Royal Dutch Conservatory, Michigan State University, and the National Music Camp at Interlochen. Since 1959 he has played flutes of his own design made by Albert Cooper and Jack Moore with advice from physicists Arthur Benade, John Coltman and Ronald Laszewski. With his wife, Joan, Mr. Murray is Co-Director of the Urbana Center for the Alexander Technique and has assisted in the training of over 50 Alexander teachers, including several flutists. He studied the flute with Robert Murchie at the Royal College and Gaston Crunelle at the Paris Conservatory and the Alexander Technique with Walter Carrington, Alexander's assistant at the time of his death in 1955.