

The Alexander Technique: An Introduction for Horn Players

by Kerin Black

Many of you will have heard of, if not experienced, the Alexander Technique. It is a method for making everything in life easier and more effective, and yes, that includes horn playing! In this series of short articles on the Alexander Technique and horn playing, I want to touch on some important topics specific to our career or hobby, such as posture, stamina, practice, auditions, nerves, breathing, range, and teaching.

F.M. Alexander was a Shakespearian actor in Tasmania around the turn of the 20th century. He developed difficulties with his voice while performing, often going hoarse on stage, sometimes losing his voice completely. He consulted physicians, none of whom could find anything wrong. As he did not have any problems with his voice off-stage, he decided he must be doing something differently on-stage to off-stage which was causing the problem. After meticulous observation, he discovered that he was pulling his head back and down ever so slightly in relation to the spine, which depressed the larynx unnecessarily, and caused strain on his vocal cords resulting in the loss of his voice. Through more research and observation he was able to further expand his awareness and knowledge of how we as human beings often get in the way of ourselves, and proceeded to teach his newly discovered technique and train others to teach it as well.

The Alexander Technique is about coordination and reactions. It is based on the principle that one cannot separate mind from body. Some activities appear to be more outwardly physical, while others appear more outwardly mental. It is not a relaxation technique. With the Alexander Technique we initially learn to release excess muscle tension in activity and prevent ourselves from blocking our own progress through excessive "doing."

It is about awareness, both of yourself and your surroundings. It is about being present, always in the here and now. The Alexander Technique is a method of learning to react to everything that comes at you on the road of life, in the way that you choose to react. It gives you the ability to notice what's going on in- and outside of yourself, and to take control of your actions and reactions.

Through the Alexander Technique you learn to recognize habits in action and thought, which may be holding you back, and then you learn to let them go. You learn to consciously decide what to do next and how to do it, instead of just thoughtlessly doing what you have always done. You could, theoretically, decide to carry out the same action in the same way repeatedly. As long as you go through the process of awareness and decision each time, it is not a habit.

There are always at least three choices. Let's say I have the idea to play my daily scales. Every one of you will have a routine when you play scales. I start with C major, then work my way up in semitones. You can change this exercise to fit

your routine. So you decide to play your scales. First, stop inwardly. Don't just do it. Decide not to react immediately. Actively think about what you want to do.

Do you want to start with C major today? Or do you want to start with D major? – Or somewhere else? Why?

Do you want to start at the bottom of the scale, or maybe start at the top? Maybe you want to start in the middle, just to mix things up. Why?

Do you actually even want to play my scales now? Or would you prefer to do something else first? Or not play scales at all today? Most importantly, why?

Now I know that seems like a lot to think about when really you just want to get on with your warm-up, but with time and practice, all of these thoughts and questions take place within a split second. Maybe you'll choose day-in day-out to play the scales starting on C major, from bottom to top, and working your way up in semitones, never missing a day. As I mentioned before, as long as you always think about your options before you start, it is no longer a habit, but rather you are in control of your actions. This principle manifests itself in other areas of your life as well, as you gain experience and understanding of the Alexander Technique.

So why not do it the same way every time, if it works? Have you ever heard of Repetitive Strain Injury, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, or tendonitis? Have you ever suffered from chronic aches or pains? Have you ever reached a plateau and couldn't figure out why you weren't progressing beyond it, despite hours of practice and effort? Have you ever woken up with a stiff lip the morning of an important rehearsal or audition? What do you do when the conditions aren't the same as usual? The Alexander Technique gives you the possibility of staying flexible and finding instant and simple solutions to whatever unexpected difficulties may arise. It prevents fear and even panic when the unexpected happens and you feel like things are out of your control. It gives you complete control of yourself, and with that, your instrument in any situation. It prevents stress- and tension-related injuries. Should you develop one anyway (let's face it, nobody's perfect!), it gives you a tool to figure out the cause of that injury, and the ability to stop the problem at the source, without having to give up playing the horn.

What about that one passage that always works at home, but for some reason goes wrong in performance? You have this idea that it could go wrong, and what do you know? It does! So you practice the passage another 100 times, and it works 100 times. Then you're in a performance situation, and it doesn't work. This is a symptom of habitual thinking, which has a direct influence on physical manifestation. So you practice more, piling on more and more layers of physical experience and apparent ability, all the while holding on to the cause of the problem: a habit of thinking! The Alexander Technique teaches you



The Alexander Technique

to let go of this habit and to be free of the niggling thoughts that prevent you from performing your best. It frees you up to play with a new lightness and enjoyment.

No amount of text will ever be a replacement for hands-on work with a good teacher, but it can give you an insight into what the Alexander Technique can do for you.

I will touch on some more details related to horn-specific subjects in future articles. For now, a basic exercise to help you begin to let go of excess physical tension as a whole:

Lie down on a fairly hard surface (a table or the floor, NOT a bed) on your back. Place a stack of paperback books under your head, just enough so that it's comfortable. Raise your knees so your feet are flat on the floor and your knees are shoulder-width apart. Place your hands on your abdomen. Keep your eyes open and active throughout the exercise. Now think the following thoughts, slowly, in sequence, repeatedly, for about 10 minutes.

- Let my neck be free.
- Let my head fall to the books underneath it. Let my neck fall to the floor
- Let my back drop to the floor – my whole back. (Notice whether any part of your back is not contacting the floor, and give extra thought to that area. Do not push it to the floor or do anything to achieve the effect. Just quietly ask your muscles to release into their full length, allowing the back to fall to the

floor. You may want to give an extra thought to your lower back.)

• My shoulders are spreading away from each other – my elbows as well.

• My knees are pointing up to the ceiling. (Feel your feet touching the floor. Allow your knees to come up away from your feet, out of your hip joints.)

• Notice your breathing. Don't judge it, and don't 'fix' it. Just observe the air coming and going.

Move through other parts of your body – hands, lips, abdomen, chest, thighs. Where do you feel tension? Ask it to let go.

Try this exercise every day, and you may begin to notice small differences after just a few sessions.

Kerin Black is a professional horn player and Alexander Technique teacher in Stuttgart, Germany. After four years of private Alexander Technique lessons during her horn studies at the Royal Academy of Music, she trained to teach the Alexander Technique in London, qualifying as a teacher in 2002. Next to her private practice, she is an assistant teacher trainer in Zurich, Switzerland. She offers master classes and private lessons worldwide, with a special focus on work with musicians and especially brass players. For more information please visit: www.alexandertechnikstuttgart.com



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