

INCORPORATION OF ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE PRINCIPLES IN TEACHING VOICE: *A Psychophysical Approach*

by Larry Hensel, DMA

INTRODUCTION

As a Certified Teacher of the Alexander Technique (AT) and a college-level voice teacher, I am often asked how much I incorporate AT into a voice lesson. While I am careful to make the distinction between a voice lesson and an AT lesson, my training as an AT teacher has greatly influenced my vocal pedagogical approach. F. M. Alexander (1869–1955) began his career as a stage actor, and later devised a methodology that can be used in any activity. He codified his discoveries into principles that would “free ourselves from the deeper and deeper layers of interference with natural functioning,” (Michael Gelb, *Body Learning*).

“Learning how to learn” is what distinguishes the AT from all the other “ways to grow.” (Frank Pierce Jones, *Freedom to Change*). You can only change as quickly as you can change your thinking, which might sound easy at first, but I have found it to be one of the most challenging parts of AT. Through the exploration of awareness and change that AT has provided, I find that I communicate pedagogical ideas in a much more direct, simple way. But the most consequential change has been in my response to my students’ psychophysical development in the complex art of singing.

THE PRINCIPLES OF ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE Use and Functioning

The quality of movement in any activity affects its function. We have often heard the expression, “our instrument is our body.” I pay attention to students’ physical use of their whole body in the act of singing, as it addresses their psychophysical self. (The psychophysical self can be thought of as the relationship between the students’ subjective judgment or perception of sensations and their actual physical movement.) AT has taught me methods of addressing their use, so that they begin to understand that use and function have a direct bearing on the quality of their work. I find that I ask questions like “Were you aware of what actually moved when you took that breath?”



Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869-1955)

and “Was your neck tight when you took the inhalation for that phrase?” They begin to take responsibility for their use in a much more mindful and conscious way.

Primary Control

Primary Control refers to the way the relationship of our head/neck/back (and I would include entire spine) significantly influences our whole body coordination and movement. The primary organization of how the head actually balances on top of the spine gives us the ease of function we seek when we sing. (The head balances at the atlanto-occipital joint at the top of the spine, which is between your ears and behind the tip of your nose—not at the bottom of the back of the skull, or the back of the neck.)

Singing is movement; it is accomplished by a complex series of physically coordinated events. In some pedagogical methods, there is the notion that there is a proper “posture” which is optimal for the physical act of singing. Posture is defined as a position of a person’s body—to put or to place something. To my AT way of thinking, posture implies a holding of the body and suggests a limited range of motion. If singing is movement, then trying to acquire a “posture” can potentially interfere with efficiency and ease in that movement—it is a conflicting idea. In AT terms, there is no such thing as a position, because our use, our primary control is a constantly changing, fluid, dynamic relationship.

Becoming an AT teacher has taught me how to sense that dynamic relationship in my own use. When that fluid relationship is compromised, a tight neck can often pull the head back and down (which can be seen by the student’s chin protruding forward). This downward compression interferes with the breath (intake and release). I have been astounded by how often students tighten their neck muscles on the inhalation, and are therefore tight before they initiate the sound. They are using a group of muscles that do not need to be used. Neck muscles help hold your head up and move it in many directions—they do not help you sing.

Unreliable Sensory Appreciation

Mr. Alexander discovered that he could not rely on his kinesthetic sense. The postural “habits” that accompanied his activity were so ingrained that they always felt “right” to him. Yet he ascertained that these postural habits interfered with his speaking voice, and that they contributed to his constant vocal fatigue. For example, singers can never truly “hear” what their voices are like. When students record themselves in a lesson, they often comment, “Do I really sound like that?” or “It doesn’t *sound* that way to me at all.” I have a similar experience when AT teachers work with me. They will help me initiate a change in my body balance and/or movement, and it often feels “wrong.” And then I look in the mirror, and I see that my kinesthetic sense is unreliable. My habits of holding or using muscle groups that do not need to be used interfere with the ease and efficiency of the activity and my body balance. I have discovered

that one cannot feel through tension. My old kinesthetic sense was formed by habits of misuse and undue tension. To paraphrase Mr. Alexander, “You have to be wrong a long time before you get right.”

Whole Body/The Whole Person

When I began working with an AT Teacher with my own singing, I noticed that I had a habitual pattern of pushing up my sternum. He commented, “Think of the global consequences of that action.” I noticed that my habitual pattern actually brought my arms in, and compressed my back ribs; I had very little range of motion with my breathing muscles. To help students become more aware of their psychophysical self, I often use AT strategies of awareness. I used to go through the different body “parts” in explaining body balance: feet, knees, hips, torso, arm, and head/neck. But then I observed that my students were “stacking” their body parts and were not developing a sense of their whole body. I ask them to think of the relationship of each part to the whole self, and primarily, the relationship of the head balancing on top of the spine and how that affects their whole self. Another strategy I employ is “being in the world.” As I began to incorporate my awareness of my whole body while taking in all of my surroundings, I was astounded that I was able to monitor my use in that activity much better and more of the time. The more heightened awareness I developed, the easier it was to assimilate AT principles into my artistic work.

Inhibition

Our reaction to stimulus often initiates our habits of misuse. By stimulus, I mean a thing or event that evokes a specific functional reaction in the body. What do we do when we see a passage of music that is difficult and challenging? What is our thinking as it approaches, and how does our body react to that thinking? Mr. Alexander found that he needed to inhibit the habit by his thought process. Students often make the comment when confronted with a vocal or musical challenge, “I just need to stop overthinking it,” or “If I just don’t think about it, then things come out easier.” I would make the argument that they need to redirect their thinking and eliminate the parts that interfere with the activity. When they say, “I just shouldn’t think about it,” it is really an attempt to inhibit the initial response of startle or tension. I have sometimes said to myself, “Just stop thinking stupid things.” “When the associated stimulus is presented, three choices are available: to make the response as it was originally learned; to make a different and more appropriate response; not to respond at all” (Frank Pierce Jones, *Freedom to Change*).

Direction

In Alexander work, we learn what not to do. It is the idea of the positive “no;” “I am not going to tighten my neck” to take a breath for singing. (Missy Vineyard, *How You Stand, How You Move, How You Live*). People are often surprised that AT is really about your thinking “in” the activity. We inhibit those habits that interfere with efficient movement by our direction of thought. When my students have performance anxiety, I often give them three pieces of direction: 1) notice the movement of your breathing (ribs and abdominal wall); 2) feel both feet on the floor—the whole foot—each one; and 3) check into the back of your neck to see if it is tight, and if it is, release that tension. This helps them to realize that they truly have

options available to them and that they no longer need to habitually muscle their way through the music. They have now given themselves permission to make a new choice.

Ends and Means

Musicians are notorious for fixating on a flawless performance, so much so that they obsess about the end result and forget about their use entirely. Alexander termed this “end-gaining” and identified it as one of the leading causes of habitual tension and misuse. If we are only focused on the goal or the outcome, then what is actually happening at the moment? I teach my voice students to think more about what I call the “how” of the “what;” not how am I doing vocally or musically? but rather, how am I actually doing this activity? What is actually happening physically? I direct them to bring their attention to the process and monitor their use as best they can during the activity. AT gives one the means whereby one can affect change. Therefore, attention to the process is the goal.

Hands-on Work

One aspect of the work that I feel is quite beneficial for my voice students is the hands-on work. AT Teachers complete approximately 1,600 hours of training to use their hands in a respectful, educated and gentle way to help guide the client into an easier way of being. By direction with my hands, I am able to help them with primary control (head balancing on the top of the spine), release habitual muscular tension, sense the complete movement of all twenty-four ribs, and have a greater sense of their whole body. Nearly all AT Teachers incorporate hands-on guidance in an AT lesson. The hands-on work shows potential for ease and efficiency of motion, and gives the student kinesthetic feedback. In essence, my educated hands-on makes them “louder” to themselves—it turns up their kinesthetic volume, if you will. They have a heightened sense that balance and ease are available to them all of time.

Other Observations

One AT concept that has made an enormous difference in my pedagogical approach is that of taking care of my own self first. If I am truly doing the best that I can for myself, my own use in a lesson is better (i.e. speaking and singing voice, keyboard skills, visual and aural observations, technical and musical instruction, and intuition). If my own use and AT directional thinking are the best they can be, then I am truly available for the student. I am reminded of the Rom Dass quote, “The only thing you have to offer another human being, ever, is your own state of being.”

Final Thoughts

One of my students once asked me: “What is your definition of an artist?” In my opinion, an artist is someone who “shows up.” They are present with their whole self, all of the time: intellect, emotional intent, and awareness of the physical/whole body. They do this (to paraphrase Mr. Alexander) all at the same time, one after the other. AT is a method that provides the means whereby you can move with greater ease and efficiency. I was drawn to the Alexander Technique because you do not take time out of your day to do it; in essence, you practice your presence and live the work. Alexander Technique, then, is really about the quality of your life.

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F. M. Alexander at work

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PHOTO: Brian Degenfelder

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