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# The Alexander Technique

Nichole Lauren Vasu

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# The Alexander Technique

## **Abstract**

Imagine there was a magical book, which upon reading and then applying the learned knowledge would correct all problems with posture and pain within the body. It sounds fairly implausible, but now imagine the book is real, and one really can find a release from pain simply through learning more. I was quite skeptical at first, refusing to believe it could be that easy: all I needed to do was learn more about my body, see a teacher once a week, and read books, and I would have better posture, less pain, and a better quality of life? It seemed too good to be true. Then I started my lessons in the Alexander Technique. In this paper, I will present a history of the Alexander Technique, give a definition and list the components of this technique, share my experiences with the Alexander Technique, and state whether or not I believe this can help musicians, specifically violinists.

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THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

By

Nichole Lauren Vasu

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with Honors in Music and Dance

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Introduction**

Imagine there was a magical book, which upon reading and then applying the learned knowledge would correct all problems with posture and pain within the body. It sounds fairly implausible, but now imagine the book is real, and one really can find a release from pain simply through learning more. I was quite skeptical at first, refusing to believe it could be that easy: all I needed to do was learn more about my body, see a teacher once a week, and read books, and I would have better posture, less pain, and a better quality of life? It seemed too good to be true. Then I started my lessons in the Alexander Technique. In this paper, I will present a history of the Alexander Technique, give a definition and list the components of this technique, share my experiences with the Alexander Technique, and state whether or not I believe this can help musicians, specifically violinists.

## **The History of the Alexander Technique**

The history of the Alexander Technique cannot be told without relating the story of Frederick Matthias Alexander, known as F. M. Alexander. Alexander was born in 1869 in Australia, and made his living as an actor and reciter of plays. As a child, he suffered from various respiratory illnesses, including asthma, which kept him from attending school when he was younger. After seeming to grow out of them, he saw the return of his respiratory problems once he became more popular as an actor. Alexander's fellow actors told him they could hear him gasping for air while he spoke, and his voice felt hoarse during many performances. On one occasion, he lost his voice completely during a performance.

Alexander went to doctors, seeking as many treatments as possible in a chance to save a beloved career. One doctor told him not to speak for several weeks before his next performance, but his voice was just as hoarse by the end of that recitation. Alexander asked himself if there was perhaps something he was doing while speaking that was causing his distress, and spent the next several years trying to discover the cause. He observed himself speaking and reciting in mirrors, experimenting with various levels of observation. He noticed while reciting that three key things were happening: he pulled his head back onto his spine; he depressed the area of his throat containing his vocal cords; and he sucked in air through his mouth, producing the gasping noise. With continued observation, he noticed these things were also happening to a lesser degree when he was speaking normally.

This discovery led to the question: which of these three items – pulling back his head, depressing his throat, or sucking in air – was the catalyst to the other two? Which of these movements, if prevented, could perhaps stop the other two movements from happening as well? After several more months of study, Alexander realized that if he did not pull his head back, he also did not depress his throat or suck in air through his mouth. He called this discovery the “primary control.” Richard Brennan, in his book, The Alexander Technique Workbook, defines the primary control as the “main organizer of the body.” Brennan further describes it as a “dynamic relationship” between the head and the body: when the head moves, it affects the rest of the body (Brennan 8). To apply this to Alexander, when he pulled his head back, it directly affected the rest of his body by depressing the larynx, and therefore caused him to gasp in air.

Alexander had discovered not only the primary control, but also what he called “downward pull.” Downward pull is a result of gravity: the head, resting heavily atop the spine, starts to move back and down. This in turn pulls the spine down, specifically the thoracic section of the spine. The pelvis also moves backward and down, which causes the ankle joints to compensate and move back and down as well (Mark 35). This position of downward pull tenses or shortens some muscles, and overstretches others. The other tissues in the body, like the tendons, adjust to the new muscle positions, therefore causing the body to feel natural in the state of downward pull (Mark 34). Barbara Conable states that downward pull imposes “a pattern of tension throughout the body that compromises the primary control” (Conable 2).

With this in mind, Alexander continued to observe himself in mirrors, pulling his head back to see what else it did to his body. He made another important observation: interfering with the primary control affected the body as a whole, not just a specific part. He thought that he must then move his head forward and up to combat his earlier problems. He considered his acting issues to be solved, and checked once more in his mirrors. He quickly realized that by pulling his head forward and up, he was arching his spine and lifting his chest. These reactions would be just as harmful in acting as his first set of problems. He decided to call this “faulty sensory perception,” meaning the feedback people receive from the senses can sometimes be untrustworthy.

Alexander worked on developing his kinesthetic sense, which involves the body’s ability to sense itself. A person can discover this sense by placing a hand behind his or her back. One can still sense the hand is there, even though one cannot see, hear, taste, touch, or smell it. In terms of faulty sensory perception, Alexander realized his

kinesthetic sense was at times giving him feedback that felt natural only because it was habitual. For example, Alexander wanted to correct his past habit of pulling his head back onto the top of his spine. It was difficult to do this without the aid of the mirrors, because any new position felt different and therefore wrong. He could not trust his body's ability to sense its own position, and needed outside assistance.

At this stage, years after his trips to doctors, many people would have simply given up. Alexander, however, was determined to find the optimal way of using his body. He continued his experimentation and discovered muscle tension in much of his body, which was in turn causing other areas of tension, which continued to escalate. He called this "patterns of tension." He then decided he must now "direct" his body, rather than letting it do what had always felt natural. He needed to consciously use his body, instead of allowing old habits to take precedence. He called this "constructive conscious control," which is the ability to "consciously inhibit the imposed pattern of tension he called downward pull and to consciously cooperate with and facilitate the primary control and thereby recover grace and poise in movement and ease in sitting or standing" (Conable 2).

He discovered the next step, which he called "inhibition": Alexander would immediately refuse to react to a stimulus. He would then imagine the new direction in which he wanted his body to move and allow his body to move in the new, reasoned way. Brennan states that "by stopping for a moment before an action takes place, we have time to use our reasoning powers to check which is the most efficient and appropriate way of performing such an action" (Brennan 63). Jonathan Drake describes inhibition as allowing oneself to have all possible ranges of movement until the last moment before

committing to action. This “withholding of action, or non-doing, gives us the chance of regaining our poise” (Drake 27). In this situation, poise refers to the state of body when it is forward and up.

The final step in Alexander’s road to redefining himself was the discovery of the directions, or the orders, as he sometimes called them. Brennan defines the directions as a “process which involves projecting messages from the brain to the body’s mechanisms and conducting the energy necessary for the use of these mechanisms.” Each person can choose to direct either the entire body or a specific part. The three main directions conceived by Alexander are as follows: first, allow the neck to be free; next, let the head go forward and up; and finally, allow the back to lengthen and widen. The first direction is always first because it is an application of the primary control. Without the primary control, according to Alexander, all other directions are meaningless (Brennan 71). In addition to the main directions or orders, there is a multitude of secondary directions that also play a part in the Alexander Technique, each direction specifically tailored to the individual using them. For example, when walking, a person may think to themselves that they need to imagine their knees going away from each other. Another example occurs when sitting, in that a person can think of the weight of the legs dropping through the feet (Brennan 74).

Once he realized this would apply to every movement in the body, not just acting and reciting, Alexander established a school to share his discoveries with others. Today, there are many teachers of the Alexander Technique, and many different types of people that benefit from Alexander’s findings. Musicians, athletes, actors, and pregnant women are among the people who usually seek out this way of life. Today, students are guided

through Alexander's discoveries by their teachers, in a process that takes much less time than Alexander did himself.

### **Definition of the Alexander Technique**

It is difficult to accurately define the Alexander Technique using only a single phrase or paragraph. In my research, I have found as many definitions as I have books that I read. I believe the reason for the multitude of definitions is best stated by Michael Gelb in his book Body Learning; he states "any attempt to put that experience [of the Alexander Technique] into words is necessarily limited, rather like trying to explain music to someone who has never heard a note" (Gelb 1). The Alexander Technique can be defined as any number of things, from an alternative medicine to a way of life.

I looked through each source and wrote down the definitions of those authors, and my favorite definition is by John Gray in his book The Alexander Technique. Gray states the Alexander Technique can be defined as a "process of psycho-physical reeducation: by inhibiting automatic habitual responses it allows you to eliminate old habits of reaction and misuse of the body and, through more reliable sensory appreciation, brings about improved use and a more appropriate means of reaction" (Gray 13). I appreciate this definition due to the fact that it combines the discoveries of Alexander into one sentence: his inhibition, faulty sensory perception, and the reasoned use of the body. Jeremy Chance further sums up the Alexander Technique in a more succinct phrase: the Alexander Technique "allows release of unnecessary muscle tension through increased body awareness" (Chance 1).

Other definitions include Jonathan Drake's description in his book The Alexander Technique in Everyday Life: this technique is "systematized common sense" (Drake 10).

Gelb states the Alexander Technique is “a means for changing stereotyped response patterns by the inhibition of certain postural sets” (Gelb 2). Finally, Barbara Conable defines it as a “simple and practical method for improving ease and freedom of movement, balance, support, flexibility, and coordination” (Conable 1). I also appreciate the way Gray defines the Alexander Technique as a “change of direction in one’s life” (Gray 66). Finally, Brennan defines Alexander’s own work in discovering this technique as an application of the law of cause and effect (Brennan 3).

If I were to put the Alexander Technique into my own words, I would call it a way of life. I would not define it as simply a process one should follow, or an alternative medicine. My own experiences with studying the Alexander Technique, which will be discussed later in this paper, have involved a series of life-changing events, and I believe my personal outlook on life in general has changed for the better. I would further define the Alexander Technique as a way of using one’s body with maximum efficiency through intense self-reflection and the study of human anatomy.

### **Components of the Alexander Technique**

The Alexander Technique is comprised of seven key components, or operational ideas: use and functioning of the body, the whole person (also known as the body map), primary control, unreliable (or faulty) sensory perception, inhibition, direction, and ends and means (Gelb 87). This is not a complete and exhaustive list of all aspects of the technique, however. I chose these components to discuss in this paper due to the fact that they are present across all disciplines. A violinist needs to know about his or her body map the directions given for each action; a ballerina needs to know the same. A computer scientist spending all day in front of a computer also needs to know how the

joints in the body fit together, and how this could affect breathing. A pregnant woman needs to know about her own body usage so she can easily keep her balance throughout her term. In addition, each of these people should know about the concept of inhibition: how can someone change past postural habits without the new, reasoned use of the body?

Certified Alexander teachers come to their profession with a variety of different backgrounds. Some may approach this discipline as former musicians; others may be athletes. Still other teachers may have been office executives, looking for relief from the pain of everyday living, and choosing instead to devote their lives to the Alexander Technique. With this in mind, each teacher will bring some of their background to their teaching. The seven components that I have chosen to discuss are common across each possible background. When a student decides to study this technique, he or she will certainly focus on these areas.

Students decide to pursue the Alexander Technique for a variety of different reasons. Some are musicians or actors seeking to better their performance. Other students are average people, hoping for a release from pain. Still others are writing a research paper, and need material. For whatever the reason, all of these types of students will receive an education in the Alexander Technique that is tailored to their personal needs. Their education will not be complete, however, without the inclusion of the components previously mentioned.

### **Use and Functioning of the Body**

The first operational idea is the use and functioning of the body, which Alexander called the “use of the self,” and defined it as the quality of the mind-body connection (Drake 15). Each person uses their body every moment of every day. The quality of this

usage is the focus of the Alexander Technique. Gelb likens body usage to the use of a tool: using a tool for the wrong purpose may work in the short term, but over a longer period of time the tool will become damaged and inefficient (Gelb 27). Studying the Alexander Technique helps people find the most efficient use of their bodies, or the way with the least amount of unnecessary tension, so that their bodies will not become damaged. Gelb also states that it is “interesting to note that those most frequently seeking Alexander lessons have always been musicians, actors and dancers, whose quality of use directly affects their ability to make a living” (Gelb 27).

### **The Whole Person, or Body Mapping**

The average book on the Alexander Technique includes a multitude of the key components of this method. However, a significant and disproportionately large number of books has been dedicated to the concept of the whole person, or body mapping. Barbara Conable and William Conable have a thorough section in their book How to Learn the Alexander Technique that discusses the technique of body mapping. This idea has been credited to William Conable, and involves the student of the Alexander Technique studying how his or her skeleton fits together and moves as a whole. Conable believes each person already has a map of their own body in their mind, whether or not this map is accurate. Each person moves according to their individual body map. The inaccuracies will sometimes cause pain. For each person to be successful in learning to move without tension or pain, they need to relearn about the body. It is important to remember however, that “mapping work is never instead of Alexander work” (Conable 32).

Each person's body map is also continuously revised as they grow older (Mark 11). Just imagine if our body maps never changed: we would always believe we took up the same amount of space we did as infants. This is especially noticeable when a child goes through puberty: for a while, that child bumps into things due to the fact that they have not yet realized they grew. Once that person revises their body map, they are not quite so awkward and uncoordinated.

It is important to realize, however, that intellectual knowledge does not always equate to an accurate body map (Mark 11). People may study anatomy and know exactly how each joint moves, but unless they apply it to their own movement on a daily basis, they will not have a correct body map for themselves. To experience a better quality of movement, one needs an accurate body map and a refined kinesthetic sense, which will tell them exactly where they are in space. The parts of the body not included in one's kinesthetic sense are likely to become tense and fixed, which may lead to pain. When the body is moving according to an accurate body map, freedom and fluidity reign throughout the entire body (Mark 61). As shown with the primary control, the neck muscles are vital in body freedom and movement (Conable 4).

The most important part of one's body map is the spine. The spine is considered by Alexander teachers to be the core support of the body (Mark 21). Without this support, or with faulty support, the body will experience patterns of tension and possibly pain. To prevent this from occurring, students of the Alexander Technique will learn about "The Laws of the Spine." These laws are as follows: the head leads; the vertebrae follow in sequence; movement is distributed over the entire spine; and the spine must be free to lengthen and gather" (Mark 26). The spine should lengthen and gather throughout

the day as part of natural movement, including breathing, so it must be free to do so. As stated, movement must be distributed along the entire length of the spine, which is similar to the movements of a snake. One can watch a snake moving along the ground, leading with the head and allowing the movement to flow through the body. Leading with another part of the body besides the head will isolate the torso from the legs, causing inaccuracies in the body map and allowing the body to feel off-balance (Mark 26).

A student of the Alexander Technique could spend a lifetime relearning about the body map. I spent my Alexander lessons learning about the basic body map to help with every day activities, and the specifics of my body map needed to play the violin. For example, I learned that the foot is like a tripod, spreading your body weight in three places: the heel, the ball of the foot, and the point just below the little toe. This helped me when standing and walking, as I had always before thought of my feet as distributing weight in two places: the heel and the toes. I felt more balanced with the tripod idea. I also learned about “little finger orientation,” as it is called by Thomas Mark. This means that the arm does not rotate around the bones leading into the thumb, but around those leading into the pinky finger, or the little finger (Mark 83). This has helped my violin playing because I am now more aware of the smaller joints that I use to perform.

### **Primary Control**

The primary control, as previously mentioned, is the relationship between the head, neck, and the rest of the body. This is the most important relationship within the Alexander Technique due to the fact that it affects the entire body. When this relationship has been mapped incorrectly, the rest of the body will compensate, adding unnecessary tension throughout. A freely poised head will lead to a more lengthened

spine, which in turn allows the rest of the body to move with less effort (Gray 31). In order to achieve a freely poised head, one must not imagine the head and neck joint as a “hinge joint” but rather as a “ball and socket joint,” with the head able to move around the spine without bending the neck. Part of mapping this relationship correctly is allowing for the fact that the head itself is so heavy; gravity pulls the head downward, leading to a pattern of tension throughout the body. Alexander students need to counteract gravity and allow the head to move forward and up, which in turn lengthens the muscles of the neck, which follows a pattern down the rest of the spine, releasing tension.

### **Unreliable Sensory Perception**

Unreliable, or faulty, sensory perception involves the kinesthetic sense, and is comprised of two main aspects. Drake states these aspects best: “Sometimes there has been so much misuse in a part of the body that the brain stops registering what is occurring...Secondly, the brain may misinterpret the information received” (Drake 25). One example of the first aspect is when a person always pulls their head back onto the spine, just like Alexander himself. That person needs an outside source, such as another person or a mirror, to show them what is happening. This is due to the fact that the misuse of the body is so habitual that the brain no longer realizes the posture is incorrect. The second aspect is also common: when learning the new way of moving through the Alexander Technique, it will feel wrong and different at first, even though it is actually correct. The brain is misinterpreting the received information from the body.

## **Inhibition**

Inhibition occurs when a person refuses to react to a stimulus, such as wanting to sit down in a chair. The person will then use the directions described below to imagine how they want to sit. Once they have the process in mind, they will allow their body to follow that process and sit down. Using inhibition helps to overcome the old habits involving tension and allow for new movements with conscious effort.

## **Direction**

The directions, or orders, are a way to change the way one uses the body through messages from the brain. It is important to remember that one should always bring about the desired change by thinking alone, not actually doing (Brennan 74). Skipping this step and simply moving the body will result in using the body in the old, habitual way instead of the new, reasoned way. Habits cannot be changed without intelligent control and the use of the directions (Brennan 81). In addition, Brennan quotes Alexander as stating “there is no such thing as a right position, but there is such a thing as a right direction” (Brennan 75). I believe this applies to the directions themselves: do not simply move the body to a position you feel is correct; instead think of the correct direction and allow your body to move in that manner.

When following the directions, one thinks in a certain progression throughout the body. The release of tension in the neck always comes first, followed by the head, which demonstrates the primary control. The head should be allowed to release forward and up. A person should then think about their back, allowing the back to lengthen and widen. The next step in the directions involves the arms: are the arms hanging loosely by the sides of the torso, or are they held stiffly? Finally, the Alexander student should draw

their attention to their legs: are the knees or ankles locked, or have the knees released and been allowed to move forward and out (Gray 73-4)? Following this pattern throughout the body allows for the body to experience a release of the unnecessary tension and move with optimal efficiency.

### **Ends and Means**

This term deals with the idea of focusing on the means of achieving, rather than the end result, the achievement itself (Gelb 80). Alexander found that when he concentrated on his directions and allowed his body to move, rather than on the movement itself, he achieved the correct usage of his body with maximum efficiency. This is especially applicable in today's society, in which people are so focused on their goals and not on how to reach them. Due to this different way of thinking, I believe studying the Alexander Technique is beneficial: it teaches people to focus on the process, instead of being so goal-oriented.

### **The Alexander Lessons**

It is impossible to list every concept taught in the Alexander lessons; that list alone would be my entire thesis paper. There are several components found in every lesson, however. These components include chair work, table work, and other everyday activities (Chance 17). The format of each lesson depends on the teacher. Some teachers prefer to begin with chair work, and others prefer table work. Throughout the lessons, the Alexander student will focus on breathing, as this is an important part in learning the Alexander Technique.

## **Chair Work**

Working with the chair is considered to be the classic Alexander activity. Chance states in his book The Alexander Technique that chair work “involves you getting in and out of a chair with the teacher’s assistance and each time gives rise to a new result. You are not actually learning how to get out of a chair” (Chance 18-9). The Alexander teacher guides the student through standing and sitting, focusing on a different aspect of the Alexander Technique each time. Going from sitting to standing is fundamental in the lesson because it “requires active participation of the major joints of the body and quickly reveals fundamental patterns of discoordination” (Gelb 146). Any inaccuracies can be dealt with by the teacher and student immediately. It is also unrealistic to expect the student to be able to do more complex tasks such as playing the violin without first being able to sit and stand with optimal body usage.

In chair work, the student usually begins by standing in front of the chair, in a poised state, allowing the body to be forward and up. The teacher will then guide the student to a sitting position on the chair with their hands, arranging the student on the chair in a way that allows for maximum efficiency in the body for when the student will stand again. The teacher may pick up the student’s arms or legs and release any tension using their hands before placing the student’s limb back into place. The teacher may talk to the student at this point, monitoring how the student responds to questions with their bodies, not just their voices. The teacher will then guide the student back to a standing position, feeling with their hands how the student moves. This process will repeat as many times as necessary.

## **Table Work**

The lesson may then progress to working on a table. The student will lie down on a table and allow the teacher to move their body. Throughout table work, the teacher uses their hands to gently lengthen the torso, arms, and legs. Lying down, whether for table work or for a nap, is important due to the fact that it reabsorbs fluid into the spinal discs, which gives resilience and elasticity to the spine (Drake 38). This ensures that a person will have less back pain throughout the day. Lying down also helps to harmonize one's body with gravity (Gelb 147). Working in a standing position works well, but one has to continuously fight downward pull. When lying down, the student does not have to worry about downward pull, and can allow their body to relax.

Lying down on the table is also called the "semi-supine" position (Chance 55). The student will lie down with their head propped on several books and their knees bent with their feet closer to their spine. The support of the books under the head releases neck tension and prevents the head from pulling backward on the spine (Drake 41). The actual height of the books under one's head depends on several factors: the amount of tension in the neck, the natural curve of one's spine, the shape of one's skull, and the amount of muscle in the shoulders (Gray 54). A certified Alexander teacher is able to make the judgment of the height of the books under the student's head.

## **Breathing**

Breathing is a concept that is studied throughout the Alexander lesson due to the fact that one breathes with the entire body, and the entire torso moves like a wave in breathing (Mark 80). The Alexander Technique helps breathing in two ways: it eliminates the interference of downward pull, and it accesses the optimal reflex support

for breathing (Conable 64). Without being able to breathe properly, one will always have patterns of tension throughout the body. With that in mind, it is absolutely vital for an Alexander student to learn to breathe naturally.

There is a multitude of different ways for people to learn to breathe according to a correct body map. One way is by using the whispered “ahh.” To begin the whispered “ahh,” one must relax the jaw and let it drop down. The student must then gently rest the tongue on the tops of the bottom teeth. The student inhales through the nose, and exhales through the mouth, whispering “ahh” on the exhale. When exhaling, it is important to release all the air in the lungs, so that the inhale can completely fill the lungs again. This emphasizes breathing with the diaphragm, as opposed to breathing with only the uppermost portions of the lungs (Gray 138-41).

Other breathing exercises might include using imagery. It is useful to imagine that breathing is what allows one’s back to lengthen and widen. It is also helpful to imagine small, inflatable pillows under the arms and on the back, and with each breath those pillows are inflated. A final image used to correct breathing is to imagine the air swirling in and out of the lungs, as opposed to moving in a flat line.

### **Other Activities**

Other activities that may be taught in Alexander lessons include walking, bending, arm movement, and the positions of mechanical advantage, which are the monkey and the lunge. In each of these activities, the student relearns how to accomplish the tasks using inhibition and the directions. The positions of mechanical advantage are simply ways of moving that should be incorporated into our everyday lives. These positions have names that reflect the movements themselves, for obvious reasons. The

monkey is a position that is used when lifting objects, playing sports, or washing one's face. The Alexander student should stand with their feet hip-width apart, and allow their knees to bend forward and away each other. The student will then bend forward slightly at the hips, keeping the head, neck, and spine in an upright and balanced position, and allowing the arms to swing forward. It is easy to see why this is called the monkey (Drake 91).

The lunge is a variation on the monkey. The student places their feet hip-width apart with one foot ahead of the other. The torso, head, and neck maintain the same poise as with the monkey, with the arms swinging forward. The lunge is a position that is used when performing various household chores such as vacuuming, sweeping, and ironing (Drake 99).

Students studying this method are also taught how to learn. Studying the Alexander Technique requires students to have an active role in their own learning (Conable 18). This means that the students need to practice inhibition and the directions on their own, with each daily activity, and not just expect it to happen overnight. The Alexander Technique also uses a "questing state of mind" and requires a "commitment to taking responsibility for oneself" (Gelb 5). I believe this also means students of the Alexander Technique need to be prepared to do much of the work on their own, away from the lessons. Students should always be open to new possibilities, and should feel confident in exploring these possibilities without the aid of the Alexander teacher.

According to Gelb, there are several ways in which studying the Alexander Technique can help one's learning process in general. The Alexander Technique helps to deal with fear, develop one's attention span, devote attention to the process as opposed to

the end result, go from the known to the unknown, use experimental thinking, improve kinesthesia and coordination, and learn to not allow any interference with the learning itself. All of these items are shown in Alexander's own journey through self-knowledge.

### **The Alexander Technique and Musicians**

I have heard from many different sources, both books and people, that the Alexander Technique is incredibly beneficial to musicians. It has been interesting to learn about how this method affects musicianship through both my reading and my own personal Alexander lessons. Barbara Conable states in her book How to Learn the Alexander Technique that forty percent of musicians experience some type of pain while performing (Conable 132). With a number like that, I was even more curious to learn how the Alexander Technique could help musicians; I wanted to help future musicians with my knowledge.

In his book What Every Pianist Needs to Know About the Body, Thomas Mark states that the quality of movement in a musician determines the quality of the sound produced (Mark 46). I believe this is best demonstrated when watching a school-aged musical group perform. The lazier students who slouch in their chairs always have the worst sounds of the group. The students who sit upright and look more alert tend to produce better sounds. Glynn Macdonald states that when a musician's muscles are tense, the tone of the sound will be sharp; when the muscles are too relaxed, the tone sounds flat (Macdonald 113).

Many musicians' injuries occur from mismapping movements at the joints (Mark 68). This is due to the fact that people are more likely to think that playing music begins in the fingers themselves, not in the whole body. It is therefore important for musicians

to study anatomy and formulate a correct body map. When practicing, these musicians should make their new way of moving their top priority (Mark 15). When many musicians suffer painful injuries, they use strengthening exercises, or try to pace themselves. These methods do not work to absolve the pain in the long term. The same patterns of tension that caused the pain will still be present in the body (Mark 7). It is also vital to remember that pain is often nature's last resort in informing us that something is wrong with our bodies (Brennan 14). Musicians need to heed the warning of pain and immediately do something about it.

There are many different reasons why people should study the Alexander Technique. One startling reason I discovered was that simply through attending a few Alexander lessons, one can have a drop in blood pressure (Brennan 30). In today's society, most of America's citizens can benefit from that. In addition, many people suffer from tension and rigid posture. Tension affects many systems in the body, including the circulatory, respiratory, digestive, skeletal, and nervous systems (Brennan 95-7). When I read that, I was surprised the Alexander Technique is not more widely publicized. I cannot think of anyone I know that would not benefit from seeing a release in tension in those body systems.

Rigid posture has several negative effects as well as tension, including shallow breathing, overtiredness, stress, and depression (Brennan 20). Brennan also cites the following reasons as to why our postures change to a more rigid posture with age: "the many hours of sitting at school; lack of exercise in later years; our 'fear reflex' that is constantly being stimulated; the speed with which we often have to accomplish our tasks;

the goal-oriented attitude that we are taught as children; a distinct lack of interest in the present; the development of habits, both physical and mental” (Brennan 16)

### **My Own Experience with Alexander Lessons**

My own personal experiences with the Alexander Technique have been quite life-changing. I chose this topic for my senior thesis because I had experienced various aspects of the Alexander Technique through my limited musical career. What little I had experienced caused intriguing results and was enough to whet my curiosity further. I wondered if perhaps there was some truth to the statements I had heard from several music teachers that the Alexander Technique is vital for musicians to learn. I had heard that musicians studying this method could play for longer periods of time without pain. As a musician with violin-related pain in my past, I was eager to see for myself if these statements were possibly true.

After making my decision about my thesis topic, I developed a plan. I needed to find a qualified Alexander teacher and set up a lesson time. I would then take a series of eighteen to twenty lessons, documenting my progress through daily journal entries, which were to be a discussion of my use of my body throughout the day. I would have my violin professor at Eastern Michigan University, Daniel Foster take photographs of my posture with and without my violin at the formal onset, middle, and conclusion of my Alexander lessons. I would play several passages from my violin repertoire during these photograph sessions, and write an assessment of my own performance based on my internal feelings about my body: how did this region of my body feel during my playing; did I hurt, feel tired, or feel sore; was I frustrated or tense during my performance; et

cetera. In between Alexander lessons, I planned to read material on the Alexander Technique to further my understanding of this broad topic.

After each lesson, I would talk with Professor Daniel Foster about my Alexander experiences. Foster would then share experiences from his past lessons in the Alexander Technique, and help me to apply what I had learned to the violin. For example, one lesson involved learning how to keep my balance while standing when I brought my arms up to chest level. Foster talked with me that afternoon about what this could mean for my violin technique. I could now hold my instrument in front of me without compensating for the extra weight by throwing my body backward. This would create fewer patterns of tension throughout my body.

The final step in my plan involved this thesis paper. I would compile my information and write a paper, complete with the photographs taken of my posture. I was determined to discover how the study of the Alexander Technique could help my violin playing and overall musicianship. Professor Foster and I also discussed the possibility of presenting my findings to the Eastern Michigan University Violin Studio.

My first step in my plan was to find a qualified Alexander teacher. I chose Michelle Obrecht, who teaches in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Once a week, I would travel to her office for an hour-long private lesson. These lessons usually began with work involving the chair, as discussed earlier in this paper, and progressed to work with the table. Occasionally we would experiment with my violin.

I would always come to these lessons dressed comfortably and ready to learn. Sometimes I would leave feeling a little more relaxed. Other times, I would leave the lesson feeling vulnerable, wondering if everyone that passed me on the street could notice

how I had changed. Yet other lessons would leave me feeling as if everything in the world was new and different. In general, I was impressed by the fact that I felt taller, stronger, and more able to breathe. On several occasions, I would walk out to my car and wonder how I could fit into such a tiny space before; I felt too tall to fit there now. I always knew it had been a productive lesson when I needed to adjust my rearview mirror in my car for a taller person afterwards. I did not actually grow during these lessons, but I was sitting and walking taller. During those lessons, I simply remembered to combat downward pull, and felt much taller and more poised.

Throughout the series of lessons, I read books about the Alexander Technique. I can understand why Alexander teachers appreciate when their students read material about the lessons: I learned much about the “why” of the activities I was doing during my lessons, and was able to focus more on experiencing the new sensations. I especially remember one moment when things seemed to “click”: in the second half of my lessons, I was feeling frustrated with the things I was doing while my Alexander instructor worked with me on the table. I concentrated on my breathing and felt very relaxed, but otherwise could not sense anything happening to my body to change things. I read in several different books that the Alexander teacher used her hands to relieve tension in the student’s body. During my next lesson, I still monitored my breathing, but I was also able to sense my teacher moving the unnecessary tension out of my body.

During my lessons, I learned how to sit and stand, breathe, reach for and pick up objects, balance my head upon the top of my spine, lay down and get up from that position, walk, hold my violin, and sit and stand while playing my violin; or in other

words, I practiced the concept of inhibition, used direction, and mapped the bones and joints in my body.

I also learned much about body mapping in my own experiences with the Alexander Technique. My Alexander teacher had a moveable model skeleton in her studio. Whenever we would discuss a new concept involving my body, she could pick up that skeleton and demonstrate exactly what happened to the body in that particular movement. I would go home after that lesson and look up the affected body parts in my anatomy coloring book, which was highly recommended by every source I read. I would color those sections and read the captions on the pages. For example, when discussing breathing, I would watch the moveable skeleton's ribcage expand and contract in simulated breathing. When I got back to my apartment, I colored the pages in the section on the respiratory system and learned how the movement of the muscles between each rib contributes to breathing (Kapit 135).

The whole experience was simply amazing. At times, however, I doubted the validity of the claims that this could possibly help musicians. I wrote the following in a journal entry after my third Alexander lesson:

“Sometimes – okay, I’ll be honest – a lot of the time, I feel a little silly. Why am I doing this? What good will re-learning how to sit, stand, breathe, and move actually do me? Why spend several minutes each night with my head resting on a book? Am I a fraud? Is this thesis actually worth anything? What happens if I don’t see any real benefit – will my project still be as interesting?” (Tuesday, October 24, 2006)

I occasionally felt this way at first; I wondered how this could possibly help any musician, and tried to see everything I was doing in an analytical manner. Slowly, over the course of several lessons, I forgot to analyze what was happening to me. I forgot all about a thesis and needing to prove anything, and simply enjoyed myself. Several weeks after writing this, I found myself looking forward to my Alexander lessons, and eager for orchestra rehearsals so I could try out my new way of moving with my violin. My thesis was no longer as important as learning about my body; I was interested in the Alexander Technique for its own sake.

### **Playing the Violin**

The manner in which I approached playing the violin also changed drastically throughout the course of Alexander lessons. Before taking lessons, I would occasionally experience pain in my forearms, wrists, and hands. I had been to a doctor, who told me it was tendonitis or carpal tunnel, and I should just rest my arms for a few weeks before gradually working back up to my original practice routine. I would try that every time the pain would begin again, but it would always come back within a few weeks or months. I was quite frustrated, but thought it was probably just the way my bones and joints were made; other violinists I knew did not have this much trouble. When I paid any attention to my body, it was to my hands and arms alone, as if they were separate from the rest of me. After all, that was all I needed to play the violin: just my hands and arms.

This viewpoint showed in my performance on the violin. I was too tense, which produced a tense, tight sound on my instrument. I grew frustrated easily, wondering why it seemed to come so naturally for everyone else I knew, and I always had problems. I

often cried myself to sleep at night, refusing to take medication for the pain, but desperately wishing for relief. I wondered if I would make a good music teacher, because it seemed that I could not play my own instrument correctly.

Once I started taking Alexander lessons, my entire view of the violin changed. I changed my body map and realized what I was doing wrong to produce such pain in my forearms and hands. I spent hours with my violin, practicing new ways of playing, my new body map always the foremost thing in my mind. I also learned how to breathe while playing, something I had never realized I was not doing. With each breath, I relaxed more with my violin, and gradually began to enjoy performing again.

I also worked on developing a new way of holding my instrument and bow, one that allowed for maximum efficiency in performing. When I see pictures of myself with my violin now, I seem much more poised and natural, as if the violin is simply an extension of my own body. I also feel much less nervous when performing in front of people. Taking the time to breathe and regain my poise has built my confidence enough so that I performed my senior violin recital at Eastern Michigan University without feeling too nervous or scared.

### **My Life Throughout Alexander Lessons**

My violin playing was not the only thing affected by the Alexander lessons. It occasionally feels as if everything else about me has changed. Just like Alexander, I saw an improvement in my asthma condition. Specifically, I saw a decrease in the number of times I needed my asthma inhaler, for which I wholeheartedly credit the Alexander lessons. Before lessons, I took two daily preventative medications, and needed a rescue inhaler several times per month due to an actual asthma attack. During certain times of

the year, I would need the inhaler daily. Throughout my lessons with Michelle Obrecht, I learned how to truly take a deep breath, using my full lung capacity, and learned how to do this naturally. Whenever I find myself short of breath now, I stop and monitor my breathing. Have I reverted to my old habit of clavicular breathing, in which I would only breathe from the topmost portion of my lungs? In most cases, I have gone back to my previous habit. To fix this problem, I do a few breathing exercises (the whispered “ahh,” or using imagery learned from lessons) and let my breathing return to abdominal breathing. In the past year and a half, I have needed asthma medication fewer than ten times, or an eighty percent decrease.

In addition to a decrease in asthma attacks, I also move through my day without unnecessary pain. I can stand for longer periods of time without feeling foot or hip pain (a vital skill for a teacher). I do find myself standing or sitting in my habitual ways occasionally, but it is becoming easier each time to practice inhibition and use the directions to guide myself back to a tension-free state of balance. This new way of moving is quickly becoming my new habit.

It is such a freeing feeling to be able to turn door handles, sit down at a computer and type, or pick up an infant without feeling pain afterward. I was not aware that I was experiencing so much pain until I experienced relief. With the first few lessons in the Alexander Technique, I would feel balanced and relaxed for a day or two, and then I would feel the pain of daily activities for the rest of the week. As the lessons progressed, I would feel balanced for the entire week, feeling pain only when I allowed myself to slip back into the old habits of body usage. It was such an amazing difference! It was around

the midpoint of my series of lessons that I began to feel this way, and started to realize just how beneficial the Alexander Technique could be.

The Alexander Technique also helped me to see body map inconsistencies within my own body, and I learned how to correct them myself. I refined my own kinesthetic sense, which enabled me to discover when I was moving from an incorrect body map. I was then able to stop what I was doing, using inhibition, and then use Alexander's main and secondary directions. This was taking everything I had read in books, and everything my Alexander teacher had taught me, and applying it myself.

I now can also see the errors in other people's body maps, and I take extra notice when someone is moving in an "Alexander" way. When I see another violinist performing in a manner that seems inefficient, as if that musician is using an incorrect body map, I always want to help that violinist. I want to approach them to talk about the Alexander Technique; I do not believe any person should have to live through the day experiencing pain while accomplishing tasks that they enjoy.

Whenever I see anyone moving in a way that demonstrates a correct and efficient body map, I always take special notice. I think it is fascinating to watch someone move with that type of control: every movement seems fluid. I have a younger brother, aged eight months, who recently started trying to crawl on his own. It has been quite an education watching him move; I have learned almost as much about body mapping through him as through books and other teachers. Infants and toddlers have not yet learned how to slouch or hurry through tasks without a thought for the process or their posture, so they move with the grace and poise that adults only desire.

Finally, after experiencing the significant life-altering effects, I believed in the Alexander Technique and came to realize I could teach my future students how to perform music without unnecessary tension. Barbara Conable states that the best way to help students is to ask them what they think their joints are like, and then tell him how the joint really functions (Conable 94-5). With that in mind, I plan to incorporate body mapping in my orchestra classes. I hope my future students can learn to play their instruments without first feeling the amount of pain that many musicians do experience.

### **Photographs**

Throughout this section, I will refer to the photographs located in Appendix A. Each of the photographs ending with a one (for example, 1.1 or 3.1), with the exception of the final photograph, figure 4.1, were taken before I began Alexander lessons. The photographs of me in a brown shirt, figures 1.2, 2.2, and 3.2, were taken in the middle of the series of lessons. The remaining photographs were taken at the conclusion of the Alexander lessons.

The first page of photographs, figures 1.1 through 1.3, show my standing posture. I believe these pictures do demonstrate progress with the Alexander Technique. In figure 1.1, my shoulders look rounded and I seem to be in a slumped position. My arms rest somewhat stiffly by my sides. In figure 1.2, the picture taken in the middle of the lessons, my arms look more relaxed and free. My shoulders do still look slightly rounded, however. In the last photograph, figure 1.3, I look much more poised. My arms and shoulders both look relaxed. My head is tilted slightly to the right, but this could be due to overcompensating for the usual patterns of tension found in violinists, which

include the head turning toward the left. In general, I seem much more balanced and poised in figure 1.3, the picture taken at the end of my lessons.

The second page of photographs is a side view of my standing posture. In figure 2.1, it is easy to see the effects of downward pull. My spine is quite curved, from my tailbone all the way up to my neck. My shoulders and neck look uncomfortably tense. In figure 2.2, my spine is much less curved, and my head looks more forward and up. The final photograph, figure 2.3, shows me with a poised and upright spine. My shoulders and neck look to be much more comfortable. This position looks more natural than the positions of the previous two photographs.

The third page of photographs shows me holding my violin. Before I started taking Alexander lessons, it is obvious how much pain I experienced while playing the violin. Figure 3.1 shows me with a bent right wrist, and a slightly elevated right shoulder. This combination looks quite painful. The curve of my spine is also noticeable, and seems like it would lead to pain. My head is turned toward my violin, which is the left side of my body. In figure 3.2, the curve of my spine is less obvious, and the problem with my wrist and shoulders seems to have been fixed. My head is still tilted toward the left side, however. The picture from the end of the Alexander lessons, figure 3.3, shows a much less tense violinist. The right wrist and shoulder are moving with efficiency, my spine is curved naturally, and my head looks poised atop my spine. Nothing about this picture seems painful.

I included a final photograph on the fourth page of Appendix A, figure 4.1, because this looks to me exactly like a violinist ought to look. Everything about my posture and playing position looks natural. Nothing in this photograph looks painful or

out of place. My body is effortlessly upright, my violin is resting on my collarbone, and both forearms and wrists are moving with little-finger orientation. This is now my favorite photograph of me playing the violin, simply because I look so poised and natural. This photograph shows me that I am a violinist in the truest sense of the word, not just someone who happens to play the violin.

### **Long-Term Effects of the Alexander Technique**

Over six months have passed since my last Alexander lesson, and I am continuing to discover new ways in which the Alexander Technique has changed my life. A few days ago, I was waiting in line at the grocery store and noticed my posture while standing. Without thinking about it, I was standing in a balanced way, counteracting the downward pull of gravity. I could sense the tripod in my feet, and felt my knees bent forward and away. Every part of my body felt free and natural, as if I could move any way I desired; nothing felt fixed or tense. I also felt a lightness of spirit and emotions, which I believe came from my freedom in my body. I am always excited whenever I discover situations like that; it is a pleasure to be able to feel that free and balanced without working hard to experience it.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this has certainly been a worthwhile project. I learned so much about myself and my body, and learn new applications for this knowledge each day. I set off to prove that the Alexander Technique was beneficial for musicians, and received much more evidence than I had thought possible. I plan to continue with Alexander lessons throughout my life, with the possibility of becoming a certified Alexander teacher myself hovering somewhere in the future. I would not have traded these experiences for

anything, and strongly advocate that every musician, actor, athlete, or average person on the street study the Alexander Technique; with all the possible benefits, how can anyone afford not to learn more?

## Appendix A: Photographs



Figure 1.1



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3



Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2



Figure 2.3



Figure 3.1



Figure 3.2



Figure 3.3



Figure 4.1

## Appendix B: Works Cited

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