

TO YOUR HEALTH

The Alexander Technique: For Musicians, Every Movement Is Meaningful

Music requires some of the most complex and physically demanding movements of any profession, and musicians often risk developing any number of overuse injuries. That's what makes them the perfect students of the Alexander Technique. They're naturally disciplined, deeply familiar with the nuances of form and movement—and they are committed to maintaining proper form.

The Alexander Technique is a practical method for improving balance, support, and coordination. If, for instance, a musician is having recurring pain, an Alexander-certified teacher can determine the movement that's contributing to the problem—whether it's a bad back, neck and shoulder pain, restricted breathing, or fatigue. By analyzing their whole movement pattern, teachers can see habits of compression in a player's way of sitting, standing, and walking. With gentle coaching and hands-on guidance musicians can learn to move in a freer, more integrated way.

Behind the Technique

Australian F.M. Alexander (1869-1955) was a Shakespearean actor who kept losing his voice during performances. When his doctors could not help him, he embarked on a journey of self-discovery. He realized that excess tension in his neck and body were causing his problems, and he began to explore new ways of speaking and moving with greater ease.

Following Alexander's success in improving his own situation, his friends, and even several of the doctors he had consulted earlier, persuaded him to teach others what he had learned. He refined his method of instruction over more than 50 years and eventually trained others in what became known as the Alexander Technique.

People study this technique to achieve greater conscious control of their reactions. Most of us have learned habitual

patterns of tension. During lessons, people develop awareness of habits that interfere with their natural coordination. Students learn how to undo these patterns and develop the ability to consciously redirect their body and mind into a condition of optimal functioning. As Alexander discovered, these patterns can be unlearned to restore posture and ease of movement—a response that is in sync with the mind and body.

Through specific movements, a student learns to inhibit or prevent a response that is impeding a task or an action. When a teacher places their hands on someone's neck or shoulders, it helps the musician feel the concentration of energy. When redirected, musicians can feel the energy change. It's about relaxing and letting go. When you release tension, you're using only the energy that's required. You are sending a signal to your brain that you are not nervous; It's not a fight-or-flight situation. Cumulatively, the responses add up: the more that can be done to control these signals, the more present a musician can be in a performance.

From the Top: Balancing the Head and Spine

The focus of this technique centers on the musician's overall coordination, with an aim to prevent injuries. With a guitarist, for instance, the shoulder strap may cause them to pull down and interfere with their movements. Guitarists tend to wrap themselves around their instruments, which interferes with coordination, as well as the mobility and suppleness of their fingers. A violinist's stiff shoulders and arms will get in the way of a pleasing sound. A singer's tight neck or jaw will cause the voice to become less resonant.

Often, without realizing it, we put undue pressure on our bodies. We use more force than we need to, like lifting a coffee pot or a weight at the gym. We slouch as we sit. We blame body problems on

activities—carpal tunnel syndrome on computer work, tennis elbow on tennis. Often, it's the approach to the activity that's the problem not the activity itself.

To start, the relationship between the head and the spine is of utmost importance. The head-spine relationship determines the quality of the body's overall coordination. The neck muscles should not be overworked. Ideally, our head balances lightly at the top of the spine. The neuromuscular system is designed to work in concert with gravity. The delicate poise of the head triggers the body's anti-gravity response—a natural oppositional force in the torso that easily guides us upward. The spine lengthens, instead of compressing.

How Do I Learn the Alexander Technique?

The Alexander Technique is typically taught through a series of private lessons. Over a course of lessons, the teacher introduces concepts and practices that expand the students' awareness of the functioning of the nervous system, muscular, and skeletal systems. Musicians report that not only can they perform more comfortably, but they go about their daily activities with increased ease and less effort. To find a teacher, visit: https://www.amsatonline.org/aws/AMSAT/pt/sp/find_a_teacher

Improving the quality of physical movements in playing an instrument or singing also improves the quality of the music itself. Releasing undue tension in the body makes a performance more fluid, lively, and less tense.

Other benefits of the Alexander Technique are:

- Pain relief and prevention
- Reduced strain and muscular tension
- Injury prevention
- Improved posture and coordination
- Enhanced performance
- Better stress management
- Increased range of motion
- Improved confidence and self-control