Alexander Technique and Organ Performance

Ahra Yoo

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

University of Washington

2015

Reading Committee:

Dr. Carole Terry, Chair

Dr. Stephen Rumph

Prof. Craig Sheppard

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Music

University of Washington

Abstract

Alexander Technique and Organ Performance

Ah-Ra Yoo

Chair of the Supervisory Committee
Dr. Carole Terry
Organ Performance

The organist has an intensely *physical* relationship with her instrument. Over time, routines of practice and performance of music almost invariably lead to the build-up of stress, fatigue, and muscular tension that can lead in turn to pain and injury. The organist is particularly at risk of incurring tension and pain, due to the demands of negotiating performance on multiple dimensional planes (i.e., the multiple manuals at differing heights and the ranks of stops placed at some distance from the organist), with the added challenges of simultaneously operating the pedal board and additional expression pedals. Thus, all four limbs of the player are in almost constant and frequently independent motion, leaving the player susceptible to hyperextension, fatigue, and a variety of range-of-motion issues. The "Alexander Technique", devised by F. M. Alexander in the 1890s to assist performers and public speakers, can provide the organist with effective strategies for becoming more aware of the ways in which stress and tension can arise in the course of performance and how the prolonged misuse of the body leads to pain and injury. The goal of the Technique is restore physical balance, equilibrium and poise through body awareness, allowing efficient and painless movement over sustained periods of time. This dissertation investigates the ways in which the Alexander Technique can assist the organist in achieving this goal with regard to the particular physical demands and challenges of organ performance, focusing on how the Alexander Technique allows the organist to create and maintain the optimal posture for pain-free organ performance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I offer my most special gratitude to God, who guides my journey and allowed me to complete this project; also to my advisor Professor Jakyung Oh at the Korean National University of Art, and Professor Carole Terry at the University of Washington, both of whom inspired me to play the organ, and how to teach students as an educator.

I would like to thank my Alexander Technique teachers, Catherin Kettrick and Cathy Madden, profusely. Without their insight, patience, and guidance, I could not have completed this research. Thanks are due as well to my wonderful friend and editor, Dr. Timothy Kinsella, for proof reading and all his suggestions.

Abundant gratitude is due as well to my family, friends, and church members for all their support, prayers, and love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF EXAMPLES

Introduction

"Organists probably misuse their bodies more than any other musician"
—James Drake[1]

By its nature, organ performance is an intensively *physical* discipline involving constant simultaneous movement of all four limbs, the neck, head and shoulders. Organists share all of the challenges and problems of posture, head and neck alignment, lateral reach, hand and finger issues common to players of keyboard instruments. However, due to its construction and dimensions, the organ poses additional challenges for its players. Unlike the piano, with its solitary keyboard, organs typically have two, three, or more manuals, situated on different vertical planes. One arm is frequently situated higher or lower than the other, moving back and forth on different vertical and horizontal planes, with the organist often crossing hands at different levels. And unlike the three customary expression pedals of the modern piano, organists must operate a multi-octave pedal board, as well as the expression box and toe piston, even as they play the different keyboard manuals. Moreover, as the organist executes complex bass lines on the pedals, operation of the pedal board does not allow the player to rest her feet squarely on the ground, creating challenges of balance and stability. If the piece of music requires a change of registration while playing, reaching across large distances can create further issues.

The challenges enumerated above are compounded by the construction of various organs and the limitations of adjustment available to each. Each instrument creates very specific physical challenges and stresses. While the physical dimensions of the modern piano are relatively fixed, and differ little from instrument to instrument, the physical dimensions of the

[1] James Drake, "The Alexander Technique and Organ Playing: Freedom, Ease, Openness and Non-Doing," *The American Organist* 40 (December 2006), 82.

organ console can vary greatly, and do not often offer the organist much opportunity to adjust the instrument to her own particular body type. The fixed aspects of organ construction include bench height, the location and distribution of stops, and the relative height of the manuals with regard to the floor. The variations in manual height exist in a fluid relationship with the particular height and stature of the individual organist. For some, the manuals are located slightly lower or higher than what feels ergonomically comfortable. The varying resistance of manuals and pedalboards makes additional demands on the organist's attention and physiology.

Thus, organists are compelled to adjust their body to each different organ, and respond with a different touch and range of body movements. The considerable physical demands posed by the organ, coupled with all of the emotional and psychological demands of musical performance can lead to stress, tension and muscular fatigue, which may in turn result in chronic pain or injury hampering further practice and performance and the enjoyment thereof. The injuries experienced by musicians, including organists, are typically repetitive stress injuries, carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, back pain, and even dystonia, among others.

By way of example, I will describe my own physical relationship to the organ. Being of modest height with a relatively short inseam, it can be challenging for me to operate the pedal board, and after long hours of practice, I periodically encounter pain in my lower back, shoulders, and knees. The execution of fast passages with both the hands and feet frequently causes me to lean back from the vertical plane, deviating from the 180˚ axis and distorting my posture, resulting in chronic lower back pain. My response to the varying resistances of manuals and pedals described above has also created problems. For example, if I play an organ with a lighter action, I find myself hunching my shoulders in an effort to reduce the weight on the keys, a strategy that frequently causes tension and pain in the shoulders and neck. Playing long trills or

long passages with lot of consecutive notes without rest on the pedals often results in significant knee pain, as due to my shorter inseam, I must stretch and extend considerably to operate the pedals. The wrists are also susceptible to pain and hypertension from continuous lateral and vertical movement.

In an effort to identify the sources of the chronic pain, and find a means of avoiding and meliorating it, I began to explore a number of the "somatic" modalities of body awareness and stress reduction, of which the Alexander Technique is arguably the first and most important, as its principles informed many of the other modalities—Feldenkrais, body-mapping, etc.—that followed. "Somatic", in these modalities, means the relation of the body and mind in movement. The word is derived from the Greek root "soma" meaning "body."[2] F. Matthias Alexander was a pioneer in the field of somatics. The Alexander Technique provides a way of rethinking the process of movement, by becoming more consciously aware of the body. In contemporary lingo, the Alexander Technique could be described as a "mindfulness practice". Ethan Kind defines the purpose of the Alexander Technique as "creat[ing] freedom in movement by teaching new movement patterns in the activities of everyday life and specialized activities [...] creating physical lightness and ease,"[3] in order to "change destructive physical habits which limit freedom and movement and which create pain through straining and tension and poor posture."

According to the proponents of the Alexander Technique and other such somatic modalities, it is the *lack* of awareness or consciousness of the body and how it is moving in performance that gives rise to chronic pain and injury. Musicians are often so absorbed by the technical and expressive demands of the music that they do not pay much attention to their body

[2] Thomas Mark, *What Every Pianist Needs to Know About the Body*. With supplementary material for organists by Roberta Gary and Thom Miles (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2003): 4.
[3] Ethan Kind, *An Alexander Technique and TRICEPS Approach to Organ Technique* (Amazon: Kindle Edition, 2014), location 37 of 3538.

until such time as the tension and pain become impossible to ignore. Worse yet is when they, like certain athletes, attempt to "play through the pain", further injuring themselves. Furthermore, the pain and stress do not typically remain localized at the original site of injury. It is an axiom of the Alexander Technique that misuse of one body part or system invariably affects others adversely.

The key, of course, according to the tenets of the Alexander Technique, is for one to become and remain *conscious* of their body, how it is positioned and how it is moving *at all times*. By so doing, one may avoid the accumulation of harmful stress and tension. The Alexander Technique can be applied broadly to a wide range of activities, including music. It can be successfully utilized by singers and instrumentalists alike, for whom long hours of rehearsal and performance can lead to physical challenges and injuries. Since its development in the 1890s, the Alexander Technique has attracted many followers in subsequent generations of musicians. It helps its adherents improve posture, use muscles and joints efficiently, and maintain the critical optimal relationship between the head, neck and spine.

I had never given much thought to how I used my body while playing the organ. As my pain worsened, however, it became impossible to ignore. Seeking relief and healing, I received massages and chiropractic treatment. These treatments, although they provided temporary relief, did not cure my pain. The pain would inevitably return when I resumed my practice and performance routine. In the spring and autumn of 2014 I attended several Alexander Technique workshops in Seattle, in which I learned the basics of the technique, and about the basic concepts of "body-mapping".[4] Convinced that the Alexander Technique has much to offer the practicing organist, I have continued my study to the present.

[4] "Body mapping" is a concept first elucidated by Barbara and William Conable. A body-map is determined by one's self-perception of the body, including its size, shape, functions, and the way it moves. If one has a positive

The perspectives offered by the technique increased my somatic or bodily awareness in all aspects of my daily life, not just while playing the organ. As I became more aware of my typical posture and movement as I was playing, it became easier to avoid accumulating stress and tension. The key to this seems to be maintaining a constant awareness of the body, and consciously releasing tension as it arises.

Tension arises when, in the course of an activity, we "lock" up our muscles and joints, causing them to become rigid and inflexible. James Drake is an organist and trained the Alexander Technique teacher who has applied the technique to his own playing and that of his students. In his article "The Alexander Technique and Organ Playing: Freedom, Ease, Openness and Non-Doing", Drake points out the tendency of many organ students to lock and tighten their bodies unconsciously, even as they "grab" at the keyboard and "force" the music.[5] He proposes the Alexander Technique as an effective means of addressing and solving these problems for organists, as in his experience it leads to greater freedom, ease, openness, and confidence in playing.[6] According to Drake, the organist should become the "witness" of the music rather than the "doer", in an almost Zen-like way that emphasizes music as something that *happens* rather than something that is "made" with great personal effort. If one is "making" the music, fear and apprehension over its proper execution can lead to stress and tension. Drake asks,

---

perception of these elements, one tends to move with "poise and balance". The Conables concede, "Although [body-mapping] is not one of the original concerns in the Alexander Technique, it offers important and practical pedagogical tools." (Barbara Conable and William Conable, *How to Learn the Alexander Technique: A Manual for Students.* (Columbus, OH: Andover Press, 1995), 62. A concise definition of the concept appears on the Andover Educators website, established by Barbara Conable: "The body map is one's self-representation in one's own brain. If the body map is accurate, movement is good. If the body map is inaccurate or inadequate, movement is inefficient and injury-producing. In Body Mapping, one learns to gain access to one's own body map through self-observation and self-inquiry. The student carefully corrects his or her own body map by assimilating accurate information provided by kinesthetic experience, the use of a mirror, anatomical models, books, pictures, and teachers. One learns to recognize the source of inefficient or harmful movement and how to replace it with movement that is efficient, elegant, direct, and powerful based on the truth about one's structure, function, and size.

[5] Drake, 82.

[6] Ibid.

> How many organists playing a piece of organ literature with "difficult" passages worry about these sections long before they arrive? And what happens when these passages are reached? It has been my observation that the person quits breathing, the hands, wrist, arms, and neck lock, and the individual "forces" his way through these areas, worrying the whole time if he will make it without falling apart.[7]

The Alexander Technique can provide the organist a means by which they become conscious of the close relationship between anxiety and tension in the act of performance. The proponents of the Technique believe that by cultivating and maintaining greater body awareness, and by *rethinking* the process of movement, the musician may avoid stress and injury in practice and performance. While many of us have learned how to power or force our way through a piece of music, we do violence to it and ourselves in the process. Tension works at odds with musicality. As Drake so aptly points out, "tightening in the body, especially in the arm, wrist, neck, shoulders, and back in the act of playing is like driving with your car brakes engaged".[8]

Review of the Literature

The proponents of the Alexander Technique believe that it can be effectively applied to a wide range of human activities. Thus, there is an extensive literature comprised of books, articles, and dissertations related to the Alexander Technique in all of its manifestations, including its application to musical performance, with which we are concerned here. In what follows, I shall briefly discuss from that vast literature only those sources that pertain most directly to the application of the Alexander Technique to organ performance, and those which are valuable in assessing the general concepts of the Alexander Technique as a system.

---

[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

Primary Sources

The primary sources are those works authored by F. M. Alexander. He wrote four principal books in which he explicates the important aspects of his technique. *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, published in 1910, argues that a process of gradual evolution has resulted in the general deterioration in health and well-being of modern man, who, Alexander claimed, has been unable to adapt successfully to the conditions of industrial modernity. As the subconscious no longer served as an effective judge of mental and bodily processes, it was imperative, in Alexander's view, to become fully conscious of our bodily processes and regulate them via conscious control. In so doing, we are able to become aware of and purge our chronic, habitual "misuse" of bodily systems, and to maintain optimum posture as a basis for both rest and movement, or "working state," even as we confront unfamiliar circumstances.

According to Alexander, all the exercise, deep breathing techniques, and relaxation that one can do are largely useless if they are undertaken without reliable sensory appreciation or body awareness. Sensory appreciation refers to the feedback one receives about one's physical condition and patterns of use. In his view, unconscious and faulty sensory perceptions are the fundamental cause of bodily misuse. If one could become conscious, unified in body and mind, one can become aware of and gain control over damaging habitual behaviors.

Alexander's second book, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, was published in 1924. In this book, sensory appreciation is considered with regard to human evolution. The original, instinctual, good body use of our ancestors declined in proportion to the rapid advances of technology and changing conditions of industrial modernity. In comparison to our ancestors, we lack grace and poise, our posture is deficient, and our patterns of body use are poor. Regaining good sensory appreciation is critical. Alexander identifies the important

concepts of "end-gaining" and "means-whereby". These terms describe the pervasive human tendency to become so goal-oriented and focused on an outcome that we lose consciousness of the *process* by which the goal is achieved, and fall into unsatisfactory and harmful use patterns. When we are end-gaining, we are no longer fully present in the present moment. If our sensory appreciation is deficient, ideas and concepts arising from them will necessarily be unsound, and our ability to concentrate is impaired. In this treatise, Alexander calls for the "re-education" of the entire individual.

In *The Use of the Self*, published in 1932, Alexander presents the development of his technique over time, and the observations and discoveries that informed his evolving thought with reference to his own personal situation, in which he connected his loss of voice to destructive use habits. While initially he though it would be possible to regain trust in *feeling* as a basis by which negative habitual functioning could be overcome and misdirected instinct corrected, he later abandoned that project, declaring, "…my trust in my reasoning processes to bring me safely to my 'end' but be a genuine trust, not a half-trust needing the assurance of *feeling right* as well."[9]

The Universal Constant in Living, published in 1941, discusses the constant influence of manner of use over our general functioning and health. One's manner of use can be brought under conscious control and coordination. Alexander presents medical case histories to bolster his assertion that unsatisfactory use patterns tend over time to lead to disorder and disease. He argues as well that unless sensory appreciation is reliable, the performance of exercises could actually make physical problems worse.

---

[9] F.M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self: Its Conscious Direction in Relation to Diagnosis, Functioning and the Control of Reaction* (New York: Dutton, 1932), 45.

Secondary Literature

The secondary literature regarding the Alexander Technique is vast and diverse. As noted above, I will present here only those materials that I have personally found most useful for purposes of the present work. Barbara and William Conable's *How to Learn the Alexander Technique: A Manual for Students* (1995) discusses the typical problems encountered by artists in many disciplines, including singers, instrumentalists, dancers and actors, and presents suggestions based on the Alexander Technique to address them.[10] The Conables advocate body-mapping as a means of restoring proper sensory appreciation. The optimal relationship of bones and muscles in use is presented in anatomical illustrations.

The lavishly illustrated *What Every Musician Needs to Know About the Body* (2001), by Barbara Conable and Benjamin Conable, is based on the related concepts of body-mapping and the Alexander Technique, and seeks to cultivate greater body awareness through knowledge of anatomy and muscular/skeletal construction. *The Act of Living: Talks on the Alexander Technique* collects twenty-nine important lectures by Walter Carrington, a prominent early exponent of the Alexander Technique, and the author of several books on the Technique (see bibliography).[11] The lectures, given in the period from 1988 to 1997, consist of Carrington's readings of Alexander's writings with his own interpolated commentary. The lectures engage such topics as breathing, spinal curvature, habitual behavior, visual impression, sciatica, the concepts of Yin and Yang, flow, and gravity. *Thinking Aloud: Talks on Teaching the Alexander Technique* consists of further lectures given during the Alexander Technique teacher training

---

[10] Barbara Conable and William Conable, *How to Learn the Alexander Technique: A Manual for Students.* (Columbus, OH: Andover Press, 1995).

[11] Walter Carrington, *The Act of Living: Talks on the Alexander Technique*. Edited by Jerry Sontag (San Francisco: Mornum Time Press, 1999). Carrington also authored another collection of lectures, *Thinking Aloud* (1994), and a guide to the sometimes dense and complex writings of Alexander, *Explaining the Alexander Technique: The Writings of F.M. Alexander* (1992).

courses by Carrington over the course of twenty-four years compiled and edited by Jerry Sontag. These lectures address the sources of physical energy and their misdirection, bodily stature, "non-doing," "the demand of the constant," and the importance of a teacher's "use."

The son of an important British physician, Patrick Macdonald provides a medically-informed perspective on Alexander Technique in *The Alexander Technique as I See It.*[12] An important theme that emerges is what Macdonald identifies as a tendency towards over-reliance on drugs—described here as "poisons"—to treat physical conditions. He instead proposes helping patients identify and remove poor habits of posture and movement. The Alexander Technique, in his view, is both a "science and an art", and can be usefully applied to specific maladies such as asthma, bronchitis, paralysis, torticollis, depression, slipped disks, migraine, arthritis, heart trouble, and childbirth. The book also includes testimonials to the efficacy of Alexander Technique from such figures as Aldous Huxley and John Dewey.

Perhaps the single best resource for musicians seeking to understand the basics of the Alexander Technique and apply them is *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique* by the Brazilian cellist Pedro de Alcantara.[13] The author looks into all aspects of a musician's life, including practice, rehearsal, and performance routines, and shows how the Technique might be employed to improve tone production, technique, musical expression and interpretation. The book includes an extensive chapter on the causes and remedies for performance anxiety as considered from the perspectives of the Technique.

---

[12] Patrick Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique as I See It* (Brighton, UK: Rahula Books, 1989).
[13] Pedro de Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Dissertations

As Alexander was an actor and performer, his technique has been applied almost since its inception in the performing arts, including music. There are many dissertations investigating the application of the Alexander Technique to singing and instrumental performance of many kinds, including piano. Curiously, however, given the extreme physicality of playing the organ, to date no dissertation dedicated to the Alexander Technique and organ performance has appeared. Iris Kaplan's "The Experience of Pianists Who Have Studied the Alexander Technique: Six Case Studies" (1994)[14] investigates how the experience of six pianists with the Alexander Technique has affected and benefitted their health. According to Kaplan, the private and personal nature of the Alexander Technique, as well as reluctance on the part of some musicians to report physical problems, makes this a difficult study. Kaplan asked her subjects about what led them to the Alexander Technique, about the structure of their lessons, the ways in which they adapted and incorporated the technique in their playing, and how the Alexander Technique impacted their playing. The results of the interviews, which move from general to specific questions, lead Kaplan to conclude that the Technique is an effective means of treating and preventing pain and injury, tension, and stage fright.

The doctoral study by Maribeth Jill Hartwig Knaub [15] evaluates similarities and differences in perception between male and female instrumental students regarding their application of the Alexander Technique and body-mapping strategies as taught by William Conable. Their instruments included piano, strings, winds, and vocalists. The instrumentalists kept journals of their experiences, and the author processed and analyzed the data using

[14] Iris Kaplan, "The Experience of Pianists Who Have Studied the Alexander Technique: Six Case Studies" (PhD diss., New York University, 1994).
[15] Maribeth Jill Hartwig Knaub, *Body Mapping: An Instructional Strategy for Teaching the Alexander Technique to Music Students* (EdD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1999).

sophisticated computer programs. Knaub discovered that while there were many similarities between the genders in their experience of the Alexander Technique, the male and female musicians tended to process information differently.

Chapter One of the present dissertation provides an introduction to the life and thought of F.M. Alexander, the basic concepts and components of the Alexander Technique. Chapter Two enumerates and explicates the specific physical aspects and challenges peculiar to organ performance, as briefly identified above, including the importance of posture, weight distribution and balance, operating multiple keyboards and the pedalboard, the legs and feet, operating auxiliary foot controls, organ construction and its relationship to the body (with regard to height, weight, girth, inseam). Chapter Three discusses the application of the Alexander Technique to organ performance with regard to specific aspects of anatomy and organ construction. I will suggest exercises and insights drawn from the technique to heighten and maintain body awareness, and to cultivate superior posture and ease of movement in performance.

The conclusion attempts an evaluation of the Alexander Technique, and advocates for its (or other body awareness modalities) inclusion as a primary component of organ pedagogy from the beginning of the organist's training and education. I present the experience of several organists who have worked with the Technique, and their motivations for so doing. I recapitulate my own subjective experience of the Alexander Technique lessons and workshops and the ways in which it has personally impacted my organ performance, before making some brief suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER ONE

Alexander and his Technique

As much has already been written about the life and times of F.M. Alexander, a short introduction here will suffice.[16] The son of a farmer, Frederick Matthias Alexander was born in 1869 in Tasmania, Australia. He was an unhealthy child due to respiratory problems, perhaps resulting from his premature birth. The child was keenly interested in the arts, and by the time he was a teenager, he had studied poetry and drama, and developed a passion for theater, particularly the works of Shakespeare. At age seventeen, he left his hometown, and after a stint as an accountant for a tin mine, he became a professional reciter, which at that time was, as Alexander explains, a kind of one-man variety show.[17]

Alexander gained fame in this field, but soon he was experiencing hoarseness during his performances, often losing his voice by the end of his recital. In addition, his friends noticed an audible gasping for air during his recitations. His doctors and vocal coaches prescribed rest, a strategy that provided partial and temporary recovery. However, as soon as he commenced reciting once more, his problems would inevitably return. At this point, he had been offered "a particularly attractive and important engagement" but was afraid to accept it, because he was so uncertain about the soundness of his vocal organs. He consulted his doctor, who prescribed vocal rest—no reciting, using his voice as little as possible, and following his medical treatment. Alexander agreed, accepted the engagement, and all seemed well. His voice improved. However,

---

[16] My biographical account is drawn from the standard sources on F.M. Alexander (Michael Bloch, *F.M.: The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander: Founder of the Alexander Technique* (London: Little, Brown, 2004); Frank Pierce Jones, *Freedom to Change: the Development and Science of the Alexander Technique* (London: Mouritz,1997); Pedro de Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), as well as the accounts of my Alexander Technique teachers Catherine Kettrick and Cathy Madden, to whom I am indebted and grateful.

[17] F.M. Alexander, *Articles and Lectures*. Ed. Jean M.O. Fischer (London: Mouritz, 1995), 223.

before he was halfway through his program, his hoarseness returned and he was almost unable to speak.

Seeking a remedy, the following day he again consulted his doctor. By this time, however, Alexander had made a critical observation on his own: *he only lost his voice while reciting*. This observation is the key to the development of the Technique because without it, he would never have started experimenting. To his doctor he posed the question, "if I only lose my voice while performing, isn't it safe to say that there is something different I am doing while I recite that causes my vocal problems?"[18] The doctor agreed, but as he couldn't tell him what that difference was, Alexander decided to find out for himself.

Alexander began to observe himself in a mirror, at first as he spoke normally, and then as he recited. Later on, he added two more mirrors. In the process, at first he did not notice anything during ordinary speech, but when he recited he quickly noticed three things: "I tended to pull the head back, depress the larynx, and suck in breath through the mouth in such a way as to produce a gasping sound"[19] An interesting point is that he literally couldn't notice what he was doing in ordinary speech until he had something to compare it to. Once he saw what he was doing while reciting, he could see the same tendencies occurring in his ordinary speech. He continued to observe both his normal speaking and recitation closely.[20]

He noticed the three tendencies, and concluded that the unusual demands his recitation style placed on his voice caused his hoarseness. From this he assumed that his problem was only in his vocal organs. He didn't know which of the tendencies caused the other(s), so he experimented and found that he could indirectly and partially stop himself from gasping and depressing his larynx if he prevented himself from pulling his head back and down. Then he

[18] Kettrick, personal communication, 10 November, 2014.
[19] F.M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self* (1932), 9.
[20] Ibid.

realized it wasn't just his vocal organs; he noticed that what he was doing with his *head* affected his torso. Gradually he realized that he had cultivated poor habits of both speaking and recitation, an important recognition for actors—and musicians—as many of them reproduce the habits they learned from their teachers, consciously or not.

He recognized that the same inhibiting and constricting pattern of movements he observed in his recitation were present as well during his normal speaking, albeit to a lesser degree. He also began to notice that his habitual, everyday patterns of "use" tended to increase when he was excited or under the stress of performance, when he was consciously attempting to *do*, or to make or force something to happen. In the wake of his fateful performance of 1893, Alexander recognized that this forceful effort, which he was to call "doing", arose *unconsciously* and *habitually,* because he was not aware of his own body and how it was storing tension and stiffening in response to his desire to recite. Becoming aware of these behaviors, he attempted to alter his habits of movement, to no avail. His ingrained, habitual behaviors were very difficult to overcome, as they felt more "right" and natural than the new ways he had arrived at through his reasoning and deliberation.

What seemed like an impasse became a turning point in the evolution of his thinking. The key to his discovery was becoming conscious of habitual patterns of movement, from which arises the possibility of "conscious intervention"—if we change how we think, and direct ourselves accordingly, then we will move differently. In Alexander's terminology, this process is known as "inhibiting" unwanted behavior.

At one point he thought that all he had to do was inhibit the misdirection that was associated with his wrong habitual use. However, he found this difficult. Merely attempting to inhibit a behavior was pointless unless there was something better with which to replace it. He

consequently developed a multi-part process that included what he called "inhibition"—i.e. not immediately responding to the stimulus to speak—and to subsequently give himself *directions* until he was so practiced that he could then consider the possibility of either speaking, doing something else, or continuing to give his directions. He discovered that if he momentarily interrupted or inhibited his impulse to speak, and he repeatedly gave himself the directions to move his head forward and up, and to lengthen and broaden his back, he could consciously intervene and prevent the habitual pattern. Alexander's process of *inhibition* and *direction* allowed him to correct his own habits, and it became the cornerstone of the technique by which he was subsequently able to teach others how to consciously change their own maladaptive habits.

This discovery allowed Alexander to surmount his own difficulties and resume performance without pain. His discoveries began to find popularity, at first primarily with actors. A big win at the racing track provided him with the funds to go to England. Alexander moved to London in 1904, where he began to publish pamphlets about the technique he then called a "Method of Vocal and Respiratory Re-education,"[21] and later his first book, *Man's Supreme Inheritance* in 1910 (see above). In the decade spanning 1914 to 1924, he split his time between England and the United States, where he continued to develop and teach his method, writing two more books, *Conscious Control*, and *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, later combined into one volume under the title *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (1918).[22]

Alexander's circle of friends and supporters began to broaden, including such luminary figures as the philosopher John Dewey, who was responsible for introducing Alexander's work to an American audience, and arranged for the American publication of his books. Alexander

[21] Michael Bloch, 74.
[22] de Alcantara, 1997, 283.

came to the United States at the suggestion of Margaret Naumberg, who found pupils for him, and arranged teaching facilities. Alexander began to teach children in 1924 in London at a school he founded, and during the 1930s he established the first intensive Alexander Technique teacher training program in London, a course which required three years of study for certification. His last two books, *The Use of the Self* and *The Universal Constant in Living*, appeared in 1932 and 1941, respectively (see above). Alexander brought a successful suit for libel against the South African government in 1948 after his work was criticized in an official publication.[23] Subsequently, he remained in London where he continued to teach his method until he died in 1955.

[23]Ibid., 285.

Basic Concepts of the Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique is primarily a process of *rethinking* movement—we re-educate ourselves, unlearn poor habits and discover how to be and move in the world without unnecessary tension. We become mindful. We might even reestablish the balanced body we enjoyed as small children. Alexander's books repeatedly make the point that the re-education is a *psycho-physical* process. It is not just "body," nor is it just "mind," although in his technique it is mental directions that create physical consequences. Reestablishing the balanced body is a *consequence* of the process, not a process itself. Although he does not identify any particular postures or movement as optimal, in his early writing he does talk about "positions of mechanical advantage."[24] Such a position is, according to Pedro de Alcantara, a position in which one could easily and comfortably direct themselves:

> The merit of the procedure depends not on the pupil's assuming a particular bodily position, but on his learning to direct on a general basis. Indeed, in some of the positions the pupil will be quite uncomfortable unless he directs his whole self. […] The positions are a means to an end, more than ends in themselves.[25]

Alexander points out that if you don't interfere with your natural coordination, i.e., if you project the directions for thinking in this new way, you will naturally move in the way that is best suited for the situation you are in. His books explain at length both the reasons for changing our habits, and the means by which we may accomplish that change.

His technique requires three steps to proceed, each leading directly to the next, and each bearing a direct relationship to the others: (1) the awareness of habit results in a conscious decision not to respond to a situation in a habitual manner; from which arises (2) the sense of direction or conscious control organizing the body through a series of mental instructions

[24] Gelb, 44.
[25] de Alcantara, 1997, 88.

regarding the balance of the head, neck and back.[26] The third step, as discussed above, is to (3) create an "order of directions" that assists one in maintaining coordination during activity. His essential directions are as follows: 1) the neck is to be free, 2) so that the head can go forward and up, 3) so that the back can lengthen and widen. If one allows the neck muscles to relax, the head will naturally move forwards and up. When this happens, it mitigates unnecessary tightening of muscles elsewhere in the body, and the body tends to both lengthen and widen. The Alexander Technique teacher and writer Ethan Kind clarifies, "To *direct* in the Alexander Technique is to give an order of allowance to the head, neck and spine, to release and lengthen prior to movement".[27]

A frequent misconception of the Alexander Technique is that is solely about "correcting" posture. It is not a system of exercises, or a relaxation technique, or a method of vocal or instrumental training.[28] It is true that the technique can help one improve posture, but as a primarily mental process, it is more concerned with what Alexander termed "inhibition" and "direction". These processes are combined in practice, as one seeks to inhibit poor habits and redirect the processes of movement. With the Alexander Technique you cultivate awareness: you learn how to notice *how* you are doing what you are doing, and learn to make a *choice* about whether or not you want to continue as you have been doing. You can learn how to stop directing yourself in a way that is inefficient and wasteful and let your natural ease and coordination operate normally.

---

[26] Kaplan, 12.
[27] Kind, Location 80 of 3538.
[28] Hillary Mayers and Linda Babits, "A Balanced Approach: The Alexander Technique" (*Music Educators Journal* 74/3), 51.

Uniqueness of the Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique differs from other means of improving coordination such as yoga, tai chi, and Feldenkrais,[29] because the Alexander Technique is essentially a re-education of our body movement. Practitioners of yoga and those other techniques might also claim to re-educate body movement. However, the Alexander Technique is different in two important ways: it is the only technique that recognizes the importance of "primary control", that is, the central relationship between the head, neck, and spine that governs our posture and movement, ("primary control" is discussed further on pp.25-26), uses conscious direction to change how we move, and is a process, according to Catherine Kettrick, that one can use at *any* time for *any* activity.[30]

Other techniques aim to improve one's coordination while doing that technique, (e.g. yoga, Feldenkrais), but, to my knowledge, no *method* yet exists for using that particular technique while you are doing something *else*—walking, singing, or playing an instrument. When I asked my Alexander Technique teacher Catherine Kettrick about the differences between these different modalities and techniques, she replied, "The hope is that what you learn in a Feldenkrais lesson will carry over into your daily life, but Feldenkrais does not provide a *technique* [my emphasis] for improving the quality of your movement in activity while you are engaged in that activity."[31]

We can re-coordinate our bad habits through conscious thinking, and changes in the use of the Primary Control. As Alexander progressively overcame his old habitual behavior through

[29] Moshé Feldenkrais learned the Alexander Technique in London in the late 1940s, and published his first book on his body awareness method in 1949. Returning to Israel in 1951, he began to teach his method widely at home and abroad. Feldenkrais's method shares with the Alexander Technique a focus on body awareness, directing attention to movement to increase flexibility and ease of movement. It is similar in that it works with mental processes of rethinking movement and self-observation. (Web document, accessed 2 May 2015 at www.feldenkrais.com)

[30] Catherine Kettrick was a student of Marjorie Barstow, the first graduate of F.M. Alexander's first training course in 1933.

[31] Kettrick, personal communication, 13 April, 2015.

conscious guidance and control, he realized that what he was doing was, as Kettrick describes it, "an *on-going process of conscious direction* [my emphasis] that one can use at any time, for any activity, in the course of performing that activity".[32]

Body Awareness/Kinesthesia

What Alexander (and later somatic practitioners) refers to as "body awareness" is comprised of many elements. In Alexander's system, *kinesthesia*—broadly defined as the sensory perception of the body in movement arising from receptors in muscles, tendons, and joints—features prominently.[33] As Thomas Marks explains, the kinesthetic sense is the "movement sense", informing us of the position of the parts of the body, and the movement of our bodies.[34] He explains, "When our awareness of our bodies in movement is based on refined kinesthesia and a good body map, our conception of the music—the *sound*—will fuse with our conception of the movement that produces the music".[35] If our kinesthetic sense is not functioning properly, however, it can mislead us; in essence, if a poor habit has become ingrained, right feels wrong, and wrong feels right. Catherine Kettrick explains it this way: "What we're used to feels right because we're used to it. So feelings should come *last* [my emphasis],"[36] a statement that reflects Alexander's distrust of the feelings as a reliable means of evaluation.

Another term for the kinesthetic apparatus is "proprioception," the process of feeling by which the body becomes aware of itself. As described by de Alcantara, proprioception

---

[32] Ibid.
[33] Conable, 25.
[34] Mark, 8.
[35] Ibid., 13.
[36] Catherine Kettrick, "I've Had My First Alexander Lesson—What Do I Do Now?", private publication distributed in lessons.

"encompasses all aspects of muscular activity; orientation in space, relative position of body parts, movement of body and limbs, the gauging of effort and tension, the perception of fatigue, static and dynamic balance."[37] If your proprioception is faulty, you will misinterpret the information it is sending you, and erroneous mental conceptions will arise upon which your judgments of "right" or "wrong" will rest.

Habitual behaviors and movements as sources of stress and fatigue

The Alexander Technique teaches us that it is critical to become conscious of habitual behaviors that may affect us adversely. Becoming aware of maladaptive habits is the first and primary step in the process that allows one to intentionally interrupt habitual patterns of posture and movement and begin to restructure them in ways that reduce stress and pain and optimize freedom of movement. If the student is able to maintain this state of awareness, and allow it to guide her movement, she will find that even outside of the immediate lesson context, "the same thing will happen in his body as happens when the Alexander teacher has his hands on the student".[38]

In my own case, my Alexander Technique teacher had me get up from the keyboard and walk across the room as she observed. What became immediately obvious was the way in which I habitually walked leaning back some 10 to 15 degrees off of the vertical axis of natural spinal alignment (which, as she pointed out, is not necessarily "straight", as the spine has a natural curvature to it).[39]

The same unconscious backwards leaning was evident in the way I habitually sat at the keyboard, a position that was setting me up for unnecessary tension—and subsequently, pain—

[37] de Alcantara, 2013, 37.
[38] Drake, 82.
[39] Kettrick, personal communication, 13 April, 2015.

even before I had played a single note of music. Just having the objective mirror of the Alexander Technique teacher to provide an external perspective of habitual posture that I could not see myself was revelatory. Once she pointed this out to me, I became conscious of my off-kilter posture, and thus I am able to remember it and bring it to my conscious attention to it and correct it.

Having a qualified Alexander Technique teacher to provide external perspective is invaluable. These insights can be augmented by the use of actual mirrors in which one may observe aspects of posture and movement that may have been hitherto invisible. Alexander himself eventually used three mirrors in his process of self-observation and discovery as he was seeking the cause of his own maladies.[40]

Of course, becoming conscious of maladaptive habitual patterns is not always an easy process. That is, when my off-kilter stance was brought to my attention, and I adjusted it according to the feedback I was receiving from the teacher, the new position felt *unnatural* to me, and at first proved difficult to maintain. Thus, the process of becoming conscious is a gradual and continuous one. The tendency and inclination to slip unconsciously back into the habitual patterning is always present. One must struggle to maintain the consciousness of the improved posture until such time that *it* begins to feel natural and correct. In a sense, the Alexander Technique allows us to consciously "reprogram" ourselves for more efficient operation, but the corrections, however necessary, are not always easy to implement.

[40] At first, Alexander used one mirror for his self-observation, and later added two more mirrors in order to better observe himself in profile (Frank Pierce, and Frank Pierce Jones, *Freedom to Change: the Development and Science of the Alexander Technique* (London: Mouritz, 1995), 17.

Components of the Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique consists of seven deeply interconnected basic components. These fundamental concepts, which have influenced many subsequent somatic modalities of body-awareness techniques, are summarized below. The most thorough explanation, of course, is found in Alexander's own writings, in which he elaborates on these concepts at great length.

1) Faulty Sensory appreciation

"Faulty sensory appreciation", as Alexander explains, results from misleading sensations:

> As the readers know, I had recognized much earlier that I ought not to trust to my feeling for the direction of my use, but I had never fully realized all that this implied, namely, that the sensory experience associated with the new use would be so unfamiliar and therefore "feel" so unnatural and wrong that I, like everyone else, with my ingrained habit of judging whether experiences of use were "right" or not by the way they felt, would almost inevitably balk at employing the new use. Obviously, any new use must feel different from the old, and if the old use felt right, the new use was bound to feel wrong.[41]

In *Indirect Procedures,* Pedro de Alcantara explains this curious and pervasive dilemma: "Faulty sensory awareness is a double phenomenon; what is wrong feels right, and what is right feels wrong."[42] Over time faulty sensory awareness can be reversed, as the new behavior or habit replaces the old, and becomes more established. This is what Alexander means by "re-education". Kettrick describes the incremental and gradual process of kinesthetic deception that creates the duplicitous sense that right is wrong, and wrong is right:

> Our kinesthesia reports accurately what is happening, our brain *mis-interprets* what it is getting from our kinesthesia. And this process happens over time. You didn't wake up one day and consciously decide to pull yourself 10 degrees off center—it happened gradually, probably in response to an attempt to do something (walk, a sport, playing the organ) better. You did it little bit by little bit. And since our

---

[41] F. M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self; Its Conscious Direction in Relation to Diagnosis, Functioning and the Control of Reaction* (New York: Dutton, 1932), 31.
[42] de Alcantara, 1997, 39.

> senses are relative, (we perceive cold when we leave the house as. "Oh, that's different!") it is easy for a habit to develop bit-by-bit. All habits operate unconsciously, good and bad"[43]

One must cultivate conscious control over this process, by learning to *inhibit* and *direct* an action. If we do not learn how to do this, then we tend to rely, as de Alcantara recognizes, on an instinctual response that may well be based on faulty perception: "At the decisive moment of action, all of us will invariably choose to do what *feels* right, not what *is* right."[44]

2) Primary control

"Primary control" concerns the relationship between the head, neck, and back. This relationship coordinates the entire body and its movements, and thus assumes centrality in the dynamic organization of the body. Alexander discovered that the relationship of the head, neck and torso was of "primary importance in determining his level of functioning and in organizing his reactions into a coordinated whole"; thus, the term "primary control".[45] To gain this subtle control is a central objective of the Alexander Technique, and it is possible only when we do not tighten the neck muscles reflexively, and the head is balanced on the Atlanto-Occipital joint, a pair of joints at the top of the spine that regulates extension and flexion of the head. If the head is balanced well at the top of the spine, and, as Gelb writes, "the balancing mechanism is not interfered with," the spine can easily lengthen to fully support the body.[46] Flowing from primary control is the primary movement of which Alexander spoke, namely, "an upward movement of

[43] Kettrick, personal communication, 17 April, 2015.
[44] de Alcantara, 2013, 78.
[45] Michael Gelb, *Body Learning: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique* (New York: Holt, 1995), 42-43.
[46] Ibid., 44.

the whole body, relative to itself. [...] it meant having a tendency in your entire self to be moving upwards instead of moving down."[47]

Barbara Conable draws on the image of a cat in motion to convey the essence of primary control:

> If you can imagine the cat's movement clearly you have a handle on the primary movement the Alexander Technique can liberate in you… Do you remember what a cat does when it gets up from resting? The first thing that happens is that its head begins to move at the location of the head's joint with the spine. Then there is a wave of activation down the cat's spine that lasts half a second. There is a perceptible lengthening of the spine as this activation occurs. The cat's back seems to come to life. It is only then that the cat's legs become involved. The moving that has activated the spine.[48]

The idea of primary control was the first concept conveyed to me by the teachers of the first two Alexander Technique workshops I attended. According to de Alcantara, to use the primary control does not mean to try to hold your head in the "right" position. In fact, there is no 'right position' for the head.[49] Gelb concurs, "The main concern of the Alexander Technique is not to teach better positions, but to teach the better Use of ourselves that *result* [my emphasis] in better positions."[50]

3) Inhibition

"Inhibition", in Alexandrian terminology, means to stop reacting habitually; that is, to intervene consciously to not respond immediately to a stimulus. Alexander considered inhibition central to his method:

> "Boiled down, it all comes to inhibiting a particular reaction to a given stimulus. But no one will see it that way. They will see it as getting in and out of a chair the

[47] Carolyn Nicholls, *Body, Breath & Being: A New Guide to the Alexander Technique* (East Sussex: D & B Publishing, 2008), 39.
[48] Conable, 9-10.
[49] de Alcantara, 1997, 28.
[50] Gelb, 44.

> right way. It is nothing of the kind. It is that a pupil decides what he will or will not consent to do![51]

In this sense, inhibition is an empowering act. Pedro de Alcantara points out that "inhibition is not simply the temporary suspension of an activity: it is the suspension of the very wish to act."[52] Such statements, sounding much like a central tenet of Zen Buddhism and its sublimation of desire, almost attain a mystical tone. Once one has become conscious of an unwanted behavior, and has prevented it from occurring through the exercise of inhibition, then one determines the optimal "means-whereby" (see below) by which one can achieve the desired response or goal. You can think of inhibition as a conscious intervention in a habitual behavior, an interruption that allows us time to reprogram or reset our habits. Regarding inhibition, Carolyn Nicholls says, "If you are to change the way you respond, you first have to stop responding. You have to deny yourself the habit of stiffening and shortening. Instead you choose to give yourself new thoughts to work with; new directions for your body to make sense of."[53] It is, says she, "a mental choice that has physical a consequence."[54] Opposing one is all the force of habit and unreliable sensory information.

4) End-Gaining

It is not *what* we do, according to de Alcantara, that creates postural discomfort, but rather, *how* we do what we do. It is "misuse of the self" that typically creates such chronic conditions as lower back pain. All such misuse, according to Alexander, arises from "the

---

[51] Alexander, quoted in Gelb, 66.
[52] de Alcantara, 1997, 53.
[53] Nicholls, 2008, 43-44.
[54] Ibid., 62.

universal habit of *end-gaining*."[55] If one is so intent upon the *outcome* of a particular action, one tends to lose track of the *means* by which the end is achieved. When we end-gain, we hurry and push through to an objective, acting habitually and unconsciously. If we are performing a complicated piece of music, for example, we may be so focused on its successful execution and completion that we lose sight of the often physically damaging ways in which we are achieving this goal. When we are end-gaining, we often ignore pain and stress—critical biofeedback that alerts us to the fact that we are *misusing* our mechanism—and push through to the end. As is the case with inhibition, we need to pause and consider the means—or, in Alexander terms, "means-whereby"—we will achieve the desired outcome, rather than acting reflexively and unconsciously. "End-gaining" is prevalent if not pernicious in contemporary human behavior; it is, in de Alcantara's view, "so widespread and insidious that most people do not realize that they, and others, are end-gaining *all the time* [my emphasis]."[56] The antidote to end-gaining is a process-oriented approach.

5) Means-Whereby

"Means-whereby", in Alexander's conception, is literally the means to an end—the steps one takes to achieve a particular goal. The more conscious one becomes of the underlying processes and mechanisms of any action, the more one can inhibit negative habits and re-direct the action. Alexander explains "means-whereby" as follows:

> 'Means-whereby' [...] indicate[s] the reasoned means to the gaining of an end. These means included the inhibition of the habitual use of the mechanisms of the organism, and the conscious projection of new direction necessary to the

[55] de Alcantara, 1997, 18.
[56] Ibid, 19.

> performance of the different acts involved in a new and more satisfactory use of these mechanisms.[57]

With the means-whereby, one performs an action step by step with conscious proper direction. For example, I am sitting on the chair. If I want to pick up the cup of tea on the table, retrieving the cup of tea is my goal, and I must think about what I need to do to accomplish that efficiently—that is the means-whereby. To retrieve the cup, I will rise from my chair and walk towards the table to get the cup, return to the chair and take my seat. Of course, there are many ways in which one could accomplish that simple action. If I were to follow the Alexander Technique principles, I would first remember that the head moves forward and up, leading my torso forward as I rise from the chair; then I would remember to move my knees to walk toward the table, extend my hand to reach the cup, etc. Having reasoned out the means-whereby I will accomplish my goal, I now need to consciously direct that process. Likewise for playing the organ; each step of the process—approaching the instrument, sitting at the bench, assuming a playing posture, placing my hands on the manuals, etc.—must be undertaken with complete awareness and seamlessly integrated with all the other steps.

By focusing the attention on *how* one is performing an action—the "means-whereby"—one may improve the doing of that action. In this mode of conscious acting, each step of the process is as important as any other, and the end itself is merely another part of the process, the successful attainment of which depends upon bring conscious attention to each step.[58] As de

---

[57] Alexander, *The Use of Self*, 27.

[58] As Eugen Herrigel points out, in order for an archer to hit the target—the goal—all the steps of the process—"grasping the bow, nocking the arrow, raising the bow, drawing and remaining at the point of highest tension, loosing the shot"—must be unified and executed in a flowing, seamless manner with the greatest of awareness at each part of a process that, "In spite of its being divided into parts the entire process seemed like a living thing wholly contained in itself". Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

Alcantara points out, "it is an *indirect* process to reach any goal", and the intermediate steps are important as ends in themselves.[59] Frank Pierce Jones reminds us,

> The most important step at any time is the *next* one. In other words, application of the means-whereby principle involves awareness of the conditions present, a reasoned consideration of their causes, inhibition of habitual or end-gaining responses to these conditions, and consciously guided direction of the indirect series of steps required to gain the end.[60]

It is the task of the Alexander Technique teacher to help the student become aware of how end-gaining operates in all facets of life, including the deceptively "simple" and "natural" acts of sitting, walking, speaking, and so forth, and how, by bringing *conscious attention* to all the individual components of these processes, we may accomplish them with intuition, poise, and natural balance. As musicians, we learn a new piece or difficult passage of music in a similar manner, by breaking it down into its components, and learning how to put them back together in a flowing, seamless musically expressive manner.

6) Direction

"Direction" in Alexander's terminology means, simply, directing oneself in movement, which is primarily a *mental* process. Alexander said, "You think that the Alexander Technique is a physical thing; I tell you that it's the most mental thing that's ever been discovered."[61] Direction concerns the projection of messages from the brain to the body. Jones explains, "A basic direction in the Alexander Technique is to order the neck to relax, to order the head forward and up, to lengthen and widen the back".[62] Direction is not, however, "training" the body or the mind to act in a certain way. It is, rather, as de Alcantara explains, "to establish,

---

[59] de Alcantara, 1997, 20.

[60] Frank Pierce Jones, *Freedom to Change: The Development and Science of the Alexander Technique* (London: Mouritz, 1997), 211.

[61] Kettrick, personal communication, 13 April 2015.

[62] Jones, 211.

cultivate, and refine the connections between what you think and what you do."[63] Direction empowers us; as Nicholls reminds us, "You choose how you respond to things, because if you don't, you respond in an unthinking, habitual way."[64] This conscious choice, says she, is at the heart of the Alexander Technique.

7) Unity of body and mind

Alexander recognized that many, if not all, physical difficulties had mental components, and that if one were to treat the physical difficulty one must also reckon with their mental components. Gelb claims that the advantage of Alexander's work is that his idea of psychophysical unity is not just theoretical; it arose from his own experience of wholeness:

> When he began the process that led to his discovery he believed, like most other people, that 'mind' and 'body' were separate entities. Experience soon revealed that this was not so. First he realized that his voice problem was not result merely of the misuse of his vocal mechanism but was caused by a response of his whole body. Later he found that every idea, such as to 'speak a sentence', was inevitably associated with a response of his whole body. These discoveries about himself were confirmed by his teaching experience, and he became convinced that the so-called 'mental' and 'physical' could not be divorced from one another and that human ills and shortcomings could not be so classified and then dealt with accordingly.[65]

In Alexander's view, it is *only* when our movement is informed by our thinking, and we aware and fully conscious of our movement, that we can move in a well-balanced way.

Alexander discussed the indivisible nature of the "psycho-physical" relationship in his book, *The Use of the Self*:

> When once it is recognized that every act is a reaction to a stimulus received through the sensory mechanisms, no action can be described as wholly "mental" or wholly "physical." The most that can be said is that in some acts the "mental"

[63] de Alcantar, 56.
[64] Nicholls, 2008, 43.
[65] Gelb, 38.

> side predominates and in others the "physical." For instance, let us take the act of lifting the arm, which would be described off-hand by many people as a "physical" act. If we consider what happens between the receipt of a stimulus to lift the arm and the performance of the act, we shall see that a concerted activity takes place which brings into play not only the processes which most people are accustomed to regard as "physical," but also the processes which they regard as "mental."[66]

The holistic perspective to which Alexander alludes is a perspective more widely recognized now than in his own lifetime, but many still do not grasp the depth of his conception. Language largely obscures the fundamental unity of the human being; it is a grave mistake, in Alexander's view, to regard any of its components as intrinsically separate. As Kettrick admonishes, "Whether we use ourselves well or not, and whether we recognize it or not, we are always using our whole 'psycho-physical' selves".[67]

---

[66] F. Matthias Alexander, *The Use of the Self; its Conscious Direction in Relation to Diagnosis, Functioning and the Control of Reaction* (New York: Dutton, 1932), 43.

[67] Kettrick, personal communication, 13 April, 2015.

CHAPTER TWO

Specific Physical Aspects and Challenges of Organ Performance

As I stated in the opening chapter of the present dissertation, all musicians contend with a variety of physical aspects and challenges, whether they are singers or instrumentalists. Due to the nature of the instrument they play, organists must deal with numerous simultaneous physical issues on various planes of movement. Individual physiques and their engagement with variable organ construction and layout pose a unique set of challenges in their daily practice and performance. In what follows, I will enumerate the most crucial physical issues faced by organists.

The Organ Bench and Bench Adjustment

The wooden organ benches encountered on many instruments tend not to be very comfortable to sit on for long periods of time. Their hard construction differs from the common, adjustable piano bench that features a leather-covered cushion. If our balance is not good, the hard, unyielding organ bench can result in low back pain. Additionally, the organ bench is often fixed at a certain height, and is non-adjustable, forcing the organist to conform to the instrument. This is typically the case with older instruments. Contemporary builders have attached a roller on the side of the bench leg, so the bench may be adjusted to accommodate the varying height of different individuals. If the organ is not so equipped, the organist must improvise ways to make a crude bench adjustment, such as a wooden block placed under the legs of the bench. Even if the organ has an adjustable bench, achieving a proper height is very complicated, and the generic bench cannot be perfectly matched with the individual.

Weight Distribution and Balance

The physical construction of the organ, with its multiple planes of operation, creates a very physically demanding environment for its player. The biggest challenge for the organist is the fact that she is using all four limbs. This means that she cannot use the floor as a point of balance and a support. Other instrumentalists stand or sit with their feet firmly planted on the ground. Many organists who experience lower back pain are typically using their low back as a center of gravity, or they are "hanging" from the bench without a firm point of balance and support. One reason for this is that even if we have made some adjustment of bench height to accommodate the height of an individual, the issue of negotiating the distance from the bench to the manuals and the pedalboard still remains.

Experiencing tension in the shoulders, neck, back, and wrist are the most common physical issues encountered by organists. Tension prevents us from using our bodies properly; moreover, tension spreads easily from one body part to the next. Tension becomes an impediment to musical expression. Nelly Ben-Or compares a keyboard player who tightens their neck, pulls their chest down, and fixes their hands and fingers rigidly to a fighter preparing for combat with a tough opponent.[68] The drawback to such tensed readiness is that any sort of muscular tension inhibits musical execution and expression.

The wrists of organists are particularly susceptible to repetitive stress ailments such as carpal tunnel syndrome, a malady usually resulting from movements that put repetitive stress on the tendons in the carpal tunnel. The dangerous movements that put the organist at risk are those that involve repetitive, forceful flexing of the wrists, as in "wrist octaves" and "dropping the

[68] Nelly Ben-Or, *The Alexander Technique in the Preparation and Performance of Music; A Pianist's Thoughts on the Alexander Technique* (s.I; Ben-Or,1988), 12.

wrist".[69] Rotating the wrist as one plays to reach keys, rather than keeping it stiff and rigid, is an effective strategy to reduce strain and stress.

The upper arm, if habitually misused, is also prone to repetitive stress injuries. Mark explains,

> If a person habitually uses the upper arm in a way that causes the collarbone to put pressure on the median nerve where it passes under the collarbone, the symptoms may be the same as if pressure were placed on the median nerve in the carpal tunnel. When the problem originates in the upper arm it is called "thoracic outlet syndrome."[70]

Many organists—and keyboardists in general—focus more on finger movement, rather than moving from the arm. The organist must learn to integrate and coordinate all the components of movement. The fingers, hands, and arms must work together as a unit.

When we encounter a technically difficult or challenging passage, our muscles tend to tense up and "over-contract", again leaving us susceptible to injury. The Alexander Technique compels us to regard the body as a *system*, and become aware of the ways in which stress or tension in one part can easily affect the other parts to which it is connected. Tension in the arms, wrists, and hands can affect the shoulder, as Mark notes: "Shoulder injuries may affect the tendons in the rotator cuff or the bursa, which is the cushion underlying the tendon and protecting it."[71]

Many keyboardists tend to place their hands on the keyboard with a "thumb-oriented" position, in the false belief that the thumb is stronger and more dexterous than the other fingers. Such a position immediately moves the hand off-axis from the arm, in the direction of the little fingers, creating undue stress on the anterior side of the hand in the form of "ulnar deviation."

---

[69] "Wrist octave" refers to an octave played with the wrist held rigidly; a "dropped wrist" occurs when the wrist sinks lower than the level of the keys as one is playing. Both of these positions place undue strain on the wrist.
[70] Mark, 145.
[71] Ibid., 143.

However, if the hands are kept aligned with the arms, and the arms are used to support the hands, the radius (outer forearm bone) remains free and loose, one does not feel that the little finger is weak, and one can reach and play the necessary keys without straining.

The orientation of the back is crucial in establishing a balanced posture at the keyboard. Frequently, a less-than-optimal back orientation sets up the delivery of body weight to the tailbone (coccyx), but the tailbone is not the best place to receive the weight and serve as a balanced center of gravity. Such an orientation—usually arrived at unconsciously—throws the body off balance and distorts the spine, leaving us prone to lower back pain.[72] Back orientation is especially crucial to organists, who must operate multiple manuals at differing heights while simultaneously playing the pedalboard, all without the advantage of being able to place the feet squarely on the ground as a source of support. When bench height is not appropriately adjusted, and/or the distance from the manuals is too near or too far, organists tend to sustain their already-unbalanced posture by sitting on their tailbones, bending backwards, and hunching their shoulders. (I still struggle with this issue; indeed, this was my starting point as I began to consider optimum posture and how to improve it).

Operating Multiple Manuals on Different Vertical Planes

The presence of multiple keyboard manuals situated at different heights creates issues of vertical and horizontal asymmetry, as one arm is higher or lower than the other, and moving laterally in either similar or contrasting directions, at times with the arms crossing one over the other at different heights per the demands of the music. Adding pedals to this welter of motion complicates things further still. All six trio sonatas (BWV 525-530) of J.S. Bach require the organist to play on different manuals while executing complex footwork. Some French Romantic

[72] Mark, 49.

pieces, such as a symphony by Charles-Marie Widor, or by Louis Vierne, require the organist to play the melody with a solo stop on one manual, and use another manual for accompaniment while playing the pedals and operating the expression box. Such complex operations prove difficult even for a virtuoso-level player. The cumulative effect of all of this movement on different planes is the tendency for the organist to become unbalanced, and compromise her posture.

The organist make changes in timbre by pulling out or pushing in the organ stops to effect the desired registration, or by pressing buttons that control the memory pistons. These types of registration changes can create additional problems for the organist, depending on the placement of the stops relative to the organist, and whether or not the changes occur while the organist is playing. Reaching stops at a distance, or having to cross hands to accomplish a change, can lead to straining and muscle tension, with the added component of mental stress that may arise while attempting to execute the change of registration in time to meet the demands of the music. Stress may arise prior to the change, as the organist anticipates the difficult operation and tightens up as a reflex.

Playing the pedal-board

Playing the pedals involves simultaneous, coordinated, and precise movement of all four limbs. As I mentioned above, playing the pedals also prevents the organist from resting her feet squarely on the ground, potentially disrupting balance and stability. The only solution for this is for the organist to remain on her sit bones, and to develop significant core support. If the organist relies on her tailbone as a weight-bearing center of gravity, she will tend to lose her balance and incur lower back pain. In physical terms, losing one's balance is in fact the greatest challenge

faced by organists playing with both hands and feet. Loss of balance usually occurs unconsciously, as the organist is typically preoccupied with the demands of musical execution, and not aware of her center of gravity. The fixed physical construction of some organs can make also make balance problematic, dependent upon the stature and body type of the individual organist.

Technological Aspects of Organ Performance and Physiology

Variations in organ construction and layout as they relate to organists of varying stature and body type create a range of physical challenges for the organist. These are significant enough for the organist who primarily plays one instrument, and can become acclimated to it; the challenges are greater still for the organist who frequently performs on different organs, and must develop strategies of adjustment.

Auxiliary foot controls

Players of other instruments—strings, winds, percussion, and piano—are able to execute changes of dynamics by varying velocity of attack, pressure, breath, and force—without employing any additional tools (with the exception of mutes). Pianists control their volume through the use of a graduated piano action and the operation of the damper and *una corda* pedals; in contrast, organists rely on the expression boxes. The various expression boxes—swell box, Great/Choir box, and crescendo box-are located above the pedal board. In order to increase or decrease the level of sound, the organist, by contrast can typically only make changes with the expression pedal or by changing registration. Operating the expression box is relatively simple; volume is increased by pushing down with the toe, and decreased by pushing down with the heel.

It is the integration of operating the expression pedals simultaneously with other physical motions—playing the manuals and pedals and changing registration—that causes difficulty. Continuous and gradual volume changes—such as in a long "hairpin" crescendo/decrescendo—require significant fine muscle control; sudden, dramatic changes of volume require a rapid motion. Moreover, some expression pedals operate smoothly and lightly, whereas others feel stiff and balky. The use of the expression pedal has become increasingly popular since the nineteenth century, and the increased expressive demands of Romantic music. The organist must seek strategies to operate these pedals smoothly without compromising her balance and incurring additional tension.

Organ Construction and Body Type

Organ construction varies greatly by builder, era, region of origin, and the interrelationship of all of these. While the differences in organ construction are far too great to adequately discuss here, I will note some general characteristics, as these come to bear on the physical requirements they create for the organist. We can broadly classify the different styles of organ construction with regard to the era, with the main differences existing between Baroque and Romantic era instruments.

People, as well as organs, come in all shapes and sizes. In all cases, it is the organist who must adapt to the dimensions and fixed physical aspects of the instrument, rather than the instrument being adjusted to the individual. Obviously, leg length (inseam) varies considerably from person to person. These differences affect the angle at which the feet engage the pedal board, which in turn has physical consequences. In my own case, my relatively short inseam means that my legs will always be dangling from the bench, with the soles of my feet arched as I

play the pedals with my toes. A very tall organist with long legs may feel cramped by the very same instrument. An organist of significant girth and weight may well find it more difficult to maintain a balanced posture and move around the organ's ergonomic environment than a thinner person.

The majority of Baroque era organs feature fixed bench heights, and the stops, lacking memory pistons, must always be changed manually. The pedal board is flat, with all the pedal notes arranged in a straight axis relative to the player, with no arc or curve. Some Romantic era organ benches have rollers by which one can adjust bench height; they have memory pistons to aid registration; the pedal board is set up in a concave arc, and typically contain more pedals, as well as the expression boxes.[73]

To change the timbre, organists engage a variety of stops, the number and type of which vary considerably from organ to organ. As mentioned, some organs are equipped with memory levels, which allow the organist to control multiple stops by assigning them to a particular memory level, which mechanically "remembers" the desired set-up, and can be activated with a piston, or button. Playing on early organs, such as the Baroque style instruments, there are no pistons to set. Thus, organists have to pull the stops manually when required, or with help of an assistant. Particularly challenging is when the organist must quickly change a number of stops at the same time. This motion can cause shoulder or back muscle tension. For someone with very short arms, stops arranged flush to the organ case can be challenging to reach, and potentially upset their balance as they stretch and extend their limbs to access the stops. This difficulty

---

[73] William Harrison Barnes explains, "With American Guild of Organist Standard, modern pipe organs have 32-note (two and a half octaves, C2-G4) pedalboards, while some electronic organs and many older pipe organs have 25-note pedalboards, Manual compass CC to c4, 61notes. Length between heel board and toe board is 27"" William Harrison Barnes, *The Contemporary American Organ, its Evolution, Design and Construction* (New York: J. Fischer, 1952), 198.

should not arise on a modern console layout, in which the stops are accessed diagonally to the player.

CHAPTER THREE

Application of the Alexander Technique to Organ Performance

In the previous chapters, we have discussed the considerable physical challenges of organ performance, reviewed the key tenets of the Alexander Technique, and investigated the relationship of the instrument to the body. In this chapter, I will present and evaluate strategies for applying Alexander Technique to organ performance, based on my experience with the Alexander Technique teachers Catherine Kettrick and Cathy Madden, and drawing on insights from the literature. The application of the Alexander Technique to specific performance situations is illustrated with score examples from the organ repertoire.

It should be stated at the outset of this chapter that there can be no formulaic "method" for the Alexander Technique for the organ, nor am I meaning to suggest that this chapter offers such a method. Rather, one learns and assimilates the concepts of the Alexander Technique and puts them into practice in *every* aspect of their life experience, so that at such time one begins to play a musical instrument, the principles already inform their approach to it. The Alexander Technique is not something that can be turned on or off for any one particular activity.

Cathy Madden articulates a basic five-step process for applying the Alexander Technique to any action one performs:

1. WANTING—You want to do something
2. RECOGNIZING—Something causes you to think about your coordination/and or the Alexander Technique
3. DECIDING—You are curious to see what happens if you consciously ask yourself to *coordinate*
4. ASKING—You ask yourself to *coordinate* so that the head can move so that all of you can follow so that you can do (whatever you are doing)
5. EXPERIMENTING—You carry through with your desired action[74]

[74] Cathy Madden, *Integrative Alexander Technique for Performing Artists* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 52.

By "coordination" Madden is referring here to the process of finding "the optimal relationship between the head and spine in movement" that best serves the desired end and cooperates with our design.[75] The process Madden outlines is a beginning one for experimenting with the Alexander Technique; as one becomes more familiar with the concepts of the Technique, and what each step of the process entails, it becomes more refined and precise.

One begins to learn the Alexander Technique not by sitting at their instrument and playing, but by re-thinking and essentially relearning the supposedly "simple" acts of sitting, standing, and walking. One should not expect an Alexander Technique teacher to provide them at the onset of their study with a catalogue of the techniques specifically geared to playing an instrument. Organist and educator James Drake, who taught the Alexander Technique to musicians for over thirty years, begins with his students in the following general manner, emphasizing the primary mental nature of the Technique:

> With a very gentle touch of the hand I work first with freeing the neck and taking the head forward and away from the hips. This release allows much more freedom in the hip, knee, and ankle areas for easier and better pedaling. I tell the student to follow the directions I am giving his body with my hands, but not try to do anything physically, otherwise he will tighten and lock. I tell the student that thinking the directions mentally, as I work on a certain area with my hands, is an important first step even though it is a mental activity as opposed to a physical activity.[76]

Moreover, while some aspects of the Alexander Technique may be grasped quickly as a concept—i.e., moving the head forward and up and lengthening the spine—it takes a significant period of study and practice before these practices and responses become natural and automatic. As my own engagement and study of the Alexander Technique is in its beginning stages, I cannot claim to write from the same position of authority as someone who has learned and practiced the Technique for many years. What follows is essentially "notes from the field" of an

[75] Ibid., 26.
[76] Drake, 82.

experiment in progress, in which I give the preliminary (and encouraging) results of my engagement with the Technique, supplemented by the perspectives and advice of those who are farther along in their understanding and practice of Alexander Technique.

As the Alexander Technique compels us to rethink and relearn the processes of movement, and to constantly maintain body awareness, it can be an effective tool for organ performance. As part of the Alexander Technique training, students come to learn much about anatomy and musculature. To achieve an anatomically-balanced playing position, it is necessary to understand what part of the body bears the weight, how it functions as a center of gravity, and how it distributes weight. The latter performs the crucial processes of delivering weight to the body part best suited to supporting it. If, as Mark declares, "delivering and supporting weight [are] active or dynamic functions,"[77] these decisions should be undertaken consciously. All too frequently, we deliver the weight to the wrong place, such as the tailbone instead of the sit bones. If we deliver the weight to the wrong place, it can, as Mark says, "[oblige] various muscles to work in compensation."[78] If we are constantly compensating muscularly for the wrong center of gravity, freedom of movement is restricted, and may, as Mark warns, cause "other serious problems".

One of the foundations of the Alexander Technique, as we have seen, is its focus on the neck, head, and spine. Indeed, everything proceeds from having these parts in a proper relationship to one another. Self-observation can be a valuable tool in becoming aware of how the body is habitually positioned as we play. We can use mirrors placed at different angles (side, back, and front) for this, as Alexander did, or we can also employ a video camera. The visual feedback helps one to recognize and address problems of posture and unconscious bad habits.

---

[77] Mark, 17.
[78] Ibid.

We begin our organ performance by positioning ourselves at the organ without playing, as to begin playing immediately places us in the unconscious zone and plunges us into our habits of misuse. Instead, we pause, and *inhibit*, before consciously giving ourselves directions. This is important, as it becomes difficult, as Alexander discovered, to give direction while actively engaged in the activity (here, playing the organ, or in Alexander's case, reciting). The "order of directions" is invariably neck→head→back (or body). As Kettrick explains, "Your head can't move forward and up unless your neck is free. Letting your neck be free is what allows your head to move *forward* and *up*, and that is what allows your body to lengthen and widen.[79] Having accomplished this, we have established *primary control*, defined as the relationship between the head and the spine. If our neck is free, primary control functions in a way that allows the body to follow, which in turn is what establishes overall coordination. Regarding primary control, Kettrick reminds us, "Primary control always functions: you either interfere with it, and you are mal-coordinated, or you don't, and you can be well coordinated."[80]

Having given the most basic direction, and achieved primary control, and having begun playing, the organist must continue to give directions for each consequent step of activity, a process that is progressively more difficult as the activity is underway, but is nonetheless necessary:

> So if that is putting your hands on the keys, then you have to continue giving the directions as you let your hand move easily up to the keys, and then continue giving the directions as you depress the keys, and continue giving the directions… etc. *The directions are key at every step* [my emphasis]. If you continue to give the directions, then your old response will be inhibited as you start to play and continue to be inhibited as you play. And a person may not be able to "give the directions" literally, by saying the words to themselves; people have to get to the point where they know what the directions are (and I would say, understand their body's structure so the directions can actually have their intended effect), and then

[79] Kettrick, personal communication 24 April, 2015.
[80] Ibid.

> you can have a general awareness that the directions are working, a general awareness of a quality of ease (or whatever quality you want) that you can carry into your activity, e.g. playing.[81]

A degree of conscious thought must precede each task. We determine what the goal is, and the *means-whereby* we will most effectively accomplish this task while maintaining a high quality of coordination. If, for instance, our desire was to play with overlapped hands, we might ask ourselves, how we will get our hands where they need to be. Having consciously determined that, we then "put those means (those steps) into the general plan".[82]

This process of conscious inhibition and direction is the most basic procedure of the Alexander Technique, and is universally applicable to every aspect of organ performance. In what follows, I will attempt to provide a number of more specific instances of the Alexander Technique approach to particular organ performance scenarios as they relate to the body parts involved.

The Importance of Posture

Musicians can prevent pain and injury by proper muscle use and maintaining a balanced body. In order to achieve this, of course, it is necessary to cultivate the sort of "body awareness" to which Mr. Alexander refers. Many musicians are susceptible to chronic pain and injury due to poor habits they have cultivated since the start of their musical studies. Part of this is due to the fact that when we begin to learn an instrument, very few music teachers talk in detail about body structure and function. Cultivating body awareness in the Alexandrian sense has not been part of traditional musical pedagogy.

---

[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.

Posture is a critical if not central element of any musician's orientation to their instrument and their practice; everything else originates and depends on good posture. "Good posture" as a concept is itself inadequately defined; by this term, many people imagine a very rigid, ramrod-straight military posture, with shoulders held back, a stiff bodily attitude that violates the natural curvature of the spine. Of course, many students receive a sort of generalized basic posture instruction from their teachers, but this cannot be applied equally well to every student, as body types vary greatly. The meaning of "good posture" can be distorted through verbal explanation, and of course, if the teacher does not understand or practice optimum posture, she is quite unable to teach it to the student. It is often only after the musician experiences pain or discomfort that they may realize their difficulties arise from poor posture. Merely following generalized instructions of posture, in other words, is a recipe for disaster.

Good posture results in a balanced body, from which one can play for long periods in comfort, increased self-confidence, and better tone. In fact, practitioners of the Alexander Technique avoid using "good" or "bad" as descriptors of posture, preferring instead to describe posture as "balanced" or "unbalanced". The Alexander Technique does not regard posture as a static pose. It is more beneficial, says Carolyn Nicholls, to think less in terms of posture and more in terms of "use":

> Alexander teachers don't tend to talk about posture—we talk about Use. This concept recognises a complex inner harmony of mind and muscle. It acknowledges the ability we have to adapt to our environment and situation, our flexible nature and our ability to organize ourselves well. Good Use shows itself when we can go about our tasks in an effortless, balanced manner.[83]

Moreover, posture is always in a fluid and inseparable relationship with movement, and, as de Alcantara states: "You'll be healthier if you let go of the idea of good posture as a fixed

[83] Nicholls, 2008, 28.

arrangement of body parts, and if you embrace instead the unity of body, mind, soul, posture, movement."[84]

The Technique works as well with the recognition that as each body is different, there is no uniform "one-size-fits-all" solution to posture. Indeed, as Carolyn Nicholls writes, posture from an Alexandrian perspective is "a complex mixture of your individual structure, your habits of mind and body, your movement patterns, your breathing and all sorts of complex activities of your nervous system".[85]

It is perhaps easier to recognize when our posture is not good. The head is unbalanced on the neck, our spine slumps and contracts, and tension emerges in the neck, shoulders, and so on into the limbs, which tighten in a futile effort to restore balance. As Nicholls puts it, when our posture declines, "we sink into ourselves."[86]

As I mentioned in Chapter One, due to my modest height and short inseam, I have the unfortunate tendency to lean backwards as I play the organ, especially when pedaling, a distortion of posture that throws me off balance and leads to lower back strain. The following comments addressing my posture from my Alexander Technique teacher Cathy Madden demonstrate the role of the teacher as an informed, objective observer who is able to see clearly what we cannot see ourselves. Watching my posture deteriorate as I moved with the music, she remarks,

> The other thing I'm seeing, and it's a bit tricky, [is that] you do pulse a bit [with the music], which I think is fine—however, what I see is happening is your pulse is doing this [imitates my leaned-back posture] which is taking your core strength, so your spine can't support you anymore. So if you want to move [to the music]—the little up-and-down—that's where I would say go forward rather than go back,

[84] de Alcantara, 2013, 8.
[85] Carolyn Nicholls, *The Posture Workbook* (East Sussex: D & B Publishing, 2012), 10.
[86] Nicholls, 2008, 31.

> because [leaning] back is taking you [away from the manuals] and then you sort of [imitates me leaned way back, out of balance , and flailing my arms].[87]

Having the Alexander Technique teacher function in this way as a sort of mirror allowed me to see and improve my posture at the organ. Her comments here have little to do with the particular piece of music I was playing at the time. However, her observations of my posture, if I can integrate them into my practice, can only improve the total quality of my musical expression as the improvement of posture will allow me to play more freely without straining.

At the Organ

As I have stressed repeatedly throughout this dissertation, many organs provide little or no means of adjustment, so as organists we must find our own way to adapt to the instrument, and find the optimal, most balanced position from which to play. In my own case, for example, the organ at St. Mark's Cathedral in Seattle, which has four manuals, poses problems of reach for me. As a relatively small person, I have difficulty reaching the highest manual. Given that the fourth manual is played infrequently, my priority must be being able to play the pedalboard efficiently. So, I choose the lower of the two benches that are available to the organist at St. Mark's, and having established the best position from which to play the pedal board without leaning back excessively, I then place my hand in the middle of the second, Great manual (second from the bottom), and establish that as the point of physical reference from which I will play the organ, as it is the manual upon which the majority of the playing takes place.

The process of adapting to the different instruments we might play, from an Alexandrian perspective, is as much mental—if not much more so—than it is physical. In response to my asking her if I should move my entire torso in the direction my legs were moving in order to play

[87] Cathy Madden, from transcript of video filmed at a private lesson on 9 April, 2015 in the University of Washington organ studio.

the pedals on the extreme right-hand side of the pedalboard with a stiff action, Cathy Madden explained to me,

> That is an adaptation to a particular instrument, so if you go in there and you play around, and you go, "Oh this [action] is a lot stiffer", that means you need more work, more energy to play that, but you don't know ahead of time *how much* that is. So the message you [need to] think is, "Oh, I'll need to move my legs in such a way that I get the sound I want", not "I have to use this much [more force]", because that's what is the over-efforting, the overworking.[88]

In this way, the direction one gives is clearer, more precise, and more effective.

The Head/Neck Relationship and Order of Directions

It is critical, in the view of Alexander, for the person to become and remain aware of the whole body, in order to achieve coordination and balance. For the organist to remain well-balanced and play efficiently, she must cultivate a holistic body awareness, instead of being focused on particular body parts. Prior to my study of the Alexander Technique, I tended to be aware only of my hands, feet, shoulders, and back, those parts most obviously and immediately involved in playing.

Following the order of directions established above, we seek to have the head well-balanced and light on the spine. To achieve this, the neck must be free, as the neck contains "all the head-moving muscles, front, back, and sides."[89] Free neck and head movement is crucial for organists, who, more so than other instrumentalists, keep their heads and neck in frequent movement as they play the various manuals and manipulate the stops, even as they sometimes strain to read the notation from the music rack, located above the highest manual. Thus, the balance of the neck and head is very important for organists.

---

[88] Cathy Madden, from transcript of video filmed at a private lesson on 16 April, 2015 at the University of Washington.
[89] Conable, 34.

We also need to understand the anatomy of the skull, how it attaches to the spine, and the muscles and tendons responsible for moving it and holding it in place. Many erroneously believe that "the skull is supported somewhere toward the back instead of in the middle, and the jaw included in skull."[90] In reality, the jaw is *separate* from the skull, and it should be free at all times. The skull and spine are actually connected at the Atlanto-Occipital joint (abbreviated henceforth as "A-O joint"), placed between the head and the spine. It is so named because it serves as the connections between the atlas, the uppermost spinal vertebra, and the occipital bone located at the base of the skull. The joint facilitates the easy nodding and shaking of the head. Mark explains,

> You can locate the A-O joint by finding the intersection of an imaginary line from right between the ears at the sides, and the base of your nose and top teeth at front, and the base of the occipital bone at the back/base of your skull […]. Learn to free the A-O joint so your head balances beautifully at its center on the spine.[91]

If the neck muscles are tightened excessively, the head cannot move freely. If the head cannot move freely, coordination is upset, and balance and movement both become more difficult.

---

[90] Mark, 18

[91] Heather Buchanan, "Enhancing Voice Performance Through Somatic Pedagogy," in *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century*, ed. By Scott D. Harrison and Jessica O'Brien (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, New York and London: Springer, 2014), 160.

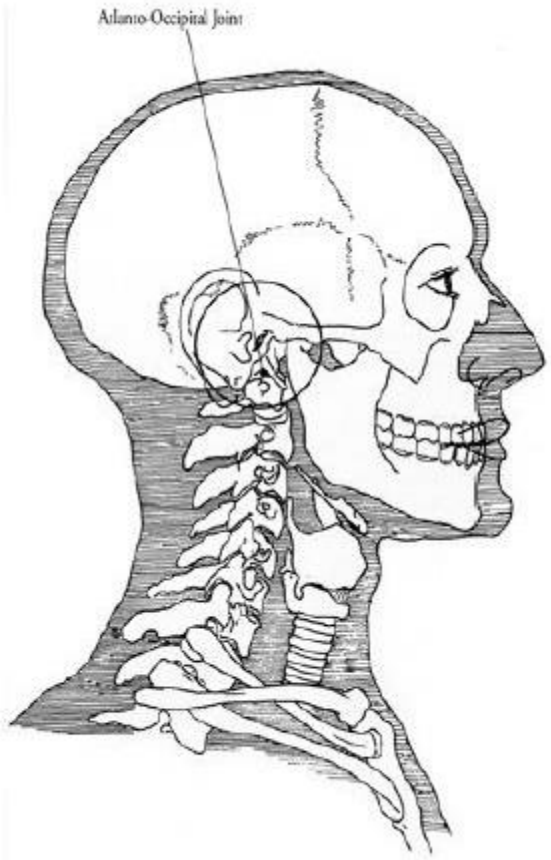


Fig. 1 A-O Joint

Bench Position

Unlike many instruments, the organ is most typically if not invariably fixed in a certain location. This condition limits the number of adjustments that can be made to the instrument to accommodate the organist. This applies to bench position, as well. Due to the wide variety of body types, sitting at the correct height is difficult, if not impossible, for many organists at many organs. Bench position thus becomes a series of trade-offs, with one aspect of playability and ergonomic comfort being sacrificed to another. For example, if I sit on the bench ideally placed to reach the manuals, it may compromise my ability to reach all of the pedals easily. Everyone

has a different height and a different inseam. There are differences between upper and lower body height as well. If the bench is at a height that suits our upper body, it may not be appropriate for the lower body.

Thomas Miles and Roberta Gary explain that the height of the bench and its distance from the console are the two most important considerations of bench position. They argue that of these two considerations, it is the distance from the bench to the console that is paramount:

> Your choice of pedal technique and the length of your lower leg will dictate the height of the bench. It is your physical relationship to the manuals, however, that should be the primary factor in determining the distance of the bench from the console. Pick the primary keyboard (usually the Great) and position yourself so that you have freedom to rock both forward and back on the bench. Most organists sit too close, and as a result are inhibited in their ability to move their arms freely. This in turn can cause tension in the back, chest, and upper limbs."[92]

Organs generally have at least two manuals; some of them have up to five. If an organ has many manuals, the proper bench height cannot be simply "determined from the relation of the elbow to the keyboard," [93] as it may on a piano. The Alexander Technique recognizes that one's orientation on the bench must arise from the sense of body awareness. One should sit on the bench on the sit bones until a balanced position is achieved. The balance can be tested by gently rocking forward or backward on the sit bones until the movement feels free and natural, and the sense of balance and equilibrium is secure.

It is important for organists to measure the distance between the bench and the pedal board. Miles and Gary advise, "If one is using a toe-heel pedal technique, the bench should be high enough for the toes to rest very slightly on the pedals while the heels are just slightly above the key surface."[94] Early and Baroque music require the all-toe technique. To reduce strain on

---

[92] Mark, 135-136.
[93] Ibid, 55.
[94] Ibid.

the ankle in all-toe playing, we need to raise the bench slightly to allow the toes to reach the pedals comfortably.

Likewise, it is necessary for the organist to evaluate the optimum distance from the bench to the console. Sitting too close to the console restricts the movement of the arms and legs. If the bench is too low, the tendency is for the shoulders to rise and hunch up, and for the neck muscles to tighten and get tense. From that it follows that the shoulder blades will lock up, and then the chest and diaphragm, restricting the organist's breathing. When the bench is too high, it becomes difficult to reach the pedals, which causes tension in the toes, ankles, and knees, and distorts the lumbar region of the spine. The wrists are going to be lower. In the course of my Alexander Technique lessons, I realized I was sitting lower than optimum for a person of my stature, causing me to lean back as I played. The leaned-back position disrupts the balanced posture, and opens the door to all sorts of tension and over-extension. Miles and Gary advise,

> When sitting too low, most organists feel as though they need to hold their legs up and off the pedal-board. This forces the player to lean back onto the tailbone and causes the lumbar spine to round and the head to be pulled forward. This distortion of the balance of the torso makes it impossible for the legs to move freely, and tightens and inhibits the arm structure, making it difficult to move freely and to reach the keyboards. For persons who are either very tall or very short, there may need to be a compromise in the bench height between what is ideal for the legs and what is an ideal alignment with the main keyboard.[95]

Back and Torso

My experience in the Alexander Technique lessons made me realize that the condition of the torso is much more important in organ performance than I had previously realized. If the torso is constricted in any way, it limits freedom of movement and impacts breathing. The organist needs to become aware of the condition of the torso, issuing the *direction* (in the Alexandrian sense) for the torso to remain free and loose while playing. If this is achieved, the

[95] Ibid.

entire body feels lighter and it becomes much easier to move and play on the instrument. In one of my lessons with Catherine Kettrick, I brought the pedal passages from J.S. Bach's Toccata in F Major BWV 540. These busy and difficult pedal passages consistently throw me off balance as I attempt to play them. In what follows, I present the exchange that followed the playing of the pedal passages as a direct transcription of the lesson scenario, both in order to present the strategy she advised to free the upper torso, and to convey something of how an Alexander Technique lesson proceeds:

> **Catherine**: What did you notice?
>
> **Ahra**: I concentrated on leg movement, and it felt like my upper body was kind of—fixed [rigid, stiff]? It doesn't look natural…
>
> **Catherine**: …*This* is your torso; your hips are part of your legs. Remember, your hip is part of your leg, you have two sit bones at bottom of your pelvis, and that's basically what you're sitting on. But your whole torso, your whole axial skeleton has to be free and easy; if it's not, it's going to push down, which makes it hard for your legs to move. So, while you are sitting here, you want to be sure that your neck is free. You will be moving around, because you have to follow your feet. So that is free; all of this wants to be nice and easy and soft. You're not directly using your upper body; you are using it, but you're not, for example, using your arms to play. So, I am going to suggest that you think about leaving your whole axial-skeleton, your whole torso alone, and you think about that your arms are all the way from your collar bone and your scapula, so that when you put your hand around the bench, you would do very easily, because you do not know how much effort you need, how much work you need to hold on. You'll find that out. So you don't want to go [makes gesture of excessive force] ahead of time, because you may not need that much. So, get yourself organized here, let your hands go to the bench, nice and easily, and *this* time when you play, not only do you think about leaving this nice and easy, but think about your feet leading, and your legs will come along, so go ahead and play, and let your feet just go where they need to…
>
> (After re-coordinating my body, I played the passage again)
>
> **Catherine**: How's that?
>
> **Ahra**: My legs are freer than before, than the previous time; I feel like there is more… I [applied] more *energy*, or extra work, but this time [my legs] felt

> lighter than before, but *still*, I feel like I'm having some [tenseness] in my lower back.
>
> **Catherine**: Now, tense in terms of *painful*, or tense in terms of *work*?
>
> **Ahra**: Both.
>
> **Catherine**: So, this takes work, and I think your comment about more energy is a good one, because I *think* what you probably notice is that since you were doing less work with your torso, you were noticing how much you work you were doing with your legs, and before, when you were doing a lot of work up here, you couldn't notice all of this work, and now you're noticing it. So, play again, and this time what you want to do is think that—this is your axial skeleton, and this is not, this is part of your legs, these are your leg muscles, they go all the way up here, but that's okay—so this is your axial skeleton, so *as* you're thinking about leaving your head free, and letting your whole axial skeleton be free, make sure that you include [in your order of directions] that this can be nice and easy and spread wider, open, whatever, so go ahead and you're going to be using all of your leg muscles, which come up here, right, these leg muscles mostly for extension, but I would be surprised if they did not contribute some support. So I would expect that there would be muscles in here that you're using to help you support yourself while you're moving your leg.[96]

Catherine went on to point how that the side-to-side lateral movement of the legs while playing the pedals is by its nature somewhat unnatural, as it is not a movement we perform while walking or sitting. Aside from the strategy she suggested for the particular challenge of executing a complex pedal passage, it is clear from the transcript how observant the Alexander Technique teacher is, and how she consistently elicits self-evaluation from the student, placing her in an active role in the lesson scenario. The passage above also underscores what Alexander refers to as the unreliability of sensory perception. When I was rigid in my upper torso, I didn't realize just how much energetic movement was happening in my legs.

[96] Catherine Kettrick, transcript from private lesson on 16 April, 2015.

According to Miles,

> Back orientation is almost epidemic among organists. Because the feet of an organists are not firmly planted on the floor, many organists feel unbalanced and compensate by distorting the natural shape of the spine into a large letter C, and sitting, or attempting to sit, on the tailbone. The results are often disastrous as the legs and arm structure are robbed of their freedom to move freely and fluently.[97]

The back-orientated position forces many organists back onto their tailbone, which is what I experienced before my engagement with the Alexander Technique brought this to my awareness. Miles observes,

> When organists sit back on the tailbone in a back-oriented position, several things happen. There is an inevitable rounding of the spine and a corresponding loss of the balance of the head on the AO joint. Because the feet are not providing support, this places enormous strain on the muscles of the neck and back. There is also a severe loss of mobility in the legs and feet, mobility that must be available to develop a good pedal technique.[98]

In order to achieve and maintain a well-balance posture, the organist must develop core support sufficient to support the torso through long periods of practice and performance. However, this "core strength" in Alexander's view differs somewhat from the concept of the same name that plays a part in so many contemporary physical fitness modalities wherein it refers to developing strong abdominals and lower back muscles. Mark explains,

We can learn to be aware of support up through the center of us from the weight-bearing spine—our core support.

> The core support is *inside* our ribs. Being aware of the core support permits us to release back, chest, and arm muscles. Many people map their spines close to the surface of their backs [...] but the weight-bearing part of the spine is not near the skin surface but deep inside the body, at the core.[99]

---

[97] Mark, 24.
[98] Ibid., 52
[99] Ibid., 23-24.

Cathy Madden, one of my Alexander Technique teachers, taught the following exercise to build core support: while standing on one leg, raise and stretch the arms vertically out to the side and roll them in little circles.

The organist sitting at the bench needs to consciously give Alexander's prime direction—to move the head forward and up, lengthening the spine. If this direction is carried out, the ribcage expands and facilitates fuller breathing; the shoulder girdle is free, which allows the arms to move freely. The shoulder blades should never remain immobile. With hands on the manual, we notice that to raise the forearm before playing tenses the muscles in anticipation of action, all the way from the forearms to the shoulders and the back. As we have become conscious of this potential for tension and overwork, at this point we *inhibit* the customary response; we do not brace the back and shoulders in preparation to play, as we might normally do. With the torso released and free, the diaphragm can expand and contract easily; our goal is to breathe fully and effortlessly.[100] As we prepare to play, Ethan Kind advises us to

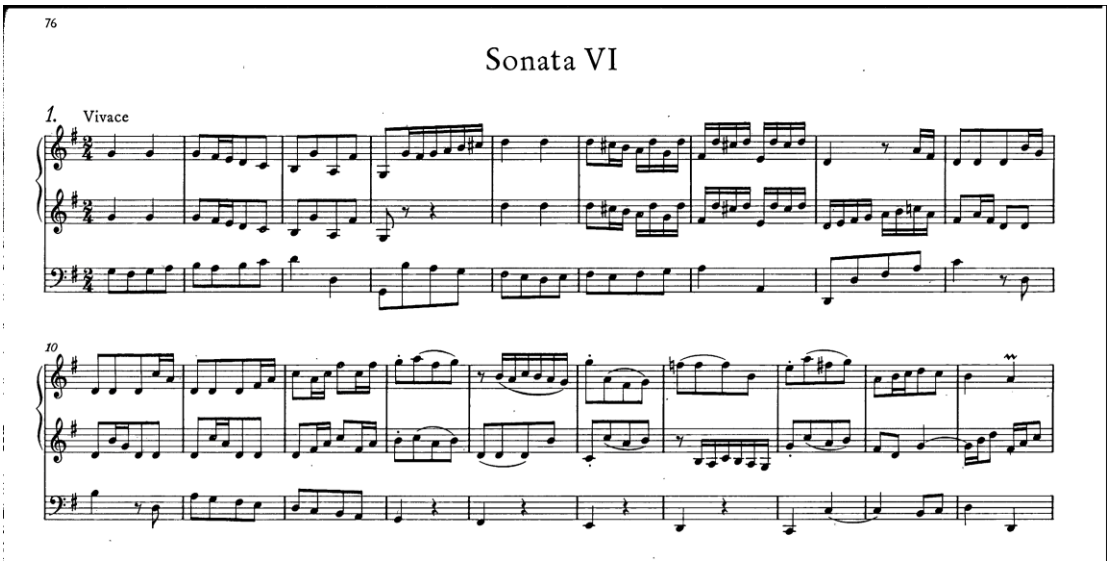
> Sit at the organ fully upright with arms suspended at your sides. See yourself suspended by your head, and feel the head's connection to the sit bones all the way down your spine. Now pivot the whole torso forward, from the head to the sit bones as an aligned lengthening unit and come back to vertical. This is how you fully support your shoulders and arms at the organ. All torso movement under the shoulders is the whole torso, sit bones to a head on a released neck, moving forward or side to side, on a lengthening spine. As you move from side to side of the keyboard, you do come off of a sit bone, but you still continue to allow a lengthening up off of the sit bone supporting you. Do not collapse your body as you move side to side or forward, or shoulders and arms will lose their freedom of suspension, if they aren't supported by the torso.[101]

[100] Kind, location 248 of 3538.
[101] Ibid., location 130-135 of 3538.

Pelvis and Sit-bones

Miles declares, "A clear understanding of the pelvis and sit bones is crucial for playing the organ. In most cases, we are using our legs and feet just to play the pedal-board and operate expression boxes and toe pistons."[102] Mark clarifies, "the pelvis receives the weight of the upper body. The weight-bearing part of the pelvis is an arch with the sacrum as its keystone."[103] In a seated position, ideally the weight of the upper body is transferred from the hips and sacrum to the sit bones, located at the bottom of the ischium (the bottom of the pelvis).

As it makes significant demands on the arms, hands, legs and feet, I chose to bring the first movement of the Trio Sonata in G major BWV 530 by J.S. Bach to my Alexander Technique lesson in order to develop strategies for balancing my body. This piece requires using both hands on different manuals and the feet all together throughout the entire movement.



Example 1. J.S. Bach, Trio Sonata in G major BWV 530, Mvt.I, mm.1-12 (© 1970, Kassel: Bärenreiter.)

[102] Miles, 28
[103] Catherine Kettrick "Anatomy It is Good to Know," pedagogical pamphlet distributed to private students.

In the course of my research, I undertook an informal survey of my organist colleagues about the challenges of controlling body movement while playing. A number of them mentioned this trio sonata as posing very significant challenges. As soon as I began to play this difficult piece, I begin to lose my balance. Observing this, my teacher offered the following exercise to develop the capacity to maintain my balance: to sit on the organ bench, tilting the pelvis back and forth several times, and rocking from far left to far right, or reversing the direction as I slid laterally on the bench without using the arms at all. This movement should involve only the sit bones and the pelvis, not the torso or upper body. This exercise helps us to sense the placement of the sit bones and strengthen the muscles that support them. Subsequently I began to do this exercise before each of my practice sessions. This enabled me to begin to develop a bodily memory and awareness of the sit bones and how they serve as the ideal center of gravity and balance at the keyboard.

To become conscious of the sit bones and how they serve as the ideal weight-bearing structure in the body is crucial to developing a balanced posture. Thomas Miles and Roberta Gary declare flatly, "Without an awareness of the pelvis and rockers, there can be no balance. [...] Some organists are aware of only the upper part of the body, ignoring the legs and often the pelvis."[104] Contrasted to a pianist, whose feet are planted firmly on the ground as pillars of support, the organist, especially when she is playing manuals only, can become "disembodied in the legs lead[ing] to a loss of awareness in the pelvic area, a loss of feeling grounded on the rockers."[105] In short, by ignoring the lower body, the organist easily loses balance, and tends to support the upper body with the back and shoulders.

[104] Mark, 9.
[105] Ibid.

Miles also provides experiments for organists to find their hip joints and sit bones, and to help them "become aware of the mobility [they] have in their legs. This will require activating the muscles of the upper leg, groin, and buttocks. Reach for the upper and lower parts of the pedalboard while rocking on [their] sit bones."[106] When such a consciousness arises, it becomes easy to notice when we have deviated from the ideal balanced posture. With the awareness of the sit bones and their function in maintaining posture I have developed with the perspectives of the Alexander Technique, I am now able to "catch myself" when I unconsciously regress into my former typical backwards-leaning.

At the Manuals

If we are going to approach playing the manuals from an Alexandrian perspective, we will need once more to interrupt or inhibit our habitual behavior. Ethan Kind suggests the following exercise, to inhibit a typical gesture he observes in organist, namely, the tendency to move the elbows slightly outward as the organist changes positions on the manual:

> Sit at the organ in preparation for playing the instrument and your hands and arms on your legs, palms up. On the release of your neck and your head leading the spine upward (directing), let the tip of your fingers lead the arms to the upper manual, without holding the elbows out at all, but a sense of very light arms. With your fingers touch the keys let your elbows point to the ground as the arms are floating to the manual from free shoulders. As you continue to release your neck with your hands touching the manual and your shoulder girdle floating on the ribcage, play a chord with both hands.[107]

If the organist becomes conscious of the relationship of the elbows, arms, and shoulders, she may then avoid the elbow lifting that can cause tension in the deltoid muscles of the arm, allowing her to play with more lightness and ease.

---

[106] Miles, 52.
[107] Kind, location 544-548 of 3538.

Arms

In her tutorial *How to Learn Alexander Technique,* Barbara Conable strongly recommends that the organist learn how the forearm rotates. Understanding how the rotating joint where the upper arm bone (humerus) joins the shoulder blade (scapula) and collarbone (clavicle) operates is important for the organist, to "understand[ing] the rotation of the joint of the upper arm and the shoulder blade and the rotation of the shoulder blades forward on the ribs. This latter rotation is often used effectively by pianists in musical passages requiring great power." [108]

As we have noted, one of the additional physical challenges facing the organist is to play on several manuals positioned at different heights, often simultaneously. The organist must be mindful that she does not overextend her arms while playing on different manuals and lose her balance. The key to this, as Mark notes, is to remain free and lose; for this to happen, the organist must understand how the body parts involved in this motion operate:

> For organists who must move from one keyboard to another, free movement at the sternoclavicular joint and the resulting mobility of the shoulder blade and collarbone must be learned and clearly understood. Organists who do not understand this mobility, when required to reach to an upper keyboard, will usually "reach out" with the arms and neck, while at the same time rounding the upper back and rocking back onto the tailbone. This places unwanted tension throughout the back and arm structure, inhibits free playing, and ultimately causes pain.[109]

As we have seemed so many times before, anatomical knowledge is critical for the Alexander Technique students who seek to increase their body awareness.

---

[108] Mark, 76.
[109] Ibid.

Shoulder Joint

Connecting the arm bone (humerus) the shoulder blade (scapula), and the collarbone (clavicle), the entire shoulder joint moves as part of the arm structure. It moves up and down, back and forth, and in rotation, through the mechanism of the rotator cuff, a bundle of muscles and tendons attached to the shoulder blades, upper arms, and rib cage, that helps stabilize the shoulder.[110] Mark observes,

> The shoulder joint seen from the side is in the same vertical plane as the point of balance of the head on the spine (AO joint). The socket of the shoulder joint faces directly out to the side of the body, like another ear. When in balance, the structure is centered in relation to the ribs, giving maximum freedom to the arms, which is important for pianists.[111]

Lacking an awareness of how the shoulder joint is actually constructed and the way in which it functions optimally, many keyboardists tend to stiffen and fix their shoulders, as if the arm were something moving *in* the shoulder joint, consequently impacting their playing by restricting freedom of movement. If we approach this from an Alexander Technique perspective, we must find ways to soften and release the shoulders. Free shoulders are necessary for the organist to move between manuals, as well as in and out of the keys. As with any other part of the body, we achieve this by becoming aware of the shoulders and inhibiting those patterns of customary movement that restrict and tighten them.

Arm Joints

There are four arm joints to consider: the shoulder joint, the elbow joint, the wrist joint, and the sternoclavicular joint. As it is connected to the sternum, some people do not think of the

---

[110] The rotator cuff muscles include Subscapularis, supraspinatus, infraspinatus, teres minor, coracobrachialis, biceps brachii, triceps, pectoralis major, latissimus dorsi, teres major, and deltoid. Blandine Calais-Germain, *Anatomy of Movement* (Seattle: Eastland, 1993), 120-126.
[111] Mark, 42.

sternoclavicular joint as part of the arm joint. However, according to Barbara and William Conable, including all of the four arm joints in the body map is beneficial for efficient arm movement:

> The accurate mapping of the joint of the collarbone with the breastbone is critical for free upper torso and arm movement. If that joint is not mapped it is not used. It is held rigid and does not contribute its share of movement when it is needed, as in shooting baskets, or reaching for a cup on an upper shelf, or going to the upper string on the violin. This forces a disproportionate movement onto the second arm joint, the joint of the upper arm with the shoulder blade. That disproportion is a source of strain in activities that require repetitive use of all four arm joints, like swimming.[112]

The "disproportion" of which the Conables write is what Alexander would consider an instance of "misuse", for which the shoulders overwork to compensate. For example, if an organist struggles with any discomfort or pain in the shoulder, it is important to check to determine that all four arm joints are unlocked and moving freely, especially because organ playing requires constant and repetitive movements of the arms.

Shoulders

The torso, supported by the sit bones, provides a firm support upon which the shoulders can move freely as we play the organ.[113] Before I took part in the Alexander Technique lessons, I tended to roll back my shoulders in an effort to release them before I began to play. This, according to the Alexander Technique, is a mistake. One of my teachers, Cathy Madden, pointed out that many people often think rolling our shoulders back releases tension. This approach, however, can make shoulder tension *worse*. Rather, she says, hugging our arms helps more to release tension, because the rolling back action causes the collarbone and back muscle to lock up. Until she pointed that out to me, I had not noticed it. I am now trying to *inhibit* the rolling

[112] Conable and Conable, 51.
[113] Kind, location 280 of 3538.

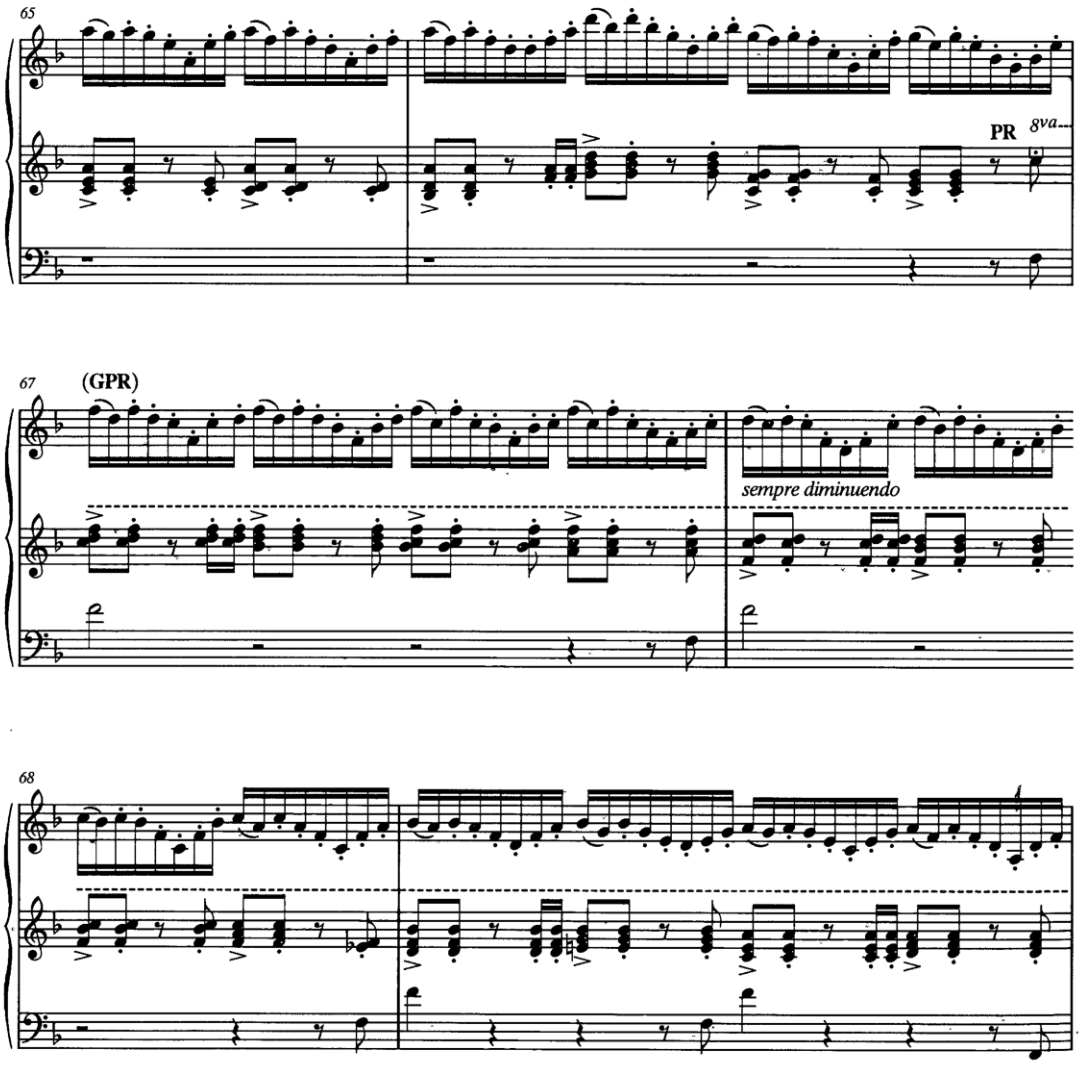
back motion, by giving the *direction* to hug my arms, as the *means-whereby* I get my shoulders to release.

So how does one play the manuals without overworking the arms and shoulders? The Alexander Technique would have us reconsider the familiar axiom of keyboard technique of "putting weight into the keys". As Kay Hooper, a Pennsylvania-based Alexander teacher and pianist, explained to me,

> It is definitely worth reconsidering the concept of putting weight into the keys. This is an overused phrase in piano technique as well, and the problem with it is that it doesn't hold up in the world of physics. It's not what is really happening. In general, when we think we are putting weight into the keys, we overwork. Our sense of "weight" actually becomes a sense of effort. Once you realize that your desire to put weight into the keys is causing a lot of pulldown, you may have the first step toward eliminating neck and wrist pain.[114]

I will provide an example from my own experience. One day, I brought the final movement of Widor's Symphony No.5 to my Alexander Technique class, as I was having some difficulty with the last page of this piece due to the use of crossed hands. The left hand crosses over to the right, as the right hand executes fast, continuous sixteenth notes with full sounds.

[114] Kay Hooper, personal communication, 23 December, 2014.



Example 2. Widor, Symphony No.5 for Organ, Mvt. V, mm.65-69 (1993, Middleton, WI: A-R Editions)

As my teacher Catherine observed my playing, she asked, "What did you notice?", to which I had to reply, "I noticed only that my arm is not comfortable, and I focused only on playing musically." This was a classic example of so-called "musical" concerns pushing one out of awareness of their body, and out of the present moment, losing track of the means-whereby music is actually created. She point out that "when you were playing your shoulder was rounded

toward the inside; you must be trying to make the loudness of the sound through your arm," i.e., through muscular force and effort alone. She suggested that the desired result would be better achieved if my torso was free and my shoulders widened.

Wrists

Alexander Technique teacher and writer Ethan Kind advocates the "triceps approach" to organ playing, As I understand this, he recommends that one should soften the muscles of the forearm and allow the strong triceps muscles to support the weight of the forearms as they are poised over the manuals, in the recognition that playing repeated chords should not be a matter of applying muscular force from the forearms. When one applies force in this manner, it creates muscular tension and strain, that potentially causes the wrists to lock up, which in turn inhibits free movement of the hands and fingers, the point from which playing should actually take place:

> Simply, I am applying what the organist usually does to play repeating chords with the triceps. I'm using the triceps to back up the fingers to play single notes and multiple notes, which is where the organist typically only uses the musculature of the forearm to move the finger or fingers to play the note or notes. The major difference between what I'm teaching here and what the organist usually does, is when the organist raises the forearm to assist the hand, the wrist and hand are released in this technique.[115]

The Symphony No. 6 by Widor proved to be an appropriate case to experiment with the triceps approach of which Kind speaks. While playing the chordal figurations of the opening (mm.1-33), I tended to lock up my wrist and collect tension in the fingers. In such a condition, I could not generate much volume of sound. My teacher suggested that I use more whole arm from the shoulder, instead of using only wrist and hands. After several attempts, I felt much more stable and free, and I was able to get more sound out of the organ than before. The triceps play

[115] Kind, location 31-35 of 3538.

an important role in supporting the weight of the forearms, and freeing the forearm from the role of supplying *force*—which requires muscular tension, and consequently, locks up the wrist and hands—instead, the triceps support the arms and allow the organist to play from the fingertips.

I frequently experience tension in my hands and wrists while playing repeated octaves and chords. Some of the tension could be due to anxiety about executing the difficult passage correctly. That might be partly true, but from an Alexandrian perspective, most of the tension arises from *misuse*. In an Alexander Technique lesson, my teacher Cathy Madden pointed out that while I was playing such figurations I was positioned a bit closer to the keyboard than I normally was, at the expense of my posture. When I re-directed to sit further back from the keyboard, I discovered that my movement was freer and more efficient.

The lack of understanding of anatomy and physiology on the part of many musicians leads to confusion and ultimately to patterns of misuse that result in stress, tension, and injury. The mechanism of the wrist is quite complicated, and understanding how it functions is crucial to maintaining flexibility. Mark informs us, "The wrist is composed of eight bones, called carpal bones [...] arranged in two rows."[116] With such a flexible arrangement, a subtle range of up-and-down and sideways movement is possible. To imagine, as many pianists do, that the wrist is one bone with which you can make circle, leads to a loss of flexibility in the wrist.

In the Alexander Technique workshops in which I participated, I noticed that the Alexander Technique principles and perspectives can be very effectively transferred from one activity to another. During the workshop, a student mentioned that whenever she writes she experiences discomfort in her wrist. The teacher recommended that she consider the whole arm as a unit, and writing not just an action undertaken at the wrist. After several tries with this new rethinking and redirecting, her movement was obviously better and looked more comfortable.

[116] Mark, 88.

Observing that process, I realized that the exact same principle applied to playing the keyboard. If the organist thinks that playing is from the wrist only, she may tend to disconnect the wrist from other arm parts, both mentally and physically, causing the various components of the chain of motion to tighten and lock up as they are not being conceived of and used as an organic whole, with each part working in connection to and support of the others.

Hands and Fingers

The hand is a marvelous and complex mechanism. It allows us to execute all of the rapid and demanding tasks necessary for musical expression. As many musicians do not understand how the hand and fingers work, and because musicianship places such demands on the hand, it is prone to tighten and lock up just when it should be most loose and supple. To prevent injury and to play more freely, we need to understand the structure of the hand and fingers. Mark writes, "The hand is made up of nineteen bones. There are five metacarpals connected to the bones of the wrist, and fourteen phalanges connected to the metacarpals."[117] Mark explains that many people do not understand that the fingers attach to the wrist by tendons; they do not grow out of the hand. The hand itself is largely bereft of musculature. In other words, "the hand is not distinct from the fingers."[118] If we understand where it is the fingers are moving from, and how they move, we may avoid locking the hand.

The thumb presents major difficulties in playing the keyboard, as players tend to lock the thumb, resulting in the locking up of the palm, the wrist, and forearms. As Drake says, "We tend to use the thumb as an *object* [my emphasis] instead of a finger".[119] As Mark pointed out, many people erroneously believe that the thumb starts at the metacarpal joint, but it actually starts at

[117] Mark, 92.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Drake, 82.

the carpo-metacarpal joint where the thumb connects to the bones of the wrist.[120] The solution to using the thumb as a blunt object, writes Mark, is anatomical knowledge and awareness:

> If you are using your whole thumb, one that includes three joints, you will feel a secure and comfortable relationship with the instrument. If you are assuming that the thumb is two bones instead of three, you will suffer from restricted movement at the CMC joint, nearest the wrist, an over-prominence at the MCP joint, and probably soreness as well.[121]

One should not play from the hands, but from the fingers; more to the point, from the fingertips, the point at which, says Drake, "the playing takes place".[122] While we should play *from* the fingers, as Drake says, the fingers, hands, and arms need to be understood from the Alexandrian perspective as a unified mechanism. The key to all of this, according to Drake, is to *soften*, keeping everything supple, soft, and open. Drawing on culinary metaphors, Drake says that he "like[s] to think of the whole arm as cooked spaghetti" and a "bread and butter" hand.[123]

Many keyboardists have difficulty when they play fast scale passages. The challenges are as much *mental* as they are physical, a situation that Alexander of course recognized. Nelly Ben-Or points out—as any musician knows—that when

> there are many notes to be played at great speed, the red light comes on in the player's mind saying "difficult" and in that instant his habitual responses come into effect. He tightens his muscles to varying degrees in readiness to push his way through the run of notes, or a whole chain of runs, and in so doing often blocks his own way.[124]

The remedy for this, suggests Ben-Or, is not to play technical etudes and scales at break-neck speed in an effort to develop the strength mechanically push through difficult rapid passages, but to organize or map the passage mentally until it reveals itself coherently and with clarity, and can be played with the soft hand described above. To achieve this, one may issue oneself directions

---

[120] Mark, 94.
[121] Ibid., 95.
[122] Drake, 82.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ben-Or, 9-10.

like those Iris Kaplan gave to her test subjects who were experimenting with the Alexander Technique: "allow the fingers to play themselves, hand free to lengthen and widen, and let there be space in the joints and knuckles."[125] Such images helped her subjects when they felt their fingers become tense and claw-like, or even as if "they were going through cement."

Legs, Feet, and Pedal Operation

We should remember the toes are not a part of the arch of the foot. Such a misconception causes "gripping" of the toes. We need to remember as well that the optimum ankle shape is not a letter "L" shape (see below). To imagine that the ankle shape is an "L" implies that the heel bone is the weight-bearing point, when actually the ankle joins the foot slightly forward of the heel. Mark writes,

> There are three weight-bearing areas in the foot: two in the ball of the foot and one at the heel. None of these receives the entire weight of the body when we stand, and we stand on the middle of it, not on one of the edges. and these three weight-bearing areas of the foot are precisely the three areas used for playing the pedals.[126]

Prior to my Alexander Technique study, I was among those who thought that the ankle moves from the edge of the heel. I tended to walk from the heel, keeping it at almost a 45-degree angle, with my body weight delivered to the heel bone. Since I learned more about the structure of ankle and foot, I consciously attempt to refrain from delivering my weight to the heel bone as I walk or stand. When I remember to practice this, I feel as if my movement is lighter than before, and it requires less work to move.

---

[125] Kaplan, 82.
[126] Mark, 31

The Leg and Knee

The knee operates by locking, balancing and bending. While locking may seem to be an undesired condition in terms of the Alexander Technique, Heather J. Buchanan explains, "the knees will need to be locked as compensation to stabilize the body and protect the lumbar spine when you are not aligned and your body weight is thrown back or 'sharp' onto the lower back. This is nature's protection mechanism."[127] During the course of my Alexander Technique lessons, when I brought conscious attention to the act of walking, I realized I was walking with some stiffness. The teacher suggested that if I were to use my hip joints more, the act of walking would become freer and more natural.

The knee joint is located behind and below the kneecap (patella); it controls the bending of the knee. Weight is delivered from the femur to the tibia.[128] Mark explains how to be become more aware of our knee joint:

> When standing, be aware of your knee joint, [located] lower than the kneecap and posterior to it. Become aware of the knee joint lined up directly below the AO joint, lumbar spine, and hip joint. Then try for a moment to stand as if weight were delivered through the front of the knee (the knee cap). Having experienced that, notice what a difference it makes when you think, correctly, of weight delivered through the knee joint behind and below the kneecap, to the shinbone, the ankle joint, and the floor. Notice that at balance the knee does not "lock" nor does it bend. It also does not feel tense.[129]

Greater use of the hip joint is an Alexander Technique perspective that can be readily applied to playing on the pedals. To work with this concept, I played Étude No.1 from Six Études by Jeanne Demessieux in my Alexander Technique lesson, a piece that includes a number of difficult pedal trills. Pedal passages such as these have previously caused me pain in the

---

[127] Heather J. Buchanan, "On The Voice: An Introduction to Body Mapping - Heather J. Buchanan Shares How to Enhance Musical Performance through Somatic Pedagogy" (*The Choral Journal* 45/7, 2005), 95.
[128] Mark, 56.
[129] Ibid., 57.

knees. I asked the teacher, Cathy Madden, how I misused my body to have this result. She advised me that when I play the pedals, I should have a conscious sense of the hip joint, and that the hip joint should be more involved in the motion of the pedaling; in other words, this motion should not originate from the knees. Due to its construction, the knee cannot operate in a circular manner, but the ball-and-socket joint of the hip is capable of this motion. The circular motion of the hips allowed my legs to move more freely, and thus, the legs operated more efficiently to bring the feet into the proper playing position. She suggested that I limit the amount of forward and backward motion at the knee when moving the feet, and instead allow that movement to flow from the hips.

The emphasis on the hip joint as the origin of leg movement at the pedals resurfaced at one of my next lessons with Cathy. In a typically Alexandrian fashion, she carefully analyzed and pointed out to me all the muscles of my legs that were involved in pedaling, and how they were being used. Pointing to her hips, she said,

> There's a bunch of muscles around the hip joint that allow this kind of [rotating circular] action in the hip joint, not using the big [leg muscles such as quadriceps or gastrocnemius]. I'm rolling the bone in the [hip] joint, and it's up here […] a little movement up here [at the hip] causes a big movement down there [at the ankle].[130]

To illustrate her last point—that a small action at one point precipitates a large action further down the line—Cathy drew upon the metaphor of a marching band executing a 45-degree turn around a street corner without breaking step:

> The person [on the inside corner] is virtually stepping in place, and the person out there [at the end] is, like, stepping huge to try and keep the line straight. So marching bands practice that a lot—so that's just the geometry of it.[131]

---

[130] Cathy Madden, from transcript of video filmed at a private lesson on 30 April, 2015 at the University of Washington.
[131] Ibid.

The pedalboard stretches across a wide expanse, up to five feet across on some instruments. The extreme lateral motion involved in playing it places strain on the hips, legs, and knees. To more effectively reach the pedals in high or low register, the legs should be placed in the proper position, well-placed on the sit bones, and feel free in the hip joints. The organist can imagine that the legs are released from the pelvis. Ethan Kind points out,

> Playing the organ usually creates as much tension in the hip joints as it does in the shoulders. The result of this tension in the hips is to jam the femur ball into the hip joint. This causes totally unnecessary wear and tear on the hip joint and restricts your freedom to pivot on the sit bone. [132]

The organist needs to give serious consideration to the issue of locking the thighs while playing the pedals, especially when using the knees-together technique. Even though modern practice compels us to keep our thighs together as we play the pedals, we can avoid locking them by maintaining our awareness of muscular tension, and keep everything loose as we move. Ethan Kind's comments on pedaling are worth quoting at length, as they not only articulate the mechanics of the motion but underscore the importance that many Alexander Technique teachers place upon understanding anatomy:

> Allow the psoas muscle to raise the leg, and the adductor and abductor to move the leg side to side, and the calf muscle (gastrocnemius and soleus) to press the pedal, all of the above with the minimum amount of work. The psoas is a powerful muscle that attaches to the inside of the upper leg and to the front of the lower spine, and if used correctly can really minimize the work in the thighs in suspending the legs and feet over the pedals. It is important that you know what muscle is doing what in the legs, so that when you order the leg to play the pedal, it is coming from an accurate sense of what is happening in the body, even as you get out of the way of the muscles. The other thing is to get a narrow bench, no more than a few inches deep and at the right height and place it up against the corner of a wall. This means the edge of the corner will be touching the center of your upper back between the shoulder blades and touching the center of the lower back, just above the top of your rear. Now, with the wall behind you, lift your leg. When you can lightly touch the wall and lift and move your leg in and out and up

[132] Kind, location 133 of 3538.

> and down without locking any muscles in your torso and legs, you will be in amazing control of your body (like a beautiful dancer at the organ).[133]

Such an approach, as with the triceps supporting the forearms at the keyboard mentioned above, transform the act of pedaling from an act of strained "doing" to a type of effortless, flowing motion that could utterly transform the organist's experience of pedaling, and their proficiency at it.

In an Alexander Technique lesson, we performed a standing exercise in order to experience the movement of the knees. The first time, we intentionally locked up our knees and held a ball weighing about five pounds. I felt my body leaning backwards in a futile attempt to achieve good balance. Then we tried the same exercise, but this time, we softened our knees before holding the heavy ball. It was much easier with soft knees to find and maintain my balance. I barely noticed the weight of the ball. If I transfer this Alexandrian insight to playing the pedal board, I find that if I soften my knees, even while playing knees-together style, my ankles and feet also become much freer and lighter.

I have a tendency to slip and slide on the bench as I execute complicated pedal passages, to the point where it feels as if I am falling off the bench. In order to prevent this from happening, my Alexander Technique teacher analyzed the movements of pedaling, and concluded that the majority of the movement in my upper legs was coming from the quadriceps and gluteus muscles. If I were to remain conscious of this, I could use the gluteus muscles to keep from slipping.[134] In this example we notice again the Alexandrian focus on anatomy and how it can be used most effectively.

---

[133] Ibid., location 413-417 of 3538.

[134] Catherine Kettrick, from transcript of video filmed at a private lesson on 16 April, 2015 at the University of Washington.

The Ankle

To play the pedals with freer movement, the Alexander Technique would have us relax the thighs, hips, and ankle. To experience what this might feel like, we can sit on the organ bench and start to move the ankle in all directions as a warm up. To get a sense of a moving ankle joint, open and close a swell box. Mark then suggests to "work the ankle through its entire range of motion from side to side. Take these movements to the pedalboard and begin playing. Become aware, also, of the three playing surfaces available on the foot: the heel, the ball of the foot behind the big toe, and the ball of the foot behind the little toe."[135] Another exercise is to play a chromatic scale on the pedalboard and use a toe-heel technique in order to feel that the ankle joins the foot slightly forward of the heel bone (see above). As I explained previously, our ankle typically moves a little bit further than we think, instead of remaining in the letter "L" shape. If we mistake or mis-map the ankle shape in this way, we may eventually experience soreness and tension in the shins and quadriceps, and the lower back may over-arch as a response.[136] The ankle joint located in the front of the heel bone. Weight is delivered by the shinbone to the foot through the ankle joint, not the heel bone.[137] It is better to imagine the ankle joint as a "T" shape where it joins the foot:

[135] Mark, 135.
[136] Ibid, 59.
[137] Mark, 57.

Fig. 2 The Bones of the Foot and Ankle

Breathing

As a holistic, somatic perspective, the Alexander Technique recognizes the centrality of breathing to human beings. It recognizes that the breath is the essence of our being, and it affects every aspect of that being. It does not, however, suggest that we try to *change* our breathing on purpose. Alexander Technique teacher Carolyn Nicholls observes, "Most of the time we are unaware of our breathing and even our best-intentioned efforts to improve it usually result in interference rather than anything else."[138] Breathing, of course, is one of the autonomous body functions. It happens whether we are conscious of it or not. We only need to maintain awareness of the cycle of inhalation and exhalation. If we breathe well, we do not breathe shallowly, spasmodically, or unintentionally hold our breath. By breathing fully, our ribcage will expand, and our torso is released. It is the case that we typically and habitually interfere with our breathing.

[138] Nicholls, 2008, 69.

The demands of musical performance, technical execution, and stage anxiety can impact our breathing negatively. Nicholls observes, "Many pianists hold their breath when they play, often breathing in a very shallow and spasmodic manner," a situation that causes the ribcage to tighten, in turn affecting "the flexibility of the spine and caus[ing] the back to narrow."[139] If we do not breathe effectively, our balance and posture will suffer, and our energy levels may drop. Improving posture cannot be separated from breathing. Posture and breathing work together and affect each other directly.

Obviously, the breath is of crucial importance to singers and players of wind instruments. Before I studied the Alexander Technique, however, it did not occur to me that how one breathed should matter much to players of other instruments that don't directly involve the breath, such as the organ. I was not conscious of my breathing or the effect that it had on my playing. My experience of the Alexander Technique showed me, to my surprise, that one could not uncouple breathing from any other physical process; indeed, to breathe fully is of crucial importance in ridding the body of tension and allowing it to move freely.

In the Alexander Technique, the understanding of breathing begins with anatomy. We must know where in fact the lungs are located and how they function. Many people, myself included, might easily imagine that the lungs are located somewhere in the middle of the visceral area or in the lower rib area. My Alexander Technique teacher surprised me by showing me a book of anatomy that clearly shows the real location of the lungs as being in the upper third of the torso, and occupying the upper half of rib area. The top of each lung is higher than the collarbone, which I never would have guessed. The bottom of the front of the lung is

[139] Ibid., 106.

approximately even with the bottom of the breastbone. Not only do the lungs fill the front of the chest; they extend out to the sides and back.[140]

Thus, if we breathe incorrectly, our entire body tightens in response. De Alcantara explains,

> Alexander had a keen understanding of the importance of breathing, and that lessons in the Technique may mitigate or eliminate many so-called breathing problems. Alexander himself, however, held views on breathing that are in nearly complete contradiction with much of current practice, and to think of his work as a method of breathing is to misunderstand both the essence of the Technique and the nature of breathing itself.[141]

Unlike other modalities that concern themselves with the breath, and attempt to achieve a degree of if not total control over breathing, this was one aspect of physiology that was not, in Alexander's view, open to direction. De Alcantara continues,

> Alexander considered breathing an effect, not a cause. We may say that *breathing is a function of use*, and as such it is outside direct control. Surely this is the defining characteristic of Alexander's understanding of breathing, and it puts the Technique in downright opposition to all schools of direct control of breathing, as exemplified by yoga and by much contemporary vocal teaching.[142]

Accordingly, observes de Alcantara, "the practical consequence of Alexander's understanding of breathing is that you do *nothing* to alter breathing *directly* in an Alexander Technique lesson."[143] This insight of "non-doing" came to Alexander after much experimentation in controlling his breathing, all of which made his breathing worse. When he finally abandoned these experiments, the insight of non-doing arose. He remarked enigmatically, "I see at last that if I don't breathe, I can breathe."[144] "Non-doing" remains elusive of precise definition, but it is, as de Alcantara writes, "a powerful concept that bridges the physical, the psychological, and the metaphysical,

---

[140] Mark, 119.
[141] de Alcantara, 1997, 90.
[142] Ibid., 91.
[143] Ibid., 97.
[144] F.M. Alexander, quoted in Nicholls 2008, 81.

and that offers profoundly satisfying answers to our quest as musicians and as human beings."[145] In Alexander's conception, the whole of breathing, good or bad, 'supported' or 'unsupported', is an *effect*, not a cause:

> We say that a person is a 'bad breather,' or that he 'breathes imperfectly.' But we must remember that this so-called 'bad breathing' is only a symptom and not a primary cause of his malcondition, for the standard of breathing depends upon the standard of general co-ordinated use of the psycho-physical mechanism. What we ought to say, therefore, in such a case if not that a person 'breathes badly,' but that he is badly co-ordinated. The act of breathing is not a primary, or even a secondary, part of the process… As a matter of fact, given the perfect co-ordination of parts as required by my system, breathing is a subordinate operation which will perform itself.[146]

Nonetheless, we may still apply the Alexandrian practice of inhibition to our breathing. In the first place, we observe our breathing at the instrument; we become conscious of how it operates. We inhibit the constriction of breath, we do not force the breath, and we inhibit under-breathing. If one breathes well, the spine is "gathered" on inhalation, and it lengthens on exhalation. The gathering is not a tensing action, just sort of a natural downward pull as the diaphragm expands. Gathering is the necessary precursor to lengthening, perhaps akin to the coiling of a spring. As Barbara Conable states, "No gathering, no lengthening."[147]

Working with the breath in my Alexander Technique lessons, the first step, as usual, is to give Alexander's direction to establish Primary Control—the head goes forward and up, the neck is free, lengthening the spine. By so doing, I free up and loosen the head, neck, torso, and ribs, which allows my breathing to be easier and more open; my breath is less constricted, and it requires less effort to breathe deeply and fully. My teacher advised me to feel the movement of my ribs as I breathed. I could not feel this distinctly at first, but after directing my attention to

---

[145] de Alcantara, 2013, xix.
[146] de Alcantara, 1997, 95.
[147] Interview with Barbara Conable, web document, accessed 4/29/15 at http://www.alexandertechnique.com/ats/conable/

this for some time, I began to feel the movement of my ribs, not only back and forth, but from side to side as my lungs filled with air. Subsequently I found I was able to control the tightening and loosening of my ribs to an extent.

While the Alexander Technique may eventually help us play with more ease and freedom of movement, the constant process of awareness, inhibiting, directing and adjusting our posture and movements as we play can actually involve a great deal of *work* to implement and sustain. We need to take care that this work, however, does not turn into what Catherine Kettrick calls "overwork", a situation in which there is a net loss of energy rather than a net gain. Madden advised me,

> You're definitely going to be doing some supportive work [to improve my posture and movement], and one thing I think people forget about with Alexander Technique is that you get this wonderful experience and it feels wonderful, light, and easy, and [you think] "I'm playing so well," and then—I'm playing a different piece and it's not quite so easy and then another piece, and [some] pieces are harder than others, and it is *work*. You don't want to overwork, but you will be working. There will be the amount of work you need to [make an improvement]. You just don't want to *overwork*.[148]

[148] Catherine Kettrick, transcript from private lesson on 16 April, 2015.

CONCLUSION

What then, is the value of an Alexander Technique-informed approach to organ performance? Does it, as James Drake, suggests, provide organists with the means to break through a "brick wall of tension" and

> unlock the detrimental and unnecessary tensions in [organists], thereby giving them greater freedom, ease, openness, and confidence in practicing and performing [...] allow[ing] their creative powers, as well as the essence of the music to come to the fore unimpeded by body and mind contraction[?][149]

The Alexander Technique is not a "quick-fix" solution to body issues experienced by organists, or anybody else, for that matter. It involves a very thorough if not radical rethinking of the body and our relationship to it, of how we use it, and of how we as embodied physical beings subject to the force of gravity move through space. To learn the Alexander Technique well requires a significant time commitment and likely, a considerable financial investment, as regular personal training with a qualified Alexander Technique teacher is a prerequisite for success with the Technique. Although there is a rich and valuable literature on all aspects of the Alexander Technique, the technique itself cannot be learned from books. The teacher is indispensable. According to Kind, an Alexander Technique teacher has the responsibility of having and conveying to the student

> a correct concept of skeletal alignment based on anatomy and body mechanics (which is flexible to allow for differences in body build), knowledge of the typical faults in posture, an ability to locate poor relationships between the key areas of the body, knowledge of where and in what direction movement is needed to align the skeleton and to bring about postural balance, and the ability to see a restriction of range of motion in a performer. Finally, the teacher encourages the pupil to examine any false beliefs on posture and movement and technique and to let them go.[150]

---

[149] Drake, 82.
[150] Kind, locations 74-75 of 3538.

The Alexander Technique encourages us to become and remain aware of the entire range of steps involved in an action, even those we may have previously regarded as not important or extraneous to the actual playing of the organ. For example, in one of my lessons, Cathy Madden happened to observe me mounting and dismounting the organ bench, and that one "simple" action served as an excellent impromptu teaching opportunity for her to demonstrate the overall and continual state of mindfulness we need to bring to *all* of our actions. She spent the next ten minutes pointing out all the muscles involved in the action of lowering myself to the bench, finding my center of gravity, raising my legs and swiveling over the end of the bench to arrive gracefully at my playing position, outlining the "order of directions" that would allow me to accomplish this.

At several times during my Alexander Technique lessons, a specific small-scale issue or challenge became the vehicle by which the teacher could express a larger perspective arising from the Technique. I will cite here just one example. At one lesson I played a piece that I had selected as being representative of the type of piece that, due to its many challenging pedal passages, often results in knee pain for me. As it happened, the piece that I had selected—the Étude No.1 from Six Études by Demessieux, mentioned previously—was not one that I knew very well, and when I encountered a challenging pedal passage, my unfamiliarity with the piece became evident to my teacher. Instead of directly addressing my original concern with a strategy for freeing up my knees, the teacher seized spontaneously on this moment to address the question of how can the Alexander Technique could be applied to the process of learning a new piece of music.

Observing my tenseness and stiffening alerted Cathy to the difficulties I was encountering as I played. When I stopped playing, she asked me how well I knew the piece, to which I replied, "not well at all." The following dialogue ensued, which I present here at length:

> **Cathy**: That's what I saw—I saw, oh, this is a newer piece. So you did the appropriate thing the first time you got to [the difficult passage]—you said, 'wait a second, I don't know where I'm going. So that's another element there, so the Alexander Technique doesn't exactly take away the getting to know you section of the thing, but let's use it for that—So you got there and you found out there's something going on. Right now I don't know whether it was an expectation that you would be able to play it without having practiced it, or—so what if you go into, "I'm learning this, I wonder how I need to play this? So that's interesting, you're looking at it differently. What information are you getting looking at the page now? If you had to describe what your feet need to do, you're looking at it…
>
> [Ahra plays the passage again]
>
> **Cathy**: The first movement is easy; the second time [you played it] you tightened—what were you thinking when you went to repeat?
>
> **Ahra**: I thought—second time was, you know—I thought I knew the notes better than [the] previous time, so I feel like, "Oh, it's going to be eas[ier] to play than the first time—I mean, I'm just getting used to playing these notes.
>
> **Cathy**: Right—okay—yeah [thinking]. I wonder, what was the easy work [about learning the passage]? So each time it's new, so what if it could be as simple as knowing each repetition is not the same as the one before and you don't actually want to do the one the same as before, you want to keep building it—let's try that. [Ask yourself], "how do I play it this time, how do I play it this time? So it's not actually I'm going to do it like I just did it…"
>
> And you could put in there [the order of directions] a little about what playing the pedals [does] to create a sound for the reason I do music? So you just can put that in there, too, a little bit. The emphasis is on learning the notes, but still, you're learning the notes *because* there's something you care about in music…
>
> **Ahra**: So that could be—that thinking could be part of my directions?
>
> **Cathy**: It could be part of your wish always. It essentially is. You wouldn't walk in the music building, you wouldn't hand in your dissertation on time, you wouldn't walk into a practice room or arrange for lessons if you didn't care deeply about something. Sometimes we forget when we go to practice that that's what we're doing.
>
> **Ahra**: Hmmm. That's true…

> **Cathy**: So it [playing music] loses some of its joy […] So I'm not saying that [your desire to play] is the dominant thing right now [when learning a difficult passage]—when you're doing repetitions of something, one way to help them continue to be different is to keep new thought of it [i.e., keep rethinking the process]. How do these notes tell a story? How does that story fit into why I do music? I think it's really important to wed technique and intention as you learn a piece. Ideally we would never separate it […] A lot of music people will say that they had a first music teacher who got them to love music; a second one who they usually hated, but they got their technique better, and a third one who helped bring those two things together. I'm not sure they ever need to be separated, but often at the conservatory level and the professional level that's one of the things I've encountered. *Alexander Technique is the tool that serves to unite the whole self in service of the intention* [my emphasis].[151]

The perceptiveness and intuition of my Alexander Technique teacher as I struggled with unfamiliar material became a five-minute "teaching moment" that at once gave me practical strategies for learning new material, identified one of the perennial issues facing music conservatory students, and expressed in a nutshell the central, essential purpose of the Alexander Technique, as it applies to organ performance or any other endeavor.

The Alexander Technique is not merely a set of technical exercises one may learn and apply to their playing a particular instrument. It is up to the individual, with the assistance and guidance of her Alexander Technique teacher, to assess and determine what her particular patterns of misuse and habit are, and to conceive and execute the appropriate directions to begin to reorganize her approach to playing her instrument. Moreover, if one learns the Alexander Technique, its application will not remain limited to one specific realm of activity such as making music. If one has absorbed the principles and put them into practice successfully while playing an instrument, they will necessarily be operative in whatever activity one engages in, as the heightened state of awareness one achieves tends to remain active. In other words, it is

[151] Cathy Madden, from transcript of video filmed at a private lesson on 30 April, 2015 at the University of Washington.

unlikely that when studying and practicing the Technique one could achieve impeccable posture while playing the organ only to resume slouching in front of the television afterwards.

At the beginning of my research, I enquired of several Alexander Technique teachers whether there were any recommended exercises to address an organist's discomforts. To my initial surprise, they all said that the Alexander Technique is actually an "anti-exercise", because any exercise that one does only strengthens one's habitual use. In the Alexander Technique lessons you are learning how to "undo" so that eventually you can "not-do" whatever activity it is that you are undertaking, whether it is simply bending over in your room to pick up a pencil, or playing the Toccata and Fugue in D minor by Bach on the Youn Dong Presbyterian Church organ in Seoul for hundreds of people.[152]

Alexander's principal insight is elegantly simple. As Kind writes,

> Alexander came to realize that all beautifully coordinated effortless movement was preceded by the neck releasing and the spine lengthening. The problem was that most people did the opposite of this, especially in the activities that were learned with an element of fear.[153]

Many performers of classical music are hampered by fear and anxiety, and an unrealistic obsession with an unobtainable degree of "perfection". Anytime fear is present, adrenalin flows, and the musculature contracts, ironically preventing the effortless musical flow that would bring the performer closer to the ideal she pursues. The Alexander Technique, with its focus on awareness, its ability to create a gap between stimulus and response, and its ability to curb "end-gaining," can serve as a remedy for stage fright. Alexander wrote extensively about stage fright, and how his method might overcome it. The Alexander Technique students report feeling much more self-confident after learning and practicing the Technique.

---

[152] The organ at Youn Dong Presbyterian Church in Seoul, ROK, is currently the largest church organ in Asia.
[153] Kind, location 85 of 3538.

As I am still in the beginning stages of my engagement with the Alexander Technique, I do not feel qualified to issue definitive statements about its overall value and utility. However, the perspectives I have thus far learned in my Alexander Technique lessons and study show me that my habits of daily life are reflected in my posture on the organ. For instance, I notice that I habitually tighten my wrist when I type on the computer keyboard, a tightening that actually affects to my organ playing. In other words, I *notice* that I still have tension in my wrist. If through inhibition and direction I can consistently allow my fingers and wrist to remain free when I am typing, I know that I could apply the same habitual behavior to my performance.

Prior to my Alexander Technique study and practice, I only thought about my "posture"—in the traditional sense of a rigid, upright position—and I took no notice of my habitual behaviors. Having engaged in studying the Alexander Technique, I find that I am always consciously thinking about how my body is positioned and how it is moving. As Alexander himself came to learn through his experience, "feeling" can be misleading, at least until old habitual behavior has been transformed into more optimal, balanced habits. I, too, am learning to trust my thinking instead of my feeling. That is my biggest single change before and after the lessons.

By virtue of having begun to study the Alexander Technique, I have notice that I have become considerably more conscious of my body, not only as I play the organ, but when I sit in a coffeehouse or drive my car. The Alexander Technique insists on maintaining a constant state of body awareness. The organist must strive to remain in this consciousness; it is not a passive state, and it falls upon both teachers and students to gain an awareness of the body—the joints, tendons, muscles, spine, the breath, everything—and keep the awareness even as they engage the demands of musical execution.

I sense that if I am able to maintain the constant state of awareness that Alexander espouses, my playing will become progressively lighter and freer, and I will not feel as if I am "forcing" the music to happen. It is important to remain in the present moment, and not allow anxieties about upcoming technical challenges manifest as muscle tension and stress. We needn't, as Drake observes, "mentally or physically *grab* [my emphasis] for [the next note/chord/passage]. It will be there".[154]

The Alexander Technique has become widely popular among musicians. It is even taught at Julliard. It is a particularly apt practice for musicians, writes Carolyn Nicholls, as "musicians, by their very nature, tend to be dedicated end-gainers."[155] This is partly due to the ultra-competitive environment in which contemporary musicians are compelled to operate. "Failures" have consequences for the musician, professional, emotional and otherwise. In such a situation, "there is not much room for shrinking violets and lack of confidence. Some [musicians] meet this challenge by bracing their entire bodies against the potential rejection they will experience…"[156] Musicians have much need of what the Technique offers, and much to gain from it. Nelly Ben-Or writes,

> Any Alexander teacher who has worked with musicians will inevitably heard from them of physical discomfort and mental tiredness resulting from playing. Yet this is totally avoidable. With proper guidance and honest scrutiny it can be changed. Quite new horizons can open to a musician who learns to understand himself and his work in the light of Alexander's teaching. This will inevitably imply profound personal changes and so indirectly alter his approach to learning and performing music.[157]

As Ben-Or suggests, the mindfulness that arises from diligent practice of the Alexander Method can cause changes and effects in one's life beyond musical practice. This notion is

---

[154] Drake, 82.
[155] Nicholls, 2008, 98.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Nelly Ben-Or, 18.

confirmed by de Alcantara, who noted that some of his musician colleagues who had engaged the Alexander Technique had found that many negative personal habits, including addictive behaviors, had begun to slowly transform or disappear as their sense of awareness expanded from the musical realm into other aspects of their lives. He firmly believes that the Technique is a vehicle that will take you as far as you want to go—or as far as you are capable of going. In his view, the Technique is a means by which one may discover the range and depth of their potential:

> Alexander Technique can only help you become your best. A committed study of the Alexander Technique will help you discover and develop your potentialities, and no more. Keep in mind, however, that you have always assessed your talents in light of your habitual misuse. Not until you have freed your use from the constraints of habit and faulty sensory awareness will you know how far you can really go.[158]

It is difficult to find much criticism of the Alexander Technique, even among medical professionals normally skeptical of what they consider "alternative medicine". Many musicians who have embraced the Alexander Technique are quite enthusiastically devoted to it, and view it as a deeply transformative practice that heals past injuries and revitalizes their approach to their instrument. To be freed from pain is quite liberating for those for whom daily practice had become excruciating. Kay Hooper's motivation to adopt the Alexander Technique followed "Ten years of pain, plain and simple. Ten years of cortisone shots, chiropractic, and anti-inflammatory drugs. Ten years of mega-doses of aspirin, ice and heat treatments, and exercises. Ten years of playing and teaching piano in pain."[159]

For Hooper, discovering the Alexander Technique was an "epiphany" that allowed her to realize that since her whole body was involved in the act of making music, the solution for her

---

[158] de Alcantara, 1997, 275.

[159] Kay Hooper, "Why I Study Alexander Technique" (Web document, accessed 29 April 2015, at http://www.alexandertechnique.com/articles/kayhooper/)

pain would have to take the whole body into account, not just the parts that were hurting the most or directly involved in the playing. Moreover, the conscious direction practice of the Technique allowed her to feel empowered, as she was now the one taking active responsibility for her choices, and not just being a passive victim of circumstances. Similarly to Hooper, the participants for Iris Kaplan's study had all volunteered because they were

> motivated by pain, discomfort, tension and disillusionment with piano teachers to study the Alexander Technique. They were also lured to the Alexander Technique by curiosity and a willingness to try something new, as they wondered what it was all about, and if it would really help their piano playing. [...] They sought after the Alexander Technique before their problems became totally debilitating.[160]

In my own experience with Alexander instruction, I found it helpful to video record the lessons, so that I could review the lesson and see my own body from a different angle as the teacher guided and repositioned it. It can be quite instructive to observe one's own movement. My study of the Alexander Technique has caused me to become much more aware of posture and balance, and to restore these when they lapse. Through my Alexander Technique lessons, I gained the opportunity to observe my own body and consider how to release tension and inhibit and change my old habits. I began to sense that these perspectives could be gainfully applied to all aspects of my daily life. Although I was somewhat skeptical of the claims made by Alexander practitioners as I began this research, and although I still consider myself to be in the beginning stages of learning and applying the Technique, I would not hesitate to recommend it to any musician.

Even in the few months that I have attended Alexander Technique lessons, I have felt my posture and balance improve at the organ (and off!). As I have written above, as people have very different body types and sizes, there is no single model of "good" posture that can work for

[160] Kaplan, 174-175.

everyone. However, it seems possible that through the sort of total body awareness and conscious direction cultivated by the Alexander Technique, that everyone can strive for and achieve a more balanced posture. The technique can be applied to both musical performance and daily life. I noticed as well that as my posture improved, I gained more confidence in my musicianship. There has been a discernible change in my life because of my experience of the Alexander Technique. Although many of my old habits remain with me (I am finding it is difficult to stop end-gaining), I sense that the Technique offers a way to improve and play with less tension and chronic pain.

As I stated in the Introduction to this dissertation, there is no shortage of literature devoted to various aspects of the Alexander Technique. It would be valuable to study the ways in which the Technique as Alexander established has evolved and developed in the century that has passed since its inception, and the ways in which it has both influenced subsequent body awareness approaches and the ways contemporary Alexander Technique teachers have embraced and assimilated these approaches, such as body-mapping and Feldenkrais, to create something new and continually vital. The Alexander Technique has developed and changed continuously since its inception. In fact, many Alexander Technique teachers do not rely heavily upon Alexander's terminology to convey the concepts. More studies, such as the one undertaken by Kaplan (see Introduction) which attempt to quantitatively assess the results of students experience as they learn and implement the Technique, would certainly enlarge our understanding of its efficacy, and refine the ways in which it is applied. Case studies of the progress of organists actively engaging the Technique could be valuable.

My study and experience of the Alexander Technique has confirmed its utility to the practicing musician, and convinced me that it should become a basic component of every

musician's training and education. That body-awareness modalities such as the Alexander Technique still remain on the fringe of a standard musical education is problematic. Of what use is all the technique and musicianship in the world if the musician is too wracked with stress, tension, and pain to enjoy performance and practice?

Bibliography

Alcantara, Pedro de. *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997 and 2013.

_____. *The Alexander Technique: A Skill for Life*. Ramsbury, UK: Crowood Press, 1999.

Alexander, F. Matthias. *The Use of the Self: Its Conscious Direction in Relation to Diagnosis, Functioning and the Control of Reaction*. New York: Dutton, 1932.

_____. *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*. 7th ed. London: Methuen, 1938.

_____. *The Universal Constant in Living*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1941.

Alexander, F. Matthias, and Fischer, Jean M. O. *Man's Supreme Inheritance*. London: Mouritz, 1996.

Arsenault, Michele. *Moving to Learn: A Classroom Guide to Understanding and Using Good Body Mechanics*. Atlanta: Move to Learn Society, 1998.

Barlow, Wilfred. *The Alexander Technique: How to Use Your Body Without Stress*. Healing Arts Press ed. Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1990.

Barnes, William Harrison. *The Contemporary American Organ.* 8th Ed. Glen Rock, NJ: Fischer, 1964.

Ben-Or, Nelly. "The Alexander Technique and Performance." In *Tensions in the Performance of Music*, ed. Carola Grindea, 84-95. London: Kahn & Averill, 1985.

Binkley, Goddard. *The Expanding Self: How the Alexander Technique Changed My Life*. London: STAT Books, 1993.

Bloch, Michael. *F.M.: The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander, Founder of the Alexander Technique.* London: Little, Brown, 2004.

Brennan, Richard. *Alexander Technique: A Practical Introduction.* Shaftesbury, UK: Element, 1992.

Calais-Germain, Blandine. Anatomy of Movement. Seattle: Eastland Press, 2007.

Carolyn Nicholls, *The Posture Workbook*. East Sussex: D & B Publishing, 2012.

_____. *Body, Breath & Being: A New Guide to the Alexander Technique*. East

Sussex: D & B Publishing, 2008.

Carrington, Walter. *Thinking Aloud: Talks on Teaching the Alexander Technique*. Ed. by Jerry Sontag. San Francisco: Mornum Time Press, 1994.

Carrington, Walter, and Jerry Sontag. *The Act of Living: Talks on the Alexander Technique*. San Francisco: Mornum Time Press, 1999.

Chance, Jeremy, *Thorson's Principles of the Alexander Technique*. London: Thorsons, 1998.

Conable, Barbara, and Benjamin Conable. What Every Musician Needs to Know About the Body. Portland, OR: Andover, 2001.

Conable, Barbara and William Conable. *How to Learn the Alexander Technique: A Manual for Students. Columbus*, OH: Andover Press, 1995.

Craze, Richard. *Alexander Technique*. London: Teach Yourself Books, 1996.

Dart, Raymond *A. Skill and Poise*. London: STAT Books, 1996.

Dimon, Theodore, Jr. *The Undivided Self: The Alexander Technique and the Control of Stress.* Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1999.

Dimon, Theodore, and Richard Brown. Frank Pierce Jones: *Collected Writings on the Alexander Technique*. Cambridge, MA: Alexander Technique Archives, 1998.

Drake, Jonathan. *The Alexander Technique in Everyday Life*. London: Thorsons, 1996.

_____. *Body Know-How: A Practical Guide to the Use of the Alexander Technique in Everyday Life*. London: Thorsons, 1991.

_____. *Thorson's Introductory Guide to the Alexander Technique*. London: Thorsons, 1993.

Gary, John. *Your Guide to the Alexander Technique*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990

Gelb, Michael. *Body Learning: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique*. New York: Holt, 1995.

Grennell, Gerard. *Directed Activities: A Diary of Practical Procedures for Students and Teachers of the F.M. Alexander Technique as Taught at the Constructive Learning Centre*. London: Mouritz, 2002.

Grindea, Carola. Tensions in the Performance: A Symposium. London and White Plains, NY: Kahn & Averill; Pro/Am Music Resources, 1995.

Harer, John B., and Munden, Sharon. *The Alexander Technique Resource Book: A Reference Guide*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009.

Jones, Frank Pierce. *Freedom to Change: The Development and Science of the Alexander Technique*. 3rd ed. London: Mouritz, 1997.

Jones, Frank Pierce. *A Technique for Musicians*. Champaign, IL: North American Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique, 1968.

Kapit, Wynn, and Elson, Lawrence M. *The Anatomy Coloring Book*. 2nd ed. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1993.

Kleinman, Judith, and Peter Buckoke. *The Alexander Technique for Musicians*, 2013.

Leibowitz, Judith, and Connington, Bill. *The Alexander Technique*. 1st Harper Perennial Edition. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991.

Macdonald, Glynn. *Illustrated Elements of the Alexander Technique*. London: Element, 2002.

_____. *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Alexander Technique*. Shaftsbury, Dorset: Element, 1998.

Macdonald, Patrick. *The Alexander Technique as I See It*. Brighton, Great Britain: Rahula, 1989.

Macdonald, Robert, and Caro Ness. *Secrets of the Alexander Technique.* London: Dorling-Kindersley, 2000.

Madden, Cathy. *Integrative Alexander Technique for Performing Artists*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Mark, Thomas. *What Every Pianist Needs to Know about the Body.* With Supplementary Material for Organists by Roberta Gary and Thom Miles. GIA Publications, 2003.

Masterton, Ailsa. *The Alexander Technique in a Nutshell: A Step-by- Step Guide.* London: Element, 2002.

Maunder, Alex. *Let Your Life Flow: The Physical, Psychological, and Spiritual Benefits of the Alexander Technique*. Essex, UK: C.W. Daniel Co., 2002.

Park, Glen. *A New Approach to the Alexander Technique: Moving toward a More Balanced Expression of the Whole Self.* Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1998.

Roberts, Tristan D. M. *Understanding Balance: The Mechanics of Posture and Locomotion*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1995.

Valentine, Elisabeth R. “Alexander Technique.” In *Musical Excellence: Strategies and Techniques to Enhance Performance*. Edited by Aaron Williamson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Vineyard, Missy. *How You Stand, How You Move, How You Live: Learning the Alexander Technique to Explore your Mind-body Connection and Achieve Self-Mastery*. New York: Marlowe & Co. 2007.

Articles

Babits, Linda, and Hilary Mayers. “The Path to Productive Practicing: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique.” *American Music Teacher* 38/2 (November/December 1988): 24-26.

Bosanquet, Caroline R. “The Alexander Principle and Its Importance to Music Education.” *British Journal of Music Education* 4/3 (November 1987): 229-42.

Connington, Bill. “The Alexander Technique: Learn to Use Your Body with Ease.” *Massage Magazine* 63 (September/October 1996): 20-24.

Friedman, Jonathan. “Reflections on the Alexander Technique.” *Interlude: Official Journal of the Boston Musicians’ Association and the Boston Musicians’ Building Association* (July/August 1991): 7-8.

Mayers, Hillary, and Linda Babits. “A Balanced Approach: The Alexander Technique.” *Music Educator’s Journal* 74/3 (November 1987): 51-54.

Valentine, Elisabeth R., et al. “The Effect of Lessons in the Alexander Technique on Music Performance in High and Low Stress Situations.” *Psychology of Music* 23/2 (1995): 129- 41.

Drake, James M. 2006. "The Alexander Technique and Organ Playing—Freedom, Ease, Openness, and Not-Doing.” *American Organist Magazine.* 40 (12).

Dissertations

Kaplan, Iris. “The Experience of Pianists Who Have Studied the Alexander Technique: Six Case Studies.” PhD dissertation: New York University, 1994.

Knaub, Mary Beth Jill Hartwig. “Body Mapping: An Instructional Strategy for Teaching the Alexander Technique to Music Students.” Ed.D. dissertation: University of Pittsburgh, 1999, 206 pages.

Santiago, Patricia Furst. "An Exploration of the Potential Contributions of the Alexander Technique to Piano Pedagogy." Ph.D. dissertation: University of London, 2004.

Websites

www.pianoandorgantechnique.com

http://www.hilaryking.net/

www.alexandertechnique.com

performanceschool.org

Videos

Caplan, Deborah. *The Alexander Technique: Solutions for Back Trouble*. New York: Wellspring Media, 1998. VHS.

Hurt, William., Kosminsky, Jane. *First Lesson an Introduction to the Alexander Technique.* New York: Wellspring Media, 1999. VHS.

Kingsley, Anthony P., Robin Ellis, and Robb Hart. *From Stress to Freedom with the Alexander Technique*. London: Alexander Technique Center for Training and Development, 1990. VHS.

Lister-Sink, Barbara, and Glenna Batson. *Freeing the Caged Bird: Developing Well-Coordinated, Injury-preventive Piano Technique*. Winston-Salem, NC: Wingsound, 2005. DVD.

McBride, Molly, William Hurt, Jane Kosminsky, and Deborah Caplan. *The Alexander Technique*. New York: Wellspring Media, 2000. DVD.