

## **“A Rocky Road to Revolution”**

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A personal account of transformation and the surprising new directions which emerged from the crises of physical injury and over-investment in playing and teaching music. The author's rocky road becomes a revolution through the revelations of Alexander Technique. In a series of three articles, she shares her story and demonstrates how her discoveries in psycho-physics have been applied to the music studio.

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**“People do not decide their futures, they decide their habits and their habits decide their futures”. (F.M. Alexander)**

### **How it all began:**

When I think back to the predicament I was in some years ago, I have a deep sense of gratitude to my Alexander Technique teacher, Greg Holdaway, and the good fortune which delivered me to his studio in 2009. He led me in a rescue operation away from my unconscious self-harming ways of being, towards a pathway in co-operation with human design. With training I have become a different person, having found new, more enlightened ways to work as a musician and teacher with more compassion, ease and clarity.

My sole intention to try the Alexander Technique was physical. I wanted to have my neck, shoulder and right hand fixed up and free of pain. The farce that Greg witnessed as I arrived for my first lesson will demonstrate the state I was in, and then I'll relate how my unintentional musical revolution came about.

This scenario is amusing and makes me laugh a little now - here it is:

At the time of my appointment Greg was walking to his front gate to meet me - I was running slightly late as usual, being chronically too busy. Driving too fast, I pulled up at his house and parked abruptly. In a great hurry and flustered, I grabbed my coat, scarf, bag and X-rays then opened the car door which the wind whipped out of my grasp. I lurched out to grab it, inflicting a stab of pain to my frozen neck and shoulder. Bracing myself, I got out of the car and slammed the door shut against the wind, hurting my useless injured hand while awkwardly clutching at all the other stuff with my other hand. My hair was flying everywhere, getting stuck in my eyes and mouth and tangled around my neck while I was struggling to put on my coat and scarf – and not drop the car keys. All this was happening fast and furious ... all at once! The final straw came when my coat was halfway on, the scarf tangled up with my hair and sunglasses, my bag falling off my shoulder as I was trying to hitch it up with my locked-up neck; the wind whipped away my X-ray envelope! I dashed after it trying to keep a hold on all the loose bits of my stuff. It was a stupid slapstick scene. This was when Greg stepped up to the car, said a happy hello (with a little smile on his face), and helped me into the studio.

Being eager to get on with it, I tried to put aside my feelings of frustration and embarrassment. I was extremely keen to relate all the treatment failures I'd had with my injuries over the previous four years, and I was dying to show Greg my terrible neck X-rays which would prove how serious my case was. However, to get the lesson started he asked me

to seat myself comfortably, so I sat up nice and straight with what I thought was “good posture” in order to protect my back and neck injuries. My issues were clamouring for his attention, but having observed my crazy arrival, Greg’s priority was to create some comfort and ease in me. The roots of my issues were clearly exposed to him in those flustered 20 seconds at the car. Since I was in the depths of a crisis, I suspended pressing my agenda and submitted myself to his curiously indirect ways of working. Using his hands he helped me to organise my head, neck and spine in simple movements. He was skilful and patient as I found myself experiencing some truly blissful moments there and then. He impressed upon me that this experience came from within myself. I could hardly believe it; this was an epiphany! The feeling was so profound that I made myself a commitment to explore the Alexander Technique (AT) in earnest.

Ever since the first days of my journey with AT, I have been encountering more mysteries and subtleties by looking into the psycho-physics within myself and my students. In these three articles I’d like to explore some ideas which have influenced me and revolutionised my approach to music and teaching. Some fundamental notions and keywords woven throughout my reflections are: wholeness, integration, permission, choice, curiosity, trust, awareness, intention, imagination, illusions, clarity and *not* knowing.

Our conventions of teaching and the syllabi we use mark off distinct areas for musical development such as technique, sight reading, aural, theory, composition, improvisation, memorisation and performance. I have been reflecting on alternative ways to understand what these topics really mean for us in making music, and then exploring ways to integrate them in teaching. I would like to shed some light (as I see it) onto some unusual connections between some of these areas, which otherwise hide behind their separate well-worn definitions.

### **Wholeness and Integration: thoughts**

By virtue of the meaning of the words “wholeness” and “integration”, we can reason that the act of integration brings about the state of wholeness. Everything within the fabric of music is intrinsically linked but is often separated. This separation of disciplines can contribute to imbalances both in the player and the playing, diminishing the richness that music offers. I am interested in integration towards musical wholeness on various levels – general and specific, personal and musical, physical and psychological. At the core, my aim is the wish to help students integrate all areas of their music making along with their individual abilities and personal histories in order to experience the wholeness of music and of being a musician.

The AT is commonly perceived as being a posture correction technique, and while it does help many people with their posture, it is far more comprehensive than that. We humans are unified beings: our mental states and thinking habits determine our physical actions and ways of being. Equally, we are beings whose physical condition, expressions and habits influence our mental and emotional states.

**“You translate everything whether physical, spiritual or mental, into muscular tension.”** (F.M. Alexander)

As musicians we encompass all of our previous training and habits along with our musical feeling and thinking tendencies, thus we are shaped by the past for better or worse. The *present* moment offers us the opportunity to create the future in the way we choose for ourselves. Commonly, musicians feel they are not where they “should” be. This judgemental attitude obscures the experience of being at one’s best in the moment. It also negates the act of giving music as something valuable and alive within us. The “should be” attitude creates a chronic sense of inadequacy which interferes with progress and pleasure, and sadly tends to be self-fulfilling, bringing out something lesser within us. Music given with the “I should be better than this” attitude is like giving your gift with a closed fist.

Instead, the Alexander Technique encourages us to gather information and to make an accurate evaluation of where we are in the moment in all senses: place, time, body, thought. All this is done without making any judgements, simply noticing. This point of acknowledgement is where we can make choices and invite ourselves to create change to move ahead. With a trained Alexander teacher we begin with the biomechanical principles governing the optimal way we can use ourselves, which Alexander discovered. In a nutshell, the technique hinges on co-operation with human design, whereby the subtle organisation of our head, neck and spine working in co-operation with our antigravity reflexes, results in healthy, well-co-ordinated movement. While one needs to have mental clarity with this work, its effectiveness depends on suspending expectation or doubt. The mystery is that success comes about through being open to explore, and not know what will happen.

**“You can’t do something you don’t know, if you keep on doing what you do know”.** (F.M. Alexander)

### **Permission and choice: thoughts**

By way of describing my new approaches in the teaching studio, I’ll first relate the story of how I learnt to heal myself through my AT lessons.

Over the years I was damaging myself and adding insult to injury as I persisted in zealously driving my music, but to me the sensations registered as good hard work ... until the pain and immobility hit suddenly! My forearm tendon frayed rendering my hand useless, and my neck was seized in an acute fixed cramp, pulling my head into my shoulder day in, day out. Greg listened to my woes but showed more interest in my whole-self than in my specifics. So I continued to set aside my insistence on fixing my injuries and put my trust in Greg and the technique. By following and practising the AT directions for improving my co-ordination (as well as shedding my “should be” thinking), I was able to enjoy an increasing degree of relief. After some months I was in a reasonable condition to approach the piano in my AT lessons. However, I was so heavily invested in it that adverse physical changes come upon me just at the sight or thought of playing it (which I wasn’t aware of), and so Greg steered me away from playing in our lessons for another few months. I needed to drop the idea that I really *had to* play. Meanwhile I stopped trying to practise piano and struggled on with my teaching and I channelled my desire to make music into singing. Being a student of voice with a fresh new approach to music and mindfully using AT principles has been illuminating, rewarding and a lot of fun!

Eventually, being somewhat happily distracted with my vocal success, I achieved relative peace with the idea of playing the piano. We then started exploring specific techniques on how to play the piano with ease, and discovering the habits which prevented it. It was a battle to discard all that I held dear. I had prided myself on in having “beautiful posture” and “lovely choreography” (according to my audiences). I had been playing like a dancer, overworking and overloading my back and neck, which didn’t include any curving movements in my spine. Since I had had an accident fracturing six thoracic vertebrae in 1990, I had developed unconscious reasons of survival for playing with such “good” posture. The bracing of my abdominal muscles to keep my back straight was my strategy to stay upright and to protect and strengthen my spine. These ideas and efforts served me well at the time in my ignorance, but were based on misconceptions of good and bad posture which eventually caught up with me.

Little by little, the nuts and bolts of my piano technique were updated in these lessons. First bringing myself to the stool without back tension was an epic achievement, then to get my hands to the keys with clear mental intention and well-directed energy was an extraordinary accomplishment. Through experimentation, under Greg’s guidance I learnt to detect the blockages which were hiding behind the ideas of right and wrong playing. I gave myself permission to drop my old judgements and to move in ways which I knew deep down were right for my body, but felt weird and even wrong being so foreign. Now a decade later I am much improved, and I have some great tools to use in guiding students through difficult phases and nurturing them in healthy wholistic playing.

Here are a few observations with points of advice to counter the sorts of harmful habits which are often overlooked. I know these undesirable traits well when I see them in others, because I discovered them in myself and have found new ways to think and move.

1. Often pianists are already setting up their arms and hands to play before they’ve quite sat down. This brings about a whole set of misaligned and misdirected movements which impede the healthy use of the spine, resulting in tempo and tone instability and a lack of presence in the music. Instead, permit yourself time to be seated at the piano (or any instrument) with mindfulness. In getting onto the seat your body mass will flow naturally and easily by allowing the hip joints to bend a lot more than seems usual. To do this, activate your thigh muscles and bend the knees deeply. The upper body will move forward and down with gravity as you place the “sit bones” on the seat, then rock back and come to an upright position, pivoting at the hip joints with the head lightly balanced above (tending forwards). This manoeuvre may look uncommon as it occupies different physical spaces than normal, but it feels good and creates the conditions for ease and success in playing.
2. There is a commonly accepted idea that we need to keep the shoulders parallel to the keyboard, especially when playing in the extreme registers. Unconsciously we do it so that the arms and fingers are aligned with the keys. It *seems* to make it more convenient, but in doing so we make clunky, jarring sideways shifts in our bodies instead of allowing subtle spinal twisting with a calm body. Consequently we are using only half of our available arm movement. Our arms are joined to the skeleton at the clavicle joint (just below the neck) not at the shoulder. I have designed a movement

activity with balls away from the piano to encourage students to use free range arms for getting around the registers. This activity has many other benefits relating to the awareness of our back, head, feet and hands which I'll describe in a later instalment.

3. Being prepared for performance seems like a good idea, but if you prepare by habitually setting your muscles in an attitude of readiness for the next note or chord, it generates pre-set muscle fixations and mental anxiety which continually affect tone and tempo adversely. Instead, allow your muscles to be available to meet the next note or chord as it arrives. There is a delicate call to put trust in the subconscious learning that is there, and to allow the body and mind to co-ordinate the appropriate timing of thought and action, greeting each moment in the playing. Initially it means you won't know exactly what will happen, so it feels out of your control.

Recognising covert performance anxiety in myself, I chose to forfeit the urge to be in control. In a leap of faith I now place trust in the musical work I've done and the Alexander principles as I play relatively free of muscle fixation and the fear of failure ... whatever may come to pass!

We are living in a time where I believe the old conventions of our profession are due for review and change. For my part, I am challenging the values I inherited, and renovating my musical life to meet the needs of myself and my students as members of the twenty-first century. AT training encourages us to unsubscribe from ideas of right or wrong. It's not about making absolute value judgements. Rather, we acknowledge our desires, make our choices (whatever they may be) then move ahead with the AT directions from wherever we are at.

**"You want to know if you're right. When you get further on you will be right, but you won't know it and won't want to know if you're right."**

(F.M. Alexander)

In the following instalments I will touch on technique, expression, sight reading, improvisation, practise and interpretation in the light of the psychophysical realm and the Alexander Technique applied.

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For more information about the Alexander Technique please see:

[www.alexandertechnique.com.au](http://www.alexandertechnique.com.au)

[www.mouritz.co.uk](http://www.mouritz.co.uk)

<http://at-toledo.com/aphorisms/index.html>

Further Reading:

Alexander, F. (1985). *The Use of The Self*. London: Orion.

Maisel, E. (1986). *The Resurrection of the Body: The Essential Writings of F. Matthias Alexander*. Boston & London: Shambala.

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