

Musical Notes from the UK Reflective Practice, the Alexander Technique, and Technology

by Judith Kleinman

In a recent interview, internationally famous concert violinist Joshua Bell was asked why he thought he had made it to the top when there were so many good violinists out there. His reply was food for thought. “I think there are three main things that have helped me to be a successful solo violinist: (1) I am very good under pressure, (2) I am very good at focusing on what I am doing, and (3) I have played a lot of computer games, so have a great approach to getting things wrong and learning from my mistakes.”¹

Sometimes it’s an interesting challenge to articulate the benefits of our work without sounding long-winded or overly earnest. Bell’s thoughts get very close to communicating aspects of what the Alexander Technique has to offer young musicians, and he expresses himself in relatable terms. Alexander work offers trustworthy ideas that help musicians deal well with pressure, learn to organize their thinking, and maintain creative attitudes towards playing their instruments. Whenever I mention Bell’s quote, students get interested. They step back and ask themselves, “Is that me? Am I good at those things?”

When I arrived at music college that definitely *wouldn’t* have been me. Learning how to be fully present in practice as well as in performance under pressure, how to think clearly, and how to develop strategies for learning were not in the curriculum.

An essential part of being an artist is not only being skillful and expressive, but also knowing that making mistakes is normal. Mistakes are opportunities to learn; understanding and embodying this concept helps us to cope with the ups and downs of the performing artist’s career and to improve on ineffective strategies, like constantly beating ourselves up while trying to be perfect or creating the ultimate bulletproof jacket against criticism.

Part of the teacher’s challenge when helping young people is to get them to realize that the Alexander Technique isn’t just about standing upright or taking time to lie down. Bridging the gap between the worlds of learning and well-being is where our work has so much to offer performers; they can work on being creative as well as being comfortable. The balance of self-acceptance and self-development is vital to performing artists—to all of us.

For the last twenty-five years, I have been teaching at the Royal College of Music (RCM) and at the Junior Royal Academy of Music, alongside fellow-musician Peter Buckoke (my husband), some wonderful instrumental and singing teachers, and an enlightened management. I help young musicians see that the most important choice they can make is in their thinking. Hours of practice don’t necessarily make for a great performance and can even be harmful if not executed well. Current research² shows that it is emotional states, or, in Alexander Technique language, our *use* that makes the difference in performance. Differences are psychophysical and include breathing, vision, coordination, balance, and also how we choose to think and become aware.

Most performers want to diminish performance anxiety. They want to put all their constructive practice into play to become the

successful performer they have always dreamed of being. How can we turn all their adrenaline into great performing energy?

We, of course, have Alexander’s story to convey to our students. Sometimes I wonder if what Alexander actually suffered from was a form of performance anxiety, even if he didn’t specifically call it that. His discovery included noticing the disturbance of his *primary control*, which forms the startle pattern; the tightening of his feet and legs; the shortening and narrowing of his torso; and changes to his breathing pattern. Most performers describe similar behaviors when they record their symptoms of stage fright. FM had to work out how to deal with the pressure of performance. To achieve this, he also had to work out how to make his practice relevant to his performance.



Judith Kleinman

The Performance Simulator

At the RCM, we have a Performance Simulator in the Centre for Performing Science department.³ The Alexander Technique department now has access to this invaluable resource. I think if FM were alive today, he would be doing what we are encouraging our students to do, which is to use this virtual reality resource to film their practice and performances and to make videos of their work. From these processes, they get not only the vital feedback of what they look like and how they present themselves, but also the opportunity to observe more clearly how their movement patterns affect their sound. Our faculty finds that students having these experiences become more aware of how they relate to themselves. When students view their videos with their peers, the performers can discuss their levels of confidence or objectivity and their ability to accept themselves; the viewers learn to offer the performer constructive feedback. They all begin to build rigor in both their thinking and listening. Being positive and helpful to themselves and their colleagues turns out to be an important factor in building everyone’s self-esteem.

The Performance Simulator has a greenroom (performer’s preparatory space near the stage) where one sees a video of the audience and then walks through a door into the main concert hall where a virtual audience watches. There is a Hogwarts-like element to this resource, which can be great fun for students. The performance is filmed so students have a record of both their reactions to the audience and their performances. In the greenroom, a technician adjusts the simulator; one can ask to have a positive audience, a standing ovation, a booing audience, or even an audience that coughs a lot. The students report how nice it feels when the audience is positive, but also how discombobulating boos can be—even from a virtual audience! The audience can also represent an audition or exam panel, which is very useful when preparing for the many exams at the RCM.

The students unanimously find the Simulator a very useful experience and substantial component in changing their playing and practice. With this technology, they can expand their practice to include practicing *performing* and not just practicing *music*. It

is important to note that each student can choose to participate as performer or just as observer during class, quietly returning solo to the technology later on. It is inspiring to see how supportive students are of one another when the context is the Alexander Technique and they are all working on the psychophysical aspects of being themselves as well as on their playing.

Developing Awareness

After using the simulator, the students' awareness of their *use* develops with greater clarity, making it an ideal time to consider these questions: How does their thinking and awareness affect their playing? Can they compose themselves? Are they able to stop and think at any point? Before going on stage—or even *when* they are on stage, could they stop and add a few *directions*—maybe occasionally during a rest or pause in the music? How might they experiment with preparing in a different way for their next performance? Is their daily practice supporting their performing?

We discuss how they can observe themselves in performance in a more objective way. For example, when guitarists pull down towards the instrument, they begin to see what we have been talking about, that we can only see the top of the head. They can now observe themselves staring at their hands rather than connecting with the audience. Violinists see that they stand on one leg, and flute players see the same, but on the other leg! Students notice whether they performed well under pressure and, with Alexander strategies, can work on developing that skill of maintaining poise more effectively. They can see what happens to their performance when their minds wander and so work next time on attention and awareness to become more present. Most importantly, they can work on not being so hard on themselves when they have played something wrong, realizing that this more constructive attitude is also incorporated into their Alexander lessons. It is interesting to notice that it is often the most skillful students who already have a certain measure of a constructive approach, and their perspective can influence and inspire their peers.

Using Mobile Phones to Learn

In addition to offering the Performance Simulator, we have started to encourage the students to use their phone cameras and audio recorders in their practice rooms. We have even set new assignments. For example, we ask them to make a series of short videos of themselves practicing and performing as well as of themselves in daily life. They also have the option to insert some Alexander quotes and voice-overs about their process. Another teacher encourages students to make a film comparing treatises on instrumental or vocal performance with an Alexander approach to playing and performing. With this assignment, students often find that many of the great maestros have great use, that this is part of their success, and that they often advocate ideas similar to the

Alexander principles. (Of course, a few treatises have completely different approaches, and some great maestros are gods *without* great use!) This assignment is useful because it asks students to think about and then decide how their choices relate to advice from other teachers and musicians as well as from us.

It has been so interesting for us; when Peter and I first started teaching at the RCM, no one had a mobile phone. Now, we have all had to confront the problems this technology can create for young people's use. In the spirit of "Adapt and change" and, maybe, "If you can't beat them, join them," we hope young artists will see this technology

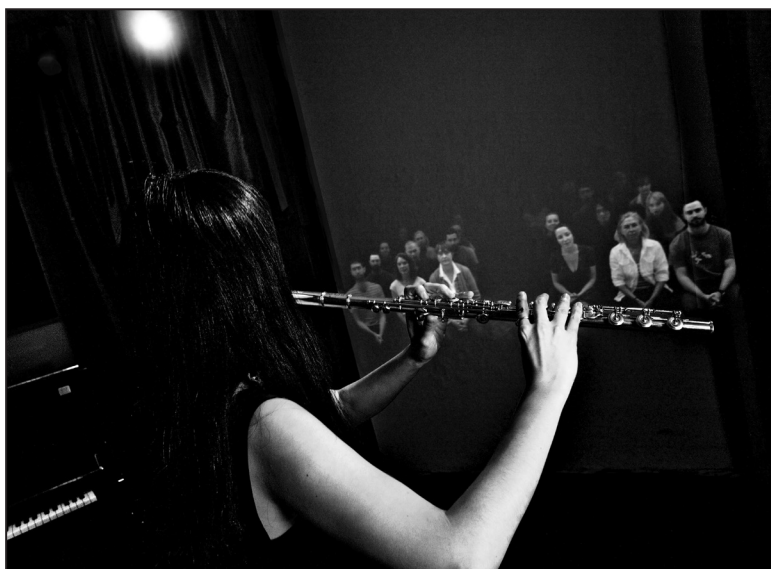
not only as really useful, but also as another stimulus from which they can learn to make healthy choices. We want them to hardwire into their systems the ability to stop and choose how to connect to their phones while staying present with their embodiment. Students can choose to not constantly check their phones for the social value and, rather, transform them into practice toolkits that connect them to spatial awareness and presence. We encourage them to use technology to help them locate a deep sense of emotional space in activity. This generates the feeling of being at

home with themselves and their instruments in the practice room and ultimately, in front of an audience.

This approach to Alexander Technique work in practice and performance—using technology alongside reading and research—has been a big step forward in our work at the RCM. For years, we have been asking our students to keep Alexander diaries, to write essays, and to support their lessons with reading and research on Alexander principles and ideas. Much of this written work has been remarkable. However, with these added video assignments, students make the work even more their own and deepen the practice of using the principles in their lives, their playing, and their teaching. They use technology as part of their work on constructive self-observation and think, "Oh I do this or that, so I need to work out the *means-whereby* more effectively." Through the courses and private lessons, students gradually accept that faulty sensory awareness affects us all and that self-observation, including using smart phone and Performance Simulator technology, is a tool for change. These assignments that integrate technology, along with all the wonderful things that happen in lessons with hands-on work, mirror work, etc., influence students to make more constructive, independent choices and help them manage well under pressure, incorporate a balance of attention, awareness, and a means-whereby-approach to learning.

I differentiate attention and awareness as did Frank Pierce Jones:

The key is to be found in the relation between awareness and another conscious state, attention. Awareness, as I conceive it, is a general, unfocused condition in which



The Performance Simulator provides a virtual audience of the student's choice: positive, booing, or even an audience that coughs a lot.

*a person is wide awake and alert to whatever may be going on without being concentrated on anything in particular. Attention, on the other hand, is focused on some particular aspect of the field. It has been compared to a spotlight on a dark stage.*⁴

The Coach's Eye App

Since using this work with mobile phones and the Performance Simulator at the RCM, I have also started to use the Coach's Eye app⁵ at the London Centre for Alexander Technique and Teacher Training (LCATT), the training course where I teach. On this app, one can film oneself and then draw direction lines or circles onto the images. Playback of movement can be very easily freeze-framed, run slowly, or run in reverse. Trainees use the app to watch movement patterns in activity and hands-on work, and they can also use it to work on how we observe and judge ourselves. We always give the option for the students to not be filmed in front of others but rather to observe the activity without the technology. However, when this work is done in groups, we develop the means-whereby approach and at the same time our most important sense of all: our sense of humor! I mention these uses of technology because they are well known in the sports world but less so in the performing arts or at Alexander Technique teacher-training schools. This technology can offer both the student and the teacher a more objectively accurate opportunity to view use.

There are lots of new apps being developed. For example, Peter Buckoke was recently involved in developing one for guitarists that utilizes video scanning and a computer. The guitarist sets movement parameters, and if the player exceeds the chosen parameters, the computer sounds an audible warning. Some of these technologies will not appeal to everyone, but it might well be that younger learners will connect to our work more when they use technology.

Conclusion

We might not all end up becoming the next Joshua Bell, but in conjunction with Alexander work, these technologies can help

us make choices and find our potential by helping us to notice our limits. If we can learn to deal well with pressure as well as learn how to learn, we might find, more often than not, that we have so much more to offer and are more resilient than we thought.

Endnotes

1. Paraphrased from <https://theviolinchannel.com/joshua-bell-vc-20-questions/>.
2. www.rcm.ac.uk/cps/archive/people/clark/.
3. www.rcm.ac.uk/research/simulator/.
4. Frank Pierce Jones, "The Organization of Awareness," in *Freedom to Change* (London: Mouritz, 1997), 176.
5. www.coachseye.com/.



The virtual audience can represent an audition or exam panel.

Suggested Reading

- Coyle, Daniel. *The Talent Code*. New York: Arrow Books, 2010.
- Fehmi, Les and Jim Robbins. *The Open-Focus Brain*. Boston and London: Trumpeter, 2008.
- Kleinman, Judith, and Peter Buckoke. *The Alexander Technique for Musicians*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
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