Performing With Ease

An Introduction to the Alexander Technique

By Rob Falvo

We all have habitual patterns of movement, but we're not all conscious of these patterns. This results in resistance to movement, and performing becomes stressful to the body. When we are aware of our movements, we can sense both the ease and stress in our body. When we are unaware, we may not feel excess tension until it becomes painful.

Virtuosity is moving with balance and lightness—in other words, moving with presence. In that moment we are connected to the audience, the size of the hall, the percussion instruments we are playing, and the ease at which we are playing them. Typically, our favorite performers are those who make it look easy because it *is* easy.

Percussion playing can be big, loud, and full of energy, and is typically exciting to hear and to watch. However, the performer who plays with power can do so with balance and ease. Playing with the least amount of tension throughout the body is key.

WHAT IS THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE?

The Alexander Technique deals with the conservation of energy. It is a practice that encourages people to notice the quality of their movement. F.M. Alexander used the word "psychophysical" to point out that the mind and body are not separated; how we think is how we move. Normally, people move with some resistance to the body's natural way. Conditioning that begins early on sets up habitual patterns that typically are not natural. These habits are passed down from generation to generation and go unnoticed until questioned.

For example: "Do I need to walk this way or is there an easier way?" "Why does my lower back ache after a long day at work?" "Why does my arm ache after practicing this piece?"

When one becomes conscious of excess tension in the body, it can be released. Many musicians are not aware of the tension they bring to their playing, which causes a great deal of forcing and pushing.

A simple exercise that you can do now is to notice, as you are reading this article, if you have tension in your neck area. Your neck is probably pushed a little forward from your body, thus creating a strain on your neck muscles. This tightens your back and prevents you from breathing fully and easily.

When this happens, think about allowing the magazine (or computer) to come to you rather than you going to it. This change in perspective can create a profound shift in how you read and is a simple way to allow your neck muscles to come into their natural length and width, thus allowing your head to balance easily on the top joint of your spine. This, in turn prevents the pull on your neck, which prevents the strain on your back and allows you to breathe effortlessly. This also works while reading music, no matter how far away the stand might be.

Rob Falvo with Tommy Smith, a graduate percussion student as he performs on marimba. Hands-on is a way of teaching Alexander Technique.

F.M. Alexander was an actor in the late 1800s in Australia, whose specialty was reciting Shakespeare. He kept losing his voice on stage and did not know why. His doctors did not have a cure for him, so Alexander decided to observe himself in mirrors to find out what was happening when he spoke.

He found, after years of observing, that every time he spoke he tightened his neck muscles, which made his head drop back and down. This, in turn, shortened his neck, back, and chest muscles and put a strain on his larynx. He began to understand his habitual way of moving and found that if the tension in his neck were released, his head would move forward and up (or slightly away from his body), allowing his spine to lengthen and his back to widen, which in turn would allow his hips, knees, and ankles to be free (unlocked). He discovered the way to move with ease. Later on, scientists found that all animals move in this manner normally.

WHY IS THIS INTERESTING?

Virtuosity is performing with ease (which includes an ease of expression). To understand this is to be aware of the whole picture, which includes: (1) the quality of your movement; (2) the percussion instrument(s) on which you are performing; (3) the music; (4) the other musicians; (5) the resonance of the instruments in the hall; (6) the amount of people you are performing for; and (7) the size of the hall.

When the performer is aware of the whole and not concerned with wrong notes or judging the next passage coming up as hard or easy, he or she is in the moment, and the performance happens effortlessly. The feeling is typically one of freedom, lightness, not noticing time passing, etc. It is a wonderful, magical moment.

Alexander Technique supports this understanding. It encourages the performer to notice unconscious habits, thus allowing the releasing of those habits, permitting free and easy movement. With this, a musician can achieve his or her highest potential.

OBSERVATIONAL MIND AND INTELLECTUAL MIND

In the previous paragraph I mentioned seven basic observations that constitute virtuosity. I have had students comment, "How can I think of all these things while I need to concentrate on reading the music? I cannot do all these things at once." Often times this is referred to as multi-tasking. Actually, I see this as expanding the depth of your observational skills so that eventually you begin to sense each of the seven parts all at the same time.

Your observational mind does not judge something as right or wrong, good or bad, ugly or beautiful, etc. It observes what is happening

and does not include a judgment. Your intellectual mind judges everything. How many times have you said to yourself or others: this is good or bad, this is right or wrong, etc. Your intellectual mind is trying to get the music right and judging your performance every step of the way.

In my experience, the key to creating change is not just in getting the movement right or adding on more information to what you already know (although sometimes more information can help), but in seeing the tension in you and allowing change to take place. This means observing the interferences that get in the way of fluid, easy performing.

We understand by observing what is there and having change happen through us. Alexander Technique is about clearing your mind/body and thus letting go of excess tension. It is about teaching ourselves to take notice and to educate ourselves about how we move. It is about becoming conscious of what is happening and stripping away habits.

BODY MAPPING

Body Mapping, discovered by cellist and Alexander teacher Bill Conable, is the way your mind diagrams your body to perceive structure, function, and size. If our maps are faulty we interfere with the way we move naturally because we have learned to think of our bone structure, function, or size differently than the way it really is.

For example, many people point to the top of their pelvis when asked where their hip joints are located. As a result, they might be creating excess tension in their body when they bend. When people find that their hip joints are much lower, they tend to move more easily.

Many teachers use Body Mapping as an adjunct to teaching the Alexander Technique. It enhances the learning experience and, along with the Alexander Technique, can increase students' understanding of how they move.

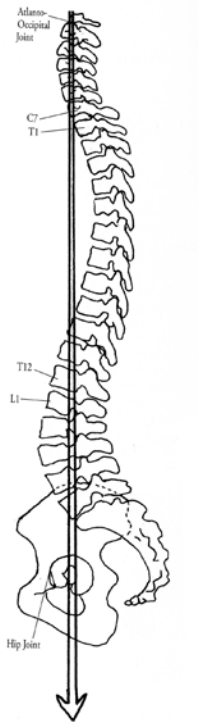
MAPPING YOUR SPINE AND FOUR MAIN JOINTS

The human spine typically has 24 vertebrae. The cervical spine starts at the top joint that connects your head to your neck, called the atlas or C1, and ends at the bottom of your neck at C7. The thoracic spine is where your ribs connect to your spine, starting at the top rib at T1 to the bottom rib at T12. The lumbar spine, which has the largest vertebrae in your body, begins after the thoracic spine and has five vertebrae from L1 to L5. Following the lumbar is the sacrum and coccyx, which is at the tail end.

When viewing a person from the side, the spine is not straight; there are four curves that allow for flexibility and stability. Your line of gravity goes through the lumbar spine and cervical spine; your thoracic and sacrum are naturally found behind it. (See Figure 1).

Compare your spine to a water hose and your energy to the water. The more you bend the hose, the slower the water will come out; if you bend the hose too far, the water will be cut off. Energy in your body works in the same fashion. If your back is bent, creating a main joint where there is none, energy will be cut off, making it difficult to perform at an optimum level. If your back is bent too far, injury may occur. Many backaches stem from this scenario.

Figure 1



How practical is this understanding for performing? As percussionists we move around our instruments all the time. If, for example, you are playing drumset and you begin to slouch over the drums, you will become tired more quickly and not have the same quality of energy for playing as when you are aware of the natural curves in your back.

Your back has all the flexibility it needs to reach the cymbals and drums, and if you need to reach farther you can move forward from your hip joints, leaving your back and arms free and relaxed. By slouching over to reach or to "coast" at a late-night gig (when everyone, including yourself, is just drop-dead tired), you create unnecessary tension in your body.

The first main joint in your body is between your ears and behind your nose. It connects the spine to the head and is called the Atlanto-Occipital joint or A/O joint (see Figure 2). When you nod your head to say "yes" you move primarily from this area. Begin to notice whether you are actually nodding from there or nodding from an area lower down on your spine. Many people will find that they are actually bending from the bottom of their neck. If you do that, you may begin to change when becoming aware that your top main joint is higher up.

When performing, begin to notice if you are primarily looking down at the music on a music stand from your A/O joint or if you are pushing your neck forward and down to bring your eyes closer to the music. You should bring the music closer to you rather than you going to it. Musicians rarely see the music any better by straining their necks.

When you need to look up or side-to-side, the same type of observation will help. For example, if you are playing chimes and need to look up to see the striking area on the tubes, are you moving primarily from the A/O joint or are you pushing your chest out, thereby narrowing your back in a way that causes excess tension throughout your body? In the Alexander Technique the neck area (which includes the front and back of your neck) is where movement begins, regardless of what you are doing. So, in any movement, begin to notice whether you are tightening your neck or letting it be free. I do not know of any activity where your neck needs to be tight!

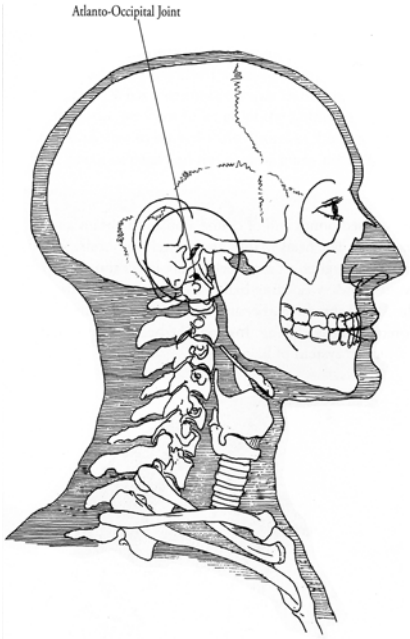
Your hip joints are another major joint. Most people move as if their hip joints were located at the top of their pelvis—at the waist. However, no bones or joints make up the waist! The hip joints are located lower than what is generally thought. When you sit in a chair you can see the fold that is created by your thigh and upper body. Your hip joints are found deep within the center of that crease.

The hip socket faces outward to the side of the body, not in front. When moving down toward the marimba, snare drum, or timpani, notice if you are moving forward from your hip joints or bending down from the top of your pelvis area. A lot of fluid movement is available if you change your body map and move where the body is naturally designed to move. When this is discovered, movement on instruments (easily observed on marimba since it is so long and you need to move quickly) becomes easy, light, and fluid.

Many people perform activities with excess tension in their pelvis area, which tends to look as if the pelvis is pushed forward. This puts a strain on the whole body, particularly the hip area, creating resistance, and cutting off energy throughout the whole body. When energy is blocked it is like driving a car with your brakes on. Explore your pelvis/hip area to understand where your hip joints are and how your hip joints move.

Your knees are the third main joint. People often lock their knees when standing or walk-

Figure 2



ing—or when performing on almost any percussion instrument. It is like standing or moving on stilts. Your mind thinks of your legs as straight boards, and your body does its best to move. When you are standing, walking, or performing, notice if your knees are hyper-extended or flexed in a locked position. Or, is there a dynamic balance in the upper leg and lower leg that allows for flexible movement?

If you find yourself locked, keep in mind that the stiffness created in your knees might be because of tensions found in your upper body. When you notice tension in your torso you can let it go and, as Alexander put it, allow your neck to be free so that your head can move forward and up, so that your spine can lengthen and your back can widen.

Your ankles are the fourth main joint. Become aware of any tightness in your foot as you glide or step from the top end of the marimba to the bottom. When you lift your leg, are you holding tension in your ankles? A misconception is that the ankle located at the back end of the foot at the spot that forms the shape of the letter "L" with the leg. Actually, the ankle joint is more centered and allows your weight to be distributed evenly from the front of your foot to the back. This understanding can help you move with less tension.

IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING WITH ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE TEACHERS

This article is just an introduction to the Alexander Technique. There is no substitute for taking lessons from a teacher. Lessons vary in nature depending on the teacher's understanding and creativity. The teacher's hands can be placed on your body to encourage the releasing of tension, or the teacher may not use his or her hands at all. Many lessons with performing artists include having the artist perform while the teacher observes and gives feedback on the quality of the performer's movement.

Many people have noticed extraordinary changes in the way they move by studying Alexander Technique. Many have lived a happier and healthier life because of it. Alexander Technique does not just pertain to performing artists, although they tend to have a vested interest in what it has to offer. In my case, it has become a way of life—a way of understanding myself that perhaps I would not have found without it—and performing and teaching music has taken on a whole different dimension.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

Conable, Barbara. *What Every Musician Needs To Know About The Body.* Portland: GIA Publications, Inc. 1998 revised 2000.

Conable's book is the first I recommend to any musician interested in learning about body movement. It can be referred to over and over again by any musician, and it is wonderful for music instructors at any level to teach body awareness to students. It is easy to read and full of informative pictures.

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

This well-written book takes you through many aspects of the Alexander Technique and performing music.

Gilmore, Robin. *What Every Dancer Needs To Know About The Body.* Contact Robin Gilmore at: rglimmer@mindspring.com to purchase a copy.

Gilmore's book is not just for dancers. Percussionists can benefit from it tremendously—after all, we dance on and around our instruments all the time.

Barker, Sarah. *The Alexander Technique – Learning To Use Your Body For Total Energy.* New York: Bantam Books, 1978; revised 1991.

Barker's book was one of the first to appear after Alexander's own books (which were written between 1910 and 1941). It is concise and informative. The second half of the book, called "The Practice Of The Technique – How To Do It," gives hints on how to observe your habits while moving your arms, sitting, standing, etc.

Gelb, Michael. *Body Learning – An Introduction to the Alexander Technique.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc. First Owl Book Edition, 1987.

Gelb's book is used in many college-level Alexander Technique classes as a beginning text. It is written to provide the basic information on the Alexander Technique and provides clear definitions of phrases and words that most Alexander Technique teachers use today.

Alexander, F.M. *The Use of the Self.* London: Methuen and Co., 1932 reissued Orion Books Ltd., 2001.

Alexander's third book, written in 1932. It is a must for anybody interested in reading about the technique by the person who discovered it. The chapter called "Evolution of a Technique" tells Alexander's story step by step on how he changed his habitual tendencies.

Oysler, Linnie. *Observations – Journal 1991–2003.* Unpublished. Contact Rob Falvo at: falvorj@appstate.edu to purchase a copy.

Personal observations on movement, consciousness and self-awareness. Oysler's observations come from many years of being an Alexander Technique teacher and her interest in spiritual consciousness.

Rob Falvo is an associate professor of music at Appalachian State University, where he heads the percussion department, and he is a member of the Philidor Percussion Group In May 2007, Falvo graduated from the Chesapeake Bay Alexander Studies – North Carolina Teacher Training Program and in June 2007 became a certified teaching member of Alexander Technique International. Falvo earned a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in percussion performance from the Manhattan School of Music. PN