

INTRODUCTION TO THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

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Abstract: The Alexander Technique (AT) is based on the idea that as vertebrates we are whole systems where all muscles are coordinated with each other, and that all muscles play a role in the movement of an animal. This includes the muscles involved with phonation. The principles of AT are summarized here with a singer in mind.

Keywords: Posture, Voice, Efficiency, Coordination, Mobility

I. INTRODUCTION

The Alexander Technique (AT) seeks to find the most effective relationships between the body parts (head, torso, and limbs), for the performer (vocalist) to achieve the most efficacious mobility in gravity, to engage in the environment to achieve effective bodily posture/movement. The AT finds that the most efficient relationships of the entire body for movement in humans, are the very same for the movements of the vocal muscles. Recent research on neuro-mechanics supports findings that AT helps in the efficiency of movement control [5].

II. METHODS

This presentation outlines the main principles of AT to help the vocal artist (VA) to realize AT organization in allowing the VA to reduce bodily fatigue during all forms of performance, from rehearsals to a full stage concert.

AT helps to control the components of the body that affect free singing. These components include the following parts: Larynx, Feet, Hips, Head and Neck Joints, Jaw, and Spine.

1. *Larynx:* Part of the laryngeal vocal system comprises a muscular suspension system, and from an AT perspective, it is part of the larger suspension and movement system of the entire body. The vertebrate suspension system brings the animal up off of the Earth, and establishes effective relationships between all of the muscles and bones for coordinated movement while preserving this vertical arrangement. When vocal problems are detected, the AT

instructor discovers which parts of the body are having a detrimental influence on the vocal muscles.

2. *Feet:* We often think the feet are a long way from where we produce sound in the neck. But if we are using more tension because we are standing inefficiently in the force of gravity, that extra tension will affect the freedom of our vocalizing muscles. For example, if we have more than 50% of our weight on our heels, then we will be essentially falling backwards, and since this is unacceptable, the muscles in the front of the body will grip to keep us from falling rearward. The throat muscles will try to help in holding us upright, and that extra tension can affect the voice.
3. *Hips:* Leaning backwards at the hip joints is simply prohibited by AT. Humans have evolved to be fully upright, but usually modern humans continue to go farther and are standing on the back slopes of the femur heads where the upper body is again falling backwards. When this happens vocal and breathing muscles will again be recruited to hold us up, rather than to be free to move for breathing and singing.
4. *The Head Neck Joint:* There are many reasons why we tend to lean backwards at the hip joints, but one of them is that when we do so, our eyes are positioned higher. Since vision is our dominant sense, we often measure our stature and uprightness by how high the eyes are. But for measuring the efficient alignment of the skeleton in gravity, the head neck joint over the hip joint is a more accurate line up of our bones. Thus if eye height is used at the measurement of height, we will tend to put our hips forward, balance on the back slope of the femur heads, and use the muscles on the front of the torso, including the throat, to hold ourselves up, with the result that we restrict breathing and the movement of the vocal muscles.

5. *The jaw*: The muscles of the jaw are also a part of the movement system, and this makes sense because the original reason for movement was to go get food. Why our locomotion system works so well with a long spine, is the advantage a long spine gives to an animal to reach the food first. Through millions of years of evolution our bodies have coordinated movement with the mouth and jaw. In modern life where we are also talking and singing, we tend to sit down to eat, and we usually do not think that jaw movement has anything to do with leg movement. But when we want the most integrated and efficient use of the jaw, we see that every other joint is able to help by participating in that movement. The reverse is also true. If we hold all of the muscles of our body the movement of the jaw is reduced. Similarly, if we grip the jaw, our hip joints will tend to tighten. You might enjoy opening your jaw and allowing every joint in your body to play a role in that movement, especially for adjusting for the changes in balance that occur with jaw movement.

Relations between Movement and Singing:

As our ancestors engaged with their environments, their ability to coordinate individual movement was of high survival importance, but also vocal communication to coordinate with others as a moving hunting band, was also probably of great importance. The ability for humans to synchronize movement and communication would have been a very valuable skill.

However, today we often see that modern humans are tending to use only parts of their bodies when moving to phonate. Plus, we often see singers overworking to try to overcome the background tensions associated with non-moving postures. This excess gripping, which tends to immobilize the body, is often restricting the very muscles that need to move to sing freely. Singing with excess tension is so common now, that when searching for images of singers on Google images, the vast majority of singers are over compressing their bodies to vocalize. Unfortunately, these extra tensions can lead to vocal injury. The injured singer can rest and heal, but if they return to singing using the same postural relationships that were present when they were injured, they can easily re-injure themselves.

III. CONCLUSION

The AT can be of great use in tuning the vocalist's body so that their entire body is contributing and participating in the sound. The AT is an educational technique, where the student is taught to notice the inefficient ways, they are arranging their bodies. AT shows how to stop using unconscious habitual postures, how to move to into improved arrangement of a vocalist's body, and how to use improved postures of the whole body for producing free sound.

Note: After my workshop with the Krakow Conservatory students, one singer said that she was never able to get a full breath until she learned the information that she was usually leaning backwards to sing.

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