



WSMTA

2023 Conference @ Sun Mountain Lodge, Winthrop, WA

Tuesday, June 27, 3:00 PM

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Integrative Alexander Technique for Music Teachers

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What is the Alexander Technique?

Alexander Technique teachers describe the work in many ways. Here are a few I have come to:

1. A way to call yourself into coordination so you can do anything better.
2. A way to become more neuroplastic and deliberately create new patterns.
3. A wish you carry into any activity.
4. A way to consciously direct yourself and have more freedom of choice in your work, play, and life.
5. An educational method that teaches you to take unnecessary pressure off of your system so that you can move in a more fluid, coordinated way.

...you'll notice that all of these include something like "method" "wish" or "way." That's important. The AT is a process-oriented, educational method. It isn't a therapy or medical treatment. However, because it creates optimal conditions for change and renewal, it can aid in healing of all kinds.

How does the Alexander Technique work?

- In the workshop, recall that we did a simple activity called the "reverse Alexander Technique," a term coined by master teacher Cathy Madden. If you tighten between your head/spine and then try to play your instrument, you will likely notice various undesirable results. When you restore to a free and natural head-spine relationship, it feels better. The trick, or "technique" part? Keeping the new coordination going while doing your ingrained, habitual activity. Scrunch again. At the moment you go to play, make a new choice: ask to unscrouch, and then decide whether to continue to play as you continue to unscrouch. *That's the AT in a nutshell!*
- In the workshop, we also used a spring as a metaphor for the spine. When you release pressure from the top, the spring restores to its natural resting length. I learned this in my very first lesson with Catherine Ketrick and David Mills.
- **Alexander Technique process** by Cathy Madden. (www.cathymadden.net)
 - Ask to "coordinate" - *a simple thought - if you've thought about it you've done it!*
 - So your head can move - *restoring free/easy movement between head and spine*
 - So all of you can follow - *automatic postural patterns, whole system readiness, freeing, etc.*
 - So that you can do what you're doing - *integrate the coordination into your activity*

What are some key concepts?

- **Integrative Alexander Technique:** the school I am from that believes that the AT can and should be integrated into your life and activity right away. Traditional AT teachers may ask you to come to 10 lessons before they deem you ready to try your instrument in a lesson; we want students to explore using the AT to play music right away even if it is messy, because that often leads to the best learning.
- **Use/coordination:** your overall quality of movement. Everyone recognizes the beautiful coordination with which great athletes, young children, and performers move. Can beautiful movement be taught, or is it something some people have and others don't? What do you think after taking this workshop?
- **Primary control:** The idea that the head-spine relationship governs our overall quality of movement.
- **Psychophysical unity:** we are whole. Mind and body are united. **Movement is embodied thought.** Two of my trainers, Catherine Kettrick and David Mills, say this often.
- **Conscious direction, aka the AT process:** this is the conscious wish to coordinate via head-spine, so that your whole system can come along, so you can do what you're doing. I realize this is wordy; that is one challenge with this work. When you practice, it becomes a fluid, unified process!
- **Faulty sensory appreciation:** this is a fancy way to say you can't 100% trust your sensory feedback (i.e., "I feel lighter!" or "I feel bubbly"). Our senses report change and register contrast. Each sensory experience is unique and useful. However, searching for a feeling of lightness as a way to gauge your effectiveness is a dead end. You may be moving beautifully but notice absolutely nothing. Instead, rely on the rational, repeatable Alexander Technique process.

What is Body Mapping and how does it relate to the Alexander Technique?

Body mapping was founded by Barbara Conable, who had already been teaching the Alexander Technique for many years. She saw how much musicians benefitted from understanding the anatomical truth of their design. As an Integrated AT teacher, I use body mapping extensively in my work. Integrating anatomy information with the AT process is a very powerful combination.

Recommended reading: *What Every Musician Needs to Know about the Body* by B. Conable, www.bodymap.org.

Body Mapping concepts for beginners

Integrate these with Alexander Technique process for the most powerful results.

- Atlanto-occipital joint (aka AO or OA joint) - where is it? What does it do? Why is it important?
- spine - what is it like?
- whole arm - my personal mission is that all music teachers in WA would know what a whole arm is!

Other ideas that music teachers may find useful

- the AT offers a safe, reliable, and efficient solution for performance anxiety. No more pretending the audience is in their underwear! (who came up with that, anyway?!)
- Language is powerful, so we need to carefully consider how we're speaking to our students. Young children are quite literal and may take movement metaphors the wrong way. For example, a pinky cannot be "round" but dutiful students will try! Another example: music playing and performance are NOT relaxing. They are highly coordinated, whole system, exciting activities. When told to relax or calm down, many people slump or pull themselves down.
- You can't get "into your body" or "out of your head." (sorry!) However, you can learn to think whole.