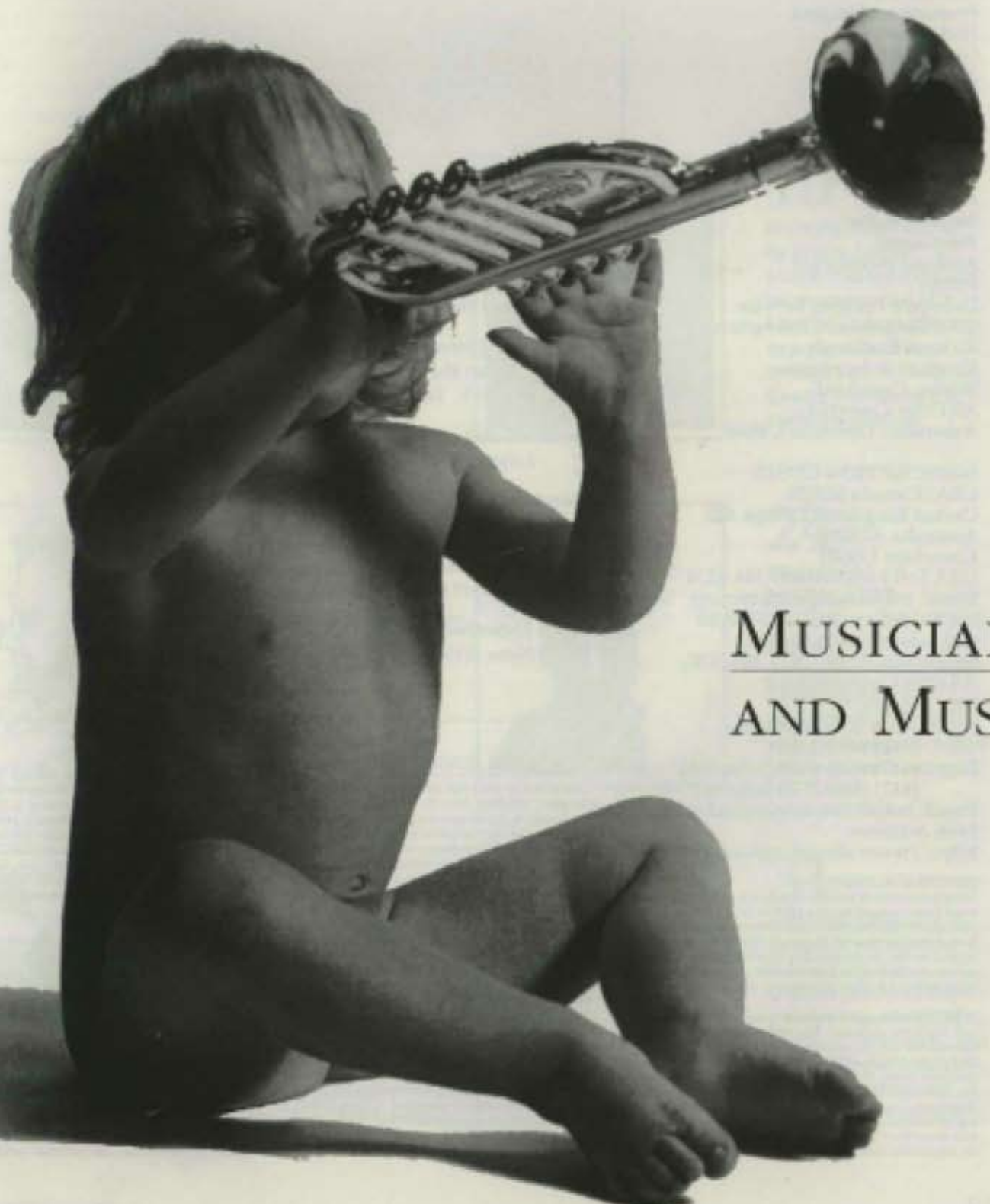


DIRECTION

A Journal on the Alexander Technique

MUSICIANS & MUSIC



MUSICIANS
AND MUSIC

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CORRECTIONS

DIRECTION Volume 1 (7) pp. 287-291, F.M. Alexander and Evolution, by Iain M. O. Fothergill contained the following mistakes. Our apologies to readers and the author (all those late nights left): p.289 1st column, for (pp.117-118) read (G, pp.117-118); for (p.124) read (G, p.124). Reference to footnote 4 belongs after the word "prominently" on p.290, 2nd column. Reference to footnote 5 belongs after "declining" on p.290, 1st column. In the references BB means "Encyclopaedia Britannica", and H means "The Golden Bough". P.290, 2nd column, for "nature defies nature" read "nature defies nurture". Also, footnote no. 4, "Magnum's paper in 1928" should read "Magnum's paper of 1924"; for "retired" read "retired".

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STAGE FRIGHT

by Ulfried Tölle



We all suffer from stage fright of some form in our lives. Musicians, however, have to regularly confront this issue. We learn a technique to gain control over our instrument. We spend hours on perfecting these instrumental skills in order to attain this control. Then comes the moment of truth. The spectre of stage fright arises and, under performance conditions, I know of nobody who manages to keep complete control. In performing, momentum carries us along after the first note. But the problem of that first note always exists.

I've been fighting stage fright for more than ten years now. It was as part of this process that I came to know the Alexander Technique and I must say I abused it, because I was only interested in the technique as a means of getting rid of my stage fright. Although my problems with stage fright diminished throughout my training, I never actually started to direct myself as I was a stubborn end-gainer. As a result, I continued being such a victim of my trembling on stage that my French horn shook, thus causing an uncontrolled vibrato.

I struggled for a long time to find the trick - I even trained to become an Alexander teacher for that purpose - but I kept on not finding it. What new insights have I gained about the Alexander Technique through my confrontation with my stage fears?

We all know about letting our necks be free, etc., but we really know very little about the nature of the habits we have and want to overcome. Unless we investigate this question we will fail in any stress situation just as surely as the sun will rise tomorrow. As I see it, we have to know more about the nature of our habits in order to take responsibility for the ones we have. Other-

wise we can quit once more and say, "Sorry, I'm the victim of my habit again today!" But that isn't what we want, is it?

Let us begin our investigation. Look at your Self, observe your Use. Have you *chosen* the way you sit or stand? I don't know your answers, but most of the time when I ask myself this question, I have to answer, "No, I didn't *choose*, it just happened that way". While we can always choose, we normally don't. We just don't think about choice. And when we fail to make a choice we rely on our habits and react in accordance with our preconceived ideas.

I have come to realize that there are two concepts which play a large role in my life and thus also with stage fright. Firstly, I have discovered that I waste a lot of energy on stage by desiring to be someplace other than where I am, whereas the only possibility is to acknowledge where I am and to *be there*.

Secondly, I have the desire to gain and maintain control. I have come to understand that this is not only my personal concept, but everybody's personal concept, to a greater or lesser degree. Today, however, I no longer allow myself to be tied to the concept of having to gain control, but to choose to be out of control so that I can direct my awareness towards that which is required now, whatever that may be.

The only thing we can do, is to allow ourselves to be where we are now, namely, in the state of *being out of control!*

This, of course, did not solve my problems all at once, but gave me the freedom to look in new directions. I became free to look for the underlying concepts which

allow a specific habit to persist. I discovered that I have been *and still am* thinking that I have to prove to other people that I am *really* good enough. Furthermore this discovery revealed that I unconsciously assume that I am better than others and then have to prove to myself that I am really someone special. I still have not got rid of this idea and I think that it is a part of *who I am*, of who Ulf is in my mind. I create a gap between the audience and myself by the thought that there is a *really big* difference between everyday life and performance. So I have no chance of being in contact with either the audience or with my Self.

My mind was, and still is, preoccupied with such thoughts. Remembering that I always waste the most energy when I am somewhere and wish to be elsewhere, I now choose to allow these thoughts to be there. I simply inhibit any reaction to them and this means I gain more freedom to direct my awareness.

This in turn leads me to another aspect of dealing with stage fright: that of *action*, and being active.

Most of the time I have my preconceived ideas of what people, things and situations are like. I get into trouble with this because I do not take responsibility for my reactions to these ideas.

Michael, a student of mine, complained to me about one of his habits in playing the piano. He was *always* measuring the extent to which he could express himself in sound and was never satisfied. He could not express himself as long as he was preoccupied with evaluating what had already happened, thereby leaving himself no room to be in the present. He was reacting to his preconceived idea of the music. I pointed that out to him clearly enough for him to understand what he was doing. I requested he not try to fight against his evaluating 'automatism', as it is habitual and will make its appearance anyway. I asked him to be aware of it, not feeling bad or even guilty, but simply allowing it be there, taking over responsibility for the fact that it exists within him, and to go on playing. When it makes its appearance - fine! - and what about the other qualities he could be aware of, such as his contact with the chair, the length and width of his back, the lightness of his movements, etc? Because he allowed himself the possibility of being aware of these other factors he was thus able to change his playing, and so became satisfied with his sound.

Michael's habit to measure his playing, and to feel bad about, it left him in the domain of reaction to other thoughts. This did not allow him access to a shift in awareness and thus there could be no shift in his Use.

The non-doing part for Michael was the inhibition of reaction to any thought that arises. At the moment when he wanted something not to be, or to be

different, he was already reacting to preconceived ideas. I perceive the active part of this situation as being the assumption of responsibility for whatever thoughts or tensions are present. I define the simultaneity of non-doing and becoming responsible, as being the opposite of reaction, that is - *action*.

*"...in order to deal with...
my stage fright, I have to take
responsibility for my habits."*

How can we enter into a space of *action* from our habitual realm of *reaction*? Normally I am in the state of reaction, for example now when I am writing. As soon as I became aware of it, I began to sit differently as awareness caused a shift in the relationship of my head, neck, and back. I became responsible for my sitting while writing and in this sense my writing became *action*. And if we observe ourselves, we can all find ourselves in similar situations most of the time. Perhaps you will find this easier to observe in a conversation with a friend. Ask him what he wants to do now. He will give you all sorts of answers, but the last thing he is likely to say, while standing, is; "I want to stand here now and talk with you." That is a measure of how far away we are from ourselves in our activity. It makes a difference in the head, neck and back relationship when you *can* choose to do whatever you are doing now, whatever that is.

And, of course, what is true for my 'normal' state of being is even more true for the 'abnormal' one of performance. Only by taking responsibility for my habit of trembling on stage, by allowing it to be there, can I become aware of my Use, thereby causing a shift in my head, neck, and back relationship. I start *actively* playing: I choose to go on stage, I choose to tune my French horn to the oboe, I choose to listen to the orchestra in preparation for my next entrance, etc. Thus, in order to deal with the symptoms of my stage fright, I have to take responsibility for my habits.

It is this sense of responsibility for their habits that I try to communicate to my students in the work. For it is only by assuming responsibility for our habits - whether it be trembling on stage, sitting slumped over a book, or measuring our playing - that we can become free to direct our awareness towards our Use.

Irene, was also a student of mine. She brought another, perhaps more obvious, concept of not being responsible into our lessons: "me - little student, you - big teacher." By this means she gave me the power to tell her who and what she was for that day. This naturally

spoiled our lessons. The moment she delegated a part of her responsibility, she started to carry out my instructions mechanically and simply replaced old habits with new ones, for one of her preconceived ideas was the desire to cling to something or someone else. So I requested that she simply regard me as a fellow student, and not to put me on a throne. I pointed out to her that by placing me up there she was avoiding assuming responsibility for herself. She understood this and we finally managed to have a successful lesson together.

“Alexander once said that the most difficult things to get rid of are the things that don’t exist. Stage fright does not exist.”

At this point, I wish to add that I consider praise in teaching very problematic, although I find myself saying, “Yes”, “That’s it!” and similar things often enough in lessons. It makes my students believe that they are finally *doing* something *correctly*, as there is a universal desire to cling to something perceived to be good. This can, however, undermine the possibility for a successful lesson, because the instant a student clings to an idea of success, he is no longer responsible and he stops being active. At the very moment he fixes on this specific idea of ‘correctness’, he starts to react to this idea, thus curtailing his reasoning process. The Alexander Technique is powerful just because it sets a reasoning process in motion by which people are enabled to start to release tensions and preconceived concepts.

As this is a universal problem, some Alexander teachers use few words, work more practically, or only express the directions by means of metaphors. I do not know whether these methods of instruction can empower a student to become responsible for his habits. For myself, I have found that the instant I deal with a pattern of movement I have to deal with the underlying concept at the same time.

Let us take another look at the question of stage fright now that we have examined these aspects of a person’s conceptual make-up.

Alexander once said that the most difficult things to get rid of are the things that don’t exist. Stage fright does not exist. There are a lot of symptoms that occur when I’m on stage, similar to symptoms of other people when they are on stage, which by tradition are called ‘stage fright’. So for more than ten years I have been working to reduce something that does not exist

I sometimes still have to contend with these things

today. But by shifting my approach to my everyday life, which also takes place on stage, I can be increasingly aware while performing, or, if you prefer, I have started performing in my everyday life.

Perhaps the most active part of this shift is assuming responsibility for the fact that we have these ideas and, by this simple act, we no longer need to react to them. We are free to allow them to be there, but we are no longer tied to them. Whenever I am not fully aware, I have already reacted to the first preconceived idea that pops into my head. In teaching, this has the effect that I always, when either of us is not ‘present’, automatically force my students to conform to this concept. For me the Alexander Technique is a brilliant method for entering the domain of *now*; through union with the body in the present moment, we attain awareness of physically being here, now.

Andreas, another student of mine, plays the organ professionally and came to me complaining about a lack of connection with his arms. His preconceived idea that he already knew how to play the organ prevented any change in his playing, which is why he used himself the way he did. After about eight run-of-the-mill lessons he came and told me of a shift in his awareness which enabled him to change his Use. Andreas realised that he could give himself directions and was able to release undue tension the instant he became “aware” because, as he expressed it, he was “in contact with that which is.” Similarly, Michael, the pianist, formulated forward and up as “the ability of the senses to be in contact with the world.”

Andreas and Michael emerged from their habitual realm of reacting to preconceived ideas into a space where action becomes possible. Real action is unpredictable in its power.

In my opinion, our work with Alexander’s discoveries consists of knowing what is required and searching for what is missing - the awareness of what we feel and do not feel. We can only know intellectually whether something is missing - normally we even overlook the fact that something might be missing. It is only with our intellect that we can remember and remember again, and start being aware, right now... today.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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