

Interview with Alexander Farkas

The following dialogue with pianist, music educator and Alexander Technique Senior Teacher Alexander Farkas from Poughkeepsie/New York, originates from an initially private mail exchange. As an instrumental pedagogue & Alexander Technique teacher, I was primarily interested in Alex's personal perspective on numerous aspects of music-making, as well as -teaching and -learning, which results from his many years of practice of the Alexander Technique.

So, first things first - can you tell us a bit about your musical background?

I am a pianist, beginning as a young child of 6 years old, I think. The usual lessons from neighborhood teachers and then when in secondary school (specialist School of Performing Arts in New York City) moved on to a then famous piano teacher. That continued through university years and then a further degree with another also well-known piano teacher. I had a strong interest during those early years to be a partner for singers and learn the literature of Lied and French Melodies. I had another three years afterwards with yet another piano teacher who supposedly would help me with 'technique,' an area that needed attention. So as you see, I tried all the usual paths to achieve a level of professional competence - but without a satisfactory result. I still lacked an adequate skill level to form an active career as a pianist.

I don't know exactly how or when it happened, but at some point after the many paths of study I pursued, I realised that none of the piano teachers I studied with really were able to bring me to a place of skill and comfort at the keyboard. So, in a way similar to that of FM Alexander, I decided to find out for myself. I simply didn't want to be uncomfortable at the piano any longer. And more or less at the same time, I heard about the Alexander Technique. Life has such chance synchronicities: a singer I was playing for had a girlfriend at the time who was a teacher of the AT and made me a present of a lesson. In a word that was it, or at least from that beginning a path opened up. (Also a chance reading of *Kunst des Bogenschiessens - natürlich auf Englisch* - at about the same time, gave a further opening to my search.)

And then there was a third stage which really moved me on to another level and that was a meeting with Patrick Macdonald when he came on a visit to New York. All previous Alexander work paled instantly the moment he took me from the chair to standing. I then made several visits

to London to have further work from him and to observe his teaching and his training class. It took me a few years further until I was able to do the training course myself - by then Macdonald no longer taught in London - with his former assistant, Shoshana Kaminitz.

I'm not sure I can say what it has been like since then, only to assure you that I am still making discoveries at the piano, always relating to what is happening in any and all parts of the body, and how any change influences the quality of sound and the ease of movement. There is no separation of playing piano and experience of the Technique. It is merely an application of the AT to the act of playing the piano, and the recognition that sound quality and gracious movement of the music become so obvious in the process. There is a complete unity of the two studies, no question about that. This line of discovery - self-teaching in a way - continues today anytime I am able to be at the piano. At the moment I am drawn to the idea and search for absolute equality of all voices in the fugues of the WTC. It is such satisfying work.

Now, before we get into further detail, can you give us a short summary of your teaching-background and tell us a bit about your changes in approaching music teaching after starting to apply Alexander's principles:

Did you know that I taught for some years as a teacher of solfege/ear-training using the Kodaly materials which I studied for two years in Hungary? The curriculum is a very good one, the music Kodaly wrote for classroom study leading to choral participation is both beautiful and well sequenced, a model of pedagogy. However, I began to notice after some while that the students had difficulty focusing on the task at hand, were restless and unable to apply the necessary decoding steps in order to sing a written line of music. I knew that they needed something that I could not provide in the context of what I was meant to teach in that class.

In the meanwhile I had been taking time to pursue my AT studies in London leading to the teaching certificate. My principle teacher was Shoshana Kaminitz who had been Patrick Macdonald's assistant. My lineage as a teacher was formed in that school to which I originally connected when Mr. Macdonald came to offer lessons in New York some years earlier. You can find more detail in the bio at the end of my book.

I don't know that there was ever a clear dividing line in my music teaching marking a border between how I taught before and then after my

Alexander teacher training. I think I was fortunate in that I had a critical sense of what was good and what was not whether in music teaching or Alexander Technique and I can't say that applying FM's principles directly to either teaching began precisely as a conscious decision. It was more a question of recognising a certain quality that formed a common core of experience. It is probably more accurate to say that the Technique gave me a way of accessing an experience which seemed to resonate at a visceral level. In fact, I am very suspicious of the kind of testimonial for the Technique which implies that by 'adding' the AT any serious problem will disappear. The process is more individual, longer and more organic calling for a deepening sensitivity on the part of both student and teacher. (The AT in my opinion does not work for every students in every situation.)

I also think that FM's work was a continuous process and search approaching an essence and to which there is no point of absolute arrival. We are all learning, teaching ourselves and learning from our experiences, i.e. from our students.

So, how exactly did your Alexander studies influence your approach on teaching music? What kind of needs did you sense in those students and (how) did you manage to give them something different than before?

The students I worked with were at a music conservatory level, a college as we call it here in the States. They were in the 18 to 22 year age bracket, so not very young children. I don't know that I managed to give them something different as I was obliged to teach a specific skill - music literacy and oral skills - and was not able to present ideas along AT lines. They showed symptoms: nervous tapping of feet and knees, arms tightly held, needing to leave the room and return from lavatory. The other area: inability to visualize a structure (do, re, mi upwards is mi, re, do downwards), resistance to decoding symbols, impatience with repetition. One student even said: I just want to know it already; I don't want to have to take the time to learn it. I must say she was very honest. In my present (subsequent) position, I am able to give AT lessons to instrumental students and that is a much better situation as the students discover that playing can be done with much greater ease and lesson stress.

I find this very interesting. Do you still think that it wasn't possible to present ideas along AT lines in such a setting or was that your perspective back in the days? From my teaching experience it's

possible in most situations, both teaching and everyday life, to interlace aspects of AT thinking and achieve surprising results. I'm not talking about naming inhibition, direction and getting people in and out of chairs, but all the indirect qualities like not jumping to solutions too quickly, staying present, open and leaving room for choice. Sometimes I feel like I'm almost always teaching AT, no matter what's the subject on the surface. Do you have any thoughts on this?

That's hard to say now, perhaps had I been more experienced as an AT teacher at the time I might have been able to have a wider vision and incorporate more of the ideas. But then not all students respond equally well to the Technique and some are so thoroughly end-gaining because of their education that they are not willing to allow a change in how they are thinking. Last week I presented an introductory session to a group of first year conservatory students; about four responded with active interest, the other ten were bored and impatient. I think we need to be honest and, as much as we see the deep value in the AT, not everyone will respond to our enthusiasm. It also comes back to me that one of my goals in the solfege class was to bring the students to appreciate a very simple line of music, to find beauty in the sound and shape of it - and isn't this what we are about with the Technique as well?

Absolutely. So this is what you think it boils down to? Being able to (use ourselves well in order to) support & inspire others in finding beauty, ease and lightness in approaching and executing something - no matter if it's learning a musical piece or getting in and out of a chair?

Yes, the Alexander Technique, in its concept and application, forms an underlying basis for anything we wish to do. It can be applied to how we sing or play any instrument, to how an artist uses himself when holding a brush or pencil, or any movement artist of ballet or contemporary dance, etc. And I would like to make clear that the advantages of employing the Technique extend far beyond simply easing and eliminating pain or being able to improve technique. It is difficult to describe the change that follows on once we think in terms of the AT principles when we play. Nothing short of a transformation takes place: it is apparent in the quality of sound – more present, richer – and in the more continuous, more perceptible melodic line. Such changes are the result of an energy that resonates in the music, an energy that originates in the player and to which he has given free rein to from his own body. Music that has this

quality, when he hear it, makes us feel that we are breathing for the first time ever.

Sounds a lot like Dewey to me: „It (the technique of Mr. Alexander) bears the same relation to education that education itself bears to all other human activities. [...] Without the control of our use of ourselves, our use of other things is blind; it may lead to anything.“

Dewey helped us to better understand what Alexander was all about; he saw how a change in our fundamental use allowed us to change how we go about any task at hand. His use of the phrase ‘thinking in activity’ enables us to change priority, from exerting the effort we think we need to apply to get a ‘perfect’ result, to returning and remaining with the principle of ‘non-doing.’ I cannot emphasize enough how important the very basic idea of change of priority is. It enables us to set aside the effort to ‘end-gain.’

If I asked you to pick one aspect of contemporary music education to be observed critically, what might that be?

Something I’ve been thinking about recently might serve as a general area to explore and that is the heightened anxiety that attaches to studio lessons - of all kinds, even AT lessons. The one-to-one structure in itself coupled with the anxiety of never having practiced enough and the fear of not doing well, all contribute to a very stressful environment. At the conservatory where I give AT lessons, I think a similar level of anxiety accompanies the student into the Alexander lesson as well. It is after all also a lesson.

I think we have to recognize that hardly any music education occurs without a considerable level of stress, beginning the moment that the student opens the case and simply looks at the instrument. The fear of error, of the next note being out of tune, or the bow not in the right alignment, or the elbow not at the right height - all of these and more take over the student’s focus and he/she is unable to have an internal contact awareness with any and all other areas of the body. Put simply, there is precious little music instruction that isn’t end-gaining.

As an encouraging story, a friend who had lessons with James Galway told me that at her first lesson with him he said that she was not to worry about intonation yet! I like that, very much, but it is not often the case.

From my experience I guess it's both a cultural habit as well as a thing we learn in school: to fear the error, to rely on an errant concept of concentration and to mainly focus on the outcome rather than the way we acquire new information in a constructive, open and rewarding way. When thinking about my own students the wide majority of them brings this habit to a certain extent to their lessons and I spend lots of time to work on alleviating it's impact on the learning environment and process. It's really tough and even young children of 6-7 years, who know nothing about the widely-used teaching methods at music conservatories, bring this fear of judgement & failure to the lessons and try to overcome it by all sorts of end-gaining.

Thinking back about my music teachers I was very lucky to have been taught mostly in encouraging ways. Even one of them, who still used to beat children back in the 70s and early 80s for playing wrong notes, had matured into a fine old gentleman, when I studied with him. Nonetheless there always was some aura of fear in his teaching room and I guess I was lucky enough to have been extremely motivated and working diligently on my musical skills at that time, which seemed to please him.

When I started to teach my own students it was a strong focus of mine to explore encouraging ways of learning and I guess I was lucky again: Berkeley instructor Jon Finn was the first to point me - about 10 years before my first encounter with F.M. Alexander's work - to Barry Green's "The inner game of music". Green, an American orchestral and solo double bass player and teacher, strongly influenced my musical approach in learning and teaching, as he was the first one to point me to the formula "performance is potential minus interference".

He wrote a lot about the psychology of making music and encouraged experiments with accepting the possibility to fail in performing a passage. He also was the first to make me think about the means-whereby and to rely on making musical choices instead of gaining ends. Much later I found out that Green himself had been taking Alexander lessons for many years, which clarified where his line of thinking was coming from.

Nowadays I often meet Guitar-/Piano students who "fled from" public music schools in search for a different environment. They often report about fear being abused actively as a "motivator" for

working harder, practicing more, learning faster, etc. I think this is a psychologically complex topic and goes far beyond reproducing the ways these teachers have been taught themselves.

What is your experience in this field, as you can look to some more decades of learning and teaching music?

I'm beginning to question something very basic: the structure of a weekly lesson, not that I have a plan for something to replace it. Two objections: the student never feels he's practiced enough, and secondly, he sees the lesson as a test, hoping that the teacher will be pleased. What he sees as a test brings anxiety and the fear that he will fail. Most instrumental tuition is exterior, keep this elbow at this level, shape your finger and put it in that place. It essentially stops the breath. In woodwinds and brass, the student is told to swallow as much air as possible and hold it in, always with the fear of running out of air, and once the breath is held it is very difficult to release it back to movement. Essentially, most music education is end-gaining. And the anxiety is built in so that any lesson, even an AT lesson, begins in a state of apprehension. I don't have an alternative structure in mind yet, but I think we must begin to think differently and examine the many assumptions we have accepted for a very long time. Contrast that with how the gypsy violinist learned to play for example. Voice teaching has perhaps the most problematic system of all and for that I do have some ideas. (Irving Berlin made Ethel Merman promise never to go to a voice teacher!) Some of Suzuki's ideas are admirable, but that also depends on how the teacher applies them. Kodaly's teaching materials for beginning music education are beautiful but they approach it from choral singing — and the transfer to instrumental is not always done well.

I totally agree on that. For 10 years now I'm teaching with less and less expectations towards the musical outcome of my students on a „test and fail“-level. I always work with what they bring to the lesson and never push them to practice more or improve faster. Of course I give them advice in how I would approach a certain obstacle or support them in finding suitable means to reach their desired ends. But I'm very cautious of not projecting personal expectations onto them like many teachers do („You see what a good student he/she is? That's because I'm such a good teacher/musician.“). It's not about my ego, it's about them feeling supported and working towards musical and personal liberation. Do you know what I mean?

Competition exists in all fields and very often a teacher's prestige acts as a factor in demanding more from the student. Teaching is an art; it requires balance. No two lessons are ever the same, no relation of teacher and student is ever the same. Of course we are happy when our work is appreciated, recognized as having been helpful to the student. But when not properly recognized we must acknowledge our disappointment and move on. I think it is important in teaching to always aim for our student to not be dependent on us, that we encourage every student to become independent and find his own way. (This is especially true in training future teachers - and more especially in training future teachers of the AT!) Are we presenting a set of rules to our student which must be followed, or are we passing along a quality of working, of movement, of a way of being and thinking? Are we teaching confinement or encouraging a freedom of movement and a gradual refinement of coordinative ability? At a deeper, more subtle level, are we presenting our student with the idea and possibility of non-doing?

One misleading concept that arises in my teaching from time to time is the one of „muscle memory“ - the ability to „program“ your fingers and bodies in a way that can be recalled like computer data when performing. What do you think about the whole underlying idea:

I'm trying to give this question some thought. What do we understand as muscle memory? For a professional musician who has to perform under stress, I can see that there is a need for reliability which can be fixed so that there is no chance of an error. But in fact, my experience has been that the professional musician/singer cannot disturb what it is they are used to and cannot risk changing their way of working. There is security in the familiar and change means letting go of at least some of that security.

But from the Alexander perspective, recognizing the power of habit, in fact there is a muscle memory in every phrase we have ever played. If one simply takes the score away from the instrument and lets the eye move along the line of music, it becomes obvious where and how the muscle memory is reactivated. As AT teachers it is our task to teach the possibility of changing that muscle memory so that something different can occur. But the professional cannot afford to suspend the known and wait for something unknown to take its place. As students we are looking to unlock the habitual and wait for the arrival of that different something. So, yes, we are bringing about the possibility of change to something easier but in those first moments of suspending the habitual we are

moving into a void which can be disorientating. To become accepting of the present moment is not as easy as it may sound.

Does this make sense? It goes against traditional ways of teaching much of which assumes that playing music needs to be restrictive and confining. Education too often means only how not to make a mistake and there are so many opportunities to be wrong in music: intonation, bow movement/angle, rhythmic notation, etc. Muscle memory is an attempt to reduce risk - but it can also deaden the music and cut it off from our hearts.

How would you approach a professional musician with, let's say, RSI? How would you make him question the whole concept of muscle memory and over-repetition as a tool to make his playing more reliable? And more important: how would you teach younger musicians differently so that they don't fall into the whole vortex you described above?

The professional musician is very hard to teach. For him there is too much at stake. His livelihood and professional life depend on doing what he has been doing and not changing it. What he would need is to stop playing at all for a while and agree to change how he works, but that is a choice he may not have. Ironically it would be fortunate if some condition arises that prevents him from continuing, and then perhaps he might have the motivation to rethink the strain and effort he has always assumed was necessary. There is no reason for anyone to think that a familiar activity can be achieved at a lower level of effort. How to begin with young students now requires us to examine and think differently of the earliest lessons. Could the student simply play along with the teacher, a kind of apprentice learning, absorbing a quality of being and of movement, and not giving the student a list of rules to follow. I'm thinking more in that direction.

I love that idea, teaching by example instead of trying to infuse knowledge with the „Nuremberg funnel“ and force rules upon them. I share your experience that sometimes it's very hard for students - at all ages and levels of proficiency - to overcome the hierarchic pressure they know from school, university or sports and take advantage of (and also responsibility for) the space we can create in a lesson.

Maybe a lot of what can be achieved in that area boils down to how Alexander described the work once: "I'm giving you an exercise to

find out what thinking is." If we can provide suitable exercises for our students/apprentices, they will find it out all by themselves, just like the gypsy musicians you mentioned above.

Sometimes it might take years for them to find their inner voice and real motivation - and some for sure will always drop out before reaching that stage - but when they do, the musical outcome is full of miracles.

What do you think?

In fact I had one very wise teacher who told me that I would find my niche and the longer it took the better. And a propos he was someone from whom I learned a great deal simply by watching his hands at the piano as he played; they were soft, pudgy, and had dimples where knuckles would have been. A remarkable musician who had been Lotte Lehmann's pianist, he had a repertoire of jokes which he loved to tell but only once he turned very serious when I was coaching with a singer and he suddenly turned to us and said: This song is a sacred trust. One moment in which one learns so much and never forgets - not many such are normally part of our formal education. So what does this tell us about learning? That what we learn is only that which we have decided to take into ourselves, in essence to teach ourselves. (We aren't like geese who were forcefully fed, nicht wahr?) But thinking back, there were not so many moments in my education that became so deeply stamped into my memory.) You have heard perhaps of Margaret Goldie, a long-time associate of Alexander's, who taught (and sometimes terrified many AT teachers in London for many years) who had a way of 'dropping words into your ear,' that actually remained (in the original key, so to speak) forever.

There is so much that we cannot explain. Some music students (a relatively small percent) just seem to have their own, innate, musical personality. For these students we should say as little as possible and never try to impose limitations and rules, only make small suggestions to help them along their own path. And yes, there will be many who will leave music behind as it is not what they are happiest doing. Some others will continue and enjoy amateur participation (they are sometimes more enthusiastic than professionals). Some players will not reveal their true musical passion until after some time, and then yes, there will be miraculous moments. Recently I had a chance to play Schubert's Arpeggione with a student violist who allowed the music to bring out an emotional reaction that surprised me very much - I would not have

expected it -- and the satisfaction was so lovely. There is a reason we have this amazing repertoire, literature: it helps us bring forth our best qualities.

Offerings and suggestions. That sounds a lot like Reformpädagogik and 21st century skills, so we're clearly heading somewhere. What do you think: does the AT add exclusively to these approaches (maybe even beyond what Dewey already brought in)?

I'm not in a position to speak about what in the US is known as 'progressive' education, and remember that John Dewey was an American and it was in the US that progressive education became very popular. My ideas about education have been changing largely because of my continuing years as an Alexander teacher. Dewey did first use the term 'thinking in activity' which I've come to see as an essential element that lets us change our habitual responses. But the application of 'thinking in activity' is not so easy to engage. It asks us to develop an awareness of what is happening in all parts of our body while at the same time we are playing an instrument or singing or dancing, or while we are engaging in any activity. I like to use the term 'inner contact awareness' to describe the process. In other words, while I am playing the piano am I aware of what is happening in my legs, or my spine, or my jaw, or any other area while my hands are doing what they must in order to play the music on the page in front of me, or by memory. It is a never-ending exploration that integrates the music and the physical movement that creates it: it is in fact the joining of the psycho- and the physical.

But I would also like to call attention to the enormous advantage this way of working brings to the process: when 'thinking in activity' we are not able to judge the result as if we were outside ourselves and being our own critic and lamenting whatever we think we are doing badly. In short, it is the antidote to *end-gaining!* That in itself, being a reduction of the effort to end-gain, is of enormous benefit. We cannot simply decide not to end-gain; something must take its place. And 'thinking in activity' leads back to the most essential element of all: *non-doing!* But books have been written about 'non-doing' and it is an area of deep exploration, an endless path of enquiry and development. I do think that Alexander himself was working along these lines and moving closer and closer to the realization of what non-doing was really about. We have his model to guide us and we would do well to follow it.

Patrick Macdonald wrote in his book, that AR Alexander remarked to him, that ,non-doing' was a bit of a confusing term, as „directions

are also doings“, but they are „very small and usually below the sense register“. Also, at another point you write about what we are doing *seems* to happen by itself, while FM talked about the right thing *doing* itself, if we stop *doing* the wrong thing. Could you elaborate a bit about these fine differences?

Ironic and paradoxical that the most important concept in our work is the most difficult to describe in words. My own sense of Macdonald's intention is that he would not want the term 'non-doing' to suggest a state of collapse or an absence of alertness. In fact, not only is the idea of non-doing difficult to describe, it is even more difficult to even imagine what it might be. The concept goes against everything we have ever been taught. Can we even entertain the thought that we put aside the idea that we do not have to initiate movement. That we do not have to 'prepare' to do something correctly. Virtually all our educational experience has been a series of 4 steps: we are told what to do, how to do it, try harder to do it better, and above all we must not make any mistakes. Against this background, we come to an Alexander lesson and we are encouraged to put all this aside and not make any attempt to do anything. It really puts us at a loss, for we think surely there must be something to figure out, find out how to do it, and if we are a really good student, we shall succeed and at the end of the lesson will be able to do something better.

Yes, you will be able to do something better, perhaps, but hopefully you will have an experience that you could not have had had you been trying your best. If we try to do anything, we can only do what we already know and are familiar with. To have a different experience, we have to decide not to do the familiar. Therefore, there has to be a space of time in which we put aside the urge to do something, and wait receptively for something different to happen. It was well expressed by Miss Goldie at the beginning of my very first lesson with her: 'Now as Mr. Alexander used to say, just let yourself be quiet inside so that something different may happen.' That is another way of trying to describe the space and time in which non-doing occurs.

From another side of the same question, we could describe non-doing as a state of *receptivity*. That is what it seems like to me. *But* we must not think that receptivity is passive. Quite the opposite, it is a highly energized state. In fact, receptivity produces a strong force of attraction. (It is the basis of pulling one's enemy off balance in the practice of martial arts.) By becoming receptive, we activate our own internal energy and set it flowing along the pathways through the spine and limbs. (This is what I think Alexander intends to convey when he speaks about

‘direction.’) And further, the state of receptivity activates the attractive force of our hands, the ‘power’ of our hands that creates change in the way our Alexander student is using himself. The link is therefore: non-doing changes itself seamlessly into receptivity that actively creates a power of attraction. Within this process all other details subside into the overall movement of energy – and at this point we no longer need speak of ‘technique’ as it has quite disappeared of its own accord.

Is there anything else you’d like to add?

I recently read something which struck me very forcefully, from an ancient Chinese philosopher: “When there is a problem, we need not try to solve it, only to describe it, use language to say what it is. Then some way out will over time begin to appear.”

I totally agree. Yesterday a piano student of mine (13 y.o.) was unable to play a short polyphonic passage and kept repeating the same mistake without noticing it. I asked her to describe what happened and after two or three repetitions she found out by herself and put into words what she was doing. I then told her how would I approach a similar problem and played the passage once for her. She followed, played the part absolutely flawlessly and looked at me - totally stunned. "It just happened all by itself!", she exclaimed.

Well, my congratulations to you, Marcell. What a lovely story and experience for both your student and yourself. When a student says - it played itself - that’s a high point, and feels so satisfying. As a parallel, a piano student of mine, after some urging, was able to allow her hands to become softer and more fluid and then played a delicate cadenza in a Liszt etude so beautifully, she then looked at me and said - ‘that didn’t feel like my hands.’ And yes, more recently I also have had the experience of moments when the hands seemed to go without me. We are coming close to Zen skills which are described in that manner. Beyond judgment, we are totally in the moment and in the place, not ahead and not behind in our thinking. If in the course of a lesson, however long, there are even 90 seconds of being in that place and moment, consider it a big success. It is by nature fleeting, never to be grasped, the nature of nature itself. And in that space the music becomes something sublime, raising us to an unknown but recognizable plateau. It brings us to the place where the composer was when the music came forth from his pen. Then we arrive at the vulnerable and usually experience a release of tears.

If one had similar experiences, he/she will exactly know what you're talking about. But what do you think it is, that makes these moments so subtle & fleeting, which lets us forget about certain principles of reality, time and again? I mean, when *it's* there it seems almost impossible to lose it but when it's not, you might end up trying to chase your own shadow.

Well, you are now moving into another sphere, one which is most difficult to put into words. I think you are referring to those times when what we are doing seems to be happening by itself, of its own accord. It is a delicious time that comes about when conditions permit it and we ourselves are surprised by its arrival. Does it seem unreal? Yes, but only because it is so different from our usual drive to achieve it. Does it alter our sense of time? Yes, but only because we are usually racing against time and are now moving along with it in unity, not opposing it. At such a moment a musician is no longer concerned with tempo, wondering whether it is too fast or too slow. It is difficult for us to not try to follow a series of rules and instructions, which are in fact what we think is meant by 'technique.' And I would like to stress that both in playing music or in working on the Alexander Technique, we are too used to following a set of imposed rules that we think will enable us to achieve our ends. (Hence the term 'end-gaining!'). The challenge takes us to the threshold of that place where 'technique' disappears, evaporates, and we no longer need to think about it. It is reduced to simply knowing: this is how I do it – I can't do it any other way.

I think what we recognize at such a time of effortless work is that we have not so much found something, but rather have only invited something to come to us. It takes courage to be so open and vulnerable, as we may, at such a time, feel we have lost control. If we try to retrieve it by effort, it will escape our grasp – it cannot be grasped or held. So you are right, chasing our shadow is futile, self-defeating. Maybe it is a question of faith, but confidence grows with repeated experience and then even faith is no longer abstract or capricious.

So if we transfer these ideas to the professional musician, isn't he also working on building faith and confidence in what he *assumes* to be the only way to perform a piece of music - with the difference lying in his *concept* of execution? I guess in most cases he will rely on something more or less randomly made up by himself or his teacher(s), instead of the way nature might reveal it as being most efficient and vivid. If he is lucky, his technique will carry him as far

as he needs it and if he isn't, he will enter the realm of injury and failure sooner or later.

Somehow this reminds me of Marjory Barlow's quote from „*An examined life*“: „Inhibition is further back than people think. [...] It's inhibiting your first reaction to that idea, whatever it is“

Isn't that where we'd have to start if we wanted to interrupt the average musician's cycle of constant testing and self-defeat? With the very basic idea that *he* knew which technique would bring about success and which wouldn't?

Marcell, with this question you are reaching into something at such a deep level that I'm not sure I can actually touch that place with words alone. Marjory Barlow's words are totally *a propos* to what we are dealing with here: there is always a point somewhere further back that brings us closer to that deeper level towards which our work is carrying us.

I once read about a well-known and much beloved professor of French language and literature at Yale University who was quoted as saying that 'we teach who we are.' Perhaps as musicians we can also play *who* we are. But that means taking those steps that are necessary to bring us to that place 'further back' where we find our own core, where we play the music as we do because we could not do it any other way. It is a process of clearing away any mannerism or effect, and putting aside all artificiality.

Then the question is: how do we engage this process? We must begin by *not* deciding what we wish to sound like. (I have more recently begun to doubt the usefulness of musical 'coaching' as it is usually done.). Here the link to non-doing becomes apparent. By allowing ourselves to remain quiet and become receptive, the space in which our individual response to the music will be able to reveal itself, at which point the futility of testing (trying to self-consciously judge from the outside) becomes moot. (I now realize that any thought of being tested arouses the fear of failing.)

In relation to 'technique' as we generally understand the word, our individual voice as a musician will only come forth in so far as our physical movements are also reduced to the level of greatest ease and least effort. In other words, 'technique' as such needs to gradually cease to be an end in itself. The often cited dichotomy of 'technique' versus 'interpretation' is to me a lack of understanding, holding that the physical

and the thought process are two unrelated entities. To whatever extent our playing acquires a non-doing quality, our deepest response to the music will present itself outwardly to our listeners. Our ideal is that we become totally vulnerable so that our physical-emotional energy flows freely outwards. It is only a baring of our innermost being that is worth communicating to others.

At the same time, I want to be clear that playing music (in this way) is not an exercise in indulging our ego. Quite the contrary, it is an act of allowing a very liberating energy merely to pass through us; when it does we are content and find a happiness that is its own reward. Our ego then has no further need to assert itself. As Alexander teachers our aim is to activate the flow of 'direction' (or *chi*) so that our movements become lighter, more flowing and less effortful. The same practice will enable us to inform our listeners as to *who* we really are. We each have a quality that is our own unlike that of anyone else's and we have the strength and courage to allow others to hear it. It is called a 'soul'.

In his later years Alexander said: "After working for a lifetime in this new field I am conscious that the knowledge gained is but a beginning [...] my experience may one day be recognized as a signpost directing the explorer to a country hitherto 'undiscovered,' and one which offers unlimited opportunity for fruitful research to the patient and observant pioneer." What do you think he might have meant by that?

I was not aware that Alexander had spoken of such an idea, but it would seem logical to me that his work brought him to such a thought. He was so true to the step-by-step path he followed that it was inevitable for him to approach such a realm. The basic tenet that the physical and the mind's activity were one and the same must have inevitably brought him to move into such a view.

Do you personally think there is an end to this whole process of self-discovery - to rediscovering and becoming one's 'true self', one's 'essence' or the living, breathing manifestation of a 'unaltered soul' again?

Exactly! there is no absolute point of arrival; movement in that direction never stops. There are times, usually brief moments, when we have a feeling of well-being, of re-connecting with our own center, of knowing we are in the place where we truly belong. (Warning: we will be tempted to hold on to such a moment or to recreate it, neither of which is possible.)

These moments/times happen when we are in motion of some kind, even if the motion is not an actual spatial displacement. We feel both peaceful and energized at such a time, optimistic and securely hopeful that all will be well. It is being true to who we really are.

Thank you very much for these insights and your time, Alex.

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