

Modifications and News in the World Methodology of Violin/Viola Training in the Beginning of the XXIst Century

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Chapter one from my book "Method and Metodology of Violin Training in the Beginning of Twenty First Century, published at 2007, Sofia, ISBN 1310-3946

Changes in the violin method of teaching began around the 1970s, with the popularization of Frederic Matthias Alexander's method named "Alexander Technique". At the age of 23 he became a professional reciting and dramatic actor. After almost completely losing his voice, Alexander begins to look for the reasons for this loss. After a long process of research and self-observation, he creates a method to improve the "use" of body muscles in all positions and movements and heals without medical help. F Alexander reveals that most people stand, sit and move incorrectly, and this is the cause of many illnesses and pains.

He created a school in London that has been functioning until today, teaching his method and publishing his first book, *The Use of Self*, in 1932, in a British Medical Journal. Alexander died in 1955, about twenty years before Alexander Principles or Alexander Technique became world-renowned, and music educators from all over the world began to apply them in their everyday practice. The school he created works with great success, continued and applied in the world by specially trained teachers called " Alexander Technique Practitioners ". The disclosure of this method in detail is a broad and interesting topic, but in this book I can only mention the basic principles of Alexander Technique, which, in the violin/viola teaching methods give extraordinary results.

One of the basic principles of his doctrine is prevention, not treatment. This is a solution to the problems and the more significant the knowledge about the use and functioning of the human body under the control of the brain, the greater the ability of each person to improve health and get rid of the dominant instinctual and mechanical habits that hurt him/her and hinder his/her self-realization.

When he began his studies, Alexander encountered the widespread theory of the separate functioning of "body" and "reason," as well as the beliefs associated with that theory that the illnesses and difficulties in the functioning of a person are either "mental" or "physical" . Of course, in the process of continuing research, Alexander reveals that it is impossible to distinguish "physical" from "brain" processes in any form of human activity.

There could be thousands of examples to confirm this thesis. Here is one of them given in the textbook of F.M. Alexander: Bend the upper part of your body (torso) hard and try to take a deep breath. You will find that this is impossible. Breathing can not be deep because the movement of the chest and lungs is blocked. After several such experiments, the body begins to send "alarming" signals to the brain, accompanied by feelings of pain and inconvenience, which, after alarming the brain control, lead to the correction of the torso position and the release of the normal pathway for the breathing process. The "self-defense" of the body comes after the realization of the "danger"signals coming of the brain. Where is the boundary of "physical" and where on the "brain" - they are connected in inseparable interaction. If the violinist or violinist thinks before they start playing how to "program" the tool's placement so that they do not twist the torso, the problems with the cracked breathing, the pains in the body, and all the permanent injuries resulting from the multiple misplacement would not exist.

Therefore, every musician should have knowledge of Primary Control or Fundamental (fundamental) control. What is F.M.Alexander's concept of the Primary control? If consciousness is the perception of what the brain does, and the physical - what the body does, then the Primary control is the sense of coordinating the conscious with the unconscious movement under the control of the brain. We experience this fundamental control as dynamic maintenance, smoothness and power. F. Alexander reveals that this support of the main control movements comes from the correct "uncompromising" connection between the head and the spine, which provides the opportunity for natural stretching and contraction of the spine. Thus, this control is continuous, undisturbed and healthy, unlike the so-called "pure posture" which, apart from the correct function of the body, has a negative and physically injurious effect. Translated from medical terminology into spoken language, the definition of Primary Control is the natural and inherent mechanism of balance and body support in motion and in immobility controlled by the brain.

In the process of the first self-observation, F. Alexander reveals that excessive backward motion, which he usually does when declaiming, causes a problem in his vocal cords, and putting his head forward releases the muscles of the throat (larynx). This gives rise to the fundamental conclusion that a person experiences tightness and harmful bodily disruptions if the neck muscles are tight, especially if this constriction is common and repetitive. From there, F.Alexander took the following logical conclusions:

- the release of the whole body must begin with the release of the muscles of the neck;
- in the case of free movement, the head leads and the body follows it in a certain physiological order;
- consciously targeting the wrong movements: it is quite possible to learn from old, harmful habits and build new ones that would help smooth and healthy movements not only in playing but also in everyday life.

In support of his last conclusion, F. Alexander said in his book, the "Use of Self" (Ch.1, p.8): **"It does not matter how old are your bad habits to tighten, they cannot be older than the Primary Control, which you have at birth and which is given to you in an intact (healthy) form. "**

To begin training with Alexander Technique and to feel comfortable and light, the student should understand the role of the sensors (sensations) he must use in the learning process. Just as the vision (visual sensation) uses pictures when visiting a museum, hearing (hearing sensation) while attending a concert, the student must use the kinaesthetic (motor sensation) in absorbing Alexander Technique. *The kinaesthetic sensation is not even named* - it is perceived that one has five senses - visual, auditory, taste, touching and odorous. **The kinaesthetic sensation is the sensation of the position and size of the body, whether it moves or not, and whether it moves where and how.**

F.M. Alexandre gives a simple example of establishing a kinesthetic sensation: "Place your hand over your head where you can not see it. Notice that you know exactly where your hand is, without doing anything that we usually call visual activity. Note that you can describe in detail the position of your hand. You can tell how the fingers are connected to one another and to the palm, where exactly the head is placed, whether the wrist is folded or loose. Move your fingers. Note that you can tell when it started and when the movement stopped, determine its speed and sequence, whether the palm was included in the movement and whether the joints are involved. Move your hand in front of your body - Notice that at this point you are using your vision to establish its disposition and movement. Put one hand on the other over your head without seeing it. Note that by touching the second hand (tactile sensation) you are trying to find the position and movements of the first hand. **Another important element of his conclusion is that when you focus only on the arm placed over your head, you do not include the other parts of the body - the shoulders, the torso, the legs. At this point of narrow focus on one hand, you can tighten the leg muscles or twist the torso without paying attention and correcting the errors.**

Alexander Technique Practitioner teaches students to develop their attention to all sensory signals by observing the activity of individual parts of the body along with the overall sense of movement of the body. Thus the learner acquires the ability to feel how the body changes when the neck is released and the head is able to be properly balanced, especially during stage performance. This knowledge should also extend to the ability to balance the weight of the whole body into the joints throughout the exercise and concert performance. This would avoid overloading the spine, pain and fatigue.

The Alexander Technique Practitioner's student develops the ability to bring signals coming from the body to a conscious sensation, confirming the fact that the effort is not the attempt to feel our body, but vice versa - ignorance and ignoring the signals coming from it.

Another neglected sensor is the feel of touch (*tactile sensor*). People with a strong sense of touch also have a sense of the limits of the body and of the body's contact with the world, which helps them to turn this feeling into a corresponding movement. On the other hand, the violinists/violists have much less sense of touch with the strings, because in the process of their training, the skin of their fingers grows thicker.

The kinaesthetic sensation is difficult to train, not only because it is not even officially named and included in science for our senses but also because we get orientation and knowledge about the other sensations from very young children, but no one teaches us to pay attention and to develop motor sensations.

Another important aspect of F. Alexander's system is the discovery of damage to the play caused by tightening or twisting of the body, based on the interplay between all of its parts. *Sometimes the true cause of mistakes is not visible - so modern pedagogues need to develop a simple analytical method to help students discover the exact cause of the damage.*

As I have already mentioned, the aim of my book is not to give all the examples and details in explaining and performing a movement in violin/viola playing, but to help modern young performers to learn to bring in harmony between the natural movements of the body and the violin/viola mechanics under the brain control, **as well as to highlight the role of the modern violin/viola pedagogue, to create a habit for students to "program" and control their movements.** Of course, the process of violin/viola training, includes as in all fields' training two main sides: teachers and students. **Alexander Technique's lecturers use in their work: clarification, graphics, texts, mirrors, tape, VCR DVD, all nowadays existing media, and demonstration with their hands.**

Students who want to successfully master Alexander Technique should actively participate through careful observation of all kinds of demonstrations, ask questions, experiment, learn from old habits, and consciously follow and assimilate the instructions of lecturers

After F.M. Alexander's death, his disciples and enthusiastic followers such as Yehudi Menuhin, Moshe Feldkrise, William and Barbara Conable, and Julie Lieberman further developed, enriched and wrote "tools" for the use of this doctrine.

Before going on separately to the most important additions and contributions of the listed authors, I will mention that starting with F.M. Alexander, all these scientists, performers and educators **recommend students in their everyday work to exclude the excessive physical and psychological effort.**

Every attempt to achieve the limit of movement ability ends with a stronger or weaker pain in the muscles or tendons.

It is logical for every performer, including the violinists/violists, to ask which kind of a result can be achieved with shrunken muscles, intermittent breathing and pain before proceeding to repetitive daily exercises.

I would like to address separately the listed followers of F.M. Alexander

Yehudi Menuhin (1916-1999) is known not only as a talented violinist, but also as a conductor and outstanding teacher, with one of the longest and most successful professional careers among 20th-century musicians. He created in 1963 a special school called the Yehudi Menuhin Academy in the vicinity of London where he taught Alexander Technique and organized training courses in this teaching. The results of Menuhin's teaching method reached a record-breaking success in the late 1980s. His book **The Sixth Violin Lesson published in 1972 is a model of wisdom and a progressive vision of the development of violin techniques.** I would like to note one more fact: watching Menuhin's TV recordings carefully, we can discover the ease of movement, the lack of any effort during the playing, which provoke the natural and enthusiastic reaction of the audience. He is a bright example of the implementation and use of Alexander Technique!

Young violinists, check out Yehudi Menuhin's free web site www.YouTube.com and watch his way of playing. You would gain valuable knowledge.

Moshe Feldenkrais is a scientist, biologist and neuropathologist who observes and conducts a lot of research on the results of everyday work of musicians, artists and athletes.

He points out the great importance of breathing for all life processes and especially for the effective activities of musicians and athletes. In his book *Awareness Heals* (Ch. 4, p. 102), M. Feldenkrais says, "*Normally every person focuses on inhalation and ignores exhalation. It ignores the fact that the main pathway in which breathing is regulated neurologically is based on the release of carbon dioxide, and oxygen intake comes second.*" The main results of his studies show that under stressful situations, breathing is held back, sharpened and cracked. In stage performances, under the influence of fear and tension and other side effects, breathing affects. Feldenkrais suggests instead of focusing on breathing especially during the performance, the violinist/violist to exhale slowly, deeply and completely. This would lead to the release of carbon dioxide, the oxygen supply, the normalization of the breathing rate, and hence to a faster and lighter overcoming of the stress situation. Another important contribution of M. Feldenkrais is the definition of the four components of waking consciousness whose differentiation and combination helps to control and facilitate the overall process of learning and reproducing the violin/viola repertoire.

- 1) Sensations: In it, besides the five known sensations, it also includes the kinesthetic, which helps the orientation in time and place, the rhythm and the sequence of movements and the sense of time passage
- 2) Thinking: M. Feldenkrais includes all the functions of the intellect, such as classifications correct-wrong, good-evil, right-left, understanding, knowing that one understands, memorizing, imagining and others.
- 3) Movement: In it the scientist includes breathing, talking, blood circulation, eating and digestion.
- 4) The emotions: besides the usual feelings of joy, sorrow, anger, etc., M. Feldenkrais adds in his classification self-esteem, super sensitivity and other conscious and unconscious feelings that are present in the everyday life of modern man.

M. Feldenkrais pays special attention to another fundamental feature of the human nervous system that helps most effectively to overcome fear in the stage performance. **One can not feel at the same time two different feelings.** If the violinist/violist succeeds at critical or frightening times to put his thoughts out of play, he can easily overcome any negative emotions and their detrimental influence on stage performance. This method has been repeatedly and successfully used and tested by the author in the practice of stage performance of students as well as in personal concert performances.

Another contribution by M. Feldenkrais is the conclusion he makes on the basis of scientific studies and experiments: *the movement of the eyes organizes the movement of the body. He finds that the movement of the eyes is in the opposite direction to that of the head, and the movement of the head is in the opposite direction of the body, which gives the dimension of the movement. Musicians need to know this fact to "program" the movements in their dimension. M. Feldenkrais suggests in the course of daily exercises to focus on different elements of the material studied and on the different parts of the body conducting the movement in order not to lose attention and mechanical play with all the consequences deriving from this act.*

The most important contribution of **Barbara Conable, a violin teacher, an Alexander Technique Practitioner and William Conable, a cello teacher at Ohio University, and also an Alexander Technique Practitioner is the creation of a "body map"**. They classify this „body map” as follows: "Imagine that you have a map of your body somewhere in your brain, nervous system or psyche, as you would call the inner part of yourself that enables you to use this information and provide easy access to it. When there is a conflict between the map and reality, the map always "defeats" in the direction of the movement because it is formed in the process of the whole practice and the human experience of man, and can only be changed with conscious effort.

Some mistakes in the body map disrupt the career of professional violinists/violists, and cause the professional illness known as tendonitis (tendon disease), which was very common at the end of the 20th century. This disease is caused by the misconception of the rotation of the bones around the thumb rather than the small finger (pinkie). When the violinist/violist understands the true structure of his/her hand and how to use it in order to be in harmony with the natural movement, the tendonitis disappears on its own without medical intervention, because the musician has removed the tension on the tendons and joints! In the course of Teaching Alexander Technique, the authors reveal that much of the students' mistakes are due to their inaccurate idea of the structure, function and dimensions of their own body.

For example: Some students believe that their hands have three joints in the areas of the shoulder, the elbow and the wrist. The "card" they have is wrong because the hand has one more joint - the collarbone. The playing of these students will be hampered by the misconception, the movements of their hands will be limited by tension. *Sometimes the wrong "map" comes from a false functional concept. This idea comes from the mistaken believe that people have only five types of sensations - acoustic, visual, sensory, tasteful and touching. The sixth sense-motor (kinaesthetic) allows us to know the size, disposition and movement (immobility) of the body. Musicians should rely on, and use this sensor extensively.*

This same human brain, which develops a correct and accurate "body map" in some people, is capable of recreating a fully accurate "body map" in other people who have a wrong "map" through a conscious correction. Body map is built and developed through all stages of human life - from baby to adulthood (maturity), thanks to the neurological system and personal experience. If the map is accurate, it provides free, smooth, effective movements because it is based on the correct idea of the structure, function and size of the body.

In the motto of his book *What Every Musician should Know about the Body*, the Conable family said: **"Musical education should have a somatic basis because musicians move to produce sounds just as the dancers and athletes move, but their movements are more refined, and faster "**

Somatic is a science of human movement and coordination between body and brain in the process of movement. The use of somatic knowledge would protect the musician from injury, physically release the body, would give a sensitivity in building the violinist's technical skills, and the power and expressiveness of his/her performance.

In order to be able to use and apply the principles of somatics, the music students must have an accurate idea of the anatomical structure of the body. Since the quality of motion determines the quality of the sound produced, the alignment of the movement with the natural body kinaesthetic under the brain control, gives rise to improvements in the performance of young violinists/violists. Therefore, they have to learn to think during play, to learn how to have free and effective motor activity of the whole body and to acquire increased sensory activity. I will add an interesting quote from **the organist Dale Beaver**, Alexander Technique Practitioner, who associates the movement with time (in a climatic sense): *"Our sense of structure is our geography, our sense of function is our topography, and our sense of quality movement is time. This is a time over which we have control. If you are experiencing a storm of over-effort, bring the sun through easy, balanced, and free motion quality. "*

The Conable family concludes that the "body map" is the main source of change from misuse of the body to its proper use. Another important contribution of Barbara and William Conwaybell is to direct the attention of violin/viola and violin/viola students to the instrument's support on different parts of the body.

The opinion of Barbara and William Conable is that the main point of the instrument's support is the left collarbone, which they call a "shelf" for the violin / viola.

The important role of the violin / viola's shoulder rest, which should transfer the weight of the instrument onto the collarbone, is highlighted. If the shoulder rest is not placed on the collarbone, the violinist/violist loses its first and principal pivot, which would result in tightening the neck's muscles, twisting of the torso and misuse of the hands. *The Conable family defines the head as a second point of support for the tool.* The head is heavy - the violin and the violas are light. No additional work of the head is required to support the violin / viola. The weight of the head is sufficient. If the performer uses an effort, it would lead to tightening and tension on the neck. **In their book, the Conable define as the third point of support the left hand, which should not assume the functions of the collarbone and the head.**

Many novice violinists make this mistake by lifting the shoulders high, the shoulder rest can not be placed on the collar bone, and the tight neck muscles and the overloaded full-weight muscles on the left hand would block the shift of positions, interfere with the fluidity of sound producing and phrasing.

Another follower of Alexander Technique's teachings and M. Feldkrise's teachings, is the American violinist Julie Lieberman. She gives the following example in her book, "You are your Instrument": "A visible result - shifting into a high position, which has an unsettled and very often disturbed intonation. The real reason - a raised right shoulder that causes the connected with it left shoulder to be lifted up sympathetically, and block the movement upwards.

The student can not realize the real reason, he /she continues to practice the shifting without identifying the real reason, instead of getting the expected correct result, repeating and stabilizing the wrong starting position for the movement "

I, as an Alexander Technique follower would add another basic, important reason for challenges related to shifting and coming from the natural kinaesthetic construction of the body: Upon physical jump, the shoulders rise upward and, together with the narrowed limbs, help to "relieve" the weight of the body at the moment of the movement; when "jumping" to a high position, the way it can be successful is by suppressing the natural desire to raise the shoulders and shrink muscles. **"This is the only case when the hand movement is performed in the process of playing against, but not in harmony with the kinaesthetics of the body!"**

Judie's Lieberman greatest contribution is in the field of memory types and their use in the preparation and memorization of the concert material. In her book, "You're Your Instrument," Dr. Lieberman gives a short anatomical reference to the brain construction, its two hemispheres, and which of them guides a particular activity. The author classifies the five types of memory: muscular, acoustic, visual, analytic and imaginary. Each of them, put in communication with other types of memory, helps the student to prepare better for a concert performance.

In the third chapter of my book you will find more details and explanations on this topic-here I will mention just a short characteristic.

Muscular memory is built on a certain degree of technical skills created during the years of training and in stage performances does not help especially if not supported by other types of memory.

The Sound (acoustic)memory is related to the violinist's ability to "hear" the music sounding in his "inner" ear without playing the instrument.

Visual memory means the musician's ability to "see" the page with music as a photograph without looking at it.

Analytical memory. This is a type of memory based on a structural and musical analysis of the work being performed. Even if the nervousness of the stage performance affects the musical and sonic memory, the violinist/violist will be able to remember the work if he/she has a clear idea of the construction of the particular musical work.

Visualizing (giving visual perception). This type of memory includes the ability of the brain to create pictures and fragments. Can be used as a musician creates an imaginary film of his/her stage performance with ease, convenience and expressiveness. Visualization memory works with specific pictures and helps the student to experience the same body changes he/she would experience in real-world play, and that allows the performer to understand what is changing in his/her body so that can be removed as a hindrance to the real concert. It is based on the sensory sensations. This helps violinists/violist to make a connection between body and mind and find some missing knowledge about the work they perform or about the instrument they play.

The violinist/violist of the Twenty First century, armed with knowledge of how our body functions in the process of memorizing, exercising, and concert performance is successfully prepared for long-lasting and healthy participation on the stage and in the life.

I wish to the modern, highly educated and ready to add all the novelties of the world's violin/viola teaching methodologists, to continue to transmit the knowledge about the scientific part of our musical art to the young performers.

I hope that my book will help in the orientation for the development and achievements in the work of the violin/viola methodology at the beginning of the 21st century.

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