

# **Nelly Ben-Or**

**‘The Alexander Technique  
in the Preparation and  
Performance of Music’**

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**‘A Pianist’s Thoughts on  
the Alexander Technique’**

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NELLY BEN-OR

Nelly Ben-Or is a concert pianist who appears internationally in public and broadcast performances as well as on commercial recordings of solo piano and chamber music.

Since qualifying as a teacher of the Alexander Technique in the early 1960's, Miss Ben-Or has continually worked on integrating Alexander's teaching into the preparation and performance of music, particularly in her own field of piano playing.

Nelly Ben-Or is professor of piano and the Alexander Technique at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London. She is often invited, in conjunction with her concert travels, to give master classes to musicians and students at universities and music colleges in Britain and other European countries as well as in the USA, Canada, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Israel and Iceland.

NOTE

The terms 'inhibition' and 'directing', as used in the following pages, will be unfamiliar to readers with no first hand experience of the Alexander Technique.

INHIBITION in the Alexander Technique implies a conscious decision to stop one's habitual automatic physico-physical responses at any given moment as a basic condition for the possibility of change in one's use of one's self. It is not to be confused with psychologists' use of the term as describing the results of suppression of painful experiences from the past.

DIRECTING implies attention to the consciously chosen new co-ordination as a means by which the given reactions can occur.

For a real understanding of these concepts, lessons in the Alexander Technique are indispensable.

The Alexander Technique in the  
Preparation and Performance of Music

The F M Alexander Memorial Lecture, given by  
Nelly Ben-Or to the Society of Teachers of  
the Alexander Technique in London, November  
1987.

For the past 27 years I have been continually engaged in the process of learning to apply the principles of the Alexander Technique to my own work as a pianist and to that of other musicians whom I teach. Tonight I would like to share with you some observations of that process as I see it so far. Before going into that, let me tell you how I came to the Technique and learned it in this country at a time when knowledge of its existence was limited to very few individuals in musical circles. When I first began my lessons in London I met with many musicians who had never heard of Alexander and his work, and who readily dismissed my enthusiasm for the Alexander Technique with remarks such as: "Well, if you believe in something it probably does you some good!"

As a teenager I became a student of a very remarkable piano teacher. She was an American whose name was Henrietta Michaelson. I studied with her in Israel to where she had retired after many years of teaching the piano at the Juilliard School in New York. Although I later studied with other distinguished musicians, it was her teaching that greatly affected my development as a young pianist and incidentally altered the course of my professional future.

It so happened that Henrietta Michaelson had met F M Alexander in New York and took some lessons from him. These had a profound impact on her. She soon realised the significance of his work and became a most enthusiastic proselytiser of his teaching. When she came to live in Israel she brought with her all Alexander's books and instilled in a number of her students an ardent desire to have lessons in the Alexander Technique.

In those days however one could not even hope to find a teacher of the Technique in Israel. But I was fortunate. In 1960 I quite unexpectedly received an invitation from a friend who was studying the piano in London to come and spend a few weeks with her so as to be able to take some lessons in the Alexander Technique. She had had some and found them to be quite extraordinary.

On my arrival in London I was introduced by my friend to the Alexander Foundation in Ashley Place and there had my first few lessons from Patrick Macdonald. My experience of these lessons was so powerful that I immediately decided to go in for the most intensive

training in the Technique that I could afford. To have many private lessons, which was what I so wanted, was financially prohibitive. However at that time Patrick Macdonald had just started a teacher training course with a group of students from various countries, which curiously enough included only one Englishman. I decided to join that course and paid my way by borrowing money for one year's fees. This gave me the opportunity to be taught every day, but not at the high cost of individual lessons.

My intention was very simple. I did not plan to become an Alexander teacher as I was already working professionally as a musician, both in performing and teaching. In all innocence I expected to learn everything there was to be learned about the Technique during that year in the training course, and then to return home to Israel 'knowing' it really well.

Needless to say, having started the first year of training I soon came to realise how unrealistic that hope was. That non-ending quest which is the learning of Alexander's teaching had started for me and with it began to fade the innocent belief that at a certain point I will know everything about it; just as did the parallel dream of reaching as it were a final rung on the ladder of becoming a pianist. Here I am 27 years later experiencing each new step as another beginning in both the Alexander Technique and music.

So, through the years since 1963, when I completed my formal Alexander training, the search for the refining of the art of piano playing has become for me incorporated into the wider context of following Alexander's teaching to the best of my ability. Dreams of arriving at conclusive knowledge, or a perfect ability, have receded and given way to the more real, daily encounter with one's false perceptions, inadequacies, and resistances to change.

Thankfully I am also aware of an increasing sense of real possibilities for further development. That is the most exciting and rewarding realisation. For having been led towards it I shall always remain deeply grateful to Alexander for the unique legacy of his

outstanding efforts, and to Patrick Macdonald for guiding me towards that road into the unknown, from which glimpses of understanding appear, given the right attitude and in the ripeness of time.

As I have found for myself, and later with my music students, it is common for an initial encounter with the Technique to lead one to an unexpected revelation in the sensation of ease in playing or singing which one had not experienced previously.

From an Alexander teacher's point of view this is self explanatory. The teacher, if competent, can cause a change in a pupil's habitual response patterns and so remove a considerable amount of unnecessary strain and tension. This will of course benefit the pupil's playing or singing skills. He reacts with enthusiasm over the newly found ease and thinks that at last all the difficulties of performance will cease.

With some there is almost a sense of euphoria from this initial sense of liberation encountered in their Alexander lessons. Various symptoms of physical discomfort experienced during practising may be greatly reduced and with continuous lessons be alleviated altogether. Such are the most commonly acknowledged benefits that musicians derive from their lessons in the Technique.

Unfortunately the physical relief is too often considered to be the performer's main benefit from the Alexander Technique and the fact that behind it there is a conscious mental process at work is somehow unacknowledged, or at best only vaguely understood. When that is the case, the view of the Technique remains limited by the idea that it causes improvements of posture, for which it has indeed become so popularly known.

Regrettably such a view takes the 'Finger for the Moon' as the Zen saying goes, and mistakes the by-product of the Technique - namely postural improvements - for its essence, which is the mental process of inhibition and directing. This attitude may account for the fact that often after the initial excitement about the help they get from the Technique, musicians tend to use it as a kind of prop or treatment rather than a real, total way of working, applicable to the entire process of preparation of music for performance.

It is true that a good Alexander teacher - and I must stress the adjective - may give the musician who comes to him for lessons clear explanations of Alexander directions as well as bring about changes in his sensory experience and appreciation. However, the rest of the road of linking these principles to the demands of an instrument and of the music has of necessity to be travelled by the pupil alone. That is unless the teacher is a musician, and a performer at that, who has direct knowledge and experience in applying the principles of the Alexander Technique to the field of preparation and performance of music.

There seems to be amongst some people a rather simplistic assumption about the use of the Technique in music making. They assume that if pupils understand how to give directions for an improved use of the primary control, then that in itself will take care of whatever difficulties may arise in their playing or singing.

This is in my opinion an over-simplification of what is involved in a high level of musical performance. The Alexander Technique can indeed be of great assistance to a musician by releasing much unnecessary body tension and leading to improved co-ordination. But above all it should show him how PATTERNS OF THINKING in music have to be changed from habitual to new ones.

It is this aspect of Alexander's teaching which has the most important contribution to make in the work of a musician. The approach to the musical score will need a more questioning mind. A new understanding of its contents will lead the musician to employ new consciously chosen means for playing, often very different from those he has hitherto mechanically acquired. I have become increasingly aware that Alexander's instruction for inhibition and conscious direction can not be sufficiently effective unless the ENTIRE PROCESS of preparation of a work of music for performance is re-examined.

Over the years of working with the Technique, I began to look beyond the obvious physical benefits it offered. What has preoccupied me, and does so increasingly, is the search for clarification of the mental processes that govern the skills of a musician.

The Alexander Technique requires CONSCIOUS ATTENTION and CLARITY OF PERCEPTION. These are also the most important factors in the preparation for music making. They constitute the finest means for acquiring a creative performing technique: a technique in which one's musical intention is instantly manifested in sound by means which rely on clear awareness and conscious directions.

To this end Alexander's principle of inhibition is invaluable. However not just inhibition relating to the responses of the physical aspects of playing or singing, but a much deeper application of this all important principle underlying Alexander's teaching. To apply it to the preparation of music, the musician must first learn to stop before he rushes into playing. Then he can examine the way in which he responds to a musical text. What otherwise happens is that he sees the music in pre-conditioned patterns to which he reacts automatically in his habitual way.

It is quite possible, and in fact extremely practical, for a performer to change his perception of various musical passages so that they will alter their appearance in his mind from complex to simpler ones, and therefore become easier to perform. This can be achieved by mentally reorganising the text as it were, and so presenting it to oneself for learning in a clearer and simplified appearance. This is best done away from the instrument. Such an approach will avoid the usual reaction of strain which arises automatically when a musician faces what appears to be a difficult or complex musical score.

To further illustrate some of my ideas, let me look briefly at two of the various elements of piano playing: the two I have chosen to speak about are most commonly responsible for difficulties in performance at the piano - VELOCITY IN PLAYING and VOLUME OF SONORITY. These also apply to other instruments of course, but I will for the moment speak as a pianist.

Let us first look at the question of speed (or velocity) in music. When there are many notes to be played at great speed, the red light comes on in the player's mind saying "Difficult" and in that instant his habitual responses come into effect. He tightens his muscles to varying degrees in readiness to push his way through the run of notes, or a whole chain of runs, and in so doing often

blocks his own way.

Needless to say, various methods have been devised to deal with the question of fast playing. What is amazing is the fact that almost all of these methods - and certainly most that I have come across at many music colleges and conservatoires - are based on approaching the question of speed as a challenge for the body. And so endless mechanical exercises are devised and practised to overcome this challenge.

None of these exercises take into account the person as an integral whole; nor do they consider the fact that to play many notes fast, one needs to be able to think them clearly and fluently at the required speed before involving the body in producing the corresponding sounds. It is the MIND that has to absorb and organise the material for speed. The MENTAL activity propels the body. And whereas our body has limitations such as size of hands, length of fingers and so on, the mind has no such restrictions.

I often ask musicians with whom I work how is it possible for a certain piece of music, or a passage in it, to be DIFFICULT when one person tries to play it and to be EASY for another. Is then the piece itself difficult, or is it easy? The student is bewildered by the question. In reality the piece is neither difficult nor easy, but becomes one or the other according to how the particular player perceives it. Therefore it would seem that it is in the area of a truly active perception of a musical text that the effectiveness of a musician's preparation for performance lies.

We can organise mentally a run of notes, so as to be able to represent them to ourselves fluently, without the physical tensions which arise when we try to play fast just through an impetus of the body. If one can really perceive a passage of music with all clarity, and represent it to oneself mentally as it relates to the instrument, then there is no obstacle left for the body to freely express it in sound. And so what previously seemed to be a difficult piece becomes easy to play fluently.

This may seem to be a fantastic claim, but it is not. I witness it as a regular occurrence in my every day experience of playing

and teaching. In this way, Alexander's technique of mental directions becomes applicable to the process of learning music and not only to the process of improving the use of the physical manifestations of our Primary Control.

A way of working at the instrument that involves engaging one's mind more than one's body in the preparatory process is obviously more creative, and to my mind much more rewarding.

It is an extraordinary fact that athletic procedures in learning to play a piece of music are so widely adopted. Practising commonly implies hours and hours of mechanical repetition. These dull the mind and unduly exert the body. Yes of course repetition is an indispensable factor in learning, but can there not be repetition with clear conscious awareness that guides the process? Does it have to be mechanical and almost unconscious?

My answer is an emphatic NO. The way much music is practised would be inconceivable in an actor's preparation. Would he spend six hours a day repeating in different rhythms for example: "to be; to be; to be or not to be;" etc? Such a proposition is too ridiculous to consider. But in the field of learning music these mechanistic, thoughtless procedures are considered indispensable according to some methods. Yet they may not really lead to fluent playing and at their worst they may cause trouble - even medical complaints and occasionally a sad disruption of a player's study or career.

I hope that I have somewhat clarified what I take to be the application of Alexander's principles in the particular area of velocity in playing.

The other aspect of playing or singing that I mentioned as causing difficulties relates to producing a large volume of sound.

The problem is very straightforward. So often the more sound a musician wants, the more strained becomes his way of trying to get it. Having gained some experience of the Alexander Technique, one becomes increasingly aware of the exaggeration of physical effort that often seems to be involved in producing a large volume of sound. It is apparent that some players work harder and do more than is really necessary. The physical exertion in trying



to produce much sonority is common amongst all instrumentalists as well as among singers.

In my experience as a pianist I have come to realise the futility of this strong muscular approach to producing large sonorities. I see constantly that the resistance which the instrument seems to present in yielding its sound is proportionate to the strained, tight way the player relates to it. The harder the player tries, the less the instrument yields. I see keyboard players tightening their necks, pulling the chest down and finally fixing the hand and fingers into a state of preparedness for action which one would associate with a physical fight against the toughest opponent. Yet what in reality is needed is the use of a very small part of a finger to release a piano key down about half an inch. What- ever else a pianist does at the same time is useless and wasteful.

And so, once again in this area of playing, a change in one's mental attitude towards the instrument can give unexpected results. If the player does not necessarily accept his fixed conviction that he MUST use the amount of force he "feels" the instrument requires from him, he may begin to find that his own improved use will bring about an easier way of creating large sonorities.

Those of us who work in the Technique know only too well how misleading our usual body "feelings" - its sensory perception - can be. Therefore if a player becomes free from relying on them, he will reassess very profoundly his concepts of playing technique. He may then find that the more aware he becomes of WHAT NOT TO DO, the more sensitively he will relate to the instrument he plays. This will as a result give him a richer sonority in either loud or soft playing. And what is more, it will relieve him of much unnecessary physical effort in playing, and will therefore make him more available to the real task of a musical performer which is listening with great attention to the music he plays.

That alone brings a musician to the essence of his art. It is a pity that I cannot illustrate this and other points to you at the piano, as there is no instrument here.

What I have talked about so far describes some aspects of preparation for the performance of music; ones which will benefit from

the employment of the principles of the Alexander Technique. I have of course not mentioned the many other details of musical knowledge which will relate to style, character, structure of a composition and much else in music which makes up an artist's performance. I feel strongly that if the musician develops a growing conscious awareness of how he prepares the details of a piece, and what means he employs for learning it, then he will gain a more direct access to the essence of the music he performs. His attention will become more available for listening to the unfolding of the music. A player's task in preparation for performance is to clear the ground for the music which he conceives in his inner hearing to manifest in sound through the simplest possible means.

I have no doubt that the occasional exceptionally great musical talents have such a road laid open for them without the need for special effort on their part. But those are the rarest amongst musicians. Others, though they may have much musical potential, need to, and can, pave the road for themselves. Those will find great value and assistance from learning to understand the wider implications of the principles at work in Alexander's teaching.

Before concluding, let me summarise the main points of relating the Alexander Technique to the preparation of music for performance:

- (a) The need to learn the means for improving the functioning of the Primary Control through the application of the process of INHIBITION and GIVING DIRECTIONS.
- (b) The need to learn to continue that process while engaging in the learning of a given piece of music.
- (c) The need - in the light of the process of inhibiting and directing - to re-examine old learning and practising procedures so as to allow the performer to gain a clearer and simpler way of absorbing and playing the musical text.

The quality with which the preparation of music for performance takes place will remain in the actual performance, although various other mostly unpredictable elements will affect it both for better and for worse. Nevertheless, the basic improvement in performance

resulting from the preparation along the lines mentioned above, will be indisputably evident.

The ultimate aim in music making is to arrive at a point where the performance brings about a sense of unification of the work into an integral whole, so that the piece has an almost biological unity. What a clear parallel one can draw between this and Alexander's aim of bringing about the integrated use of the self. It is for that reason that I stress so much the importance of turning the preparation of music for performance into much more of a mental process rather than physical work.

That kind of preparation demands more listening and much less doing. By listening, I mean an active aural attention which is in music the equivalent of mental directions in the Alexander Technique. When a musician is free of excessive crude physical involvement in playing or singing he becomes much more available to that kind of listening which plays the most essential part in a creative performance of music. In it are contained all the elements of his musical knowledge as well as expressive qualities which originate in the depths of his artistic gift.

I am well aware that the processes I have touched on tonight do not lend themselves to purely verbal description. They are nonetheless a reality in my own work and that of my students. They have, however, taken me many years to learn about. And, I am convinced that there can be no short cuts towards them. This is an adventure which offers more the longer one pursues it. And to engage in that pursuit is to gain more clarity and understanding by degrees. In my experience it is the most rewarding, enlightening and the most practically valid path in the preparation and performance of music. It is also a never ending process of further development.

### A Pianist's Thoughts on the Alexander Technique

An article in The Alexander Journal, autumn 1978; published by the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique.

There are many aspects of the Alexander Technique and the one I wish to consider here is that of 'activity in a non-doing way'. Despite the apparent paradox, this does seem to be the best way of describing an experience in which one is both fully active and at the same time aware of no effort, no direct involvement, no 'doing' whatsoever. The specific activity I have in mind is a complex and highly skilled one - piano playing; playing of the kind which is the vehicle of musical thought and imagination; creative playing. In the space of this article I can of course only touch on this in a very general way.

My own musical training as a pianist drew on much of the best traditional education available. Some years after my professional career began I was introduced to the Alexander Technique and before long, sensing the scope of personal development it offered, I decided to join an Alexander teacher training course. The years of work as a performer and teacher, of both the piano and the Alexander Technique, which followed the completion of this course led me to reassess much of what I had previously learnt from even the most highly regarded pianists and teachers. I began to question the traditional approaches to the art of piano playing and came to realise that most, if not all, of these deal with problems of that art in a basically dualistic way. That is to say they consider music with all the wealth of its language separately from the means of performing it. Those means are generally learned as a series of intricate mechanistic devices and muscular skills developed through various methods, in none of which is the player considered as an integral whole. Such work is in some respects similar to the training of an athlete. But one cannot expect athletic achievement to lead towards sensitivity and creative awareness - indispensable qualities for a musician.

With some pianists these 'athletic' skills can become a glamorized end in themselves, deceiving both players and listeners into believing them to have artistic quality. Fortunately, there are also artists who realise the dullness and wastefulness of energy in unnecessary emphasising of these muscular skills. They steer clear of the dualistic approach, trying to solve the so-called technical problems of playing directly in the context of the musical composition.

This seems to be intrinsically more relevant to the art of recreating music - which is what a pianist's task is all about. However, neither does this approach guarantee good results as there still remains a factor of which few performers are aware: their ignorance of the relationship between the 'use' of the player (as understood by F M Alexander) and his instrumental and artistic skill. What players generally do not realise is that the poorer their 'use', the more distorted becomes the impression of the piece of music they are attempting to play. This generates a reaction of strain and effort in the attempt to overcome those apparent difficulties and so the results do not reach the desired end. The struggle continues with more tension and effort until 'by hook or by crook' a solution is found - though often not a satisfactory one.

Any Alexander teacher who has worked with musicians will inevitably have heard from them of physical discomfort and mental tiredness resulting from playing. Yet all this is totally avoidable. With proper guidance and honest scrutiny it can be changed. Quite new horizons can open to a musician who learns to understand himself and his work in the light of Alexander's teaching. This will inevitably imply profound personal changes and so indirectly alter his approach to learning and performing music. The task will not be simple and cannot be learned in just a few lessons.

Anyone familiar with the Alexander Technique (and I assume here that readers of this journal have experience of the Technique) will know how difficult it is to give up deeply rooted habitual reactions even in everyday movements such as getting up from a chair, sitting down or walking. One's faulty association of physical and mental strain with any of these movements persistently interferes with the possibility of ease and simplicity of co-ordination with which they could occur. Considering then that a pianist has to sustain in his mind the overall shape and the intricate detail of a complex musical text which he must translate into sound through elaborate finger activity, one can easily recognise that his task is vastly more demanding than sitting down or getting up. The pitfalls for 'misuse' in his case are a thousandfold greater and often less obvious. The difference however between a highly skilled activity and a simple one lies in the degree of complexity rather than in the basic principle involved. Therefore a general change

of attitude to one's use which Alexander lessons can bring about may be 'translated' from the comparatively simple tasks dealt with in a typical Alexander lesson into the more complex demands of piano playing.

Once the possibility of change from habitual ways is understood and the resulting freedom experienced, a pianist will realise the far greater scope of the new way of learning and performing. No longer will there be need for the usual duality of approach - music on the one hand and technique of playing on the other. In this way he learns the musical text without playing it - as a conductor learns a score - with such precision that he is aware of all the details, including for example the right speed and image of the tonal quality, without having to be concerned at the same time with how his fingers should work. In fact it is essential for him deliberately to let go of all preconceived ideas about ways of using his fingers on the keyboard in order to allow the maximum of freedom and spontaneity in playing. If the music has been thoroughly learnt and his attitude allows the Alexander directions to be operative, his fingers will freely select and play the notes in the way that the pianist intends them to sound. The volume, tone quality, emotional content and compositional structure of the music will all be moulded instantly by his mental directions.

Playing in this way is indeed an experience of total activity in a 'non-doing' way. It brings about a state of spiritual aliveness and richness, the player becoming an instrument through which his entire musical awareness and intention is expressed in sound.

Music is probably the most abstract of all the arts. In its essence it does not rely on visual or verbal symbols. Those of us for whom music is alive, who respond to it intensely do so from the depth of our being. Yet we who are engaged in recreating music often find great stumbling blocks in our way. It is not uncommon for even the most talented and deeply musical pianists to encounter serious difficulties in performing music without strain with simplicity and fluency. A pianist who has become familiar with the Alexander principle will realise that his 'use', together with a thorough knowledge of the text of the composition, will determine the skill and quality of his playing. The same will of course apply to other instrumentalists or singers.

I would therefore suggest that learning to play a piece of music should consist firstly of absorbing with utmost clarity and precision all the details of the text (preferably away from the instrument) and learning to see it in relation to its constantly flowing placement on the keyboard. Then, providing one has experience and understanding of 'directing' (in Alexander's sense of the word) one should give one's hands to the keyboard and listen for the required sound rather than try to force or strike it out of the instrument. Music should be practised in this way without needing to spend time in solving problems of playing which are in any case mainly of our own making. They arise either because we think that a piece is 'difficult' (which makes us react as if it were so), or because we are slaves to the old muscular experiences of 'hard work' whenever we are faced with many notes to be played, much volume required, or passages which we try to play faster than we can accurately think them. Rid of these wrong habits (some of which may have become deeply entrenched), a musician can develop progressively greater sensitivity in his inner hearing and more ease in the playing of music. At the same time he would gain deeper understanding of what 'directing' as opposed to 'doing' means as applied to his art.

The teaching of this way is of course not easy. Many deeply ingrained habits have to be dissolved before a student will begin to respond to the possibility of freedom in music-making which he may never have experienced before. A skilled teacher can bring about the sensation of freedom, but his real task will be to guide the pupil towards an understanding of the changed attitude of mind which alone will lead him to further growth. So his experience of playing through 'directing' will become less elusive, more real.

My own experience of playing in this way has strengthened my belief that an artist who aims at a profoundly musical expression has to go through what I can only describe as the apparent loss of self - the dissolving of that aspect of his being which controls and interferes with a spontaneous expression of his art; the kind of spontaneity which arises from inner sources quite beyond our ordinary understanding. All artistic intuition and inspiration seem to come from a realm which cannot be intellectually controlled or understood. Therefore an approach that exposes and lessens

the interfering tendencies of the self helps to bring us in closer touch with that creative realm. It is in this that F M Alexander's remarkable work and ideas are of inestimable value to any artist.