

Alexander Technique Benefits Musicians

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Years ago, Gabriel Evens suffered from chronic tendonitis as a result of his work as a professional pianist. He tried several solutions, all to no avail.

Finally, at the suggestion of a friend, Evens took a year of Alexander Technique (AT) lessons. They helped him heal and he enrolled in a New England AT Training Centre where he trained for three years to become a teacher.

Today, Evens is a certified teacher of AT and a lecturer in jazz piano performance, improvisation and composition at the Cultural Centre of the University of Malaya.

We caught up with him to find out more about the Alexander Technique and how it can help musicians.

What is the Alexander Technique?

The AT is a method that teaches us how to use ourselves more efficiently or with less unnecessary tension, compression, poor balance and bad posture. It does this by increasing awareness of habitual misuse of the body, and then consciously redirecting ourselves to an improved use.

How can it help musicians?

Because of the stress caused by many hours of repetitive motions during daily practice, many musicians end up with various pains and injuries —sometimes career ending! If musicians can learn to practice and perform in a more efficient way, it is astounding how pain and tension seem to just disappear. But even if a musician has no pain, the AT often helps with technique, emotional expression, and even stage fright.

Should musicians go for AT sessions only when they experience pain?

AT can be beneficial for musicians because of the reasons above, but in fact everybody can benefit from this work even if they are not musicians. We tend to misuse ourselves in every activity whether it is sitting at the computer, doing the dishes, reading a book, engaging in a conversation or eating. Often, we even tense ourselves while sleeping. The AT helps with every activity we do. But in professions that heavily involve the use of the body, such as sports, music, dance, etc. it can be particularly helpful. Of course, pain is the biggest motivator for making some kind of change, so usually musicians wait until they are having discomfort before they will try the AT. Fortunately it is never too late, and the body can often heal itself



Gabriel Evens: jazz pianist



Everyone can benefit from the Alexander Technique

extremely quickly with improved use.

What do the sessions involve?

The sessions involve very simple movements such as sitting and standing, going up on the toes, squatting, walking, and also practice at the instrument for musicians. I use my hands and words to guide and give feedback to the students. The simple movements are to help the students become more aware of the patterns of misuse that are present in every activity. If I try to work with students at their instruments straight away, the movements and emotional attachment to their sound is often too strong of a stimulus to effect a change. Although after a few lessons, it is helpful to work at the instrument. The end of the session the students lie on the table while I use my hands to help them release tension and redirect themselves to a state of expansion.

How many sessions are required?

This inevitable question is a tricky one. Alexander used to require his students to take 20 lessons however I just ask them to try one and see how they feel. I've had students come for years, and students come just once. Learning how to affect a beneficial change in oneself is a never-ending process. If a student comes because of a specific pain, often when the pain resolves, he/she will be done. Other times, people really enjoy the work and just want to keep coming, in order to work at a more and more subtle, but powerful level.

Why did you decide to learn the Alexander Technique?

I learned the AT after I developed severe tendonitis as a professional pianist. I tried many typical treatments to no avail and decided to try the AT out of desperation. Later, I entered a training course in Newton, Massachusetts at the Alexander Technique Training Center studying under Ruth Kilroy. The training course is a three-year program, four hours per day, four days per week. I am a certified teacher by the American Society for the Alexander Technique (AmSAT).

How has the Alexander Technique helped you as a musician?

I would not be able to play music at all without it because of the pain I was suffering. But it has helped much, much more than just the tendonitis (which is completely gone now for over a decade.) My technique is much more efficient and I have a natural sense of ease when I play the piano that I never had before. In fact, playing piano was always uncomfortable for me, but now I feel very free. It helps with stage fright as well.

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