Aingeala De Búrca

The Alexander Technique

The application of FM Alexander's principles to music performance

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore how the application of the Alexander Technique, as taught from the point of view of the Interactive Teaching Method (ITM), can be of benefit in performance preparation as well as in the enhancement of the musician’s practice and performance in general. Although the specific performance described in this paper was for violin, the argument is made that the exploration and methods of practice would be of benefit to any musician. This paper describes the experience of a study of the Alexander Technique. Information is provided about the Alexander Technique, its origins, principles and practices. The application of Alexander’s work to violin playing in general is discussed, and specifically to the preparation for the performance of Sonata Duodecima by Isabella Leonarda.

Keywords: Alexander Technique, Interactive Teaching Method, musicianship, musician’s health and wellbeing, violin playing, Isabella Leonarda, Sonata Duodecima
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1. Introduction

To perform music is thrilling and challenging. Musicians often search for new and effective ways to face the demands required by their art. The question of how to remain healthy – physically, mentally and emotionally – while performing can be fundamental in attaining mastery.

While a vast amount of a musician’s study necessarily focuses on learning and refining technique, mastery involves much more than just acquiring a proficient technique. In order to enjoy success and fulfilment, musicians must also acquire and integrate a broad range of additional knowledge and skills including music theory; ear training; and how to listen and respond for immediate and sensitive communication.

However, too often musicians struggle with experiencing themselves as being ‘limited’ by the physical body: by tension and other restrictions that present obstacles to their ability to be creative and expressive. Having to make repetitive movements continually can cause rigidity and make the musician experience their technique as deteriorating. Increasing and excessive physical tension can reduce standards of performance and make the dream of living as a musician seem too difficult.

In their search for ways of performing with more ease, the Alexander Technique is one of the approaches that musicians often turn to. Because of its many mental and physical benefits, it is taught in music and drama conservatories throughout the world.

The apparent contradiction between discipline and the ability to be expressive is clear and important and the musician's life and training is one of extraordinary discipline. But ideas of what discipline really is and how to sustain it can go wrong and get in the way of performing.

The Alexander Technique, on the other hand, is a mental discipline with which musicians can enhance both their technique and the quality of their musical expression. This, in turn, would give them the opportunity to fulfil all their desired musical potential.

1.1 Background to the Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique is not a particular technique per se, but the name given to the work first created by FM Alexander (1869 – 1955).

The technique is primarily an approach to self-development and its benefits are available to anyone who studies it. The belief that it is limited to musicians and other performers is erroneous and misleading.

A knowledge and understanding of the technique and how to apply it can enable anyone who studies Alexander’s work to improve their standards of performance in any subject or activity. This includes the process or activity of learning itself.

The work came about when FM Alexander’s early career as an actor was threatened by the onset of problems with his voice. What began as a search for a solution to his problems in performance was to become his life’s work. Mr Alexander himself said the primary purpose of his work was for the fulfilment of one’s potentials, describing it as having the
power to bring about nothing less than a “whole new way of living”. ¹

1.1.1 My Background

I have been a professional violinist for over thirty years and an Alexander Technique teacher since 2007. The technique has been of great benefit to me as a musician, and more recently during my studies in KMH.

Because of the value I have received, I decided to write my paper about the technique and how I applied it in relation to learning and performing one of my chosen pieces, Sonata Duodecima by Isabella Leonardo.

I was born and raised in Dublin, Ireland. I began to play the violin at the age of five and I studied at the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM) in Dublin. For my final three years of study there I was concertmaster of the RIAM Chamber Orchestra and I was awarded the Associate Diploma at the age of 21.

Since then, I have earned my living continuously as a musician.

My career has been one of many twists and turns.

For example, soon after leaving the RIAM, in November 1985, I joined an Irish rock band called In Tua Nua. Within three months, I found myself performing in front of 350,000 people at a stadium concert called “Self Aid.” This was quickly followed by a deal with Virgin Records and over the next three years we composed and recorded two albums. We toured constantly around Europe and America. My experience working in the rock music profession was an extraordinary experience of great extremes.

On leaving the band, I returned to my classical studies at Trinity College, Dublin graduating with a Bachelor’s degree with honours in 1993.

I was an active performer in my University, and was concertmaster of both the Trinity College Chamber Orchestra and the Trinity Choral Society Orchestra, often performing as a soloist with both orchestras. During my studies I sustained my interest in improvisation that I had acquired from playing rock music. Added to this I was developing an interest in working with people in a therapeutic or healing capacity, so I moved to the UK to train as a Music Therapist and was awarded a Postgraduate Diploma in Music Therapy from the Welsh College of Music and Drama.

On returning to Ireland, I combined my career as a violinist with working as a music therapist. As a freelance performer, I have enjoyed performing with major Irish orchestras, improvising with rock bands and performing as part of theatre productions. I continue to use my music therapy experience by doing performance and interactive workshops in educational and healthcare settings. While an individual’s career might contain many surprises, I could not have predicted such variety in my own career.

One of the most surprising adventures in my life has been becoming an Alexander Technique teacher.

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¹ Alexander, FM, “Universal Constant in Living”, Mouritz, London, 2000, p.84
1.1.2 How I came to study the Alexander Technique

During my studies at the RIAM, my violin teacher continuously stressed the importance of building a good technique while remaining as relaxed as possible. I acquired a good foundation of violin technique but from a young age, like many violinists, I struggled with physical tension and pain. Over the years I had good days and bad days. I was often aware of tension.

In my mid-thirties, when I had been working professionally for almost fifteen years, my ‘bad days’ began to get worse and more frequent. My situation looked seriously problematic. I began to experience a real fear of being unable to complete a full concert. I also felt frustration from a strong sense of being creatively stuck. While I could vary dynamics in my playing, I felt I had limited colours to my sound. In fact, I could no longer imagine what kind of different sounds I might make.

I tried various healthcare approaches in search of a solution.

In spite of experiencing some relief at times, my problems always returned. I finally went for an Alexander lesson with reluctance. Having had some earlier experiences of the Alexander Technique during my studies, I was left with a sense of resistance towards the technique.

I remember clearly my expectations of my first lesson. I expected to be shown how to sit and stand correctly, and perhaps to have my posture analysed and corrected. With the exception of my music therapy training, I had no other experience of teaching or learning but to be told how to fix things that were wrong.

While a large number of Alexander teachers still teach in this manner, to my surprise, my experience of the Alexander Technique was nothing like this.

Rather than being told what to do, or given some kind of recipe for improved movement, my teacher led me through an investigation of various movements, while challenging my habitual movements and the beliefs I had that created them. Her questions were incisive and illuminating, while through the use of her hands and the lesson design, we created a partnership in which my concepts and movements could be explored. I was fascinated and always curious and inspired to keep going.

I was delighted to find that my lessons helped me to make positive and lasting changes with surprising ease. Within three months of starting lessons, I went to a workshop in Germany taught by my teacher’s trainer, Don Weed, the Head of Training for the Interactive Teaching Method (ITM). ²

This workshop was a turning point for me in my life.

As a result, I felt very fortunate that I met Don Weed and decided to study with him.

Having jumped to early conclusions about the Alexander Technique, as I now know that many others have done, I might not have chosen to study it. If I had not studied the Alexander Technique, I would have missed out on learning about Mr Alexander’s extraordinary discoveries.

Having worked with Don Weed in Germany, I was fascinated and eager to learn more. I

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² It is worth pointing out here that there is a wide variety in approaches to teaching the Alexander Technique. My discussion on the Alexander Technique in this paper will all be from the ITM point of view.
joined the next ITM four year teacher-training course the following September in 2003. I graduated in 2007. I have been teaching the work ever since while continuing with my primary career as a violinist. I am surprised and delighted to find that my fascination with Alexander’s work does not diminish but grows from year to year.

1.1.3 My Alexander Technique Training

The ITM training course is primarily for personal development and self-improvement. Trainees who take and pass the examinations and other requirements can graduate as teachers. I began my four-year training with the ITM primarily for personal development and to improve my violin playing. As my training progressed, an interest in teaching the technique for the benefit of others began to grow and by the time I certified in 2007 – inspired by the changes in myself and my fellow trainees – I couldn’t wait to teach.

From the beginning of the course, I was impressed by how quickly and easily I could make positive changes in my movements, especially related to my violin playing. I also became excited by the ITM approach to education in general which was entirely different to anything I had ever experienced. It was challenging, but a kind of challenge that was new to me. My ITM education taught me that to grasp quickly for results, whether as a teacher or a student, has the inevitable and undesirable effect of delaying even further the achievement of those results.

As a student, to be responsible for doing my learning for myself required commitment and discipline, but it was deeply engaging. The ITM curriculum and approach gave me what I needed to learn and change while leaving me free to find my own fascination for myself in my own way.

Not only did my ITM training deliver on the promised personal development, one of the most important changes was my personal renaissance as a violinist. After graduating from the ITM, I immediately commenced a Master’s degree in Violin Performance at the University of Limerick, Ireland. There, my primary teacher was Mariana Sirbu, who at the time was also Professor of Violin at the Leipzig College of Music.

In just four years, I had reoriented myself away from stagnation and hopelessness, towards a pathway of improvement and satisfaction as a violinist. Prior to my ITM training, things had become so terrible that I had almost considered giving up the violin.

As one of my Masters degree electives, I chose to study the baroque violin. I began to travel to Stockholm to take lessons with Ann Wallström. During the summer months of 2010 - 2015, I attended master classes with a number of other excellent baroque violinists as well.

Soon I began to work with the Irish Baroque Orchestra. With each project, my love for playing baroque music on gut strings grew. I applied to study Early Music performance fulltime with Ann Wallström in KMH. When I was offered a place, I embraced the next adventure in my life and moved to Sweden in 2015.

During my time in KMH, a number of musicians have approached me for Alexander lessons, many of whom were also students at KMH. Since then, there is a growing number of ITM students in Stockholm, a number of them whom will join the next ITM teacher-training course in September 2021.

I look back and realise how, for many years, I had had a strong sense that there must be more to being a musician and to life in general. In the end it was the Alexander Technique
that helped me learn how to search, how to question, and how to direct myself in my movements and in my life, in increasingly more fruitful and open-minded ways.

1.2 Purpose of Paper

Experimentation is at the heart of Alexander’s work. His discoveries came about by means of his designing and evaluating a series of experiments, one after another. What he learned from each experiment he applied to the next, constantly testing each new hypothesis for its truth and validity.

My training was consistent with Alexander’s mind-set and, on the training course, we were trained to bring this kind of thinking and practice to everything we do. This is very much what I did when I studied this particular piece for my exam concert. I experimented in a step-wise fashion while learning the music and applied these processes to everything I did. I believe that doing this in this way improved my knowledge, understanding and performance immensely.

This paper will present a method of practising based on Alexander’s principles, a method I devised while working with his principles. Although my way of working was the same as would be taught to any ITM student, it was developed further with new ideas that emerged as a result of combining Alexander’s work with early music studies with Ann Wallström. Further, I believe that making this information about this approach to the AT available to other musicians would be of benefit to everyone who wishes to learn more about how Alexander’s work might be of value for them.

2. Method

In order to create an appropriate context, I will discuss my method of work and how I used it in preparing my chosen sonata, Isabella Leonardo’s Sonata Duodecima, giving the background to Leonarda and her music. I will discuss FM Alexander’s work in somewhat greater detail and use this to demonstrate my plan for applying the AT to the preparation of the piece.

2.1 Isabella Leonarda

Anna Isabella Leonarda was born on the 6th September 1620 in Novara, west of Milan. During the seventeenth century, there was a “sudden flowering of compositional activity amongst women” which was centred in Italy where at least twenty-four women published compositions. This was a greater number of published compositions by women than in all the other European countries combined. Amongst these women composers, Leonarda occupies a place of importance because of the volume of music she composed. Nearly two hundred of her individual compositions survive. She was the first woman composer to publish sonatas. ³

³ Carter, Stewart, Women Composers: Music Through The Ages, Music Library Association, p. 139
The Leonardi family was an old and prominent family, the members of which included important church and civic officials. Leonarda’s father was a count and a doctor of law.

In 1636, at the age of 16, Leonarda entered the convent of Collegio di Sant'Orsola. During her life as a nun, she held positions of authority with increasing responsibility finally becoming mother superior.

Leonarda’s compositions were written over a span of sixty years, beginning with the Dialogues (1640) and concluding with Motetti a voce sola (1700). She was over fifty when she began to compose regularly, resulting in many of the works we know today.  

When Leonarda was eighteen a document relating to an inspection by ecclesiastical authorities described her as being able to sing, write, compute, and compose music. The following year she professed vows and remained in the convent until her death on the 25th February 1704.

Leonarda’s dedications in her publications reveal minimal information about her life. She dedicated several of her publications to the Virgin Mary and many of these have a second dedication to a living person, for example, the bishop of Novaro, the Archbishop of Milan, and Emperor Leopold I. The aim of these dedications was likely to have been to seek financial aid for the convent.

Several of Leonarda’s works were composed in stile antico, a style of musical composition begun in the sixteenth century. In most of her compositions however, vocal and instrumental, she used a composite, sectional structure. It is more appropriate to describe divisions in her works as sections rather than movements since most are brief. She achieves contrast amongst sections by using changes in tempo, texture, melodic style and especially metric contrasts such as alternating sections in duple, triple and compound meter.

This compositional style is evident in her Sonata Duodecima.

2.1.1 Sonata Duodecima

Leonarda’s only instrumental work, Sonate a Istromenti Opus 16, which was published in 1693, consists of twelve compositions. They are apparently the only sonatas composed by a woman in the seventeenth century. Eleven of the works are ensemble sonatas for two violins, violone, and organ. The twelfth and final sonata, Sonata Duodecima is for solo violin with organ.

None of Leonarda’s sonatas follow the slow-fast-slow-fast form standardised by Corelli. Rather, her sonatas are more conservative in nature and reflect the style prior to Corelli. Only two of her sonatas have two movements and one has eleven. Sonata Duodecima is divided into seven sections that include two slow sections, both of which are like recitatives, inviting moments of improvisation.

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4 Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isabella_Leonarda accessed 05.05.18
5 Carter, Stewart, Women Composers: Music Through The Ages, p. 139
6 Ibid., p.140
7 Ibid., p.141
8 Ibid., p.143
9 Ibid., p.143
Sonata Duodecima is an expressive work with two rhapsodic, toccata-like sections balanced against dancelike sections in triple or compound meter and canzona-like sections in common time.\textsuperscript{11}

Learning this sonata was a delight and a challenge. At first glance, the sonata gives an impression of being technically simple with occasionally some more technically challenging moments.

Like with a lot of the baroque repertoire, upon further study, I find the seeming simplicity of melody deceptive. My early impressions that the piece was not very difficult proved to be wrong, and as I studied the piece, I found that it took quite some time to reach my desired standard.

Another aspect of early music I have discovered and valued deeply is the freedom available to the performer, a freedom that seems integral to the style.

Study of the Alexander Technique is a powerful tool for increasing one’s picture of freedom. It claims that freedom is not attained quickly but is the reward of study over time. I have found that the same rules apply to the freedom available to the performer of early music.

In applying the Alexander Technique to the process of learning this piece, as I now do with any new piece, my experience of learning is very different as is my experience of my ability to retain what I learn.

In order to address what I mean by this, it will be necessary to give a partial introduction to the Alexander Technique before going into more detail of my own personal process of preparation for my exam concert.

### 2.2 The Alexander Technique: Historical background

As a young actor, Fredrick Matthias (FM) Alexander had an ambition to build a career reciting Shakespeare, which was a popular art form at the time.

However, early in his career, Alexander developed difficulties with his voice and vocal mechanisms during performances. When the problems became more severe, Alexander sought help from doctors and vocal coaches.

After having followed their advice and treatment, it became clear to Alexander that the treatments were not working. He set about solving his problems for himself beginning what was to become a long process of experimentation and exploration.

Early on in his investigation, Alexander began to discover that his new methods of preventing his difficulties were not only effective, but that he could convey what he was learning to others. Over time, he began to shift his focus away from remedial and performance studies and towards the control of our reactions and behaviours in general. Amongst his new students was his brother Albert Redden (AR) Alexander (1874-1947). Realising the importance of his discoveries, Alexander moved to London in 1904, with his brother AR, to bring these new discoveries to the wider world. They taught the work for the rest of their lives travelling between England and the east coast of the USA. FM Alexander wrote four books and numerous articles. He developed a training course that

\textsuperscript{11} Carter, Stewart, \textit{Women Composers: Music Through The Ages}, p. 143
commenced in London in 1931 and with AR Alexander, continued to train teachers to teach his work until his death in 1955.

It is thanks to Alexander’s having a problem, and the persistence and commitment with which he searched for the cause and solution to his problem, that we now have available to us a powerful approach for learning to make positive changes in all areas of our lives.

At the end of 1933, Marjorie Barstow from Lincoln, Nebraska was the first person to graduate from the first Alexander teacher-training course. Marjorie taught Alexander’s work until her death in 1996 when she was 97 years of age.  

In 1971, a young actor named Don Weed came to one of her classes. At 21 years of age, Don was studying acting, musical theatre and singing. After many years of training with Marjorie Barstow he made the decision to dedicate his life’s work to teaching Alexander’s work.

He spent many years in his native USA developing the curriculum of his proposed training course, and in 1993, with the dream of creating a teacher-training course that would be worthy of Alexander’s work, he moved to Europe. There he founded the Interactive Teaching Method (ITM), and taught his four-year teacher-training course for the first time in the UK and Switzerland to future teachers from all over Europe.

The ITM curriculum design is firmly rooted in Alexander’s writings and enhanced with modern anatomical knowledge, educational theory and success education theory. He made a commitment to train 100 teachers as a promise to Mr Alexander, a promise that he has since more than fulfilled. I am proud to be one of those teachers.

In the first chapter of his third book, Alexander tells his story. He tells us how, when the treatments prescribed for him for his voice problems failed to help, he made the decision to stop the treatment. Instead he asked his doctor if it was not fair to conclude that it was something he was doing (to himself) in using his voice that was the cause of his trouble? When his doctor agreed that it might be so Alexander replied “Very well, if that is so, I must try and find out for myself” and he went to work.

The chapter outlines his experiments and the observations he made in his investigation, how each time he experienced himself as failing he persisted and designed a new experiment. Beginning by looking at his physical movements, searching for a physical cause and solution, his discoveries led him to a deeper exploration of his mental processes. His final mental experiments led him finally to realise that in order to make lasting progress, he needed to place his trust in developing his reasoning skills to guide him and to resist the temptation of using his sense of ‘feeling right’ in the performance of his activities as a guide.

Although he was trying to solve what seemed like a physical problem, even the decision to move and how to move was actually a mental process that determined his response. In time, he came to understand, on a deep level, that progress can only be made by training the mind. In fact, in his first book, he told us that “the secret of (our) ability to resist, to conquer and finally to govern the circumstance of (our lives)” exists in the mind.

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12 https://www.marjoriebarstow.com accessed 08/06/21 and personal classroom notebooks
14 ibid., p. 25
15 ibid., p.8
2.2.1 The Alexander Technique: Process of Study

Every AT student takes the same journey.

Just as Alexander did, we begin with a question and working through our own journey of self-discovery by applying his processes in such a way as to learn the truth of his principles through our own experience. This is a process based on learning how to reason and to think, and it opens up new possibilities in life, making fulfilment of the whole of a person’s potential not just a dream but reality. In other words, the work of the Alexander Technique indicates not a destination, but a knowledge of how to journey.

Alexander wrote that the real purpose of his work was to learn how to fulfil one’s whole potential.

It is not only musicians who often struggle with making changes, change is difficult for everyone.

Usually the problem is that people try to use their old ways of thinking to create new ways of behaving, or moving, and this is not possible. ‘Habitual’ ways of thinking, based on ideas and beliefs from the past, keep a person trapped in an habitual cycle of guiding or directing themselves ineffectively.

It is becoming well known in many modern approaches to personal development, that in order to solve difficulties, to make lasting change, it is necessary to replace old ways of thinking with new ways or systems of thinking. Alexander began to discover this in the 1890s. Alexander discovered that even our physical movements and behaviours are caused by the ‘thinking’ processes with which we create them.

He wrote, “I have no hesitation in stating that the pupil’s fixed ideas and conceptions are the cause of the major part of his difficulties” and that people can change the manner of their performance by changing the manner in which they mentally direct themselves.\(^{16}\)

One of Alexander’s greatest discoveries was that people can change the manner of their performance by changing the manner in which they mentally direct themselves. By learning how to retrain our mental processes -- the ‘thinking’ with which we direct ourselves in movement -- we can learn to stop limiting ourselves.

Alexander wrote that everyone ‘thinks and acts in accordance with their psychophysical make-up’ unless ‘forced to do otherwise’.\(^{17}\) A person’s psychophysical make-up is their unique blend of mental and physical functioning including their idiosyncratic ideas and beliefs from their past experiences. These ideas and beliefs influence how he or she operates themselves on the physical plane.

The AT teacher designs lessons with focussed questions and interactions in combination with specialised use of their hands to provide the leverage necessary to ‘force’ the student to ‘do otherwise’ in everyday and specialised activities. In this way, the student has the opportunity to have new experiences of movement and thought, and over time learns to do this thinking for him or herself.

Or, as Don Weed has written, “If we are ever to change successfully, we must learn to train our minds to dominate our previous protocols of directive guidance. We must train our minds to operate on principles of directive guidance that are conscious, reasoned, flexible, and themselves subject to evaluation and change. We must train our minds to the point that we can continuously overcome the dominance of these habitual patterns of directive guidance.”

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\(^{17}\) ibid., p.96
guidance and escape their habitual tyranny.” 18

Every student begins their process of study as Alexander did, with the question of what they are doing to themselves in the manner of their performance that is the cause of their difficulties.

Through a series of lesson experiences, students quickly learn that all behaviours, no matter how simple or complex, are made up of little movements. This is especially true of musical performance, which is “made up of movements large and small, singly and in combinations of astonishing variation and degree”. 19

Too often, people, particularly musicians, try to make changes by changing their movements directly, by trying to make different movements while performing the same task, or they try to make the same movements in different ways. 20

Instead of attempting to make changes directly, it is necessary to learn to change the thinking with which we direct our movements. To pursue this study is to engage in what Alexander is quoted as saying by his niece, Marjory Barlow, as “an exercise in finding out what thinking is”. 21

Alexander discovered, among other things, that the relationship of the head with the neck, and the head and neck with the rest of the body has an influence on the standard of functioning of the entire organism. He wrote that “a particular relativity of the head to the neck and the head and neck to the other parts of the organism tended to improve general use and functioning of the organism as a whole”. 22

In other words, Alexander claimed that what you do with your head in relation to your body in movement has either a beneficial effect on the quality and coordination of your entire performance or it has a detrimental effect.

Interferences with the healthy or natural functioning of this relationship will consequently interfere with the person’s overall coordination. Because the overall standard of coordination determines the general standard of the person’s movements, this overall general standard of a person’s coordination and movements will determine the standard of any activity that person engages in.

As ought to be clear by now, the Alexander Technique is a process of learning how to apply reason and thought to direct your ways of thinking more effectively in everything you do and how you do it. In lessons, students perform activities ranging from simple everyday actions to more specialised activities such as music performance. In this way they learn how to apply their new reasoning skills to how they are moving as they perform. They also learn about what is involved in the mechanics of general and specific movements and how to direct their thinking to raise the quality and standard of the concepts with which they direct themselves.

This course of study is a pathway to freedom that includes learning to do things more effectively and with more ease and efficiency by bringing greater mental skills to bear. This leads in turn to achieving higher standards of performance and living with constant improvement. Freedom and ease in the thoughts with which we direct ourselves in our movements and behaviours will produce freedom and ease in our physical movements and

19 Weed, Donald, Reach Your Dreams, ITM Publications, 2012, p.32
20 ibid, p.32
21 Barlow, Marjory, An Examined Life, Mormum Time Press, 2002, p.130
22 Alexander, FM, Universal Constant in Living, Mouritz, London, 2000, p. 47
performance.

For example, in violin playing I have been taught to think of many elements of movements or mechanics. I used to try to think about all of the different elements at the same time. I believed that if I put one of these elements out of order the whole thing would be out of order. While at the same time, I was required to make sure that my arms were always completely ‘relaxed.’ I would use a lot of mental effort to try to control everything directly to bring these conditions about. As a result, I ended up with concrete legs and flaccid upper arm muscles.

There is a way of doing all this thinking as a unified field of thought, that includes all of the thinking and moving necessary to play, based on having an indirect control over everything that needs to happen for violin playing to occur. This is what I have been learning to do in my study of the Alexander Technique.

2.2.2 Analysis of Sonata Duodecima

As with the learning of all new compositions, I started my study of the Sonata Duodecima with a formal analysis.

It is interesting and exciting to study and perform what is considered to be the first sonata for violin composed by a woman. It is composed beautifully; Leonarda’s harmonies and melodies sit very well on the violin and make the most of the violin’s potentials. Leonarda’s choice of key, D minor, has a special resonance on the violin especially when played on gut strings.

At the time that Leonarda composed her Opus 16 in 1693, Corelli was forty years of age. He is considered to have established the four movement ‘sonata di chiesa’ structure with a slow-fast-slow-fast structure, however Leonarda’s sonatas vary from having four to thirteen movements. 23 Sonata Duodecima is constructed in seven movements or sections.

During these seven sections, free rhapsodic passages are juxtaposed against more structured sections similar to those in her trio sonatas. 24 The slower moving rhapsodic passages characterise the first movement/section and the opening of the fifth section. The other five movements have faster dance-like meters, consisting of duple and triple meters, each with its own thematic material.

Harmonically, the Sonata opens and closes in D minor and as it travels through a variety of harmonies, the keys of F and C major are featured, Bb major is the furthest point from the ‘home’ key of D minor, and G minor as the Sonata approaches its completion in D minor.

The opening and closing movements both consist of simpler, slower moving harmonic structure. Moving away from the early sections towards the centre of the Sonata, the music travels through more frequent changes of harmony with fewer cadences. The richness of harmony builds as the music travels away from D minor and simplifies again as we approach the end of the Sonata.

The marvellous and mysterious opening ……exemplifies her ability to play around with daring and unexpected harmonies. 25 The dramatic opening chord of D minor is played by both violin and continuo. It lasts for eight beats (at the speed of the tactus) before the

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24 Hearne, Kate, http://archive.westcorkmusic.ie/details/view/cmf/566 accessed 04/06/21
melody moves from D, to C# in the violin part, creating the first dissonance of the sonata against the pedal D in the bass.

This C# sounds dissonant yet it emphasises the key of D minor. In measure 4, the Bb in the melody creates some sense of resolution but the tension continues to hold until the bass moves in measure 7 from D, to Bb and to the imperfect cadence on the chord of A major in measure 8.

Returning immediately to D minor, the section closes in D minor eight measures later, having presented Leonarda’s ability for rich harmonies in just a few short measures. For example, in measure 10 the violin plays a major 7th ‘A’ above Bb in the bass and a diminished chord on G# in first inversion leads to A major. Immediately D major leads to G minor, and G major to C minor as a sequence in measure 13. Measure 14 ends with a diminished seventh with G# in the bass which leads to the perfect cadence in D minor to close the section.

In just sixteen measures, Leonarda presents ideas with harmonic and melodic richness setting the scene for the continuation of the Sonata.

Having opened and closed the first section in D minor, the second section does the same. While the third section opens in D minor it cadences to F major in measure 81. A short phrase in the bass acts as a bridge leading from the F major ending to the opening of section four ‘Spiritoso’ on an F major chord. The music however does not settle on F major but continues to move through suggestions of different keys until the perfect cadence in C major in measure 100.
Section 4, ‘Spiritoso’ closes in D minor giving a sense of ‘home’ but immediately section 5 opens in Bb major.

The opening and closing sections reflect one another in structure. Sections 2, 6 and 7 are constructed around a section that opens and closes in the key of the section, D minor, G minor and D minor respectively. These sections come to a perfect cadence in the same key. The thematic material is then repeated a fifth higher. Leonarda often uses short repetitions of the theme, like a ‘coda’, at the ends of her introduction of her thematic material. They re-establish the key, and create anticipation by postponing the next harmonic event.

As we approach the ‘centre’ of the Sonata, away from D minor, the bass line has a lot more continuous movement. By section four, for the first time, a section begins in a different key to D minor. At this point, the speed of harmonic events begins to increase as the music approaches the second slow section.

This second rhapsodic section opens in Bb major, and its opening two measures are a reminder of the opening section of the Sonata with its florid and improvisatory style.

Having arrived at Section 5, measure 126, we are harmonically at the point of greatest tension. This harmonic ‘distance’ from D minor is juxtaposed with melodic ‘familiar ground’ from the opening of the Sonata. At the Sonata’s furthest point from D minor we are reminded of the opening sections of the sonata. Resolution of the dramatic tension takes place in the final two sections, and the speed of harmonic events slows down.

Thematically, the five dance-like sections, each with its own material, are unified by motivic similarities. The melodies are usually tightly contained within small intervals, with many 3rds and 5ths, often emphasising the 3rd and the 5th of the key. Melodies rise and fall gradually except when thematic material jumps up a fifth in changing key (in the second, sixth and final movement).

The opening of Section 2, Allegro, e presto, is in duple metre, and plays with emphasising the second and usually weaker beat. It introduces the following theme the opening of which emphasises the pitches D and F in measures 17-19 and it builds slowly to its highest point in measure 23. The interval of the 3rd is featured along with important notes in the keys of D minor and F major anticipating the perfect cadences in F major in measures 24 and 27. Immediately, the opening of the theme is repeated in D minor.
The structure of this second section is quite simple in that Leonarda simply repeats that entire section in A minor. She closes the movement by returning to a shorter version of the theme in D minor.

Section 3, *Vivace e largo* opens in D minor. Again the melody is focussed around the pitches A, F and D. The tactus is now divided into three with the second note in the groups of three being emphasised by the movement in the bass line.
The fourth movement or section, *Spiritoso*, opens on the chord of F major functioning as the dominant in C major. Here we can clearly see the frequent use of thirds and fifths in the melody.

Section 6, *Aria, Allegro*, the melody is contained within a fifth, between the pitches G and D in the opening measure, measure 152, and also in the continuation of the melody between measures 153-155. Again, the main pitches of the keys continue to be emphasised, in the opening key of G minor and from the Bb major section from measure 155 – 159.
As in the opening of the Sonata, in Section 2, the theme of Section 6 is repeated in its entirety in a new key, the key of D minor. Leonarda uses the home key in this section as a tension creating device against the key of G minor anticipating the harmonic resolution of the entire Sonata in the following and final section, Section 7.

Section 7, *Veloce*, is the most upbeat, organising the entire 6/8 meter around the tactus. Again the melody is organised around the 5th of the key, D minor. The thematic material in D minor from measure 189 to 205 is repeated in its entirety in A minor. The same thematic material repeated in D minor closes the Sonata.

On analysing the Sonata, it becomes clear that Leonarda’s compositional skill lies in her ability to develop simple ideas into a composition rich in harmony and texture, while maintaining integrity of the ideas upon which the composition is based at all times on all levels.

As Sébastian de Brossard wrote in 1724, ”all of the works of this illustrious and incomparable composer are so beautiful, so gracious, so brilliant and at the same time so knowledgeable and so wise, that my great regret is in not having them all”.

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26 Hearne, Kate, [http://archive.westcorkmusic.ie/details/view/cmf/566](http://archive.westcorkmusic.ie/details/view/cmf/566) accessed 04/06/2021
2.2.3 My Process of work

Having reached my preliminary understanding of the Sonata, I began the process of learning the piece for performance. Interestingly, as I work on my violin performance, it becomes part of my study of the Alexander Technique.

Under the influence of my training, Alexander’s model of experimentation, evaluating results and designing new experiments that inform my thinking has become my standard. Working things out afresh again and again, with the guidance of a violin teacher who is of a compatible mind-set, and who has been able to help me pass mental and technical obstacles when they arose, has been an on-going adventure.

I consider the principles and tools I used in this study and in my practice, including the new ideas that came to me as I worked, to come under a general heading of applying reasoning in my practice, in order to learn more about violin performance. Some of the most important general elements involved in this part of the process are these:

**Poise**

Working with Alexandrian concepts, such as ‘poise’ and ‘being in constant motion,’ diverts me away from the strong ideas of fixed, correct postures that I was trained in as a younger musician. Learning in this way is not a linear path as old ideas and practices continue to have great power over me even after many years. However the practice and application of reasoning has the power, over time, to dominate.

Working with the aim of asking myself for poise, for constant delicate movement in myself, rather than a fixed posture, creates the possibility of increasing movement throughout my system.

It is a liberating process.

I have also learned during my time at KMH that rather than aiming to have ‘perfect posture’ while playing, I am served better by bringing motion into my movement. Thinking of ‘posture’ results in trying to feel I am getting things right again, that my body parts are in right places. But this approach causes me to make myself stiff. To ask for a static concept such as posture and to play dynamically with movement at the same time is to ask for contradictions in my system.

**Reasoning**

The focus of lessons in the Alexander Technique consists of reasoning the most appropriate manner in which to do an activity while taking our anatomy and our physiological organisation into account.

We focus on reasoning out the most appropriate protocol for chosen activities, by identifying appropriate steps in their sequence. Reasoning in this way can expose faults in our conceptions of how to perform the acts we wish to perform that are incongruent with human anatomy or the conditions with which we are working.

A lot of my Alexander Technique study has consisted of reasoning out how to play the violin. My aim has been to understand more of how to play within the actual parameters of the human body, rather than within the narrower limitations created by the ideas and perceptions that I had cultivated earlier and had struggled so hard to keep in place. In this way, I have acquired a deeper knowledge of the movements involved in violin playing.

One of the most significant aspects of learning to reason is learning to stop doing things that we don’t need to do – to stop doing the things that get in our way, the (ones) that cause
us difficulties and prevent us from reaching our potential.

One of the most important principles in Alexander’s work is the principle of learning to stop creating difficulties in ourselves by preventing the interferences we create rather than trying to do something new to fix the problem. Alexander wrote that the way out of an impasse is not by doing something new and additional to fix the problem, but to stop creating the problem in the first place.

Working in this way has been uncomfortable for me, because so often performing based on reasoning means letting go of ‘feeling right’ as I am playing. In this case, my sense of ‘feeling right’ is based on doing things the way I have always done them, because doing things in the same old way produces the same old feelings. And these old feelings have come to be judged and labelled by me as ‘feeling right.’

Using these reasoning processes, Alexander asks us to let go of the illusion of a certain kind of security based on a sense of ‘feeling right.’ This is a false comfort that is only created by having a previous familiarity with those old feelings. In this respect, Alexander quotes his student, Joseph Rowntree as saying “This work is about reasoning from the known to the unknown” and the unknown – because it is so new and unfamiliar – can feel very uncomfortable indeed.

I would now like to describe a number of specific practices I used during this process.

**Starting from the end of the piece**

I began the practice of working from the end of the piece forward, to start to learn from the end of the final movement to the beginning. I also approached each movement from the end to the beginning as well. This meant that I spent more time learning the end of the piece than the beginning.

I reasoned out that the end of a composition contains an integrated coming together of all of the ideas of the piece, from the initial statement of the idea upon which the piece is based to the culmination of the development of the ideas melodically and harmonically.

By beginning at the end and working backwards, I was able to learn the rest of the piece more quickly and easily. Working in this way seems to accelerate the learning and understanding of the earlier stages of the piece.

There is also an added confidence that comes from this practice. When one spends the majority of time working from the beginning, one learns the beginning best. But when one is playing the piece in performance, one is always moving away from what one knows best. By starting with the end, one is always working toward the part of the piece you know best.

**Using the metronome**

I use the metronome as a frequent practice tool, listening to see if my playing is exactly with the tempo of the metronome. Playing very slowly is also an excellent way of paying more attention to intonation.

Slowing down the tempo creates space in my mind to pay attention to all of the relationships that take place as I play. I also ‘listen’ to the use of my body—the internal relationships of movement – as well as the relationships in the music, such as the relationship of the melody to the harmonic structure.

Using a recording device

In addition, I often made great use of a recording device. This enables me to listen to my accuracy more objectively. Often when I listened back to my recordings, I was frequently surprised when I heard something I had not heard while playing.

When I heard I was ahead or behind the metronome, or out of tune, I would repeat the section placing my attention on making the desired changes.

Often, I would record myself playing the melody line separately and then I would record the bass line. This would enable me to play with either line listening to the recording.

During my practice sessions, when accompanying myself in this way, I could hear clearly any inaccuracies in rhythm and unsteadiness in pulse. It was also an excellent tool for improving intonation. This approach helped my listening, and my understanding of the harmonic structure.

Mental sight singing

Another tool I used at an early stage in learning this piece was to sight sing the music mentally. This helped me establish the accuracy of the melody in my mind and it has also helped me develop an ability to understand the music more deeply.

As a general principle, I believe that in order to be able to play something, I must be able to sing it. I believe that this approach in general helps me to develop a deeper understanding of the music.

While working in this way, I would add in more questions, such as, what is the bass line at this point? What is the harmonic order of events? As my understanding of the harmonic structure of the piece developed, I practised holding the key in my mind and listening to make sure each note I played was in tune with the overall key.

After working in this way for some time, I then practised mentally singing both parts and mentally hearing the whole of the harmony.

I noticed my understanding of the music continued to deepen over time, both at and away from the violin. For example, as I worked in this way, I would often find myself hearing both melody and bass line in my mind simultaneously with very little effort. It became clear to me that I had been ‘working’ on the piece unconsciously while going about my daily business.

During the early stages of working with a new piece in these ways, I would deliberately postpone decisions about bowing and fingering until I had become more familiar with the music.

As a practice tool, I did not at first do the printed bowing, but would play slowly with one bow per bar/measure and so, in effect, temporarily ‘removed’ the work of the right hand. This allowed me to give more attention to the work of the left hand, including the accuracy of the notes, the intonation, and how much effort and pressure I was using.

In addition, applying a technique I had learned for text study in my Alexander training, I wrote out the Sonata longhand onto manuscript. This forced me to slow down my thinking as I considered the piece. This, in turn, enabled me to deepen my knowledge of the piece. In this process, I was able to notice things like the progression of events through the piece with a slower and clearer focus. The benefits that came from this were similar in nature and importance to the benefits derived from playing very slowly.
3 What I learned

I believe that basing my approach to learning this piece of music on the principles and processes of the Alexander Technique has been extremely beneficial for me as a musician and a person. I believe this is a process that would be of benefit to every musician.

**Just as much effort and energy as required and no more**

In the ITM we often talk about Fred Astaire whose high standard made his dancing look effortless. Dancing is not effortless, and requires energy. Fred Astaire created the appearance of ‘effortlessness’ by only using just as much effort as he needed in his dancing and no more. 28

During the time of my work with the Alexander Technique, I came to understand that the power in Astaire’s ‘effortlessness’ did not come from his dancing technique, but rather from the high standard of coordination in his system. In other words, the more effortlessly a person organises their general coordination, the more coordinated and effortless their specialised movements will be.

One of the most significant things I have learned is that the pathway to using less effort in playing is entirely different to anything I could have imagined or foreseen. I do not believe it is possible to play using less effort in a direct manner as so many musicians attempt to do. I realise that I have earned my ‘lessened’ effort while playing by following Alexander’s principles and process. The ‘less effort’ I was looking for can be acquired through learning to redirect the thinking processes with which we direct ourselves in our performances.

Alexander’s understanding of teaching is to place the facts, for and against a particular topic, before the pupil in such a way as to appeal to his reasoning faculties and his latent powers of originality. 29 Today we might think of this phrase “latent powers of originality” to mean imagination or creativity. In fact, my favourite aspect of FM’s work is its power and effectiveness in developing and increasing our creativity.

In my opinion, freedom for a musician lies in acquiring an on-going ease in expressing themselves through their feelings and musical imagination while having the ability to bring the necessary technical skill to the task required to play well. In other words, freedom for musicians is having both a free flow of ideas and emotion accompanied by the skill required to express them.

I believe that it is possible for anyone who trains as a musician to achieve this kind of skill. But, looking back on my own musical training and experience, it seems to me that, in general, many musicians are trained away from the realisation of this potential.

The ITM approach to the Alexander Technique has given me a depth of understanding that has developed slowly. The combination of studying with an excellent violinist, Ann Wallström, in conjunction with training in the ITM, has been a combination that is unsurpassed. Through this combination, I have learned what I need to do to play, what I don’t need to do to play and how to stop the old ideas and practices that were getting in my way.

In the past years I have received numerous comments from audience members about the

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wonderful quality of my sound and my ‘relaxed’ appearance on stage. What looks to the audience as ‘relaxed’ is in fact the natural outcome of using an approach to playing based on a growing understanding of what needs to be done to play.

I have also become fascinated by similarities between Alexander’s work and Early Music. It seems to me that there is a freedom in this style of music that is compatible with and that reflects the growing freedom that I experience from my ITM study. I have come to wonder if earlier musicians and composers had a concept of freedom in music making that sometimes seems to be lost amongst the majority of modern musicians. My study of Leonarda’s Sonata Duodecima has given me a budding curiosity about this subject and it is one I hope to explore more thoroughly in the future.

4. Conclusions

From my study of Alexander’s work, I have discovered that playing with less effort is indeed possible, through a pathway entirely different from anything I was taught or could have imagined or foreseen beforehand. I now know that the ease and ‘less effort’ in playing that I was looking for could not have been achieved by any direct means, but as an indirect outcome of learning to follow the processes and principles that F.M. Alexander left for us in his books.

Now that I have been trained to think and act differently, I can employ my reasoning skills more usefully. As a result, my practising has become more productive and the quality of my performance enhanced. I have learned to set more constructive goals and to ask myself more useful questions.

I have been fortunate that my teacher at KMH, Ann Wallström, has worked with me in a manner that is consistent with Alexander’s principles of reasoning. I have found that our approach to our work together has at all times been consistent with my other studies.

I have learned that Alexander’s way of thinking and directing oneself in activity is fundamentally different to the way I was trained to think as a musician.

For example, the belief was instilled in me from an early age that doing a certain number of hours of practice a day had the power to bring about certain positive results. I was not trained to think about how I was doing my practice or how to do things while practising. I was putting the responsibility for success on this belief that the length of time practicing and the repetition of exercises would bring me my desired results.

Because of this, I was directing my efforts in ineffective ways. Hours of practice without understanding what I was doing and why I was doing it only reinforced the wrong ideas I had about violin playing and the faulty performances created by these wrong ideas. Learning how to apply myself more effectively to everything I do – as I learned in the Alexander Technique – has made my efforts more effective and fulfilling.

I love the combination of being both a musician and an Alexander Technique teacher. The interactions of the two art forms are a beautiful complement to one another. In my mind both disciplines form one complete whole from which I learn more about music, the Alexander Technique, and life.

I am indeed on a pathway through life that I could never have anticipated.
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