

REPORT CEMPE PROJECT

Horn Students Explore Alexander Technique

Ilene Chanon

Introduction

From October 2017 through March 2018, the horn studio at the Grieg Academy of Music and Stephen Parker embarked upon a collaborative Alexander Technique (AT) project. Parker has Alexander Technique private practices in both Bergen and Oslo, and works regularly with members of the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Norwegian Opera, Gothenburg Symphony, Gothenburg Opera, and students and teachers from the Norwegian Academy of Music.

The class schedule consisted of twelve individual half-hour AT lessons for the students, four one-and-a-half hour interactive group AT lessons, and twelve half-hour AT lessons for the Assistant Professor of Horn, Ilene Chanon. The horn studio was comprised of one second-year bachelor student, one fourth-year bachelor student, and one International Diploma student. An interactive learning process was utilized wherein the students built upon their increased knowledge of certain principles attained in individual AT lessons, and exercised their observational and listening skills in group lessons. Chanon was an active collaborator during all group lessons, addressing horn technique and musicality, while Stephen Parker tackled the Alexander Technique (AT) principles. Chanon's private instruction in AT enabled her to follow the progression of the students over the duration of this project, during horn lessons and horn studio class sessions.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to find out whether, and to what degree, application of the Alexander technique leads to production of better sound and technique, even under the most stressful situations. The expectation was that, through a collaborative approach, the students would learn to avoid strain and performance inhibiting tenseness during practice and performance, and also become more aware of the relationship between their body and their instrument, thereby allowing for greater ease of playing.

Description

Before the first Alexander Technique session, the students filled out an *Alexander Technique Questionnaire*¹ exploring their thought processes during practice and performance, as well as their perception of pain, discomfort and tension relating to the quality of their horn playing. Before answering the questions, the students had no experience with the principles of Alexander Technique.

An identical questionnaire was distributed to the students after the final AT session to determine whether there were any changes in thinking, well-being of the physical body during playing, as well as quality of performance.

In addition to the questionnaire, the observations of Assistant Professor Ilene Chanon are summarized regarding improvement and progression in horn technique, expression, and overall performance.

Results and Discussion

The short six-month period of intense Alexander Technique individual lessons and interactive group lessons in the horn studio of the Grieg Academy resulted in a more constructive focus of attention during practice and concerts, a reduction in frequency of pain, tension and discomfort during horn playing, an increase in situations where optimal performance is achieved, and an increase in observational skills.

Although the project lasted only six months, the size of the horn class was relatively small, and there was an overall student attendance rate of only 80%, many noticeable changes have occurred in the horn playing and habits of the three students.

Summary of Responses²:

The students answered the questionnaire in the beginning of October 2017. They were not informed that they would be required to answer the same questionnaire at the end of March 2018. They did not have a copy of the questionnaire or their previous answers when they filled out the questionnaire for the second time in March 2018.

The questionnaire was designed to specifically address the following aspects:

1. Thoughts and Attention
2. Pain, Tension and Discomfort
3. Optimal Playing

Before AT, the students' attention was more easily distracted from their playing to other non-related thoughts, especially while practicing. When asked about what they thought about while practicing, some responses were, "things other than horn playing," and "my thoughts stray when I receive messages on my phone."

After AT, the concrete tools that AT instilled in the students resulted in a more constructive focus of attention during concerts and practice. Some examples of the replacement of distracting thoughts with constructive, helpful thoughts include AT principles such as, "both feet planted on the floor," "direction of head," and "open chest."

When measured on a scale of 1-10, 10 being most often, thoughts strayed 30% less often after the AT lessons (from an average of 3.5 on the scale before AT, and down to 2.5 after AT).

There was a considerable drop in frequency of unwanted pain, tension and discomfort during horn playing after AT instruction. On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the most pain, tension and discomfort, the results showed a 20% reduction in occurrence of pain, tension and discomfort (from an average of 3.8 on the scale before AT, and down to 3.1 after AT). Pain, tension and discomfort are experienced in the back, shoulders, neck, arms, and lips. The study of Alexander Technique has led to an enhanced awareness of the body during playing, resulting in the mentioning of some new areas of tension and discomfort, such as the stomach and legs.

Before AT, optimal playing occurred mostly during individual horn lessons, and after AT optimal playing was achieved in all situations, including rehearsals and concerts. The major causes hindering optimal playing shifted from, "lack of air," and "lack of self-confidence," before AT, to, "thinking about technical difficulties," after AT. Although nervousness and stress were present both before and after AT, the adjustments made in stance and thinking during AT sessions resulted in an enhanced uptake of air, which in turn improved self-confidence and enabled a higher standard of playing in additional situations. Unwanted tension had a 17% lesser negative effect on quality of playing after AT principles were incorporated into the students playing habits. On a scale of 1-10, 10 having the greatest effect, the students accorded an average of 5.7 on the scale before AT, and 4.7 after AT.

Chanon's observations:

Prior to AT lessons, Student A had a visible and audible hesitation in his playing at the beginning of each new phrase. After the initial in-breath, at least one second would elapse while he set up his embouchure, before a sound was produced. The rigid set-up routine resulted in a hard, aggressive attack on each initial note after the in-breath. Student A's stance was also rigid, with the chest puffed out and the head leaning back. By the end of the school year, the habits of hesitation and rigid stance were eliminated. Student A now has softer initial attacks and a more fluid stance, which corresponds with a more flowing style of playing.

Student B began her AT studies with the challenges of shallow breathing and a backward-leaning stance. The sound was relatively small, and the low register was especially weak. Student B worked on shifting her weight forward, finally allowing the lungs to be filled to capacity. At her degree recital in June 2018, the sound was bigger and rounder, and the low register greatly improved.

Student C exhibited a tendency to narrow her field of focus inward while performing, inhibiting a connection with the audience. Parker emphasized eye contact and a more open approach to performance. When Student C dared to look at the audience and establish contact, the character of the music was much more evident.

An increase in observational skill was developed during the interactive group lessons resulting in an accelerated learning environment. The students built upon their knowledge of AT principles learned during individual AT lessons, and were encouraged to actively observe the tendencies of their peers through visual scrutiny and intense listening. Through careful observation of their peers, the students recognized their own habits and noticed the clear connection between the visual, physical habits of playing and the resulting audible sounds produced.

Conclusion

The results of this project support the notion that the addition of interactive, collaborative Alexander Technique lessons to applied horn studies at universities and conservatories help the students to become more aware of the relationship between the body and the instrument, thereby allowing for greater ease of playing and avoidance of performance inhibiting tenseness. The students in this study have exhibited a great improvement in the ability to produce the best sound and technique even under the most stressful situations. A collaborative Alexander Technique program would be a welcome supplement to any horn studio, greatly enhancing the breadth of education as horn players.

Alexander Technique Questionnaire¹

1. What do you think most about while practicing, where is your attention (you may list several topics)?

2. What do you think most about during performances, where is your attention (you may list several topics)?

3. When do you feel that your playing is optimal: during concerts, rehearsals, when practicing alone, or equally well during all situations?

4. What do you think are the causes when your playing is not optimal?

5. How often do your thoughts stray from playing the horn during practice sessions?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Never

Always

Please specify the reason(s) why your attention strays, from most common to least common:

6. How often do your thoughts stray from playing the horn during concerts?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Never

Always

Please specify the reason(s) why your attention strays, from most common to least common:

7. How often do you experience pain during practice sessions?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

I Never Experience Pain

I Always Experience Pain

8. How often do you experience discomfort while playing?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

I Never Experience Discomfort

I Always Experience Discomfort

Please explain what kind of discomfort you experience and where:

9. How often do you experience unwanted tension while practicing?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

I Never Experience Tension

I Always Experience Tension

Where are you tense (you may list several areas)?

10. To what degree do you experience unwanted tension during performances:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Least

Most

Where are you tense (you may list several areas)?

11. Do you feel that unwanted tension affects the quality of your playing?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

No Effect On My Playing

Enormous Effect On My Playing

In what way do you feel that unwanted tension affects your quality of playing?

Summary of Responses²

What do you think most about while practicing, where is your attention (you may list several topics)?	
<i>Similar Responses Before and After AT</i>	Rhythm, Staying relaxed, Posture, Sound Quality, Musical Phrasing, Breathing and Use of Air
<i>New Responses After AT</i>	Both feet planted on the floor, direction of head, open chest, technical challenges
<i>Responses Before AT which do not Reappear After AT</i>	Things other than horn playing

What do you think most about during performances, where is your attention (you may list several topics)?	
<i>Similar Responses Before and After AT</i>	Air, The Music, Intonation with others.
<i>New Responses After AT</i>	Breath, dynamics, articulation, getting through the performance with best possible results, How my part fits in musically.
<i>Responses Before AT which do not Reappear After AT</i>	Timing, Upcoming Phrases, Standing Posture.

How often do your thoughts stray from playing the horn during practice sessions (On a scale from 1-10, 10 being most often)? And please specify the reason(s) why your attention strays, from most common to least common:	
<i>Placement on the Scale</i>	Before AT: 4,4,7 After AT: 2,3,4
<i>Similar Responses Before and After AT</i>	I have other things that need to be done.
<i>New Responses After AT</i>	Thoughts about the actual performance of the works I am practicing, Not enough time to get into the 'zone,' wondering about if people are listening to me now, lack of energy, unfocussed.
<i>Responses Before AT which do not Reappear After AT</i>	During Warm-up, When playing pieces that I know well, When messages arrive on my phone, Practicing unrewarding music.

How often do your thoughts stray from playing the horn during concerts (On a scale from 1-10, 10 being most often)? And please specify the reason(s) why your attention strays, from most common to least common:

<i>Placement on the Scale</i>	<i>Before AT: 2,2,2 After AT: 1,2,3</i>
<i>Similar Responses Before and After AT</i>	I think about who is in the audience.
<i>New Responses After AT</i>	My thoughts never stray, When starting to get nervous – I try to figure out how to control the nervousness.
<i>Responses Before AT which do not Reappear After AT</i>	I think about why I am nervous.

How often do you experience pain during practice sessions (On a scale from 1-10, 10 being most often)? Please explain what kind of pain you have and where:

<i>Placement on the Scale</i>	<i>Before AT: 1,4,5 After AT: 1,4,4</i>
<i>Similar Responses Before and After AT</i>	Back due to bad posture, Shoulders, Left Arm (shooting pain), Lips/Embouchure.
<i>New Responses After AT</i>	Occasional pain in cheeks
<i>Responses Before AT which do not Reappear After AT</i>	Neck, Tightening in body, occasional pain in cheeks.

How often do you experience discomfort while playing (On a scale from 1-10, 10 being most often)? Please explain what kind of discomfort you experience and where:

<i>Placement on the Scale</i>	<i>Before AT: 4,4,6 After AT: 1,3,4</i>
<i>Similar Responses Before and After AT</i>	Shoulders, back, neck, arms.
<i>New Responses After AT</i>	I never experience discomfort, I become out of breath when nervous – and then I activate all the muscles in my back and get tired faster.
<i>Responses Before AT which do not Reappear After AT</i>	Stress, lips from straining.

How often do you experience unwanted tension while practicing (On a scale from 1-10, 10 being most often)? Where are you tense (you may list several areas)?	
<i>Placement on the Scale</i>	Before AT: 1,3,6 After AT: 3,3,5
<i>Similar Responses Before and After AT</i>	Shoulders, neck, arms.
<i>New Responses After AT</i>	Chest and stomach from hunching over, legs while sitting.
<i>Responses Before AT which do not Reappear After AT</i>	Lips, Jaw, Upper-back, I never experience tension.

How often do you experience unwanted tension during performances (On a scale from 1-10, 10 being most often)? Where are you tense (you may list several areas)?	
<i>Placement on the Scale</i>	Before AT: 3,4,5 After AT: 2,2,5
<i>Similar Responses Before and After AT</i>	Back, Shoulders, Chest, Stomach, Upper body hunched,
<i>New Responses After AT</i>	I am almost never tense.
<i>Responses Before AT which do not Reappear After AT</i>	Lips, Neck

When do you feel that your playing is optimal: during concerts, rehearsals, when practicing alone, or equally well during all situations?	
<i>Similar Responses Before and After AT</i>	Horn Lessons
<i>New Responses After AT</i>	Equally well in All Situations
<i>Responses Before AT which do not Reappear After AT</i>	Rehearsals, Practicing Alone

What do you think are the causes when your playing is not optimal?	
<i>Similar Responses Before and After AT</i>	Nervous, Tense, Stress, Unfocussed.
<i>New Responses After AT</i>	Dry-mouth, Thinking about Technical Difficulties Instead of the Music, Worrying about the Embouchure getting Tired.
<i>Responses Before AT which</i>	Lack of air, Shyness, Lack of Confidence, Big expectations during

Do you feel that unwanted tension affects the quality of your playing (On a scale from 1-10, 10 having the most effect on the playing)? In what way do you feel that unwanted tension affects your quality of playing?

<i>Placement on the Scale</i>	<i>Before AT: 5,5,7 After AT: 3,4,7</i>
<i>Similar Responses Before and After AT</i>	<i>Do not use the air optimally, Tension in breathing, Wandering thoughts, Sound smaller and less resonant.</i>
<i>New Responses After AT</i>	<i>Tension in the arms, more difficult to play.</i>
<i>Responses Before AT which do not Reappear After AT</i>	<i>Too much mouthpiece pressure.</i>