



Practical Magic: The Alexander Technique provides important stress relief for performers

By Genie Carr, Artview Editor

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Violinists lose their legs when they play, says Ethan Kind. Dancers, of course, know their legs very, very well; sometimes they have to discover their upper bodies.

And a singer who strains forward is likely to lose vocal power because the muscles that help his voice are straining, unconsciously trying to gather everyone in the audience.

Kind helps performers find their legs, or their torsos, or their breath, through Alexander Technique. With a light touch here, a suggestion there, he guides an artist into releasing tightened muscles.

It looks like magic, and experiencing the change feels like magic. A singer can hear her own voice expand; someone taking notes sees her handwriting become smooth and legible.

It is not magic. It requires time, concentration and trust on the part of the Alexander student - and for starters, three years of intensive training on the part of the teacher.

Kind, a certified, full-time Alexander Technique teacher, moved to Winston-Salem in 1996. He had been here before, though: As a high-school student he studied guitar at the N.C. School of the Arts with the late Jesus Silva. After high school, he studied at the Royal College of Music in London and has a master's degree in classical guitar performance. In his third year in London, he developed severe carpal tunnel syndrome. A few months of Alexander Technique sessions solved the problem.

He continued performing. "It was 13 years or so before I did the training," he said. "I always knew that if I were not in music, I'd like to do Alexander training."

He works with performing-arts students at NCSA, Salem College and Wake Forest University as well as in his private practice. "Musicians and dancers do get very good at what they do," he said. Often, the problem is that the performer becomes so conscious of trying to play the note exactly right, or turn the leg exactly right, that things quickly go wrong. The same thing happens with golfers, Kind said. "They become hyperconscious of every move of the body."

Artistic performers are not his only clients. The goal is, first, to identify bad movement habits, then train the body to move in appropriate, fluid ways to prevent injury and lessen fatigue. Even as simple sounding a move as relaxing the neck muscles will also lower the shoulders and loosen the chest muscles, resulting in a deep breath into now-unrestricted lungs.

During the Intensive Arts period at the School of the Arts, between Thanksgiving and the Christmas break, students gathered in a music rehearsal room to find out about Alexander Technique. As volunteers played or sang, the others watched intently, observing both their student colleague and Kind's guiding hands and words.

Zach Goff, a college freshman, sat on the piano bench and went through a few measures of a Brahms waltz. Kind stepped forward, placed one foot on the bench and the ends of his fingers along Goff's neck. Goff played



again. Then Kind put one hand lightly on Goff's shoulder and the other on his back, midway down. "I'm going to take you to your full height," Kind said, and Goff, who had been leaning forward, straightened. He played the phrase again.

"Oh my God, that's way easier," he said in astonishment.

"There was no body underneath your shoulders when you leaned forward," Kind told him. He explained that Alexander technique looks for opposition - so you don't fall into what you're doing."

"Your assumption," he said to Goff and the other performers listening, "is that if you're closer to the piano, the more accurate you are. But there's tremendous physical tension when a performer hunkers down." When the body is released, straightened up so the lungs can receive more oxygen, the muscles (and the mind) are free to do their work efficiently.

"You want the music to come to you," he told Goff, an idea he repeated when saxophonist Tom Morimoto, a high school junior, stood up to play. With his fingers on Morimoto's back, Kind said, "when you arch your



back, you restrict yourself." Kind's fingers touched just behind Morimoto's ears. "Bring your instrument up to your mouth, but don't look down," he instructed. He put his fingers on the saxophonist's solar plexus and his back, to keep him standing upright. "Unlock your knees," he said.

Morimoto played again. The volume had increased dramatically, but not from Morimoto blowing harder. The same effort resulted in more air.

One violinist told Kind that she forgets to breathe deeply when she plays fast. Kind asked her to play what she had just played, but to play it "very carelessly." That got him a dubious glance, but she tried it anyway. Kind said, "When we're afraid, we don't breathe; we're playing from a state of fear. Pay attention to not holding your breath the whole time." He placed his fingers on

her rib cage in back and just below her waist. She played. "I feel light-headed," she said when she finished. "You're used to playing without air," Kind said. "Breathe naturally. Let your body do what it wants to do."

Kind works with Alexander Technique students on piano benches, at dance barres, in rehearsal rooms. In his own studio in his home off Reynolda Road, a padded table sits in a high-ceilinged room with a glass window that looks out on his fenced back yard. There are native American items in the studio. Kind explains that he has brought reminders from his last home in Albuquerque, N.M.

More than decoration, the pieces also reflect Kind's own centeredness. A stocky man who lifts weights when he's not teaching Alexander Technique, Kind observes that when he's in the gym, he sees his fellow weight-lifters' facial contortions of concentration and effort. "They're trying to lift weights with their faces," he said dryly.

As he said to Michelle Trovato, a second-year voice student at the arts school: "Exaggerated facial expressions are tension." Tension locks down the rest of the body, thereby decreasing the effectiveness of the voice - or the muscles that need to do the lifting of heavy weights. "Tension slows down the reflexes," he said.

Alexander Technique, Kind said, gives the performer the "ability to sense, feel, observe what you're doing. You're also getting out of a protective posture, so you can give your performance as a gift."

In essence, Kind said, "Alexander Technique is about taking care of yourself and accomplishing a goal. When we let our muscles release so that they don't ache and don't become fatigued, we are also taking care of our art."