

*Using the Alexander Technique when
Playing in the Symphony Orchestra
Evangeline Benedetti*

Performing in a symphony orchestra is full of challenges: Aside from the difficulty of physically playing an instrument up to a high standard and staying mentally focused and alert for long periods of time, musicians are asked to perform in very close quarters and to adhere to the artistic vision of the conductor instead of their own individual sense of musicality. How can the Alexander Technique help with these challenges?

Being able to play the instrument comfortably and with a reduction in tension is certainly a good start, but the way musicians play at home—with plenty of space to move freely, a chair that is the correct height, and everything set up just the way they like it—is rarely available in a performance setting. Especially for string players, the way the orchestra is organized on stage requires playing with that same freedom while sitting on a regulation orchestra chair placed close to the music stand right next to their stand partner.

Staying mentally focused has several aspects: The eyes must simultaneously watch the music and the conductor, and sometimes one must also pay attention to the section leader or to a musician from a different section entirely. Ideas about musicality and interpretation must come together and blend in a section; individual musicians have no control over their own tempi, bowings, phrasing, or even the music that they are playing. Under these circumstances, the Alexander Technique can help musicians attain inner freedom even without outer freedom.

Evangeline asks her students who are musicians to practice squatting (if they are able) and then to think of squatting as they sit down in a chair. Immediately after sitting, they play a scale—no time to think, acquire a postural set, or go through any kind of ritual before beginning to play. Being able to play without careful, drawn-out thinking and preparation is essential for a professional musician. Anything can happen at any moment, and if the musician is used to quickly and gracefully beginning to play with good use, he or she will be ready for the realities of live performance.

A well-developed inner sense of rhythm can help an orchestral musician as well; to demonstrate this, Evangeline had us sit and prepare to clap on the downbeat as she conducted. I found it surprisingly difficult to stay up, calm, and balanced while watching her and preparing to clap! We also experimented with keeping a steady rhythm while vocalizing different syllables and noticing the difference in sound and expression between saying “tick tick tick” (short and abrupt) and “la la la” (smoother and more flowing).

This workshop made it very clear that making use of the Alexander Technique for symphony musicians is about finding a way to expand within oneself in a challenging situation just as much as it is refining the outward expression of good use.



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—Angeline LeLeux