Three Musicians Talk about the Alexander Technique

Bill Benham (violin), Melbon Mackie (bassoon) & Joseph Sanders (oboe)
Photographs supplied by the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique

MEL: Bill, can I first ask you the question that I find terribly hard to answer if somebody asks me, "What is the Alexander Technique?"

BILL: It's always difficult to answer and it really depends on who you're speaking to because images mean different things to different people. What it isn't about is posture, because "posture" implies a static position. What I think it's about is conscious control in movement and regaining the full functioning of the natural supporting reflexes of the body with which we were all born. We can interfere with the working of these reflexes by the way we carry out voluntary activity, so if, for instance, you touch a red-hot plate, the instinct is of course is to withdraw the hand: the spinal reflex arch goes into operation. But if someone holds a gun to your head and says, "You are not to drop that plate," you can consciously veto (inhibit) this reflex reaction, hang on to the plate and burn your fingers!

F M Alexander

MEL: The image that comes to my mind is one that we see on television quite often in nature films of a leopard or cheetah running at full pace and shown in slow motion. Obviously the animal is expending a tremendous amount of energy and yet the impression is one of almost total relaxation.

The head is still and travels in a straight line parallel to the ground, and the head leads and the body follows. My feeling is that we were born with good use, in other words the body is used with the least effort with maximum efficiency, and as we grow older the conscious part of the mind interferes with that process on an unconscious, habitual level.

BILL: Basically young children up to age 3 or 4 have pretty good use compared with adults and as, gradually, they copy the adults and older children around them and they sit hunched up at school, they gradually lose their natural movements, and so then we need a way to get back: to re-educate ourselves. That means we have to inhibit or stop doing those things which are harming us. Of course "inhibit" needs explaining. Most people think of it as a Freudian word, of being an inhibited person. The word "inhibition" as used by Alexander is not that at all - it is a positive decision not to act. The animal world is full of examples. A cat will wait to assess the distance before jumping, and until exactly the right moment to pounce on its prey, even though it might be very hungry and desperate. It will inhibit the desire until it can have the best chance of succeeding in catching its meal.

The involvement of the eyes is crucial to the Alexander Technique. Musicians very often forget the eyes because we are so much involved with listening. We develop hearing but vision gets forgotten. Alexander wouldn't like people to shut their eves to try to feel what was happening. He'd get them to look out of the window and to take notice of things going on around them.

MEL: I had a teacher who on the odd occasion used to turn on the television as a way of stopping me getting over-involved. I think he was trying to distract me from what he was doing - to stop me interfering.

BILL: That's right, because we're all trying hard to "do" it. Say someone tells you that you're raising your shoulder. Suddenly you are aware of it, so then you do something to stop it going up and perhaps make it worse than before - you hold it down and you're stiffer than ever.

MEL: Yes that's a nice distinction: not raising it is different from holding it down.

BILL: You have to inhibit the habit of raising it and then you can substitute another movement [reaction] which involves less tension, and leave the shoulder alone. When someone goes to a new teacher on an instrument the teacher will say, "You are doing this or that wrong; play like me" or "like this", and he'll demonstrate it and then you try and add on the new ideas to your usual way of playing. You can end up in a mess and confused.

MEL: If you have had experience of the Alexander Technique and you then teach an instrument (as I do), you can often find yourself in something of a quandary. You can be aware that your pupils are doing something which you would describe as very bad from an Alexander point of view and you can see is very much impeding their progress on the bassoon. The question is then, what do you do? Ideally you would like to tell them that they should go off and have Alexander lessons, which is maybe an impractical suggestion. First they're not that cheap for a struggling student and also, this person may not want to have Alexander lessons. They are something a person has to realise the need for, for himself. He may become receptive, but not necessarily at that time.

BILL: It's interesting, in the book by Walter Carrington [Explaining the Alexander Technique: The Writings of F Matthias Alexander, by Walter Carrington and Sean Carey, Sheildrake Press, 1992], that when people rang up Ashley Place for lessons the secretary would ask, "Have you read Mr Alexander's books?", and if they hadn't he would advise them to read one before they came for a lesson. That would save an awful lot of explaining. Alexander would expect his students to do some work. He didn't want people coming to him and just being completely passive: to take without giving. He wanted them to be involved in their own improvement.

MEL: That's something a lot of people don't realise, even people who have had lessons. I had one colleague who used to talk about going off for a lesson as a treatment. He had a physical problem and he used to regard an Alexander teacher almost as a medical person. He would go off to his lesson, lie on the table and wait to be "done to". I suspect there are a lot of other people who see it that way as well.

BILL: Anyway, Mel, what made you start having lessons?

MEL: It was one day out of the blue. I suddenly decided my breathing wasn't right. As a student, nobody had ever mentioned breathing to me at all, it was just something one did. I wasn't aware of any particular problems with it but anyhow I began to think, "I don't think the right bits of me are moving when I breathe". So I thought, "Right, now I'll start breathing correctly. I'll make sure all the right bits move." And I ended up in a real fix. I struggled along for a year and ended up in such a tangle, and then someone suggested Alexander lessons. It took a while, in fact one never stops trying to learn. What you have to be prepared for is that it's not going to be a quick fix. Also, you go along to an Alexander teacher and say, "I want to learn to breathe correctly," and what you have to be prepared for is that the teacher isn't then going to start teaching you how to breathe. Good breathing comes as a result of other things, and other things come as a result of good breathing. Each resonates from the other. This is something I've learnt from trying to apply the Alexander Technique to playing the bassoon, especially in a performing situation; that we are a whole. The emotional state resonates with the physical state and vice versa. I'm convinced that relaxation is the key to so many things and is a state that is quite difficult to achieve, especially when the pressure is on.

BILL: People who haven't had Alexander lessons usually misinterpret the word, "relaxation". To a lot of people this implies "collapse", or that's what they do. They collapse and slump. But relaxation in Alexander terms isn't that at all. It's more to do with getting the natural supporting postural mechanisms working, but

that often takes several lessons. Until the back is working well, the breathing can't happen in a relaxed way. To use Alexander's clumsy term, the "means whereby" relaxed breathing can take place is when the back is working: tending to "lengthen and widen" as opposed to narrowing and shortening.

When 'F M' was making his initial discoveries he had been suffering from voice and breathing problems. He kept losing his voice during recitals. He was a reciter of Shakespeare, dramatic monologues and such like. He began to observe himself in mirrors and saw that certain things happened when he recited. In particular he gasped air in and tightened his neck and throat muscles. He developed a way of changing this damaging way of reacting and went on to teach others. He became known as the "Breathing Man". In his teaching he talked a lot about breathing at first, but as he got older he explained less and less in words, because people would misunderstand: the words got in the way. People's ideas about how to do things and what feels right are so bound up with their own habits and preconceptions. He developed a subtle way of using his hands to help people experience what he meant.

MEL: In a way you are trying to describe something for which there is no [common] vocabulary. But is it possible to describe what might happen in a lesson?

BILL: Yes. I suppose with particular reference to wind players, I think there is a tendency for the breathing to be tight and the rib cage to be held rigid. The more difficult the music, probably the more tension you get in the rib cage. What an Alexander teacher will do is try to calm it all down, and he will usually begin by putting a hand on the head and back of the neck to bring the head more freely into balance on the spine.

MEL: So the teacher would not necessarily say to himself "This is a wind player so I must treat him in a particular kind of way"?

BILL: No. An Alexander teacher should be using his eyes so that from the very first moment he would be observing. The interesting thing is that if Alexander himself had a young enthusiast who was very keen on a sport or an instrument, and he observed that playing messed them up he would say, "Why don't you stop?"

MEL: Yes. In fact my first teacher actually said to me, "In an ideal world I would ask you to give up playing for a year and continue having Alexander lessons". In my own personal experience it's actually very difficult to have Alexander lessons but at the same time continue doing the things which have been messing you up - that is playing the bassoon - because you continue to do things wrong. You have no choice. You're sitting there, the conductor puts the beat down and you have to produce the notes. It can be quite nerve-racking to have to bring to that situation something new and to try to change what you're used to doing.

BILL: That's right, and in a performance you can't really be thinking too much about it. You've just got to get on with the job.

MEL: Yes, but the danger is, of course, that you start to! That's happened to me, I've been about to play something and suddenly I've been concerned about whether my neck is free or not. And I've had to say to myself, "Hey, cut it out, what do you think you are doing!" An Alexander teacher I had at the time said, "Look, you can only think about one thing at a time." And that's true if you are doing it in a concentrated way.

BILL: Of course, what you need to think about in the concert is the music.

MEL: One has enough to think about - the conductor, colleagues and fitting in: being an individual and part of a group, etc... It's complicated enough, but to put a whole layer of stuff on top of that as well, and to cope with it, is quite difficult.

BILL: Well, Alexander used to advise professional people to take time off, but as a violinist I wasn't able to do that for my Alexander teachers' training course; but I feel that I would have benefited more, had I given the instrument up for six to twelve months. But that's easier said than done. The teacher training was expensive, especially for me at the time, so I had to earn the money. In fact you find that most students on training courses are working hard to earn money in work that isn't very well paid.

MEL: So having scared people off by saying it's a very difficult thing to do, do you think it's a worthwhile thing to attempt to do?

BILL: Definitely. I think it's taken me a good ten years since finishing the training to apply the Technique to the violin, but I was up against extra problems with the violin in that I am very tall and have a very long neck.

MEL: Why did you do it, Joe?

JOE: Well, I was at the Royal Academy of Music studying the oboe with Janet Craxton and she didn't talk about anything else other than playing. And that was marvellous, because obviously that was what she was good at and she stuck to what she was good at. Anything you wanted to do in your spare time was up to you, and I started Alexander lessons because someone else had had them. In fact I had seen Jean Gibson before. [Jean Gibson, now in her eighties, has helped many musicians. She has had some Alexander training in the past, but over the years has developed her own ways of working to correct poor use.] She knows about the Technique although she didn't recommend it. There was nobody teaching Alexander at the Academy at that time and I had about twelve lessons. I did it because I thought it would make playing the oboe easier - and in fact it did.

MEL: That's a good way of putting it: it's something that makes things easier. If you suggest to music students that they should have Alexander lessons and they turn round and say, "Why?", the perfect answer is to say that it will make things easier...

JOE: ...for them and for their teacher to teach them.

MEL: Of course the student is lucky to have such an enlightened teacher in that way and to have got into the Alexander Technique at a comparatively early age, because the older you are, in a way, the more difficult it is.

BILL: And I think that makes it very difficult for professionals to accept it very often. You see, what is their technique but a whole lot of habit patterns, and most are probably disadvantageous! And it's very frightening. The psychological stress of having to say, "All the way I've been playing the instrument for the past 20 years is rubbish and I've got to undo it" is very threatening and it puts a lot of people off. They don't want to face the challenge. They'd much rather go and have some osteopathic treatment where they can be just passive and get by: to forget about the backache. The alternative seems too drastic.

MEL: Okay, so we get lots of people who end up with problems like a pain in their neck, a stiff right arm or whatever it is, and it becomes self-evident to them that they have a problem that needs fixing, and a lot of people come to the Alexander Technique as a result of that. But it seems to me that the Technique has got a lot more to offer than just that.

JOE: Yes, that's the threatening bit. When people come to me I always suggest something like osteopathy, because it might help them in the short term. If you know you've got some way of controlling the pain, then

maybe you're more inclined to put up with it and then to change your lifestyle in the long run. I do suggest they try everything from beta-blockers to God knows what to open the options for them so that they feel there's a safety net to fall into.

MEL: It seems to me that the Alexander technique is a very powerful technique in the long term because it gives the individual an insight into what's going on, and the means to deal with these problems for themselves. The image that comes to my mind is that it's like taking a torch and shining a light into some dark corners of ones own way of being. I think most of us are pretty much unaware of ourselves in many ways and the Alexander Technique is a bit like a probe for exploring what's going on inside oneself on different levels. Obviously the more you go into it the deeper those levels can become and you can choose more or less for yourself how far you want to take it. The obvious physical level is probably the initial one, isn't it?

JOE: Yes, people come because they are in pain.

MEL: And also people come because they see it has potential for improving their performance. Coming back to the teaching situation, you can say to someone, "Don't tilt your head to the right" and they say, "I'm not", but you can see perfectly well that they are. They get so used to having their head tilted to the right that, to them, it feels upright. I often tell people to go away and practise in front of a mirror and people get big surprises when they see what they are actually doing.

JOE: That's the big problem: getting accurate feedback of yourself. That's why you go to an Alexander teacher or good instrumental teacher, because hopefully they tell you useful objective truths.

BILL: But in an Alexander lesson the teacher's hands tell you something. The pupil will feel the hands on him and the hands will indicate where the tension is. So one of the functions of the teacher's hands is to make the pupil more aware.

MEL: Could I ask a question that I suspect a lot of people would ask, "Why is the Alexander Technique necessary? Why is it that we can't pick up a musical instrument and play it to good physical advantage and not suffer ill effects?"

JOE: I don't think it's the musical instrument so much as the person who comes to the instrument.

MEL: I'm not sure I would agree with you there. I personally feel that the way musical instruments are designed and made presents problems. I think the basic problem is that the human frame has to accommodate itself to the instrument and not the other way around. The violin, I'm sure, is an horrendous thing to have to play. Not being a string player I could not physically get my left hand fingers onto the strings.

JOE: The thing about playing a musical instrument is that we need far better use than, say, to drive a car or to do other things...

MEL: ...because the level of physical co-ordination it requires is extremely high. In life generally one could say that the most basic actions give rise to bad use of the body - sitting down in a chair is a classic example. But as you say, playing a musical instrument is of a higher order...

JOE: ...because the demands you are making of the outcome are so much higher. You can't perform a Mozart concerto in a slumpy sort of way. People will think, "Oh that was a slumpy performance". You just can't get away with it. Your fingers, your breathing and mind have all got to be working.

MEL: Its a very complex process when people are playing a musical instrument, and on all levels: the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual states all resonating with each other, or maybe conflicting with each other, as the case may be.

JOE: And the Alexander Technique touches on all those.

BILL: So in the early lessons Alexander teachers will tell you to forget all about it between lessons and try to come regularly. Three lessons a week is the ideal, though you don't often persuade people to come that often! They used to say you need thirty lessons to get a grounding, but people don't realise how long it takes.

MEL: In actual fact, once you become involved in it, it's almost impossible to say "Alright, that's it. Finished", because it is new knowledge, and you can't ignore knowledge. And even though you may forget about it for lengthy periods every now and again it will come back - and it's brilliant when it does.

JOE: And also you are changing as a person all the time. You go to music college as a student and then you come out and you think, "Now I've finished music college; I'm the finished product". But of course it's not so. You and all the circumstances in your life change, and if you have not got a technique for adapting, you come unstuck pretty quickly.

MEL: Just on a different point. I have often been aware of students going into music college and thinking, "This is it. My career's assured"!

BILL: But I also think that with young people they can get away with a certain amount of misuse. It happens with the violin. There have been countless prodigies who have been marvellous at the age of twelve playing Paganini concertos. And then as they've got older (at the age of thirty-four or something) they can't play it. They struggle because their technique wasn't physiologically sound. It wasn't based on sound mechanical principles and they've incorporated so much misuse. You can get away with it when you're twelve. For instance, you've got a different bone structure - ossification isn't completed until you're twenty-four or so. So really Alexander should come into training much earlier than music college - say, in secondary schools.

BILL: But unfortunately unless people realise for themselves they need the Technique, they don't appreciate it. In a way you have to have to be in agony and suffering.

JOE: Well, Alexander, he was an artist, he was a vocal reciter and he was dead set on this. We all know the story. He was like all of us. We've got this career and it starts to go really well and we think, "Brilliant!" And then his voice just wouldn't work. And from about the age of about twenty-one he set out to sort it out. It took him about ten years. I don't know anyone else in that situation who's going to spend all that time and effort to sort things out. Because, there's no question about it, the Technique does need a lot of work. But it repays all the work.

MEL: What he achieved is unbelievable. The persistence of a young man like that is extraordinary.

JOE: But it is just like the work you put into an instrument. I mean, it's no new thing for musicians. You don't get anywhere by doing nothing - unless you're really lucky.

MEL: One hears professional players maybe with a little passage that they haven't yet mastered, and they will just play it again and again, making the same mistake each time. In fact what they don't realise is that they are actually practising the mistake. One could draw an analogy on a broader level and say when people misuse themselves they are confirming themselves in that misuse. This is why, as you say, as you get older you find you can't do the things you could when you were younger.

JOE: You've compounded the misuse by repeating it over and over and you've established the bad habit. Well the Technique certainly chops through all that. A friend of mine rang up recently. He was asking me about performance nerves and what to do. So I said, "Well there are lots of things you can do. In the short term take beta-blockers, hypnosis, whatever." And I talked to him as an Alexander teacher about the Technique as a long-term thing. Then I was talking to an oboist friend of mine in Germany who works with a modern music group. (She's also had a lot of Alexander work.) One day she was doing some Stockhausen thing with a big passage, one of those where you think, "Oh God it's not going right. What am I going to do about it? I've got to go on stage and do it." So eventually - she was at home - she lay down on the floor and began working on herself in an Alexander way. And then she realised, as she was playing it through in her mind, that she was tensing her neck like mad. Which is like number one "No, no!" of the Alexander Technique. Just making that simple connection for her showed that the mere thought of playing the music was causing her to tense her neck. So obviously if you are running it through in your mind and you are tensing your neck, then what's going on when you are on stage? Anyway, having taken herself out of a concert situation, she had a chance to change things at a less stressful moment, and it's very powerful. She said, "It was amazing. Tell your friend that."

BILL: The great piano teacher Theodor Leschetizcki (1830-1915) used to advise his pupils to spend as much time thinking about the music away from the instrument as in actually playing.

JOE: I had a singing teacher who is about 90 - must be 92 now - and he said, "Singing is ninety per cent meditation". He's an old man looking at it from a panoramic perspective and he's absolutely right.

MEL: In actual fact, basically what the Technique is about is teaching yourself just to let that little glint of daylight in between reacting to something in an unconscious way and reacting in a conscious way. You can say to yourself "No. I'm not going to react yet... Now I will react." Because when you react in an unconscious way you are not in control. When you react in a conscious way you are in control. For example, if someone makes you angry it doesn't mean you are going to "control" that anger and not get angry. It simply means that you choose to get angry.

JOE: Yes, you can choose to sock them one or not! And also, afterwards you wouldn't be stuck with your anger. It would tend to flow through more quickly.

BILL: Yes, I don't think Alexander would have been in favour of inhibiting ones emotions.

MEL: But some people do have this idea that Alexander people don't react, and go around like zombies. I think that anyone who is like that has got the Technique wrong.

Our sincere thanks to Malcolm Williamson (who himself teaches Alexander technique at the RNCM) for his help in transcribing this interview, and to the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT) for supplying photographs. Readers who would like to contact an Alexander teacher are invited to send an SAE to STAT, 20 London House, 266 Fulham Road, London SW10 9EL for information and a list of teachers in their area.

Biographies

Melbon Mackie was born and educated in New Zealand, coming to England in 1969 to do a post-graduate year of study with Gwydion Brooke at the RAM. At the end of that year he went to the Royal Opera House as a Principal Bassoon, a position he still holds. His interest in Alexander Technique came about as a result

of wishing to learn more about tone production and breathing, and a realisation that greater physical effort was not the correct means of obtaining a better result in these areas.

Bill Benham was a quirister at Winchester and went on to study the violin with John Sealey, Jean Pougnet and Alfredo Campoli. He led the London Festival Ballet Orchestra for several tours, and then joined the Bath Festival Orchestra under Yehudi Menuhin. At 21 he became a first violin with the London Symphony Orchestra under André Previn, where he remained for five years. After co-leading the Northern Sinfonia, and leading his own quartet he returned to freelance work in London. Last year, he formed a successful duo with Nadia Lasserson.

Mr Benham is a teacher of the Alexander Technique, and has applied for a patent for his high chin-rest.

Joseph Sanders: I first encountered the Alexander Technique whilst studying at the RAM. I had a series of lessons with Meredith Page in the Autumn of 1979, and thereafter intermittently whilst continuing my oboe studies in Germany and then whilst freelancing in London from 1983 onwards. Wanting to find out more, I trained as an Alexander Teacher with Patrick MacDonald from 1988-91 and, all along, I have found the combination of oboe playing and the Technique fascinating and rewarding.

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Three Musicians Continue their Discussion of the Alexander Technique

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Bill Benham (violin), Melbon Mackie (bassoon) & Joseph Sanders (oboe)

BILL: I think that book, *'The Inner Game of Music'* by Timothy Galway, talks about what you're thinking, which really is like the Technique.

MEL: I heard the author on the radio when his book *'The Inner Game of Tennis'* first came out and I thought, "This is pure Alexander".

BILL: You can be thinking the wrong thoughts, which will mess you up. If you've got a difficult passage coming up on the next line and you start worrying about it and think it might go wrong; you'll almost certainly muck it up. You're just setting yourself up to mess it up. He talks quite a lot in his books about fear, and as soon as we get frightened of doing something wrong it tends to interfere with our "Primary Control".

JOE: The idea of the Technique is that you can tap into that and it feeds through all the rest, a "master reflex". There is a primary reflex that controls the self and, in a sense, it's very simple. Obviously you need a certain amount of work to make the Alexander Technique simple, just as you need a lot of bassoon practice to make the bassoon simple. In the end you just blow it and move your fingers but it takes a while to get to that. And you don't always do it like that everyday. Some days it works better. The Technique too. When it's working it's a very simple thing.

BILL: "Directing the head forward and up" is another way of describing the Primary Control. It's important to realise that there is no muscle you can tighten to send the head forward and up. The centre of gravity of the head is just above the top of the ear - very much higher than most people realise. And the point of balance is just behind the ear itself - 'forward and up' is extending the line. [The head is heavier to the front of the top joint between the base of the skull and the top vertebra in the neck (the atlanto-occipital joint) so it will tend to fall forward as the neck muscles release, and it goes up as the spine lengthens.]

JOE: That's why you go for lessons. To have a teacher do it for you instantaneously. To save yourself ten years, which is how long it took Alexander himself.

MEL: Earlier on we were talking about what the Technique was about, and one of the things it is not about is slumping. People's idea of relaxation is generally a misconceived one. When you say, "there is no muscle to tighten to send the head forward and up", isn't the Alexander Technique about relaxing tensed muscles? Wouldn't you say that a muscle that is not tensed is relaxed? What people tend to do when they think they are relaxed is simply to tighten a different set of muscles.

JOE: Well it's about balancing the muscle tension [tone]. There's nothing wrong with tensed muscles - if you didn't tense muscle you'd just fall on the floor like a bag of bones. It's about the co-ordination. [Posture isn't something you can do by simply trying harder. It is an innate response to the pull of gravity among other things.]

MEL: You could say, "unnecessarily tensed", "unduly tensed" or "over-tensed".

JOE: Obviously if you want to lift weights your muscles are going to be working like mad, and to play our instruments a lot of physical activity is involved. It's how we balance that tension...

MEL: It's also to do with releasing the muscles again, once you've picked that weight up and put it down. Isn't the point that frequently one doesn't quite release the muscles to the extent they were released before, and that over a lifetime this becomes a habit?

JOE: You can even twist your bones. There was Poirot on the television the other day. It was the one on the Nile - the strychnine poisoning; someone took strychnine and it caused a muscular spasm in the jaw which broke the jawbone. The power of muscles is extraordinary.

MEL: Another example is someone being thrown across a room by an electric shock. It's not the electricity that's done that, it's the person's own muscular power reacting to the electrical charge.

JOE: That's why balance is so important. The power there is enormous.

MEL: You said something, Bill, that really hit home too when I asked, why is Alexander Technique necessary for playing a musical instrument? And you used one word, which is very largely the answer: fear. I think above all responses the one that sets up the most physical imbalances is fear. I think most professional musicians know what it's like to be afraid.

BILL: Well yes there are various theories about how we have this "startle" response. We have a response that we are all born with, so that if someone slams a door behind you and you are not expecting it you immediately crouch and shorten the neck and back and hold the breath, round the back, clench the fingers and go into a cold sweat. [Startle pattern begins with extension according to Jones & Kennedy - (M W)]. It's a procedure that we go into in a split second and it starts off with the neck. It is often pointed out that we go through a lot of fearful situations. For instance, just drive out in the car: a few near misses and we've probably already begun to shorten the neck as part of this startle response, and obviously when you get up in front of an audience and you have any fear about it, it tends to set it off again. And however many Alexander lessons you've had you are still subject to this powerful response.

JOE: It's interesting what you said earlier about the Technique being very threatening. I think that sometimes, as a pupil or teacher, you will be working at how the head is "worn" on the top of the neck and obviously you'll be interfering, ideally in a creative way, with the startle reflex. It does come up that people feel threatened because you are working with exactly that complex of emotions. They feel vulnerable because the shielding mechanism is taken away and they see their fear. Ideally with the Technique, it's done in a constructive way. In a lesson you can be working so it gives you an insight into your own fear response, so in a real situation, such as a concert, it gives you a constructive way of dealing with your fear of performing or of getting it wrong in a performance.

MEL: With the physical aspects of the startle reflex that Bill described, all these things happen. But of course what also happens is that for that brief moment the process is happening you are virtually unconscious mentally. The brain's not working. You are in a state of mental paralysis. You talk about how, when you stand up to perform, these physical things happen to you when experiencing fear, but it's the mental things as well. But if you are able to function mentally you can maybe get by these physical disadvantages. A colleague of mine describes it as the "pink mist" descending. This is what I meant when we were talking earlier on about the physical and mental and emotional all interacting with one another. If you can see there's some means of interrupting that physical response it follows that it gives you a means of changing that habitual mental response as well, so that hopefully you are able to keep a certain amount of mental awareness. We may only be talking about split seconds or we may not. These things can last a lot longer. But those split seconds tend to be the important ones.

JOE: And also, in those split seconds where you see red, disastrous things can happen and set up a whole pattern of "Oh my God the last time it was disastrous", and it sets up more and more fear in a vicious circle.

MEL: Often, if I find I'm about to go off and do something that might worry me a bit, the thing that makes me most afraid is being afraid and therefore not functioning to my best ability. If you had an experience before where fear caused you not to perform as well as you had hoped, then next time your expectation is that the same thing's going to happen again and it compounds itself.

BILL: I think we are coming up against another problem we have in that we are often required to play music that's impossible - or impossible for our technique at that time. In an ideal world we'd never try and do something that we can't do. Sometimes in sessions we rewrite the part, don't we? But it is very important to break this cycle of negative fear, actually to start performing things that are easier, or that we consider easier, and to perform them successfully, perhaps to groups of friends, often enough to build up gradually the positive feelings of self-confidence and feel good about ourselves. I went through a long period of feeling very negative and I think that at first when you decide to take Alexander lessons and try to apply it to playing, the transition period - especially for a musician who has to go out and earn a living and can't take this ideal six months off - can be very daunting.

BILL: In my case, I have such a long neck that I have had to develop my own chin-rest. It's taken me years. Basically I'm too big for the violin, so I was playing the wrong instrument to start with, and there I was stuck in the LSO first violins. So I've had to adapt the instrument to fit me. Sometimes with the bassoon you use the Dutch crutch, don't you?

MEL: Some do. I've just been thinking here we are talking about the Alexander Technique and we've hardly talked about the specific problems that musicians have with different instruments. We've talked about problems in very general terms and I don't think that is by accident. People come with a particular viewpoint, a particular problem with a particular instrument, and they may look to the Alexander Technique as a means of answering that particular problem. But I think that very quickly they are made aware of the fact that their particular problem is a result of much more general problems. So therefore it's by no means irrelevant to approach it from a general, all-encompassing viewpoint.

JOE: Yes, that's a big aspect of the Technique. You are encouraged to stand back, or, to put it another way, you are on the high diving board and you're surveying the swimming pool. You are not drowning somewhere below, you are seeing the whole thing, like you're "standing back" from your playing.

MEL: Maybe we could talk about the particular problems that are likely to arise with particular instruments. You said before that the oboe is not a particularly complex instrument, but I'm sure it has its problems.

JOE: I've fiddled around with my thumb-rest. We've talked about how we change all the time. You might play in a certain way when you are twenty-five, but that gradually changes and you have to change your playing position or reeds or something.

MEL: What happens it that you change. But if you are not aware of what you're doing that change can come simply in the form of exaggeration. Whatever you do over the years becomes more and more exaggerated and becomes a permanent feature of your physical make-up. I remember once when I was in hospital for a short period, there was an elderly man in the bed next to me, and I knew perfectly well when he got out of bed and walked down the ward that he was a dentist. Because he was incapable of standing upright. Over the years he had become so used to bending over patients that, as I said before, the muscles had never come back to quite their original state, so that over the years it had pulled his skeleton out of shape. That's an exaggerated example of what happens to most people. The problem that springs to mind for me when I think about the oboe is the mere fact of that right thumb - the instrument resting on the thumb. It would be interesting to know what sort of pressure is being applied. The weight is concentrated into a small area and that must give rise to tension all up the arm and shoulder and so on. It goes right through.

JOE: The idea of the Technique is to build up the strength in the back and the "lift" in the spine to flow in the opposite direction and counteract that.

MEL: So it's not to build up muscles, to pick up an enormous weight with your right arm, so the oboe isn't going to be a problem?

JOE: No, it's a different kettle of fish all together. Also you've got to co-ordinate the lifting up of the arm in such a way that the breathing is totally free to function. If you tense your arm your rib cage freezes so you can't play the oboe anyway. I experimented with my thumb-rest because I found it was uncomfortable. There's obviously the pad on your thumb, and that's a crucial area because it does take a lot of strain. So you don't want something that's literally digging into your skin. Now I've got one of these adjustable things that clarinettists tend to have, and you can move the thumb-rest in and out. I thought, "Who knows? I might wake up one morning and I might want to try something different."

MEL: Can I just interrupt there to make a general point? The oboe maker has probably never thought, "What effect is the instrument going to have on the player?". A lot of them don't play anyway. So you are stuck with this instrument. You take it out of its box and you have to accommodate yourself to it. Now with an oboe the amount of adjustments is fairly limited, I would have thought. But what about an instrument like the bassoon - say the old style bassoon with a sling round the neck and the crook bent at quite an angle and the instrument slanting across the body so that you have to pull your right shoulder right back to get your hand on the instrument, and with the weight resting on your left hand? A lot of players say, "Yes, I'm perfectly comfortable playing like that". But what it's doing to them in the process is appalling. It's putting them at a severe mechanical disadvantage every time they play the instrument. When you try to improve on that you can only improve certain aspects. You might use a seat strap or a spike to take the weight of the instrument, that enables you to move the instrument forward so that the right hand can move forward, free the shoulder and release the chest, so that you can breathe more easily. But as soon as you do that you find you have a problem with the left hand, because you then have to adopt a more exaggerated angle with the left wrist, and the conclusion that you come to is that the bassoon needs to be redesigned to enable you to sit normally on a chair with both feet flat on the floor, facing straight ahead with an open upper chest. If you gave me a bassoon as I sat in that position, and I put both hands on it in a perfectly normal way so that neither my wrists nor elbows were unduly bent and my fingers reasonably straight, I could not physically play it because the instrument won't allow it. It seems to me a redesign is long overdue. The shape of the instrument hasn't changed in hundreds of years.

JOE: I was in Chile and there's this clarinet player, Luis Rossi, who studied with John (Jack) McCaw in London; he is a very nice player and produces beautiful instruments and he's really into instrument design and all the rest of it. He'd played a concerto and he took us to dinner and he was talking about the design of the bassoon, and he said there have been people who redesigned it. There was some Romanian and a Russian. What happened with the Romanian chap was, he'd spent all this time building this prototype - wonderful, you could whiz all over it and it plays fantastically...

MEL: ...and probably nobody wants to play it.

JOE: He can't afford the enormous amount of money to build all the machinery to make the key-work. So what happens? Heckel say, "Oh we'll have it". They buy it, shove it in a drawer and continue making their own model. It takes an enormous amount of interest and investment to change things.

MEL: It also takes a very enlightened attitude on the part of players themselves. And maybe that's what we should be doing here to advance that a little bit. It's a closed loop isn't it? The enlightened player on his own is still going to be fed the 200 or 300 year-old bassoon.

JOE: That's getting into the politics of the Alexander Technique. You, say, go along to sort your problems out and you have lessons and things change, and then you come back to your old situation and in some ways you are politically compelled to change your original situation, and that trickles down in all sort of ways. You do have to change your life. And, say you play the bassoon, you have to sit back and consider, "Well maybe I need a short crook or a long crook", or whatever. With the oboe, you come back and you say, "My

reeds: they've got to go!" And the way you play. You can't say, "I learned this school of playing". You've got to say, "Well I've got my own self and I've got to develop my own way". Things do change.

MEL: It's not a necessarily traumatic business though, is it? One ends up wanting to change. One sees advantages for oneself. Someone once described it to me like peeling away the layers of an onion. It's not a huge explosion. You go from stage to stage as you become ready for those stages.

JOE: An oboist friend of mine said that she had this lesson - or lessons - and she said she couldn't play the oboe after that. I don't remember the details but there is a fair comment in that. When you go back to the instrument it is different and you can't play it as you played it before. I remember - I had lessons at the Academy and years passed and then I had a lot more, and then I'd started training as an Alexander teacher for a few months - and one day I had a quintet rehearsal in Westminster. I was sitting on the train and I remember thinking that my arms were completely like jelly and between the shoulders and the neck, it was like a black hole, it just wasn't there. And I was just sitting there and I thought, "Well what am I going to do now?". Something changes and you can say, "It's not like I usually am" or you can take the attitude, "Well I'll have a go. I'll take the risk and see what happens".

If you can do that, take the lessons and see what happens, you'll realise it's different - but it can be wonderful. But it does take time. Taking Alexander lessons is a risk but maybe the risk is the excitement you need to freshen up your life.

MEL: Well I've had some wonderful experiences. It's happened to me once or twice, I've been sitting there in a perfectly normal situation performing something and all of a sudden it just happens all by itself. It's incredibly exciting that one can struggle for months thinking one's not getting anywhere and then suddenly you can have a breakthrough like that. Of course you come back the next time looking for the same thing again and it may not necessarily happen.

JOE: It's the risk you took in having a go without preparing yourself for the excitement of that. You think, "Well I'll just sing like a complete idiot and I don't know anything about it." I won't think, "I always do it like this, so I'll do it like this again." Because that doesn't work. You've only got as far as you've got and ideally you want things to be different. So some days, you pick up your instrument and just see what happens say in the light of your Alexander lessons. You free your neck and say "I'm not going to interfere with my neck. Maybe I'll drop the bassoon, so what?". But you have to be prepared for something different.

MEL: You have to be prepared for failure, don't you? Alexander talks about this. We were talking about fear, the fear of failure and it's amazing, even practising alone in one's own room one can still be afraid of failure; we have to let go of that fear and be prepared to fail. It can be terrifying, but also exhilarating and a great learning experience.

BILL: Maybe we should say that it is possible to play well with a great deal of misuse - many people do! They succeed for long periods in the music profession.

JOE: I've got a violinist friend who is fantastic and his use of himself is absolutely dreadful! He's about thirty-five and plays the Tchaikovsky ballet solos wonderfully.

MEL: So he's got bad use. Is that something one can just forget about and say good luck to him, or is he going to pay the price at some time in his life?

JOE: You can't tell. You never know. It's like some people smoke and they don't get lung cancer and others don't smoke and they do. But of course it's asking for trouble.

BILL: One can't always tell how much people are misusing themselves just by looking at them. It can be very misleading. But you see there again you don't know where they are starting from. Very often people

who start the Technique are starting from a pretty bad level of use. A lot of musicians become good musicians because their use is above average. If your use is above average it will apply to everything you do, as a driver or golfer, whatever you do. But it doesn't mean to say it can't be improved.

JOE: And, also it doesn't mean that it can't deteriorate, even if it starts out relatively good, which is obviously why a lot of people come to the Technique.

BILL: Many who become Alexander teachers started off from a fairly wrecked sort of state with a lot of pain. I sometimes think that people look at teachers and say, "What's so special about them?", but they don't know where they started, where they have come from.

JOE: Yes, it isn't about looking good - it's the process. I trained with Patrick Macdonald and he looked absolutely dreadful, but he was one of the great teachers.

People think you're going to live long and be beautiful, but although they do tend to live longer and better, that's not the aim, its the work; finding a way of working that you can apply to an instrument as well as everything else. I think it's quite good to learn something to do alongside the Technique. You know these Zen people, they do flower arranging and archery, all these kinds of things. Zen ideas are all a bit airy-fairy, so they do a practical activity to work the ideas out in reality, to make them actually tangible. And I think a musical instrument is like that. It does make what you are doing with yourself very tangible - audible and all the rest of it.

MEL: It's not quite the same though, because if you come to the Technique through your instrument it's generally because there's some anxiety associated with the instrument. You are looking for that anxiety to be eschewed, which isn't really a very good thing. Ideally you want to be able to forget the anxiety altogether.

BILL: One of the aphorisms of F M was, "You're all trying to be right. Try to be wrong" We've got to get away from this thing we have about right and wrong and treat everything as a sort of experiment. If you play something and you fluff a note it's not the end of the world. You've got to be able to take the fact that sometimes squeaks are going to creep in or the unexpected is going to happen.

JOE: Well certainly you have to be prepared to accept your failures, and the Technique allows you to do that in a very constructive way. It doesn't just drop you in there, it gives you something to do with them.

BILL: But I think that among some musicians there is still some hostility to the technique. One of the reasons for that could be that it is so demanding and threatening and that it takes such a lot of time and effort. And that for a period your playing might actually deteriorate.

MEL: Well it leaves you a bit at sea, because as you say, you're supposed to stop doing it the old way and you haven't yet learned the new way.

BILL: Talking about applying it, you were talking about the Zen students applying it perhaps to something they hadn't done before. When we did the training course in Highgate we all had to sing, whether we'd sung before or not. Actually we all had to do something we hadn't done before, to apply the Technique, and that was very instructive. Well for me it was much more fun and enjoyable at the time than applying it to the fiddle, when it was always a disaster!

JOE: Because the whole thing about failure doesn't come into it does it? You're not trying to prove anything.

MEL: Apart from anything else, when it comes to the fiddle you've got preconceptions. I think that was probably what I was trying to say before. You're going back to it with a preconception of what it could be, what you're afraid it might be. BILL: And the longer you've been training - if you've done ten years' practice on an instrument - your whole ego is bound up with that. If you wake up one morning and think, "I can't do

it" and this is the one thing you're meant to be able to do better than most other people, it's a very big psychological thing.

JOE: Of course on a basic level, that's exactly what the Technique is asking, or demanding that you do. You wake up and say, "All right I can't play - in my case - the oboe, but let's see what happens." And if you've got that state of mind it will probably work out and be fine.

BILL: But I believe it has been the case that certain Alexander teachers have taken part in public masterclasses and destroyed players. There would be a masterclass where there was an Alexander teacher present. The music student wasn't having regular Alexander lessons, wasn't actually in a prepared state to understand them, and was told all these things by a teacher and couldn't take it.

MEL: It wasn't a very enlightened teacher in that case.

BILL: It does require great sensitivity, and certainly when there are other people present I think it is much better taught in private.

MEL: Absolutely, because the main fear of failure is having others see you fail. If you fail only to yourself it doesn't matter so much, but in front of all your colleagues... It's the old phenomenon, sitting at home in your bathroom you can play anything, but to do it in front of an audience is a different matter altogether.

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Three Musicians Conclude their Discussion of the Alexander Technique

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Bill Benham (violin), Melbon Mackie (bassoon) & Joseph Sanders (oboe)

JOE: Another little Zen activity one can adopt is making reeds without interfering with your neck. It's very difficult. It's a wonderful stress activity to think, "I've got this reed and everything depends on it". I teach a few oboists and I do talk about that, and how to sit. It is something away from playing but allied to it, and there's no reason why you should particularly misuse yourself whilst doing it. But one does possibly misuse oneself worse whilst making reeds than when playing the instrument itself.

MEL: The problem there is the eyes. You're doing very fine and important high precision work and you're trying to see clearly.

JOE: There's no reason why you shouldn't bring the reed to you to do it.

MEL: Yes, but usually you want to put it on the table and then bend down.

JOE: And then three hours later you've got a stiff back and you've wrecked all your reeds! For some reason it is a very stressful activity. I have talked to oboe players about this and they say, "Oh playing the oboe is easy once you've got a good reed." There's all this onus on reed-making.

MEL: Do you think it has anything to do with whether people actually like making reeds or not?

JOE: Definitely. Obviously if you are thinking, "I hate this" you are not going to be using yourself very well.

MEL: Precisely. I know oboe reeds last a lot shorter time than bassoon reeds and I often see oboe players scraping reeds to use virtually straight away. If I ever find myself doing that then I'm in a real panic. I find that if I don't actually feel like making a reed then there's no way I'm going to produce a good one. Whereas, other times I'll feel like making or scraping some reeds even if I don't actually need one, that's when I'll produce a good reed. Is it just the effort of concentration? People do tend to tense up when they concentrate.

JOE: Yes, on a simple level people are tensing their neck as they make reeds. But it's not that easy to stop. You don't even realise you're doing it.

Bill talked about the fear reflex. We've made this leap from the fear reflex to making reeds. It's not quite the same thing is it? You are sitting scraping a reed, you might have the radio going and it's a nice day outside and you've got a couple of hours, there's no real pressure on you. It's quite a different situation from someone firing off a gun behind your head, isn't it?

BILL: The boredom factor is something that I think you touched on earlier. F M Alexander talks about concentrating on what you're doing. There's so much we do nowadays, like listening to the radio at the same time, and if you do that your awareness has got to be reduced.

MEL: This is something one could say when they ask, "Why do I need the Technique?" It's because it would never occur to the vast majority of people that thinking about their neck is something they ought to do, and even if it's suggested to them it wouldn't make any sense.

JOE: Talking or reading about the Technique is definitely secondary to having experience of it with a teacher and taking that experience into your everyday life. Like you say, "So what, about the neck?". But you have some lessons and then you find out, and realise it opens up a whole new range of possibilities.

BILL: I think it's important to realise that if you relax the neck muscles completely the head will fall forward. The centre of gravity of the head is forward of the point of balance, so there has to be a certain amount of tension there, or more precisely, muscle tone. You also have to realise that if the head is misplaced on the top it is a rather heavy item.

JOE: A friend of mine got a football and filled it up with stones to represent the weight of the head: 12-13lbs.

BILL: In fact if it's misplaced the amount of damage it can do over time is tremendous. So people have to compensate lower down in the body - usually in the hips by putting their hips forward and leaning back from the hips and maybe forward again from the shoulder blades - so you've got an exaggerated "S"-shaped spine.

MEL: The business of being upright and walking really is amazing brinkmanship. We do it without even thinking about it, but you've only got to step on a sheet of ice and you've hit the floor before realising what's happening. It takes very little to send you down and it's quite a business to stay upright. It's not surprising that people end up doing all sorts of exaggerated things in order to stay upright.

BILL: When children learn to walk they do a lot of falling down usually in a very relaxed way and it's a bit of a game. Everyone laughs and they get up and do it again. And after many experiences the body seems to learn exactly how much tension is needed not to fall down. And that should be with you for the rest of your life, but then we add on to it.

There is a slight conflict between the Eastern Tai Chi and Alexander. In Tai Chi they're lowering their centre of gravity - and the whole object of that is not to be pushed over.

MEL: I've heard a Tai Chi instructor criticise Alexander students in that their centre of gravity is too high. And I suspect that is quite a valid criticism.

JOE: The thing I realised is that gravity is taking your whole self down, easing you onto the earth, and then the lift of your life force or whatever you call it grows in the opposite direction. So they are both working on your whole self all of the time.

MEL: The tendency is downwards, but you have to counterbalance that with an up, and if you succeed in making your spine lengthen, then every bit, except maybe the very bottom bit, has to go up.

JOE: I think there is a reason why some musicians have some antagonism towards with the Technique. They instinctively think of playing a musical instrument as a down-to-earth activity - you're on the spot and you've got to do it now - and you can't be all airy-fairy and up in your mind.

MEL: It's interesting the different problems people have with conceptions. I was talking to a girl and she said she was half way through her training course before she realised where "up" was. And she said that when she did she burst into tears at the thought of all that waste of time! She'd been saying "forward and up" with no idea of where "up" was.

JOE: Well that's all Mr Macdonald used to say to us everyday for my whole training. He'd say, "Where's up?"

BILL: One thing we haven't talked about is chairs. I take lots of wood around because I can't cope with chairs that slope backwards.

MEL: This is what's so frustrating. Once you become aware of the dangers of things like bad chairs you are less prepared to compromise yourself. One doesn't like to make a fuss, and we have to put up with the chairs that are provided, but they are often appalling. It's another of those examples of where musicians in this country are under-considered. You go out to do a date somewhere and you're lucky to get a cup of coffee in the interval. And the plastic moulding of a chair with wobbly metal legs...!

JOE: Its very difficult to keep your back open and free.

MEL: A lot of chairs seem deliberately designed to cause you all the problems that we have spent an awful lot of money trying to overcome!

BILL: Well they've been designed by people who have bad use of themselves and have no idea. F M said that he thought you should be able to cope with any sort of chair. If there was a perfect chair invented you'd have to carry it around everywhere...

MEL: ...and put your back out in the process!

BILL: I think chair design has got worse since the days he was around. They didn't have moulded bucket chairs then.

MEL: When we say chairs aren't designed, surely they are designed but not to be sat in: to be stacked, transported, all these sort of things?

BILL: I'm tall so I always prefer a higher chair, and then there's the problem of music stands and having to share with the shortest person in the orchestra.

MEL: That's one thing a wind player doesn't have. I often look at string players in orchestra sitting having to face in one direction and the music stand is somewhere entirely different, so they have to turn their heads to read the music.

BILL: Well violinists have to have their head turned to the left most of the time. I have a job persuading some Alexander teachers that you can actually send your head "forward and up" whilst looking to the left.

MEL: So once again it's the human frame accommodating the instrument and not the other way around.

BILL: Of course, the teaching of the violin has changed in recent years. Anything goes now in the music colleges. If you go back to the great teachers of the early part of this century such as Leopold Auer (1845 - 1930, pupil of Joachim) they had definite views about how it should be held. You rest the violin on the collarbone, you look to the left, you rest your chin on the chin-rest and hopefully the two meet up alright. But it was the survival of the "short necks" with the ordinary chin rests, so I've been designing higher ones for people like me.

JOE: With the oboe the weight is in opposition to your own back. If the back is all collapsed and sagging there's really not much hope of holding the oboe up unless you grip your hand. It's only when the back is strong, more elastic and powerful, that your arm can give up some of its work and support the oboe a bit more lightly.

MEL: What about the idea of a nice long spike onto the floor?

JOE: Well you see then it would be like with the bassoon. It would be a bit stationary and then embouchure-wise you're stuck. If you want to move around, even on a moderate scale, it's very limiting. That's the nice thing about the oboe, you can move your head, or if you are leading a group you can conduct from the oboe while you play, without disturbing your playing.

MEL: What do you think from an Alexander point of view about this attitude in England to wind players, that anyone who moves whilst playing is an annoyance and a distraction? With a lot of Continental orchestras when you see them, they could almost be on a dance floor when they play.

JOE: That is relevant. It all depends on the quality of their movement. If it's good then it might enhance their playing, but if it isn't then it's very distracting because it's like someone whistling a different tune. They're waving around out of time...

MEL: One also sees players in this country who are virtually motionless.

BILL: I think that's unnatural, certainly with the fiddle it is. You're moving your whole arm with the bow and it would be quite unnatural not to have a shift of balance in the opposite direction.

MEL: Playing a stringed instrument involves physical movement, but for an oboe or bassoon it's actually possible to play without any visible movement at all (except the fingers).

JOE: There's a danger of getting stiff [fixed]...

MEL: ...and I'm wondering if people aren't becoming inhibited in the Freudian sense.

JOE: I think it's good to move a little bit.

MEL: I would have thought movement was a natural reaction to music anyway.

JOE: Yes, exactly. Music moves you. In your ear there are the semicircular canals which are linked to muscular co-ordination. So music goes into your ear and straight into your moving muscles. Ideally there is a happy marriage there. I think you're right. If you've got a moving sound going in there and you are not moving you must be holding back in some way. I remember seeing Heifitz doing all sorts of things. He's incredible! He didn't move much but his hand was zipping up and down as just a blur. This was a documentary video made of him called "Preparing for a Recital". He used to take the summer off and he'd go to his farm. And toward the end of the summer months, if he had a recital at the start of the winter season, then half way through September he'd take his violin out and begin to prepare himself in a particular way. He did these very simple exercises and then gradually built himself up. He went through a kind of re-training every autumn.

BILL: I think that's how he kept his playing up to that standard.

MEL: You've got to sustain that freshness, haven't you? I've often wondered with professional players in this country - the kind of life they lead is ridiculous for a creative process. It can't help but become a routine to a large extent. It's very difficult to maintain your own sense of recreating things. I must say that one of the particular side-benefits of learning the Alexander Technique is that during particularly boring moments of a rehearsal it gives you something constructive to think about.

JOE: I find it's useful for not reacting to conductors if you've got some pranock on the podium wobbling about!

BILL: I think the sheer fact of sitting down for that length of time, nine hours a day, isn't natural.

MEL: It's not just that either. It's bloody hard work. And as far as playing a wind instrument is concerned, merely taking a breath and holding it is hard physical work.

BILL: You haven't talked much about breathing actually. I was thinking the other day that, if you have a free rib cage, the atmospheric pressure is sufficient to get air into your lungs without you actually doing it. So there should be no effort involved in breathing in.

MEL: But the effort is in holding the air and letting it out in a very slow controlled way. That's what is tiring. If you can just take the air in and then just release it there's no problem. Incidentally, Joe, I wonder if you've noticed with people: you see them playing and they need to take a quick breath in a phrase, and what do they do? They keep their lower jaw where it is and move the whole of the head back to open the mouth. It's so common and yet it seems illogical because the lower jaw is pivoted. It's much easier to just drop the jaw to take a breath. It must be indicative of tight jaw muscles or something.

MEL: If I've been playing and thinking about Alexander Technique and I feel things are working slightly better than normal, I've found that I end up taking breaths through the nose. In fact it's not, as you say, a matter of taking a breath, its simply allowing the air in, and I can take a breath without disturbing anything of the embouchure or whatever.

BILL: As he got older F M talked less and less about breathing . He never edited his earlier books because he thought it was interesting for people to see how his thinking changed over the years. Certainly when he was young he wrote a lot about breathing.

MEL: My experience is that breathing is a very tricky subject because as soon as you start talking about it or trying to interfere with it, you're in danger of doing damage. Am I right in thinking that good breathing has to be the result of other things? It's not something you can go at directly.

JOE: I teach a few oboists, and the situation is not quite like with the bassoon. (I've also got a bassoon pupil.) There are a lot of problems with the shoulders and getting around the bassoon. It does take a lot of working out: the seating position, the reed on the crook and the shape of the crook and all that sort of thing to worry about. There isn't all that with the oboe. So with the oboe people tend initially to be asking about breathing. The breathing with the bassoon is not quite as "dynamic" as with the oboe. You need quite a lot of force in the breathing with the oboe. It's a more gentle activity on the bassoon - the pressure on the reed is less.

MEL: I'm not sure I would necessarily agree with you. The oboe has a smaller aperture to get the air through. But with the bassoon it depends on what sort of set-up you play on. I've tried other players' instruments and reeds, and some play on very light set-ups: a reed that responds very easily and so on. I always felt that I tended to play on a fairly stiff set-up with a reed that takes quite a lot of effort to make vibrate and a perhaps slightly stuffier instrument, although I suspect that I've now gone for a system that is less resistant. My ideal is to get the maximum result for the minimum input. But one plays as one is. If you're a fairly physical sort of person then it influences the way you play. I think I put a lot of energy into playing the bassoon, though I'm not sure how much of it comes out like that. So one sees other players not apparently putting as much in as I think I do, but that also can be misleading.

JOE: In the course of lessons one notices that some people just don't breathe, full stop! Its not that they need to learn how to breathe better, they just need to leave things alone and breathe without holding their breath all the time. If you want to develop your breathing, whether you have lessons or not, check yourself all day and just see if you are actually breathing. You can't improve something that you're not even doing.

BILL: But again anxiety will interfere with it.

JOE: But you can "interfere" with the anxiety by thinking about your breathing.

BILL: Sure, but I'm thinking in the orchestral situation when you get these magical moments when the whole orchestra and audience have to be quiet and when I know, as a string player, that you tend to hold your breath. You feel you don't want to break the spell by making any noise. And of course you may have to come in pianissimo on an "up" bow and very often it's that sort of moment when string players get the purlies - when they don't need to hold their breath.

MEL: There's the opposite of that as well, and that's over-breathing. You see it happening time and time again. I do it myself and every time I do it, it annoys me: a single staccato note and you take a big breath to play it. So many people do it and just for a single note!

JOE: A good point, and so simple. Yes, the beginning of Beethoven Seven. The poor first oboe has to take a big breath, with a long solo to play, but the rest have a single short chord. Once I was playing second oboe and I found myself doing exactly the same thing in the rehearsal.

MEL: But everyone does it. When I think about it, quite often, I maybe spend half an evening in a performance or a rehearsal saying to myself, "I'm not going to breathe". And I consciously refuse to take a breath before I play something. And it's amazing because my ability to play a phrase is almost entirely unaltered. We've got a lot of residual air in the lungs, and so if you don't take a big breath the ability to play a phrase is still there. It seems to me there's an awful lot of wasted effort in breathing and a lot of preconceptions about how much air is needed when one sees a big phrase coming up. One thinks, "I've got to fill my lungs as full as I possibly can" and I personally think that the effort actually stops you from filling them.

JOE: What you tend to do is just lift your chest up and then hold it there.

MEL: And also, I see it with other players as well as myself, the action of taking a big breath means you are then somehow locked in place, and that is very much a disadvantage, particularly if you have a very long quiet phrase to play. It's very hard to come in on a very quiet entry when you're struggling to hold a lung full of air and still be sufficiently relaxed to have control.

BILL: Is it ever the case, in an orchestral situation, that you need every ounce of air?

MEL: Sometimes, but not nearly as often as people imagine.

JOE: I've just been to Germany doing Hans Werner Henze's "Requiem". There was a lot of brass in the group and occasionally you really had to sing out a whole phrase over the top of all this sound. Håkan Hardenberger was playing the trumpet and there was this bit where I was playing a phrase with him. I had to play really quite loud, and it was quite high and sustained, and you did use up quite a lot of air doing that. What I used to do is just breathe anywhere. Henze didn't mind. I've been experimenting with the same thing as you: not breathing at all, to see what happens. And all you do is you get to the end of a natural breath and your body then just fills up with air. In a way you can make it more exciting, taking a passionate (reflex) breath. It holds the attention of the phrase and carries it on anyway instead of this holding-on-for-grim-death type of breathing.

MEL: It was an enormous surprise to me to find that not taking a breath didn't mean I could only play short phrases. But the biggest discovery of all is one that I now use sometimes quite deliberately. By not taking a breath at that vital moment as I go to play my mind is clear. Because as I said before, you take a breath and you lock and you're also locked mentally. If I've got some little phrase I've got to crawl in on and I want to be "there", often I don't take a breath simply to have that mental clarity.

BILL: I think there is another aspect to this in that generally we don't get enough exercise. Even in Alexander's day they were walking much further, they didn't go everywhere by car. A lot of musicians sit in their car and in the studio and they never get out of breath. In Victorian times they use to say you should get

out of breath every day - send the kids out to run about. Kids nowadays are lucky to walk for half an hour a week sometimes, they're dropped off outside their school gates. So if no demand is made on the mechanism then maybe it atrophies.

MEL: Well that's certainly true of me!

BILL: I know if I cycle and I'm late for work then I really have to give it one and the breathing really gets going. You don't have to think about how to breathe! If you look at Olympic athletes when they've run 100 meters and finish a race, they prop themselves up with their arms. Everything will be going - pectoralis, latissimus, serratus, everything. The arms will be fixed and then using the arms as a fixture the other muscles that normally move the arms are used to assist the breathing. Likewise the neck muscles.

BILL: Now the other thing we've not talked about is embouchure...

JOE: Well, your embouchure is affected by your general use, isn't it. If you want to fiddle around with your embouchure what you do first is remind yourself to leave your neck alone. And then after that you can do all sorts of things.

MEL: This may not be something that crops up in the oboe world, but it crops up from time to time with the bassoon. Someone has an embouchure problem: "I can't stop leaking around the reed. The air escapes from around the sides of the embouchure." I've puzzled over this at various times and I've come to the conclusion that this is a breathing problem and not an embouchure problem. Probably largely because the reed is too closed and too soft and they're trying to put more air through than there's room for.

JOE: There's no secret. The musculature of the lips and all that is governed by the relationship between your head and neck and back. But I tend not to talk about the embouchure too much. I think technique for the tongue is more elementary because people have different sorts of embouchures, don't they? And also, with the embouchure, you can see what's happening. You can look at someone's lips and say, "Have the lower jaw a bit further out." "Use the sides a bit more..." and so on and work with it in a visual way. Whereas with the tongue you can't see. The tongue is a more subtle and interesting domain.

MEL: I would have thought with brass players too problems could originate psychologically. With a brass player the embouchure is everything. At least he hasn't got the disadvantage/advantage of a reed in between. Sometimes I envy, say, a horn player who is playing on the same instrument every night. But then I think, "Yes, but if things are not going right on the night at least I can go away and scrape a new reed and come back tomorrow thinking it will be better."

JOE: And flute players. They take it out of the case and blow down it.

MEL: On the other hand from the Alexander point of view I think, of all the instruments, the flute is probably one of the worst because of the position of the neck. They should re-invent the recorder, I think!

MEL: Just getting back to embouchure for a minute, do you think as far as the position of the lower jaw goes, there is a particular advantage in one thing or the other with it? Like say exaggerate an over-bite or...

JOE: I wouldn't have thought so, would you? The point is the jaw should be free without tension at its joints. For my money when I teach the oboe I normally end up talking about the sides of the embouchure, because I try to get people thinking of the embouchure vertically to develop the sides and develop more roundness.

MEL: Yes. We talk about breathing and embouchure and all that and I wonder just how much you can take it in isolation. Some people do teach breathing as such, don't they? You can do it with visualisation.

JOE: I'm sure that helps. The thing about the Technique is it gives you a constructive framework into which to put all these things. That's why it's so useful. But even then it's only part of the picture. It's not the whole of life, the answer to everything. As Bill was saying you learn the Technique getting in and out of a chair and then you apply it anything you like.

BILL: A lot of people breathe too quickly and too shallowly most of the day. I think that once you get the idea of slowing down the breathing and letting out more air, once you let a bit more out, a bit more will come in. The Technique will do this with the whispered "ah". Did you do a lot of whispered "ahs"? I find that in the end it's the most fascinating thing to teach.

MEL: Why is it important to smile when you do a whispered "ah"?

BILL: The idea is to widen the face [and to lighten the thoughts].

JOE: I always think of singers. All singers smile. It's impossible to sing with a scowl! It also lifts your soft palate and you need to for resonance.

BILL: Do you need it for playing the oboe as well?

JOE: Yes you do. I've started experimenting with that myself. It's not a grin with the face, it's sort of a smile up in here, behind the eyes. It makes an enormous difference.

BILL: But maybe it happens automatically when you are happy and it's all going well.

JOE: Yes, it's all to do with the same thing. I mean, the stretch up the spine is all to do with exhilaration and a joyful experience. The smile is not just smiling for the sake of it. [Surely the point about having a "technique" is that you can perform to an acceptable standard, even in adverse conditions and when you don't feel like it. Anyone can play or go up when they are feeling good.]

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