

A Study on the Application of Alexander Technique in Chinese Piano Pieces —— Take “Pinghu Autumn Moon” as an Example

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Abstract. The Alexander Technique is a scientifically recognized method that is widely used worldwide. In the field of piano playing, this technique enables individuals to comprehend their own body structure and movement characteristics, thereby correcting playing problems and bottlenecks caused by long-term incorrect movement habits. Numerous scholars have researched this topic. However, the author aims to begin with existing works to uncover principles and methods that can be applied to specific cases and effectively guide and advance Chinese piano music.

Keywords: Alexander Technique, Chinese Piano, “Autumn Moon on the Pinghu Lake”, Applied Research.

1. Preface

It is widely acknowledged that the development of the piano in China started relatively late, only in the early 20th century. Despite more than a hundred years of progress, piano teaching in China has not yet formed a complete system of its own and still faces numerous challenges. Despite more than a hundred years of progress, piano teaching in China has not yet formed a complete system of its own and still faces numerous challenges. Many students struggle with controlling their body functions, which can negatively impact their piano performance. These issues often stem from bad habits formed during early piano learning. The Alexander Technique can be used to address and improve these problems, making it a valuable complement to traditional piano instruction. The technique aims to enhance our comprehension of the structure and function of the human body from a scientific perspective. This understanding can help correct playing disorders caused by habitual bad postures.

2. Introduction to the Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique was invented by Frederick Matthias Alexander, an Australian. In his youth, he traveled to Australia as a traveling Shakespearean theater actor. But at the very beginning of his career, Sudden hoarseness and loss of voice, after an examination at the hospital to rule out a physically ill reaction, He decided to self-medicate. He practiced in the mirror every day, Observing the changes in your body, after a decade of observation and experimentation, not only did he eventually cure himself of the disease, also created a system of rehabilitation, I.e., the Alexander Technique.

The Alexander Technique in a nutshell emphasizes the intervention and control of the brain's consciousness over the body's movements, Modern Piano Pedagogy, edited by Wolfgang Mastnak, Professor of Music Education at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, suggests that "a reliable somatic awareness can be very helpful in the early detection of long term strain or mild injury." [1] People can perceive the movement of their limbs during exercise, and perceive movements that are not by the body's natural movement patterns, then, through consciousness, it is constantly guided in the direction of correct, scientific, and natural development, ultimately realizing the unity of mind and body.

The main practice method is to correct students' bad movement habits through "breathing", "sitting", "walking", "standing" and other daily life postures. Then, through the training methods of "inhibition" and "equilibrium" to help students to adjust to the optimal state both physically and psychologically, to be able to play their ideal music.

In the current field of music teaching, more than two hundred music colleges in more than ten countries already offer courses in the technique. Only one professional institution in China, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, offers this course. [2] The popularity of the Alexander Technique in Europe and the United States illustrates precisely the scientific nature and importance of the technique, And China's current piano teaching philosophy needs some scientific methods to improve it. Therefore, recognizing and understanding the Alexander Technique helps to demonstrate its value and significance, it also assists in the further development of piano teaching in China.

3. Application of Alexander Technique in Piano Performance and Teaching

Piano is an art of sound, Music, on the other hand, is an expression of sound. For piano playing, it is the sound of the piano that needs to be used to express the artistic image of the music. Training for the strumming motion is always done as a first step. The now internationally recognized method of weighted playing was first developed by the German educator and performer Teodor Leschetitzky. Teodor Leschetitzky is a German educator and performer. He advocates touching the keys with the natural weight of the arm. This theory was later further developed by other musicians, Eventually, the theoretical basis of the "weight school" was formed. Promotes playing the piano through natural arm weights, to minimize pressure on the keys and enhances playing comfort and naturalness. This means relaxing the arm muscles and releasing the natural weight, strengthening the stability of the hand and finger supports, and learning to keep them tight inside and loose outside.

The Alexander Technique has a very important basic idea called "primary control". This idea assumes that the ability to control the relative relationship of the head, neck, and back is the basis for effective body control. The practice simply involves relaxing the neck as much as possible, while the head needs to be upright and facing forward, with the back extended. I think this practice is a very useful addition to the weighted strumming method. This is because when learning the weighted strumming method, students often have a leaning back of the body and a stiff neck movement. This erroneous movement is because when students learn to raise their arms to do the natural descending movement towards the descending body, due to the inability to fully realize the relaxation and connection of each joint part, resulting in the entire arm, shoulder, neck and head together to stiffen as a whole, then the arms will inevitably bring about the corresponding backward tilt of the body. Teaching practice has shown that if teachers teach students not to "lift and drop" but "primary control" at the beginning, students will have a deeper understanding and practice of how to control the relaxation of the body in the later stages of learning.

The most important thing in the beginning stages of piano playing is to understand what "relaxation" really means. It is a state of playing "loosely with force". Therefore this state is to be learned and maintained at all times, whether in non-contrapuntal or contrapuntal learning. The Alexander Technique piano teaching method allows the student to feel the control of the intrinsic power of the fingers by generating good somatic perception.

In the intermediate and advanced levels of piano performance, teachers will have a variety of detailed requirements for their students. For example, the control of tempo, intensity, and timbre, the expression of the emotion of the piece. However, all of these treatments can be done only on the basis that a minimum requirement can be accomplished. It's all about "accuracy and completeness". This is a basic requirement, but it takes a tremendous amount of effort for students to do this. The first step is to complete enough exercises and the second is to overcome the psychological pressure.

"Inhibition," is an important concept in the Alexander Technique. Habitual reaction patterns often dominate our thoughts, so it is important to exercise restraint before we react, creating a pause between the stimulus and the reaction, which will allow us to avoid unnecessary or even harmful reactions.[3] According to this theory, students can be asked to make a short pause when they encounter repeated mistakes and knots in their practice, or when they encounter some playing obstacles due to their movements, to overcome and correct their wrong movements and playing, and

to plan the correct and effective playing and movements in their brains before they continue to play, which will lead to a good practicing effect.

The Alexander Technique is a psycho-physical approach that benefits the movement patterns of the mind and body. The theory of "mind-body coordination" can help us to better understand that the tension of physical movements is a product of psychological motivation. Releasing inner anxiety, as well as focusing more on the act of playing music itself, training the player's mind and body as one, and positive and encouraging mental cues can help students return to the music as it is, easing the tension of playing. [4]

4. Application of Alexander Technique in Chinese Piano Pieces

Chinese people play the piano, by the influence of traditional Chinese aesthetic thought, but also pay special attention to the harmony and unity of man and nature. Mr. Zhu Gongyi, a famous Chinese pianist and educator, once suggested that the basic principle of piano playing is not to be pretentious. That is to say, everything in nature has its own rules of development, as long as you follow the rules, you can achieve harmony between man and nature.

The pianists trained in the early days of China have been constantly exploring how to use the piano, a foreign instrument, to express Chinese musical styles and to embody the national temperament in piano music in their practice of composing Chinese piano music. Transplanting and adapting traditional Chinese music has become the preferred way for composers to seek national temperament. Later on, a large number of Chinese piano adaptations appeared such as "Autumn Moon on the Pinghu Lake", "A Hundred Birds Toward the Phoenix", "Two Fountains Reflecting the Moon", "Sunset xiao jiao drums", and so on. Some of them are adapted from folk songs and ditties, while others are transplanted from traditional instrumental music, forming a typical category of Chinese piano music in terms of compositional themes, and accumulating valuable experience for the later exploration of the creation of Chinese piano music.

4.1. Application in stylistic expression

Chinese music differs from Western harmonic music in that it is typically characterized by monophonic lines of linear music. This aesthetic is reflected in all aspects of calligraphy, architecture, painting, theater, and more. The lines and patterns of Chinese architecture, the strokes of Chinese calligraphy, and the sleeves of dance and theater all reflect this linear beauty.

The lines in the music also pay attention to the melody of the horizontal rhythmic potential changes, through the melody of the staccato, light and heavy, and rich changes in timbre to express the emotions. [5]

China's famous piano piece "Pinghu Autumn Moon" is adapted from the Cantonese opera of the same name, "Pinghu Autumn Moon". The original Cantonese opera is a piece of music with strong Cantonese characteristics, also known as "Drunken Taiping", which was composed in the 1930s by Mr. Lui Shing Man, a famous composer. The melody of the piece is smooth and beautiful, poetic, showing the quiet and pleasant beauty of "Pinghu Autumn Moon". Composer Mr. Chen Peixun adapted this piece for solo piano in the 1970s. The adaptation gives full play to the advantages of the piano, using a large number of rich rhythmic weaves, but maintaining the original structure and melody, so that its artistic expression is greatly increased. The tone of the whole piece is calm and soothing, which fully expresses the realm of "emptiness" and "void" in ancient Chinese culture. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the smoothness and consistency of the player's breath and wrist and arm control.

Utilizing the Alexander Technique's concept of balance, which includes the upward flow of the trunk and downward flow of the legs, as well as the bi-directional flow of the shoulders and arms, can help students understand the causes of their muscular tension and use targeted exercises to alleviate it. I think what is more important in this process is inner balance. The Alexander Technique theory of the "unity of mind and body" is based on the Western philosophy of the body and science

and technology. The ancient Chinese body philosophy of "Heaven and Man as One" describes the relationship between the self and all things in the outside world. There is philosophical consistency between the two. "Pinghu Autumn Moon" music from the quiet and dynamic and the dynamic and quiet, through the scenery and emotions, scene blending, is the embodiment of the "unity of heaven and man" of a musical model. [6] If one understands and utilizes the body well, one can create a natural connection between the self and the outside world, and understand and accurately express the ethereal and dreamy mood of a piece of music.

4.2. Application in playing method

In the Alexander Technique, there is a theory of "sensory maps of the body". These maps for the construction of the body must be constructed in consciousness and learned in behavioral movement. In Alexander's Technique theory, mastering the right physical experience means mastering the right body posture. Opposition and dynamic space in Alexander's theory of technology: Require major parts of the body to make mutually inverse extensions centered on the connecting bones. That is, while sitting down, keep your back upright and relaxed while experiencing the role of the thighs, waist, and back that are both relaxed and opposed to each other. The core strength is in the lumbar region, while this strength is transmitted steadily to the back, shoulders, arms, and fingers, with controlled levels of intensity. Playing "Autumn Moon at Pinghu Lake" in this state is extremely advantageous for the precise control of the strength and the dynamic coherence of the melodic line of the whole piece. (See the Figure 1 and 2)

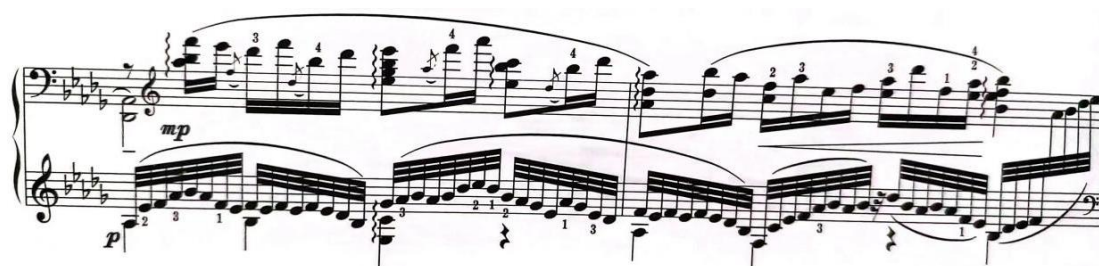


Figure 1. "Autumn Moon on the Pinghu Lake", bars 4-5

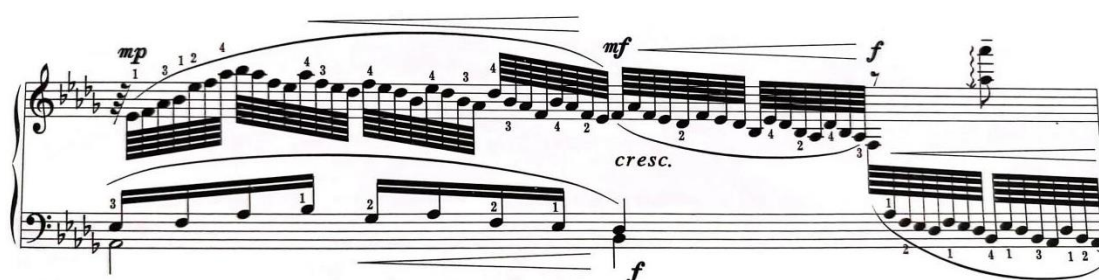


Figure 2. "Autumn Moon on the Pinghu Lake", bar 13

Due to the nature of the adaptation, the piece mimics ethnic instruments much of the time during the performance. The piece is modeled after the gaohu and guzheng, and the simulation of the variations in the timbre of these instruments requires the player to have a very focused and sensitive touch on the keys. The piece has a large number of thirty-two notes distributed from beginning to end and alternating between the right and left hands. This means that the notes have to be played quickly and clearly, but also in a "line". [7] The Alexander Technique requires the student to feel the stretching of the body during movement, first establishing a connection from the scapular belt to the fingertips, so that the shoulders, arms, elbows, wrists, and fingertips are connected into a single line as a way to drive the entire melodic line. (See the Figure 3)

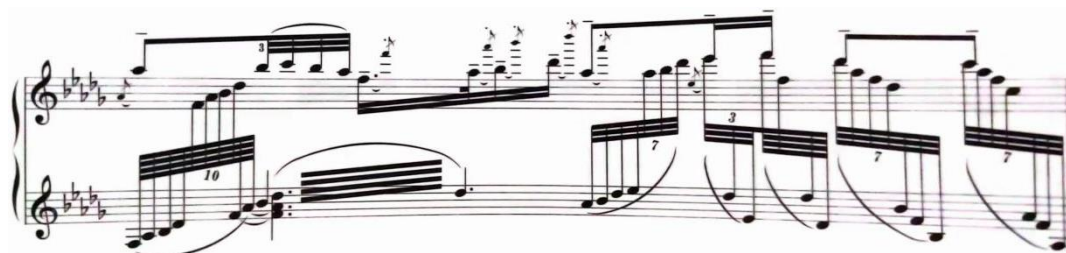


Figure 3. "Autumn Moon on the Pinghu Lake", bar 17

"Autumn Moon on the Pinghu Lake" is a very representative piece. The music absorbs the playing techniques of Western instruments while retaining the qualities of China's unique folk music. If the Alexander Technique is effectively combined with the training of playing techniques, the results will be more in line with the performance of the work. From the point of view of performance techniques and the characteristics of the work's expression of the mood, there are similar similarities in the works "Chasing the Moon with Colored Clouds", "Sunset Drums", "Prelude to a Small Stream", "Two Springs Reflecting the Moon" and so on. Purposeful training with the Alexander Technique should yield equally good performance. We are looking forward to some scientific and effective practice methods that will improve and inspire piano teaching in China.

5. Conclusion

During the centuries of its creation and development, the Alexander Technique has demonstrated its scientifically valid theoretical characteristics in countless practices. The main performance is to understand the structure of the body and the principle of movement so that the student can effectively adjust the piano playing state and psychology, and make it reach the state that best conforms to the laws of nature. The Alexander Technique can be applied to a wide range of musical disciplines, including instrumental music, vocal music, dance, etc., and many aspects of its theory can be drawn upon for more in-depth research and exploration.

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