



The Alexander Technique can play a pivotal role in reducing the pain of performing artists, writes **SYLVIA THOMPSON**

ACCLAIMED ACCORDION player Máirtín O'Connor describes the feeling he had when he went to an Alexander Technique teacher with severe neck pain. "It felt like someone had poured a full canister of three in one oil into my neck," he says.

O'Connor had developed neck pain over a 10-year period and was close to considering surgery when a friend suggested he go see Alexander Technique teacher Richard Brennan.

"After two sessions with him, I felt 20 years of neck tension fade away and I felt my chest naturally expand," he explains. "I used to wrap myself round my instrument for years and when your head is inside the music, it's like an anaesthetic, you don't feel the discomfort but I gradually became aware of how I had been causing myself problems."

O'Connor says people comment now on how he walks and sits straighter and how his shoulders aren't as hunched.

"I feel I have a greater sense of control when I'm playing if I consciously relax and it's easier overall, particularly if I'm playing something that is technically difficult."

Alexander Technique teacher Richard Brennan says performing artists have two issues that the Alexander Technique can help with. "The first is that many actors and singers try too hard when they are performing so they tense their muscles which can constrict their vocal chords.

"The other problem is that musicians can hold their instruments in a certain way that hurts over time. Many performers are at breaking point before they come to an Alexander Technique teacher," he says.

Brian McNamara teaches the violin and the Alexander Technique at the Dublin Institute of Technology's Conservatory of Music and Drama.

"Students come to me because they are in pain when they play their instrument or they are tired as soon as they start practising. When they learn to release tension, they find that they have lighter, more fluid movements. It's all about re-learning how to use the body in the natural way it was designed to be used," he explains.

At the DIT Conservatory, students can opt to take Alexander Technique lessons for a term. "The Alexander Technique is not about doing something in a certain way. It's about learning to stop doing what you are doing that causes tension," says McNamara who has a plastic skeleton in his music room at the conservatory to show students which bones control different movements.

Jazz guitarist Hugh Buckley took lessons in the Alexander Technique while doing a Masters in Music in Performance at the DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama last year.

"Before taking the lessons, I was experiencing severe and worsening neck pain. I also had an enormous amount of tension across my shoulders. Now, I no longer suffer these ailments and on the

rare occasion that I feel a hint of pain or tension, I know exactly how to counteract it with some Alexander Techniques,” explains Buckley.

“While performing I am much more relaxed which brings a more natural flow to my playing. The classes have been a definite revelation for me and a genuine life-changing experience,” says Buckley.

The Australian founder of the Alexander Technique, Frederick Matthias Alexander, was an actor. And it was when he suffered hoarseness and loss of voice during performance that he started to look closely at what he was doing with his body when he performed.

By reciting in front of mirrors, he discovered that he was unconsciously pulling his head back, pulling in his larynx and sucking air in through his mouth.

He realised that he was also lifting his chest, arching his back, throwing his pelvis forward, over-tightening his leg muscles and even gripping the floor with his feet. Once he sorted his own problems, he began to help other performers.

Nowadays, Alexander Technique teachers recommend six to 10 lessons. During the lessons, the Alexander Technique teacher observes how the individual walks, sits and plays an instrument or sings/recites lines.

Correction of the posture is carried out through verbal instruction and gentle re-alignment by the teacher. Students are taught new ways to play an instrument or project their voice that will put less pressure on their joints and muscles.

“Learning new ways of moving while performing can dramatically reduce the strain on the body thus helping it work more efficiently. It’s real common sense. There is no mystery to it,” says Brennan.