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Öğr. Gör. DMA, MS Canan ÖZGÜR

Biruni Üniversitesi, Sağlık Bilimleri Fakóltesi, Dil ve Konuşma Terapisi Bölümü

İstanbul Üniversitesi, Devlet Konservatuvarı Sahne Sanatları Bölümü

cananozgur86@gmail.com

THE EFFECTS OF ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE ON MUSIC PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Abstract

Musicians usually complain about stress, musculoskeletal disorders and performance anxiety during music performances. Alexander Technique is a psycho-physical method which releases unwanted muscle tension, inhibits unnecessary habitual behaviors causing chronic neck and back-pain, and re-educates non-beneficial movement patterns. This paper evaluated studies which applied the Alexander Technique to investigate its effectiveness in music students and musicians during music performances. According to the results, it was observed that performance anxiety may be decreased through the Alexander Technique sessions. In order to explore the effect of the Alexander Technique on the music performances and performance anxieties of music students and musicians to a greater extent, well-designed future studies with one-to-one lessons from experienced, professional and licensed teachers are crucial for better results.

Keywords: Alexander Technique, musician, music performance, anxiety.

ALEXANDER TEKNİĐİ'NİN MÜZİK PERFORMANSI VE PERFORMANS KAYGISI ÜZERİNE ETKİLERİ

Öz

Müziyenler performans sırasında genellikle stres, kas-iskelet fizyolojisi hastalıkları ve performans kaygısı ile ilgili sorunlar dile getirirler. Alexander Tekniđi istenmeyen kas gerginliklerini azaltan, kronik boyun ve sırt ağrısına sebep olan gereksiz kas alışkanlıklarını engelleyen ve işe yaramayan hareket kalıplarını yeniden eğiten psiko-fiziksel bir yöntemdir. Bu makalede Alexander Tekniđi'nin müzik öğrencileri ve müziyenlerin müzik performansları üzerindeki etkisini araştıran çalışmalar değerlendirilmiştir. Ele edilen sonuçlara göre, Alexander Tekniđi eğitimleri sayesinde müzik performansı kaygısı azaltılabilir. Alexander Tekniđi'nin öğrencilerin ve müziyenlerin müzik performansları ve performans kaygıları üzerindeki etkisini daha iyi incelemek için ileride daha kapsamlı kurgulanmış, Alexander Tekniđi'nin deneyimli, profesyonel ve lisanslı çalışanlar tarafından birebir uygulandığı araştırmalar yapılmalıdır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Alexander Tekniđi, müziyen, müzik performansı, kaygı.

INTRODUCTION

Music performance anxiety is accepted as a type of social anxiety disorder. Specific fears in relation with music performance either as solo or in a group are typical to it. The musicians' negative attitudes toward the performance increase the fears related to music performance. These unwanted attitudes and performance anxiety can affect the musician's career as well as the quality of her/his life. Thus, they require recognition and treatment by clinicians (Dođan and Çilden, 2017). Research and medical/psychological treatment of it started in 1970s. Some of the treatments applied are cognitive and behavioral therapies, biofeedback, pharmacological interventions such as beta blockers, music therapy and meditation (Burin and Osorio, 2016).

Music students and professional musicians report stress, performance anxiety and performance-related injuries such as neck and back pain or muscular overuse syndromes, related to the instrument they play (Ackermann, *et al.*, 2012). Musculoskeletal disorders are treated with physical therapy. However, there is not a specialized care for musicians (Guptill, 2011). Therefore, the methods applied are generally yoga, Feldenkrais method or Alexander Technique (AT).

The Alexander Technique (AT), developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander who also suffered from chronic hoarseness and loss of his voice during performance (Liebowitz and Conington, 2011), is a psychophysical method which uses voluntary inhibition and kinesthetic awareness in order to prevent unnecessary movement models (Klein, *et al.*, 2014). AT lessons provide lifelong skills for self-care which help individuals to comprehend and avoid bad habits affecting neuromuscular coordination and posture. These lessons include people's continuous personalized assessment of their habitual musculoskeletal use. The first focus point is the relationship between neck, head and back, with the aim of releasing unwanted spinal muscle tension. In order to decrease the compression of the spine, licensed teachers guide the individuals

one-to-one by hand contact or verbal instruction (Little, *et al.*, 2008). Hands-on work creates a psychophysical connection, and distinguishes AT from bodywork techniques. Non-beneficial muscle tension is released via this conscious re-education of thought and movement. Thus, breathing is also eased and the “use”, a technical term pointing out to a person’s movements and behaviors in AT, is coordinated better (Bosch, 2005; Klein, *et al.*, 2014). Some of the conditions that can be alleviated using AT are round shoulders, whiplash, neck and shoulder stiffness and pain, disc trouble, arthritis, muscular cramps/tics, stress-related disorders, breathing disorders, sciatica, tension, anxiety (Liebowitz and Connington, 2011) and chronic back pain (Woodman and Moore, 2012).

The people who practice AT mention that they experience a general feeling of lightness through their bodies, describing it like “walking on air”. The lessons make them feel happier and calmer (Brennan, 1996). In order to improve one’s posture, AT exercises start with standing up. Since the “idea” of standing causes early and unnecessary tension, one should learn to sit. The muscular tension in the neck should be released, so the head rotates forward and up, bringing the spine with it. Oppositional to that movement, the sit bones should release down into the chair. The standing up starts with moving the feet back, hinging forward using hip joints where the legs meet the torso, putting pressure into the entire feet gently and pushing off of the floor. Neck or lower back tension should not be involved in these movements. The knees should be unlocked and soft. In order to sit down, the knees should be sent forward and the hip joints backward. The body should be lowered down into the chair without the engagement of the lower back or neck. Hinging back should be using the hip joints (Josefsberg, 2018).

“Fingertips Rule” which is another AT exercise deals with reducing stress during the usage of the hands, especially when typing. The exercise starts with holding the hands by one’s sides while either standing or sitting position. Normally, when one wants to lift the hands, the movement starts with the big muscles of the arm or the shoulder with an extra tension. Instead, the hands should be lifted by imagining that only the fingertips are lifted (Ergonomic Trends, 2019).

AT exercises involve exhalation control, too. In order to do that, a slow and controlled “ahh” sound is whispered, helping to reduce stress, calm the mind and relax the body. During this vocal exercise the voice should be calm and at a low pitch. After a complete and comfortable emptiness in the lungs, the air should come in through the nose silently. The jaw should be released and open during exhalation, thus letting go of excess and habitual jaw tension (Josefsberg, 2018).

Another important AT exercise is called “constructively resting”, simply lying down on a hard surface such as the floor to feel beneath oneself. A couch or a bed would be too soft to do so. The hands should be at either sides or on the stomach. The head can be supported by a pillow. While the feet are pressed flat into the floor, the knees should be bent gently, without tension on the joints (Ergonomic Trends, 2019). The body should be relaxed by letting it settle on the floor and gravity take over. The torso will widen and lengthen as one focuses on the breath using the whispering “ahh” technique. Lying down for 10-15 minutes per day in this position helps benefiting from AT to a great extent (Josefsberg, 2018).

The instrument's sound is easily affected by the posture and movement of a musician. AT aims to free and ease the movements, so that the musicians overcome habitual postures, decreased function and injuries (Schlinger, 2006). The musicians should also spend their time practicing AT between the lessons (Little, et al., 2008). All these help them to have a better musical performance, lessening the performance anxiety.

METHOD

In this review, the effectiveness of AT sessions for music students' and musicians' health and performance was evaluated through literature search. The keywords used through manual search were the Alexander Technique, music and musician. AT applied was either one-to-one or as group lessons.

RESULTS

In a study by Doyle, the neck-head relationship of violinists was searched during music performance. Short hands-on contacts were applied. One group of musicians was asked to release their sternocleidomastoid muscles on the neck via thinking of freeing them. Their skulls went forward and up, so they moved away from the hands of the experimenter. Another group was asked to tighten their muscles via thinking. Then their skulls went back and down towards the hands of the experiment. According to the photos taken before the subjects took their instrument, while holding it and after a short while, there was a change in the neck-head positions related to the instruction's guidance. This study did not measure the effect of AT sessions, but the immediate effect of verbal and hand-on techniques of AT on posture with a result of positive correlation in between (Doyle, 1984).

Nielsen studied performance anxiety on 39 musicians, dividing them into groups of AT, placebo tablet, beta blocker and running exercises with the outcome measures of blood pressure and heart rate. The AT and beta blocker groups had a significant reduction in systolic blood pressure. The AT group also had improved energy and breathing. The running group's heart rate decreased and had an increase in general well-being. The placebo group had no significant changes (Nielsen, 1988).

The effects of AT sessions on performance anxiety were searched at another study by Valentine *et al.* through qualitative and quantitative measures. Heart rate, performance anxiety, music performance were measured during both low (e.g. performance at class) and high stress situations (e.g. recital, audition) before and after AT sessions. Compared to the control group, the AT group showed improvements in heart rate variance, overall technical and musical quality, positive attitude towards performance and self-rated anxiety. Respiratory function did not significantly change in the AT group compared to the control group. According to the interviews with the AT group, the participants' awareness of tension increased, and their ability to relax improved. It was concluded that 15 AT lessons were not enough in order to apply the technique in high stress situations (Valentine, *et al.*, 1995).

In another study, the effects of AT as well as mental skills training and physical exercise on music performance and anxiety were investigated. According to the results, training helped the students to reduce their performance anxiety. 15 AT sessions were seen to be insufficient to have a positive effect on musical understanding or overall quality of music performance (Egner and Gruzelier, 2003).

Valentine and Williamon also investigated the effect of AT use in comparison with neurofeedback on music performance of strings, keyboard, voice and wind students. A significant reduction in self-rated anxiety before performance was recorded in both groups. According to the expert judges, the AT group showed significant improvements in music performance, and the students' feedback showed that AT training was highly satisfactory and beneficial (Valentine and Williamon, 2003).

Hoberg investigated the effects of AT on performance anxiety during flute lessons. Specific principles of AT were applied to a group of six students during the lessons. Another group of six students had flute lessons without AT principles. According to the results, the group which had the principles of AT showed less nervousness compared to their previous examination. The control group showed more symptoms of anxiety (Hoberg, 2008).

Mozeiko's study was a mixed method of observations, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, in which the effects of AT sessions were investigated on female violinists. Awareness, pain, well-being and executive skill function were the outcome measures before and after the AT sessions. Additional to the sessions, the participants were asked to lie down in a semi-supine position once or twice a day as a part of learning AT. Compared to the control group, there was a significant improvement in executive skill function and awareness at the experimental group (Mozeiko, 2011).

Rachelle and his colleagues had a study to determine if muscle activation, movement kinematics, musical performance, and qualitative self-assessment over ten weeks of AT intervention are viable in violinists/violists. Music performance was video-recorded and evaluated by an expert for quality and kinesthetic awareness. One group participated in weekly 1-hour group AT lessons and kept a personal journal of their progress. Another group received no AT lessons. According to the results, the intervention employed and the measures could be a viable means of determining the potential benefits of AT training (Rachel *et al.*, 2017).

According to Zhukov's review on music performance anxiety, treatment of it includes cognitive/behavioral therapies, mindfulness-based approaches, physiological/physically-based therapies, music therapy, psychotherapy and prescribed medication. In order to manage the physical symptoms, the most popular methods are relaxation techniques, such as yoga, deep breathing exercises and meditation. Other strategies are healthy lifestyle, bio-and neuro-feedback, prescription drugs and AT. Musicians can be harsh on themselves by perfectionism and self-handicapping. The cognitive symptoms of music performance anxiety can be managed through realistic goal-setting, music therapy, psychotherapy, cognitive restructuring, and systematic desensitization. The best and the most promising approach seems to be combining cognitive therapy strategies with behavioral techniques in order to reduce music performance anxiety and improve the quality of music performance (Zhukov, 2019).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Music performance may cause musicians to feel stress, musculoskeletal disorders and performance anxiety. As a psycho-physical method the Alexander Technique (AT) releases unnecessary muscle tension and habitual behaviors which causes chronic back or neck-pain. This review evaluated studies that applied AT to search its effectiveness in music students and musicians during music performances.

In clinical experiments with musicians, the most commonly measured outcomes of AT sessions were respiratory function, music performance and performance anxiety. It was observed that AT lessons did not change the respiratory function significantly. Also, some results related to music performance which were judged by external experts may not be satisfactory because they are difficult and complex to access. The performance anxiety as a medical condition was investigated and it was observed that AT lessons had a decreasing effect on it. The AT study durations of three to four months may not be enough for the participants to incorporate their AT knowledge to their music performances, for the improvement to be observed fully (Klein *et al.*, 2014).

Some other studies observe the effects of AT at people with back pain (Little, *et al.*, 2008). The studies included in this review had mostly young and healthy participants without any specific pain problems. In future studies, musicians with back pain related to their instruments may be investigated using AT methods. The designs of the studies should be well-established including sufficient number of participants with longer periods of time for the sessions to be more successful. Also, one-to-one lessons of AT from registered teachers would produce more satisfactory results in the long term.

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