

Jane Gregory: **The Alexander Technique****Perfect Performance Posture Is Possible: Part 3**

In our concluding article, I will be looking at practical ways of implementing improved posture as part of your day-to-day playing



Jane Gregory

The best way to benefit from the Alexander Technique is have one-to-one lessons with a qualified teacher. Jane Gregory works with many musicians including drummers, guitarists, bassists, vocalists and keyboard players, and is based in Epping, Essex (on the Central line). [www.janegregory.org.uk](http://www.janegregory.org.uk)

There are teachers of the Alexander Technique across the UK. For details of a teacher near you, contact The Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique: [www.stat.org.uk](http://www.stat.org.uk) or call 0845 230 7828.

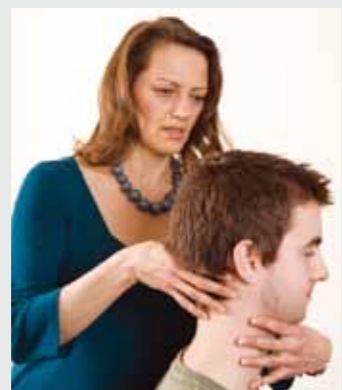


Jane Gregory teaches at The Institute for Contemporary Music Performance. To find out more about ICMP, visit [www.icmp.co.uk](http://www.icmp.co.uk)

**W**elcome back to the third and final part of our series (cue sad violins) on playing bass and the Alexander Technique. Last month we dedicated the entire article to arms – and we're not finished with them just yet...

**Arms Are A Pain In The Neck**

Even though we are blissfully unaware of it, most of us tense our neck muscles whenever we move our arms. If you imagine how many times a day you move your arms, and that you are stiffening your neck every time, this means you are practising tensing your neck millions of times a day. What a waste of energy! Energy best saved to play bass. That'll explain the stiff neck after the gig! Of course, we're right back where we started in part one of this series, talking about the great importance of keeping the neck free of excess tension. (If you've missed or forgotten about the neck muscles, go back and reread it now!) So, how can we stop tensing the neck when playing? Although it might not be anatomically correct, when we think of the neck as the fifth limb, it helps to keep the neck independent from the movement of the other four limbs, namely the arms and legs. How? Well,



Jane Gregory, working with bass student, Lee Feltham

when you move your left hand up and down the fretboard do you involve your right leg? Of course you don't. So, by the same argument, why should you involve the fifth limb, ie your neck? Put like this it does seem ridiculous that we stiffen the neck every time we play.

In this next exercise, we're going right back to the 'Power of Thinking', which we talked about in part one of this series, in an attempt to gain independence of the neck. Please remember that keeping the neck free is the key to good body use so it's worth spending a bit of time on this exercise even though it may seem quite simple. Sit quietly with arms resting in your lap. Now send a message to your neck that you want it to be free and keep sending the message continuously as you lift one arm up in front of you and put it back in your lap. How was your attention split between the neck and the arm? Probably most of your attention was on your moving arm and less on your poor old neck muscles, right? So now, repeat the exercise. This time, however, give 90% of your attention to keeping your neck free and just 10% to lifting the arm. The difference will be subtle but it should feel slightly easier, more integrated than the first time. The trick is to free the neck before using the arms, and then keep this independence of the neck going during movement. When you feel you are making headway with this, try the exercise again, but with lifting the arm to play bass instead.

'But hang on,' I hear you cry, 'I can't afford to give so much attention to my neck when I need it to play bass.' Once you get the hang of keeping your neck free while playing, it establishes a new and better habit. As a musician you are used to dividing your attention on stage. You're working with the drummer, thinking about your sound and volume, watching the bandleader – oh yeah, and playing bass! You are already an expert at splitting your attention. Practise thinking about freeing your neck every time you pick

**Remember, you can change anything just by thinking it, so have a go and try it.**

• Have you softened the muscles at the back of the neck enough for the head to balance itself?

• Can you let go of your fingers, hands, wrists, elbows, armpits, shoulders? Bassists' arms often stay in 'playing mode' even after putting down the bass.

• Are you releasing up the front of the body from the hip joints all the way up to the throat?

• Are you widening across the chest from shoulder to shoulder?

• Are you really allowing your legs to be free?

• Is roughly half your body weight on your heels when standing? Move back and forth a few times from balls of feet to heels to help find the balance. (Note: when standing with your bass, be more in your heels.)

• When standing, have you softened behind the knees so they aren't braced back? (Crucial when standing with your bass.)

up your bass and soon it will become more natural.

And freeing your neck is not just for bass playing. Practise keeping your neck free while reaching for your coffee mug, before getting out of a chair, while brushing your teeth – you get the idea...

So, before we go on to talk about the benefits of lying on the floor every day, here's a quick reminder of the key things we've learnt over the past three issues.

**Bass Player's Handy Checklist**

• Connect your arms with your back by releasing excessive tension in your fingers, arms, shoulders, armpits – think outer circle.

• Free your neck and keep it free – think of it as the fifth limb and therefore separate from the other four limbs.

• When practising, take frequent mini-breaks of one or two minutes – get up, walk around, drink some water, lie on the floor in the semi-supine position (see box).

• Sit with feet flat on the floor (this helps the postural reflexes of the back to kick in).

• Sit on your sitting bones. (They're the two bones sticking out of your bottom! To find them, sit on your hands.) Check out the photograph below.



• When sitting to play, don't hold your right foot up to make your bass higher – use a foot rest to raise the leg.

• If you need to move forward when sitting, hinge from the hips.

• Don't automatically slump over your bass; rather, think up in the front of the body.

• Don't throw your head and neck forward to check out your fretting hand – stay back with your head balanced on the spine. (Compare Photographs 1 and 2.)

• When standing, balance the ball and heel of both feet, then come back into your heels more to allow for the extra weight of the bass.

• Let your bass come to you. Don't contort your body towards your bass. (Compare Photographs 3 and 4.)

• Check your strap length – is it allowing best use of both wrists?

• Lying in semi-supine for two or three minutes before a practice session will heighten your awareness of any tension when you get up and start to play.

• You're less likely to be tense if you're happy, so smile – bass playing is fun, right?



Photograph 1



Photograph 2



Photograph 3



Photograph 4

**"... simple act of lying down for 15 minutes allows all the fluid to go back into the discs and literally 'plump up' the spine again"**

**Lying Down On The Job**

Lying down on the ground for just 10–15 minutes a day is one of the most beneficial things you can do for the human body. In Alexander Technique we call it 'semi-supine' or 'active rest'.

**The Benefits**

- Allows complete rest of the body.
- Reinforces a good relationship between head, neck and back.
- Plumps up the cushioning discs of the spine.
- You can practise releasing muscle tension through thinking.
- Brings mind and body together.

By lying in semi-supine just before bass practice, you will be more aware of tension in your body while playing.

**Semi-Supine Position**

1. Lie on a carpeted surface. A bed or sofa won't do!

2. Place a small stack of books under the head – about 1–2 inches, so that your chin isn't at your chest, but your head isn't arching backwards either.

3. Bend your knees and bring your feet comfortably close to your body. Legs should feel balanced and be hip width apart.

4. Rest your hands on your abdomen just below the ribs.

**What Should I Think About?**

Allow your whole body to release onto the floor and feel the floor supporting you.

Tell yourself that your head is supported by the books so your neck has nothing to do – it can really release.

Imagine what your back looks like (remember those lats from last month's issue), and let it widen and lengthen onto the floor.

Think about your knees pointing up to the ceiling and allow your hip joints to be free – this will help your lower back to release.

Let your hands mould to the shape of your abdomen by releasing them, and think about your elbows sinking into the carpet – this will release the arms.

Allow your shoulders to drift slowly apart from each other and your shoulder blades to sink into the floor.

Become aware of the natural rhythm of your breathing and just let it happen.

Remember, don't 'do' anything, just use your thinking to achieve results.

If you do semi-supine and realise you haven't done any constructive thinking at all, take heart. The spine, like a hydraulic system, slowly compresses throughout the day, and just the simple act of lying down for 15 minutes allows all the fluid to go back into the discs and literally 'plump up' the spine again. So, you haven't wasted your time!