

Gravity & Light

These pages contain information about Gravity and Light, a one-act opera. It includes background information on who the characters are based on and the full libretto, which is annotated to explain aspects of how it relates to The Alexander Technique.

Gravity and Light

A one act opera based on the Alexander Technique

Premiered on 20 th August 2004 7.45pm at Oxford Town Hall as part of the 7th International Congress of Alexander Technique Teachers

Libretto by Carolyn Nicholls

Composed and conducted by Leon Coates

Directed by Lee Warren

This performance was dedicated by the librettist to Walter and Dilys Carrington in whose presence the opera took place.

DVD copies of the performance will be available by Christmas 2004

Video recording by George Robertson

Excerpts from the programme

How it happened...

This short but succinct opera wrote itself whilst I was writing an academic thesis entitled "The Analysis of the Specialised Use of the Hands in Alexander Technique Teaching". During the course of my research study I recorded interviews, both on tape and video, with Alexander teacher-trainers and training course students. The resultant material flooded my senses to such an extent that writing an opera libretto was one way of making sense of it all. All the characters in the opera are either 'real' people who took part in my study, or conglomerates of people. Many of the words and phrases used are those from the mouths of my study participants.

I threaded the resultant libretto through my master's thesis, having obtained special permission to do so from the bemused academic board of the University of East London (bless them for their open-mindedness) and that, thought I, was the end of it.

I presented the 2003 F. M. Alexander Memorial Lecture (*Candles and Onions*) and, when mentioning the libretto was astonished to find people wanting to audition for the role of Emily-to compose the opera-to direct it-to make it happen. So, thanks to the enthusiastic help of many people, here it is...

The tale , version 1. Emily wants to set the world to rights and is a seeker after the truth. She has heard of an old magician who held the secrets of a great spell of transformation and of Hardiman, a wise man that, she believes, the magician Frederick had initiated into his practices. Hardiman lives in a large rambling house surrounded by his helpers and pupils, all of whom speak a strange language. Keen to learn everything she can, Emily wanders through the house, meeting different characters that give her thoughtful directions. But in her haste Emily misunderstands them and she constantly

finds herself climbing a spiral staircase that she thought she had already climbed, only to realise that actually, although it appears to be the same staircase, it looks different every time she climbs it, and the view is different the higher she goes.

In time Emily realises that if she wants to learn the secrets of Fredericks ' spell, she must stop looking where she has been looking and embark upon a strange and delightful journey into an unknown land and that the spiral staircase will take her there if she can understand its message.

..or version 2

This is what happens when you discover the Alexander Technique and decide to undertake the perilous task of training to teach it.

Cast		
Emily	<i>Soprano</i>	Alison Nicholls
Hardiman	<i>Baritone</i>	Phillip Tucker
Lisa	<i>Soprano</i>	Olivia Boot
Shirley-Jane	<i>Mezzo</i>	Ruth Rootberg
Alice	<i>Soprano</i>	Heather Coates
Nicholas	<i>Tenor</i>	Colin Openshaw
Chorus of students and travellers	<i>SATB</i>	Robin Bowie, Brita Forsstrom, Ann James, Priscilla Hunt, Frankie Stringer, Jeannie Woods. Jamie McDowell, Rodrigo Suarez , Kai Bahnemann, Allen Huszti, Glen Swift

Orchestra

Conducted by Leon Coates

Violin 1	Ron Colyer, Hilary Dalby, Trish Robertson
Violin 2	Sue Holliday, Jane Gillie
Viola	Antonio Del Marr, Elizabeth Waterhouse, Malcolm Williamson
'Cello	Judith Kleinman, Vivien Mackie
Double Bass	Peter Buckoke
Flute	William Morton
Oboe	Ginny Shaw
Horn	Kerin Black

Thanks are due to:

Everyone who gave their time and their considerable talents freely and willingly. To the congress organisers for their support, to those wonderful invisible people who brought tea, water, and moped fevered brows and made life easier.

And to F. M. Alexander who is responsible for all of us being here tonight.

Biographies in brief!
Carolyn Nicholls , <i>Librettist</i> originally trained as a textile artist and photographer. Previous works include <i>Time and The River</i> , (composer Guy Richardson) <i>Here is the News and Socks over the Antarctic</i> . She trained with Walter and Dilys Carrington and is Head of training of The Brighton Alexander Technique College in Hove . She gained a distinction for her MA, which included this libretto.
Leon Coates , <i>Composer</i> was educated at Derby and St John's College Cambridge . He lectures in music at Edinburgh University . His work, including concertos for viola and harpsichord, a string quartet and song cycles, has been broadcast on Radio 3, Radio Scotland and Radio Telefis Eireann. This is his first completed opera .
Lee Warren , <i>Director</i> is an AT teacher, magician, writer and director. He is the resident teacher at the Actors Centre in London . Last year he directed ' <i>Milk for Jamie</i> ' at the Soho Theatre. As a librettist he was a finalist in the international Genesis Opera Project The opera- ' <i>The Original Chinese Conjuror</i> ' (composer Raymond Yiu) was showcased at Sadlers Wells in March 2004. He is one of the busiest magicians in England and regularly runs performance and mind-influencing skills workshops for the corporate market.
Alison Nicholls , <i>Emily</i> studies singing with Penny Jenkins. She has studied in Indianapolis , Ardingly, and with the ENO . Alison made her solo debut at Glyndebourne as <i>Caoli</i> in <i>Elemental</i> . with the Glyndebourne Youth Opera (March 2004). She goes up to Durham to read Anthropology in October 2004 and intends to study opera as a postgraduate student, possibly in Australia .
Philip Tucker , <i>Hardiman</i> has already wowed Alexander audiences with his rendition of the Flanders and Swan Hippopotamus's song, which was very popular! Philip is a hard working member of STAT council.
Heather Coates , <i>Alice</i> , studied singing with Winifred Busfield, Jean Allister and Jane Manning. Opera performances include Music Theatre Scotland 's ' <i>Jonny Spielt Auf</i> ' by Krenek.
Olivia Boot , <i>Lisa</i> teaches singing as well as the Alexander Technique and delighted us with her French songs at last years' AGM in Edinburgh (2003).
Ruth Rootberg , <i>Shirley-Jane</i> has come from America just to sing this role! She says she's never auditioned by email before.....
Colin Openshaw , <i>Nicholas</i> has been very busy 'making things happen' around the congress. He sings with an Oxford choir and is training to teach.

What is the spell?

The spell, transforming gravity into light, represents several things. First and foremost it represents the essence of the Alexander Technique, which is the ability to consciously use oneself in a free and elastic manner that allows one to be lengthening in stature throughout the whole body. To put it more simply it's about 'going up'.

To achieve this happy state is simple but not easy, as Emily (and anyone else who explores it) discovers.

So the spell represents good use of oneself and also acknowledges that this is a primary consideration in any attempt to teach another person the Alexander Technique. If you want to teach people to cast this spell for themselves, to transform gravity into light, to 'go up'; you first of all must make sure that you yourself are able to perform that spell! You yourself must be able to 'go up' and to maintain your good use whilst you put your hands on another person and offer them the tools necessary to cast their own spell-to go up within themselves.

Who are the opera characters based on?

All the characters in the piece are loosely based on the people who kindly took part in the study *Analysis of The Specialised Use of the Hands in Alexander Technique Teaching*, which was my thesis title for my Masters degree. These people took part in video and tape recordings. Ron Colyer (who led the orchestra) was my Alexander Technique mentor for the study and was most helpful with encouragement and insightful comments when I was struggling with my material. Inevitably other people, AT teachers, students, pupils, and friends talked to me about what I was doing and gave me information, opinions and advice. Some people told me very forcibly what using the hands was about, others digressed into their own difficulties, but what was fascinating was the way in which similar images and concepts came up for everyone. These people in a sense became the chorus. Moments of realisations about their own and other people processes are reflected in the chorus words *...and so you see----what can you do but nothing...*

FM himself does not appear in the opera, he is the force behind it. I cast him as a magician who has amazing spells to perform (incidentally, Lee Warren who directed the performance is also a magician!) He is referred to in the narration that is spoken over the overture as '*a powerful magician named Frederick...who spent years locked in a room gazing in mirrors...*' This naturally refers to FM's chapter 3 *Evolution of a Technique* in his book *Use of the Self* in which he describes his use of mirrors in discovering aspects of his work. This image of FM was also an echo of the image of the crystal cave that Merlin the magician at the court of King Arthur was said to have dwelt in.

The Character of **Emily** is partly based on myself as a young trainee. She also represents the training journey with its elations and frustrations '*You tell me what you have already told me*' she cries in frustration when two teachers tell her to stop and think yet again.

Hardiman is clearly based on Walter Carrington. The 'rambling house' is 18 Lansdowne Road where I and many many other people trained to teach the Alexander Technique. This house must have seen thousands of Alexander lessons over decades of time. It is still a vibrant place of learning.

Hardiman also has a touch of another magician about him-Sarasro from Mozarts *Magic Flute*. When I had decided that I would write a libretto I begged the loan of some librettos from a composer friend-to look at how they were laid out, what information was included and how the whole thing was presented. My friend lent me *The Magic Flute* and *The Mikado* (Gilbert & Sullivan) both of which I love and know reasonable well. In a way both librettos coloured my thinking. Anyone who knows Walter will recognise that he is both a 'weighty' figure with his huge depth of knowledge and experience and yet he shares it joyfully. Many of the phrases that crept into the libretto come from Walter over the 25 years I have known him. *Ask yourself the question-which way am I going?* is a phrase I have heard from Walter on many occasions.

Alice is a conglomerate figure. She represents a high level on the spiral of learning. She is partly based on Dilys Carrington, who did so much to set me on the road that led (indirectly as all good

things.) to the master's degree and the opera. Alice also carries aspects of my self as a research practitioner. It is Alice who urges Emily to *turn another spiral-learn again what you know-look in the mirror, again, again*. When I spent a year as Dilys's apprentice, learning how to teach the skill of using your hands in what we know as 'hands-on groups' Dilys would often say things like 'let's all free our knees shall we?' This used to intrigue me because it revealed Dilys's ability to operate on many levels at once. She was teaching the trainee to free her knees, she was reminding me that if I wanted to feel anything of what was going on under my hands when I was monitoring the trainee she was teaching, that I too should free my knees, and that for herself, as teacher trainer, master craftsman and generous instructor-the knees were there to be freed!

Since those days I have trained established teachers to take 'hands-on groups' and I am always mindful of Dilys when I do so.

Nicholas is loosely based on input from John Nicholls, who was the other teacher trainer in my study. John talked a great deal about how people question the state of their neck, trying to 'feel' it out. This came out in Emily's plea *...but my neck is free, isn't it? Isn't it?*

Nicholas's line in the final chorus *You can't know a song by a singer who's wrong* is a paraphrase of Alexander's *You can't know a thing by an instrument that's wrong* and represents Johns often humorous way of getting his teaching across.

Shirley-Jane and Lisa are based on the trainees who took part in the study. These were both novice trainees (in the first term or two) and those about to graduate. The transcripts of the four interviews I did with trainees revealed some fascinating material, a subtle combination of understanding and awareness of distance and learning yet to cover. In the opera they are senior students or newly qualified teachers, so when Emily complains that she has lost her way they confidently tell her *Up, up, up! Make no mistake the way is up!*. But a bit later on, when Alice has spoken to Emily and told her to look again, Shirley-Jane and Lisa realise that *now we are not so sure.....*

Programme Notes

GRAVITY AND LIGHT, takes its title from the two opposing but complementary forces that stimulate the human postural mechanisms. We must contend with gravity as a downward force in our lives, holding us onto the planet, and yet we have an inbuilt urge to extend upwards. This urge is both physical and for many symbolic of an inner search for understanding, enlightenment, illumination. To grow towards the light is a fundamental urge for all most life forms, be they sentient creatures, or plants. Grappling with these two forces is a rewarding journey that can lead in many directions (mostly upwards!). This piece is the culmination of a twenty-year journey that the librettist both wittingly and unwittingly undertook. It explores a crystallisation of understanding, experience and practice that extends both into the past and the future.

Outside the rambling house.

Emily has found the house and desperately wants to explore it. She has many questions and hopes the people inside the house can enlighten her. What were Frederick's secrets? How did he transform gravity into light and could she do it too?

Emily knew that the magician had written four scrolls, in which he committed his secret studies to parchment. She had managed to get copies of the scrolls and had tried to read them. But she was

frustrated. The meaning of his words evaded her. She tried to do what he had done, to carry out the same experiments that he had carried out. She had to find out more.

The Annotated Libretto

The Mirrored Chamber

(narrated over the overture)

This is the story of Emily, a young girl who has a burning ambition to practise magic. She has heard of a powerful magician named Frederick, who had the ability to transform people with the touch of his hands. He was a mysterious figure, who had spent many years locked in a room gazing at his own reflection in mirrors. Mirrors were all around, revealing secrets that he alone could understand. He helped the lame to walk and the stutterer to speak. He freed the sick from their prison of pain, and helped the breathless to breathe. He enlivened the minds of the dull and caused the philosopher to think yet more deeply. He was a strange and powerful man, now partly wrapped in the mystery of the past; his innermost secrets known only to a few. His hands brought about the transformations he made, and Emily wondered if she too could perform his most powerful spell; transforming gravity into light.

LIBRETTO	ANNOTATION
Scene 1 . A group of students are sitting on the steps outside the rambling house (chorus).	<i>This open has a touch of the opening of The Mikado, where the gentleman of Japan are sitting around the town of Tittipu</i>
No. 1 <i>Recitative and chorus</i> <i>Allegro. Emily runs on, carrying the four scrolls of Frederick .</i>	<i>Except that as Emily was on stage the whole time we gave up this image</i>
Emily. Tell me! oh tell me! oh tell me, where can I find the secret? Tell me! oh tell me, where do I look? I know he changed things, he changed things I have heard much I want to change things, to change things Tell me the way	<i>Emily wants to find out about the Alexander Technique-‘the secret’, she knows the magician Fredrick ‘changed things’ and wants to find out how</i>
Chorus How can you listen when breath is not breathing? How can you learn when your neck is so stiff?	<i>This is Emily’s introduction to some of the principles of the AT. Free breathing and a free neck are what is required and the concept of inhibition (stopping) is introduced.</i>

<p>What would you know if you can't hear the music your mind and your muscles could play if you wish</p> <p>Stop, stop, you simply must stop</p> <p>Stop, stop, first learn how to wait</p>	
<p>Maestoso <i>Hardiman emerges from the rambling house and invites Emily to enter</i></p> <p>No. 2 Nothing is Magic, Magic is Nothing</p> <p>Hardiman. Before you can do magic</p> <p>Magic you must understand</p> <p>Before you can do something</p> <p>Nothing must be done</p> <p>Ask yourself the question</p> <p>Which way am I going?</p> <p>And if you don't know</p> <p>I can show you the way</p>	<p><i>Hardiman gives Emily an Alexander lesson (or 30!) and the ideas of non-doing are communicated. Walter Carrington often used the phrase Ask your self the question.....</i></p>
<p>Emily. The Floating Aria</p> <p>It seems I am floating but here I am solid, my mind tells my muscles the way they might go</p> <p>His hands feel so gentle, but I sense their power, it seems that inside me I know what to do</p> <p>I try, I try, I try to be right</p> <p>But I know, I know, my right to be wrong</p> <p>I'm here on the staircase, with spirals inside me, my mind and my body keep turning around</p> <p>His hands lift me up and I feel myself lengthen but he doesn't lift me its hard to know how</p> <p>The spell, the spell, I know that's it's gravity</p>	<p><i>As a result of her lessons, Emily has many experiences to make sense of. People often describe a sense of floating. Emily's 'trying' is of course end-gaining, which gets her nowhere and she comes across the horrors of faulty sensory appreciation-the fact that her 'right' has turned out to be 'wrong'</i></p> <p><i>She notices the spiral natures of her muscles and ponders on the 'spell' The lines 'his hands lift me up....but he doesn't lift me' comes from my own reflective diary that I kept during my study period where I describe an experience during a turn from Walter as 'lifting but not lifting'.</i></p>

<p>The spell, the spell, I know that it's light</p>	
<p>Chorus And so you see____ and so you see____ What can you do but do nothing? There is a way____ there is a way_____ That nothing turns out to be something. You breathe, you widen, your neck feels so long You're tall and moving, no effort at all And so you see____ and so you see_____ What can you do but do nothing? There is a way____ there is a way_____ That nothing turns out to be something</p>	<p><i>The chorus affirm Emily's discoveries, that non-doing brings results in terms of better breathing and effortless movement.</i></p>
<p>Scene 2 . Inside the rambling house, Emily explores the spiral staircase. <i>Allègrezza. Emily meets Lisa, Shirley-Jane and Alice</i></p> <p>No 4 Ensemble Emily. Where should I go? What should I do,- I have lost my way.</p>	<p><i>Going into the rambling house is symbolic of Emily beginning her teacher training, and of those awful realisations that most of us have-that we have no clue what is going on!</i></p>
<p>Lisa, Shirley-Jane and Alice. Up! Up! Up! Make no mistake, the way is up Emily. That's what I am doing, that's where I am going, I am going up, I can feel it, I am going up up up.</p>	<p><i>These three are clear what its all about but Emily has fallen into relying on her feelings (senses).</i></p>

<p>Lisa & Shirley-Jane. You think you are doing what you think you are doing But you are misled. Feelings are not your guides, they will lead you astray. Stop, stop, and think only. Only think and action will follow</p>	<p><i>Emily is advised to inhibit more-or rather to think out again what inhibition might be about-a common experience for those who are training-just when you think you've cracked it.....</i></p>	
<p>Emily. I want to cast the spell, but you tell me what you have already told me. Now show me the spell. Alice . Turn another spiral, learn again what you know. Look in the mirror, again, again, again. Look in the mirror, again, again, again.</p>	<p><i>FM looked in his mirror many many times and Emily has to reflect more deeply too.....</i></p>	
<p>Emily. Free the neck, they tell me to free the neck. To cast the spell what must I do? Why can't I know now? To cast the spell what must I do? Why can't I know now? Free the neck, but my neck is free-isn't it-isn't it free? Isn't it?</p>	<p>Lisa & Shirley-Jane. You can't know a thing by an instrument that's wrong. We are here, we are here. Going up the spiral staircase within and without. The harder you try the worse it gets. We also think we know the spell but now we are not so sure.</p>	<p>Alice . Let gravity be your friend, let the spiral inside extend your mind. When you have it you won't care to ask the questions. Look in the mirror, again, again. Feelings are not your guide. Only think and action will follow</p>
<p><i>Like all ensembles what is heard is a melee of sound from which words pop out . This ensemble represents those moments in my study when I felt that everyone was talking to me at the same time, saying wonderful insightful things-but all at once!. So in this tutti ensembble Emily is concerned with her own process, with whats happening to her neck, Shirley-Jane and Lisa, being more experienced are offering Emily advise but also questioning their own learning. Alice , as the teacher trainer is offering all three of them advise. Alice 's line 'When you have it you won't care to ask the questions' comes from FM's aphorism's (see Articles and Lectures).</i></p>		
<p>Scene 3. The Spiral Staircase. Largo . Hardiman, Nicholas and Alice discuss the trials of Emily</p>	<p><i>This scene symbolises Emily's transition into a third year student coming up for qualification. Is he up to it? Hardimans point is that one must continue on the learning journey whilst Nicholas acknowledges that</i></p>	

No 5 The Spell Begins*Trio*

Alice . Shall we teach her, is she ready, is it not too soon?

Such a power, can she wield it, will her mind be strong?

Hardiman. On and on, the journey is on, round and round the journey goes round. Believing you know what is right is the fault that all true magicians must learn to undo.

Nicholas. The spell already works upon her, the ingredients already at her hand. And all we can do is guide her senses, till her senses become her guide.

Tutti. Emily, the time has come to learn. Listen, listen the spell is.....

Emily does understand what's going on 'the spell... works upon her.' The line 'Listen, listen, the spell is' echoes the fantasy that finally in your third year of training, someone will tell you what the Alexander Technique really is about...

Scene 4 .

The spiral staircase, another turn.

Allegro . **The company and chorus**

No 6 Finale

Tutti. To change the world first change yourself and let your spirit breathe

To take your time just change your mind and all things can begin.

If you want to lift up your heart

And sing

If you want to lift up your heart and sing

How will you do it?

Emily. First I say no and then I say yes

Hardiman. The no still must linger on

Nicholas. You can't know a song by a singer who's wrong

Chorus. It is your choice, it is your choice choose to say no

And leap, and leap, into the unknown

So Emily qualifies and this is her graduation celebration ceremony and company and chorus ponder on what has been learnt. The secret of change lies within oneself and that it begins with the mind and taking the time to think things out. Not responding immediately to any stimulus that comes your way. The line 'If you want to lift up your heart and sing (my favourite line of all the opera) how will you do it?' comes again from Walter Carrington and refers to his experience of teaching Nuns who described their worship of God as 'lifting up their hearts to sing'. Walters question of 'How will you do it?' refers to the physical conditions. The heart is secured to the diaphragm by the pericardial sac, and so if the heart is genuinely to be lifted up, then the diaphragm must not be pulled down (as it so often is) but free to move upwards easily in a lengthening body!

Emily understands that she must inhibit (say no) before she gives her directions (say yes) and Hardiman reminds her that it is a more subtle and sophisticated process than that.

Only by giving up the old ways and refusing to feel if you're right

Will you find the freedom to cast the first spell of gravity and light

of gravity and light_____

Chorus and company

Gravity, gravity, gravity and light, gravity and light_____

The idea of leaping into the unknown is what happens when you genuinely don't fall into doing what you know-you must therefore risk doing something completely unknown.

The chorus knows that you have to give up cherished old habits and that the spell you cast is only the first spell-maybe they are more spells to cast.....

References

F.M's four books

Alexander 1932 *The Use of the Self*. ch.3 *Evolution of a Technique*. Alexander describes a ten-year period of self-observation using mirrors.

Alexander 1932 *The Use of The Self* ch.4 *The Stutterer*

Alexander 1995 *Articles and lectures v A Respiratory Method*

Alexander 2002 *Aphorisms*. 'I don't care what man you bring up, Socrates or anyone else: you will find gaps and holes in his thinking. Let me co-ordinate him and you will not find gaps and holes in his thinking'.