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Library News

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178 E 109th Street, #5
New York, NY 10029
Phone: 212/571-7011
Email: library@dancenotation.org
Website: www.dancenotation.org
Facebook:
www.facebook.com/dancenotationbureau

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Editor:
Joyce Greenberg

Layout:
Mei-Chen Lu

Advisors:
Jill Cirasella, Associate Librarian for Public Services and Scholarly Communication, Graduate Center, The City University of New York
Nena Couch, Curator
Lawrence and Lee Theatre Research Institute at The Ohio State University
Libby Smigel, Dance Curator
Library of Congress

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OBSERVATIONS ON THE TEACHING OF LABANOTATION

Ann Hutchinson Guest



Ann Hutchinson Guest teaching flexion and extension at Royal Academy of Dance

There have been, in my experience, very good and successful ways of teaching Labanotation, and some definitely not to be admired. I will start with the latter.

In Germany

Albrecht Knust, who did so much to advance Laban's 'infant' notation system, was a meticulous worker. When he notated a ballet, he never went into the rehearsal studio. Instead, each dancer came to his office and movement by movement showed their part. Knust wrote on graph paper, neatly writing down each symbol. He taught for many years at the Folkwangschule in his separate room. He gave no tests or examinations so his students never knew how much they had mastered in the system. One of Knust's students, Alfred Hiltman, went to teach in Amsterdam. At a demonstration there I used a few of his students to illustrate learning a waltz study from the notation. It was a disaster in that the students had never learned to turn the symbols into movement. The same situation had existed at the Jooss-Leeder Dance School at Dartington where in class we only did writing, recording the dance studies we learned. Admittedly there was little material available to read, but dancing off the page was not thought to be important. In the 1970s Sigurd Leeder had written scores for all the classroom studies he taught, yet these were not available to the students, he believed it to be more valuable for them to practice writing.

In Hungary

The notation teacher at the Hungarian State Ballet in Budapest was Emma Lugossy who had studied with Albrecht Knust. (It would have been far better if Maria Szentpál were the teacher, but it was a political choice.) Emma showed me with pride her students' notebooks in which they had written ballet steps. Quite impressive, until I learned that she had written the steps on the board and the students had just copied them. On the board she had painted the staff, a space for the starting position and then a space for the 'and' upbeat before the bar line and the count of 1. But not all pieces start with just an 'and' upbeat, it could be '2, 3, 1. or even 2, 3, 4, 1. I questioned her understanding of timing.

At the Boston Conservatory

When I was teaching Nijinsky's *Faune* ballet I had the students read their next entrance (simple enough notation). I invited the Labanotation teacher there to observe my attempt at integrating the notation into the teaching process. When we got chatting, I asked her how she approached teaching beginners. She explained, "I have them use graph paper and a ruler, and with four squares to the beat, the indicator on the forward sign should take one square." I responded, "Interesting. I use plain paper, draw a vertical line and then scribble in the sequence of events with steps by the center line, leg gestures a bit away and further out the arms and head. I don't worry about timing at first. Later I put in the bar lines and count numbers next to the appropriate symbols." "Why!" she exclaimed, "Like notator training!" "Yes, exactly," I replied, "the next step is to copy the notation neatly." She had been Bureau-trained and their teaching methods still adhered to the early days when there was a strict procedure in teaching, both in what material to cover and in the process.

Those early patterns were established by me in seeking an easy, logical progression. Yes, I am guilty. But we learned that other possibilities, such as turning or a change of front made the step patterns more interesting. I advocated putting the new front sign next to the new step, but this was shouted down by those who thought you had to show the turn taking place. Yes, but that meant learning to shorten the previous support symbol to fit in a quick turn. This is a timing problem and the fact that Labanotation (LN) can be so specific in timing, makes the system harder to learn as most people are not consciously aware of how they use timing. Systems that place turning outside the main notation are simpler to write.

Now that several shorthand devices have been recognized as helping the writing process; more open thinking has been accepted.



Teaching children with cut out symbols

Nadia Chilkovsky's Success

Nadia was a modern dance teacher who was brilliant in learning LN quite rapidly and deciding to incorporate it into the Philadelphia Dance Academy of which she was the director. She put a chart of a notation sequence on the wall. Soon the children were asking what it was. "It is written dance. Would you like to learn it?" With a positive response she embarked on introducing it. She had Jerry Packman as her assistant. Jerry taught the little ones and, with this early introduction, the children advanced into the senior division with a good basic knowledge of notation. As additional exposure, Nadia had a large circle painted on the floor in the entrance lobby. Before class the children could experiment with running around circling clockwise or anticlockwise with forward steps, backward steps or with sideward steps facing in or sideward facing out. On the dressing room doors she had painted large pins – black for the boys, white for the girls. In the studio the walls were a shade of soft green suitable for writing on with white chalk. All around was a narrow ledge for holding chalk and eraser. At any moment the teacher could grab a piece of chalk and explain a movement point on the board. All the teachers were fluent in Labanotation. In one instance, Michael Lopuzansky wrote on the floor, "Here is your starting position; you then go into the air from two feet and then land on the count of 1 (bar line inserted) on your right foot." A little girl picked up the chalk saying, "You forgot the pin for 5th position!" and drew it next to the starting position. For the older students Nadia would write a phrase of movement on the board, telling the students, "Take a look before class starts as it is a theme we will be dancing today." As a result of this form of dance education, a 13 year-old student composed and wrote her own dance, which she was then able to perform on stage with the Philadelphia Orchestra with whom Nadia had good connections.

Nadia published several books: *My First Dance Book*, and a series *Three Rs for Dancing*. These books had much good material, although she tended to use unusual versions for basic steps like gallops and skips, rather than the more standard, familiar forms. She felt the challenge of something different would be valuable. Another book of notated dance studies provided valuable reading material on her free style of modern dance.

The Hartford Ballet School

Enid Lynn and her associate Diane Fleming first learned Labanotation with Sigurd Leeder. They met with me in London, determined on getting their Hartford Ballet School completely literate. Each of their teachers would know the notation. Jill Beck created a book for beginner ballet presenting the notation of the positions and steps that the children would be learning. An experiment was then undertaken in which one group of eight-year olds would learn ballet in the usual way and the other group would have notation integrated into the class sessions. At the end of the year the results were compared. Had the second group suffered from having had some class time spent on learning notation? Was their command of ballet as good as the first group? It was found that both groups had progressed equally; the second group had the added advantage of being able to read their ballet steps.

This result was most encouraging, and the program continued until teachers left and Enid and Diane were not able to get their replacements to learn notation. Elsewhere there were pockets of such integrated use of notation, but there was no publicity, no letting the dance world know about these successes.

The High School of Performing Arts

In 1948 the Metropolitan High School added a dance section to its Performing Arts Division which already had music and drama. I was invited to teach ballet and Labanotation. This provided me with the opportunity to focus on ballet in the notation classes. Through charts on the wall I would explore various *allegro* steps, the different forms of *pas de bourrée*, the *arabesques*, the eight alignments of the body, and so on. I created check lists for them – which of these steps and positions did they know? Had they met it? Did they know it well? Had they mastered it? I created a book in which a simple step, such as an *assemblé* was shown in its basic form – springing up from one foot and landing on two. The next example showed the fifth position. Then the leg gesture to the side was added. Then a brush was added. The progression went on to beating the feet in the air, to travelling – *assemblé porté*, and so on. This progression from basic to quite fancy was provided for all the *allegro* steps. Whatever was explored in the notation class was then used in combinations in the ballet class. I was able to cut stencils for each of these pages and run them off on the school mimeograph machine, thus gradually a book was produced.

An Improvised Class at New York Theatre Ballet School

Many years ago when I visited Diana Byer at her New York Theatre Ballet School, she asked me to teach a Language of Dance class. I had no notation symbols with me and so I improvised. I cut newspaper into strips, producing several long lengths and then cutting up many small lengths. The class and I then imagined we were visiting Yellowstone Park where

we experienced the Old Faithful Geyser that spews forth a long out-pouring of steam, and also the Frying Pan, where bubbles constantly come to the surface. For the geyser, we started by kneeling, small, folded up. Then, as the geyser erupted, we rose up and carried the steam way over to the other side of the room, thereby experiencing extension of movement in time. For the Frying Pan, we sat on the floor and jiggled; then we expressed the blips with quick short movements in many parts of the body. This led to a rhythmic pattern being "spelled out," using a very long geyser followed by four bubble blips. Next came a medium-sized geyser and then two bubbles followed by stillness; two more and stillness. The explorations were done without music--just the sound of our voices following the duration of the movements: Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee, blip blip blip blip.



Ann Hutchinson Guest at New York Theatre Ballet

In Conclusion

There have been many successful examples of integrating the teaching of Labanotation into the dance class. For one reason or another each instance came to an end, the chief reason being that teachers relocated. It is important that people in the dance world know about these successes and that notation-literate teachers take the opportunity to implement these ideas in their own school or teaching. The advent of Language of Dance with its use of Motif Notation provides an easy introduction to integration of movement with written notation by the gradual introduction of additional detail leading ultimately to the full incorporation of Labanotation in dance education.