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# Library News

From the Dance Notation Bureau

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111 John Street, Suite 704  
New York, NY 10038  
Phone: 212/571-7011  
Fax: 212/571-7012  
Email: library@dancenotation.org  
Website: www.dancenotation.org

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### Editors:

Lucy Venable  
Mei-Chen Lu

**Director of Library Services:**  
Mei-Chen Lu

### Advisors:

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## Notating *Suite of Three: 3 Solos by Jean Erdman*

by Nancy Allison

I never set out to notate *Suite of Three*. I did, however, ask Senta Driver in 2005, in the midst of the DNB's financial crisis whether this would be a helpful time to initiate a notation project. Her answer was overwhelmingly affirmative and the Jean Erdman Notation Project was born. I chose three pieces from Erdman's repertory that I thought were representative of her work; the trio *Daughters of the Lonesome Isle* (1945) with its prepared piano score by John Cage and two solos, *Creature on a Journey* (1943) – a comic vignette with a rowdy percussion score by Lou Harrison – and *Hamadryad* (1948) – a sensuous work to Debussy's flute solo *Syrinx*. In February 2006 I traveled to Hawaii to celebrate Erdman's 85<sup>th</sup> birthday and secured the necessary legal consent for the project.

Next I needed to raise funds and find a host company. The former, of course, was the more difficult, but with persistence and a little creativity I was able to secure the \$25,000 necessary to notate all three pieces. Finding the host company was much easier, as many university dance directors were eager for their students to learn these modern classics. I chose Hofstra University on Long Island primarily for its proximity to New York where I live, as did the two young notators assigned to the project by Executive Director Lynne Weber. Hofstra turned out to be a marvelous choice, not only for its location, but also for the unequivocal support of Lance Westergard, who was Director of the Dance Program at that time.

For three months in autumn 2006 I traveled to Hofstra twice a week, often accompanied by Mira Kim, the notator assigned to both solos. Her strong commitment to capturing the essential form and spirit of the work consistently revealed itself through her many thoughtful questions. Neither of these solos is performed to counts, so Mira had to translate Erdman's dynamic rhythms into musical rhythms corresponding exactly to the metered musical scores. And as is often the case with American modern solos, these dances represent a unique movement vocabulary and style. Not being familiar with Labanotation, except for an introductory course as an undergraduate, I wondered how Mira could capture all this ephemeral, idiosyncratic information in scores from which dancers unfamiliar with Erdman's works could learn them.

I would have to wait a long time to find out. When the students were performing in late November Mira was still patiently plowing through pages of notes and hours of video she had collected throughout the rehearsal process. Meanwhile I set about seeking opportunities for *checking productions*, the first productions where dances are taught exclusively from score.

When I contacted Madeleine Scott, Director of the School of Dance at Ohio University in Athens, she jumped at the chance to provide her students the opportunity to learn *Creature* and *Hamadryad*. I suggested that I could also teach *Passage* (1946) an elegant, meditative dance with a haunting score for voice and piano by Otto Janowitz that Erdman had often performed with the other two as *Suite of Three* and she jumped again. Scott wisely planned to set the works in the spring of 2008 for an informal concert that May and return to them the following January for performance in the major departmental concert in March 2009.

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In January 2007, I stepped into Senta's job as Director of Programs at the DNB, allowing her to end her service to the organization. Sheila Marion, then Director of the DNB Extension at The Ohio State University recommended Rachael Riggs Leyva, a graduate student specializing in Labanotation as a potential stager for the production. In August she was able to work with Mira and me briefly. I'll never forget how nervous and excited Mira and I were as we walked to the studio for the first session.

Rachael seemed just as nervous as she began slowly recreating sections of each of the two dances. I watched silently and when she was ready I began as I had done with so many young dancers, to share my knowledge of Erdman's style. This process, however, was different because each time I began to work with Rachael on a particular aspect of the choreography I realized that there was another link in the chain of the process of transferring choreography from one generation to another — a link that was best symbolized by the question "Is that what it says in the score?"

In mid-February 2008 Mira and I traveled to OSU to repeat this process in more depth. By this time Rachael had learned both dances completely from the scores. I spent two days coaching her, often repeating the *linking* question. Each time I asked it, Rachael and Mira would go back to the score and check their interpretations of the notation thus giving me an opportunity to reflect on how I had taught the work at Hofstra and Mira the opportunity to reflect on how she had notated it. Discussions ensued. It was an intense experience for all of us.

As it turned out, due to space and time restrictions, we were not able to use the stagings in Athens as checking productions, but both Mira and I had learned a great deal through the process. In appreciation for her efforts, I gave Rachael permission to stage the dances on her OSU colleagues for her MFA project, which she snapped up.

Meanwhile I was busy at the DNB arranging for the staging of other dances from score and through this I met Greg Halloran. I was delighted when, soon after the completion of a staging project, Greg asked if there was something else we could do together. Greg had long been interested in establishing a center for Labanotation at the University of Idaho (UI) where he is Director of Dance, so my proposal to host checking productions of *Hamadryad* and *Creature on a Journey* while at the same time notating *Passage* was enthusiastically received. Working with the grant writing team at UI we secured funds through the NEA American Masters Dance Program for autumn 2010. By this time I was well acquainted with the DNB family and was delighted when stager Robin Hoffman and notator Mary Corey accepted invitations to join us.

During the summer of 2010, after Robin had learned the two dances already notated from the scores, she and I spent a long preparatory weekend together checking the scores again, adding and correcting anything necessary before Robin taught the dances at UI. A ballet dancer by training, Robin had performed many modern works as a member of the Joffrey Ballet. As I coached Robin on subtle aspects of body organization, initiation, sequencing, dynamics and space use she seemed to focus inward to a mental image imprinted in her mind. It was as if she were communing with an invisible partner. "Oh, I thought it was like this, but it's really like that" she would whisper as she altered her mental understanding of some aspect of the movement and suddenly the more nuanced version would flow through her body and into the studio. Invariably after a few of these experiences she would stop and say, "Wait, I have to write this down." What she was writing was a mystery to me, but I certainly respected her process and waited quietly. Later I learned that Robin shared these notes, scribbled in Labanotation and English, with Mira who made changes to her scores based on them.

When I arrived at UI later in the fall, after Robin had taught *Hamadryad* and *Creature* to six students I was delighted to see the degree to which she was able to pass her knowledge on to the students. While it took a good deal of my coaching to help them find the subtle core initiations, lightning quick changes of dynamics and the counterpoint conversational style of relating to the music, which are all hallmarks of Erdman's work, they were well prepared for the challenges by the strong foundation that Robin had provided.

A few days later, Mary arrived to begin the notating process as I began teaching *Passage* to the remaining two dancers. They too had been through Robin's crash course in Erdman style, so the process went quickly. As Greg hoped, the students were fascinated to watch Mary translating dynamic three-dimensional movement into symbols on paper. And as with Mira, I found Mary's questions thought provokingly helpful. When I left I felt the dancers were well prepared for the upcoming performances. My feeling was confirmed just a few weeks later by Greg's enthusiastic e-mail quoting audience members.

Still it would take until the end of June 2011 for Mary to complete the painstaking work of turning her original notes into a completed score and to the end of December for Robin to submit an addendum with further clarifications and options resulting from our work at UI. It wasn't easy, inexpensive, or quick, but Labanotation proved to be a way that dancers and audiences can experience Erdman's beautiful repertory, hopefully for many years to come.

## Diary of a Dance: Charles Weidman's *Opus 51*

by Elizabeth McPherson

In the fall of 2011, Montclair State University presented a new staging of the “Opening Dance” from Charles Weidman’s *Opus 51* (1938). Margaret O’Sullivan, who was a member of Weidman’s company in the 1970s and danced this piece at that time, was the stager, using her memories and a video from 1972. We also had a small segment of Labanotation from 1950 by Els Grelinger and Barbara Hoenig, but it is quite minimal. I assisted O’Sullivan as the rehearsal director.

We chose to stage the dance this year because I have been researching the Bennington School of the Dance held at Bennington College in the summers of 1934 -1942, and *Opus 51* premiered there on August 6, 1938. Weidman called it *Opus 51* simply because it was his 51<sup>st</sup> dance. With music by Vivian Fine, it was originally 22 minutes and involved 16 dancers -- 9 company members (including Weidman) and 7 from the student workshop group at the Bennington School of the Dance. There were 6 sections: Opening Dance, March, Comedia, Solo, Duet, and Spectacle.

Eleanor Lauer, Humphrey-Weidman company member, recalled that Weidman had such an abundance of choreographic ideas for the dance that it needed heavy editing. The directors of the school, Mary Josephine Shelly and Martha Hill, played a part:

And I know Mary Jo [Shelly] and Martha Hill used to go down to his rehearsals at night, each night. Well that was the way that dance was put together. It was just one thing and then another and another. Before we were anywhere near the performance date, he had miles and miles of it, so they’d [Shelly and Hill] go down every night and try to carve some of it out to get it down to any reasonable length.<sup>1</sup>

The Bennington School of the Dance provided opportunities for the choreographers to have their work produced with no worries as to housing and food for themselves or their company members over the 6 week summer session. However, the work was fast and furious with a set deadline only a few weeks away. Weidman went on to modify and work on *Opus 51* through different periods of his life. One wonders if this was from a sense of never having had quite enough time in the original rehearsal period.

The “Opening Dance” music has a haunting quality that lingers in one’s mind. Vivian Fine composed at Bennington working alongside Weidman. She describes that Humphrey-Weidman dancer Harriette Anne Gray would show her the movements with counts:

I composed the work *Opus 51* to counts; that’s the way most of the things were done at that point. That is, Charles would compose, choreograph a section, and then poor Harriette Anne Gray was delegated to teaching me the counts because they had to give me a whole schedule of the counts, so to speak, so that I could go ahead and match the music to the dance. It was really a tight fit; no ifs, and buts. If there were sixteen counts, there had to be sixteen counts worth of music--.<sup>2</sup>

The music has some unusual metric shifts because Vivian Fine was composing straight to dance counts:

Harriette Anne Gray would come and do all the movements for me, with crazy counts like 19, and 20—two, three, four, five, 26, 27 – 29. They were counting the movements. I had to find the meter. Charles was known for his wild counting.<sup>3</sup>



“Opening Dance” from *Opus 51*. Photographer unknown, 1972. Margaret O’Sullivan is the second dancer from right, facing front. Courtesy of the Charles Weidman Foundation

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Some sections of *Opus 51* were comic. Weidman was particularly adept at humorous pantomime. However, the “Opening Dance” is mostly pure movement with the only inkling of a narrative being a general sense of community. After the premiere at Bennington, John Martin of *The New York Times* called *Opus 51* a high point of the festival concert series, specifically a “delirious piece of nonsense.”<sup>4</sup>

The dance went through modifications over the years. In 1950, when Els Grelinger and Barbara Hoenig began notating the “Opening Dance,” the cast was 8 women and 4 men. By the 1970s, Weidman had narrowed the cast of the “Opening Dance” to 5 women. For the Montclair State staging, we decided to have two casts of seven women. Although O’Sullivan had performed the dance in a cast of 5, she knew that it had originally had more dancers, and we wished to expand the number of students who would have this opportunity.

Notation was begun on the dance in 1950, but because it was just barely started and had a different number of dancers than we were using, our 2011 version needed documentation. The Dance Notation Bureau was very supportive of the project. They sent Mira Kim to our rehearsals to notate, although funding is not yet in place for her to complete the project. The Montclair State students enjoyed talking to Kim about how Labanotation works generally as well as about her process of notating this dance – jotting down notation symbols in abbreviated format at rehearsals so that later notation along with word notes and counts can be transferred neatly to complete the score. [See “What It Takes to Produce a Score,” published in *DNB Library News* Volume 3, No. 1, September 2008 for more detailed information on the notating process.] A Labanotation stager myself, I brought the limited bits from the 1950s score to the first rehearsals. There is clearly one repeated phrase that is retained in the 1970s version with which O’Sullivan was working. There may have been much more, but this 1950s notation is a mere sketch, never completed.

O’Sullivan had a video of herself and others performing the “Opening Dance” in 1972, and she used this along with her own memories to create the 2011 staging. Our receptive and diligent dancers eagerly listened and followed O’Sullivan as she taught the dance. Through the rehearsal and performance process, the dancers slowly began to move as a group, and find the lyricism inherent in the choreography.

The costumes were made in our Theatre-Dance costume shop after Pauline Lawrence’s original design which was then re-envisioned by Weidman—emerald green sleeveless leotards and ankle length emerald green pleated skirts. They are wonderfully elegant. With the dancers’ hair swept up in French twists, they look like goddesses.

The musical recording we had was very poor quality, but a pianist from the Montclair State University Cali School of Music, Inhye Cho, played for the later rehearsals and all performances except one school show. Cho put much effort into duplicating the tempos and dynamics of the recording, which made our dancers’ transition from recording to live music seamless.

However, with the recording or with Cho playing, musicality and timing were difficult for the dancers because there is one phrase that continually begins on the upbeat/4<sup>th</sup> count of a measure. Our dancers kept migrating to start on the downbeat/1<sup>st</sup> count. Some of the dancers heard the musical cues, but others did not, and because they were trying to stay together as a group, they would slowly shift back to starting on the 1<sup>st</sup> count. I wondered if they were reading the Labanotation score, if this problem would have been solved more easily. I have found that when I see the dance on a page in measures, I can visualize more easily how it relates to the music. Holding balances as a group was also hard. The dance is somewhat like a corps de ballet in this regard. As a soloist, one could choose to hold a balance longer or come down sooner, but in a group this must be done together.

A further challenge was the larger one of bringing a 73 year old dance to life. The dancers have to move beyond the steps to find the soul of the dance. Because the steps and musicality were difficult for our students, getting to the place of truly living the performance was just beginning to happen by the final two performances. We are fortunate that we will have seven more performances in the spring of 2012 – six at Montclair State and one at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y in Manhattan. Additional aspects to work on in the spring include finding the climax points in the dance so that the energy is not level, and helping the students find breath and weight which are essential to Weidman’s style. I want to see the dance move from being a glimmer of what it might once have been to being a glorious expression of the human spirit, which it has the potential to be. And, I hope funding is secured to document the dance through Labanotation so that people may enjoy the dance for decades to come.

<sup>1</sup> Reminiscences of Eleanor Lauer (September 23, 1979) on page 37 in the Columbia University Oral History Research Office Collection (hereafter CUOHROC).

<sup>2</sup> Reminiscences of Vivian Fine (December 19, 1978) on page 11 in the CUOHROC.

<sup>3</sup> Reminiscences of Vivian Fine (December 19, 1978) on page 12 in the CUOHROC.

<sup>4</sup> John Martin. “The Dance: Cycle’s end; Bennington Festival Concludes Five-Year Schedule--New Works Presented Program’s High Points Work of Fellows Two New Suites,” *The New York Times* 14 August 1938: section Drama, Screen, Music, Dance, Art, Radio 134.