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Library News

From the Dance Notation Bureau

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Dance Notation Bureau Library

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Special Issue: 1943 Newsletter

From the editor:

In preparation for the upcoming DNB 75th anniversary in 2015, we decided to devote this issue to our very first publication in 1943. It included the correspondence between Rudolf Laban and the DNB and an account of members' activities, as well as encouragement from Hanya Holm and John Martin, both of whom served as advisors to the DNB.

As Labanotation (then called the Laban system) was still in its infancy, it was not easy to find answers when founding members encountered theory issues, and World War II made communication with Laban very difficult. In the original letter from Laban, he did not use notation illustrations. The notation symbols were believed to be enemy spy messages in cipher form during WWII, and were challenged by mail censors. Laban wrote, "Dear Ms. Hutchinson, Your questions concerning some details of dance-notation would, of course, much more easily be answered if we were able to send you some examples and drawings..." which indicated no notation was allowed in the letter. Therefore, Sandra Aberkalns, the Labanotation editor, created notation examples to illustrate the early 1940s notation and theory, as well as current usages that have been adopted by the International Council of Kinetography Laban (ICKL). Please note that some theories in the 1943 newsletter do not comply with the current standard, which we explain in the endnote. The system has become more sophisticated and highly developed. It is fun, especially for me, to see how much Labanotation has progressed over seventy-four years.

The letter from Laban was actually received in December 1941 and it took more than a year for the DNB to publish his answer, because all the members were working as volunteers at the Bureau. They all had very active dance performance careers besides the time they devoted to the growth of the DNB.

Ann Hutchinson was 21 when the Bureau was founded; she turns 97 next year. We are very fortunate to have her with us and available when we have questions.

We hope you enjoy this issue and please send us your anecdotes or pictures of the Bureau in celebration of our 75th anniversary.

Sincerely yours,



Mei-Chen Lu

DANCE NOTATION BUREAU

A Non-Profit Organization

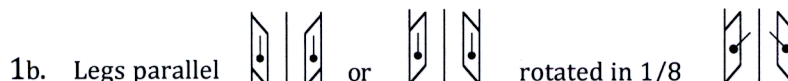
Henrietta Greenhood Ann Hutchinson Janey Price Helen Priest
Hanya Holm, John Martin: Advisors

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 New York City
 January 1943

The Dance Notation Bureau, since its formation in 1940, has given the major part of its time to the problem of unifying and standardizing the Laban system. Since notation has become more widely used, new symbols and varying interpretations have appeared. The Bureau has worked over all these and submitted the result of their findings to Mr. Laban for his criticism and approval. Due to the war, the use of notation symbols in trans-oceanic correspondence has been forbidden, and letters have been delayed. Finally, however, we have some concrete information for you. Space does not permit us to reproduce Mr. Laban's letter in full, but we quote significant passages on practical and theoretical points. (Notation examples below were produced by Sandra Aberkalns for this newsletter.)

EXCERPTS FROM LABAN'S LETTER

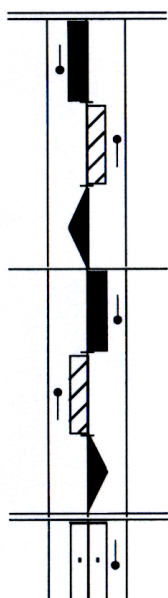
1. In writing unusual positions of the feet, first write a rotation sign for the leg (1a), or legs (such positions usually necessitate leg rotations); then, within the rotation sign write the direction that the toes point. We have used the 'pin'ⁱⁱⁱ for this indicator of direction (1b).

**Back then****And now**

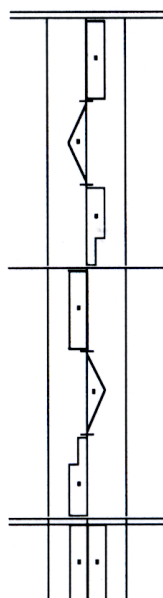
In a rotation of the leg wherein a pivot occurs, the weight is on the heel, unless the heel sign (the downturned hook) appears on the rotation symbol denoting that the heel is free, i.e., weight is on the toe.ⁱⁱⁱ

2. We think that it is a mistake to attempt to write complicated positions in a too simplified way; that, we feel, would spoil the simplicity of the simple positions. Before arriving in a complicated or grotesque position one has to perform a number of movements and tensions without which such a position would never be achieved. They cannot be completely omitted in writing.
3. In writing ballet dances in which the outturned position of 180° prevail, we give to the whole dance a signature indicating that all positions are 180° outturned, so that a leg rotation must only be added when the position is other than 180°. The same is the case with ballroom dancing, where a signature indicates that all positions are parallel. This saves a great deal of unnecessary writing.

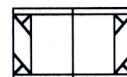
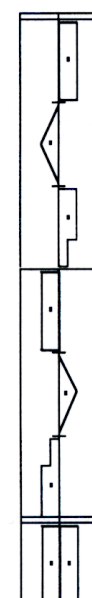
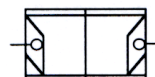
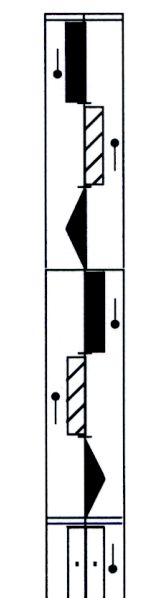
3.



Ballet



Ballroom

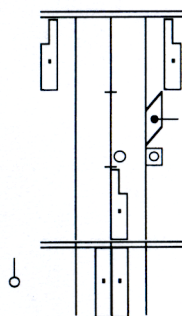


Back then

And now

4. All directional signs are related from 'stance' to space. (Stance is the original standing position and any following position into which one has last moved.) The direction of the stance is always forward. If you are facing downstage and step towards the audience and then turn your rib cage a quarter turn to the right, then raise your arms forward, your arms will move toward downstage (the audience), not in the direction of your rib cage (4a). The leg also goes by the stance, notwithstanding whether there is a move of the hip or not. The same is the case in what are called 'blind' turns.^{iv}

4a.



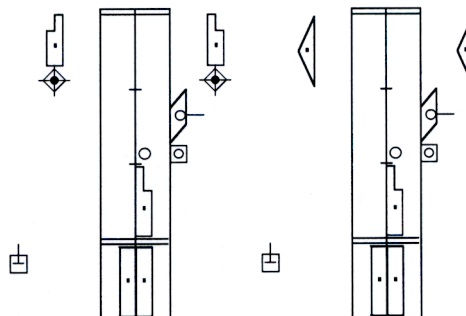
Back then

4b.



Stance Key now

4c.



Today, we have two writing options

5. If in writing down a movement you have any doubts whether your description is complete enough, we always advise to add further details. Simplicity at the cost of comprehensibility is always a mistake.
6. There has been a confusion in the use of the triangle for both indirect way and circumduction.^v This sign should be used only for indirect way. Circumduction is a circle or path in space and must be written with tied direction signs. For example: If the hand describes a circle and the arm is not stationary, then the direction symbols for the circumduction are given for the hand and the arm is shown to be passive by a dotted line in the arm column.
7. Anything is admissible which is written in a comprehensible way with the use of the original symbols. A good analysis of the movement (i.e., its rhythm, bodily function, space, etc.) will do half the work and will make the want for 'grammologues' [*sic*] superfluous. Principally one should keep in mind that a notation of movements must bear the character of mobility. The introduction of many grammologues [*sic*] would, through its stabilizing tendency, kill the fundamental idea of a movement notation. The object of a movement notation is not to find symbols which are quicker to be written than words, but that there is a need for symbols which can describe conditions of our body-mind which have no equivalent in our language of words.

NEWS OF THE BUREAU MEMBERS AND FRIENDS

Henrietta Greenhood^{vi}

After six seasons with the Hanya Holm Concert Company, and two years as instructor of notation at the school, Henrietta Greenhood is on leave of absence. However, she returned to the Hanya Holm School for the Christmas course to teach notation for ten intensive days. She is continuing as instructor of Hanya Holm technique at the New Dance Group, and with Ann Hutchinson is keeping things buzzing here at the Bureau.

Janey Price

With her husband, Roger Goeb, director of the Oklahoma University Radio Station, Janey Price is affiliated with the University dance classes and with Orchesis, the dance club. She is preparing a program for her own dance group of five girls for three performances in February. Throughout her work she has had great success in using notation in composing, by first writing out the themes, and working on the developments and variations, etc., in notation. She is also busy with choreography for part of a program to be done with the Y.W.C.A. classes in Oklahoma City, and is writing down the score of a long group dance of Helen Gregory's. She is hoping to schedule some notation broadcasts at the University radio station, and to arouse sufficient interest to start a notation class.

Helen Priest

Now Mrs. Hugh Rogers, since July 11, Helen Priest is residing in Hull, just outside Ottawa, Canada. Last winter she worked with Ann Hutchinson and Anne Wilson on the notating of a long ballet^{vii}, and since then, besides her regular work with the Bureau, has continued her experiments on the filming of dance movements and compositions, using the film as a supplementary aid to notation as well as experimenting to find the right technique for dance movies. Those who have seen Warner Brothers' "Capriccio Espagnol" and "Gaité Parisienne" will realize, as Helen did, that the problem has not begun to be solved. Before she left New York, she was assistant secretary for Dance Players.

Ann Hutchinson

Having written several Jooss ballets singlehanded, Ann Hutchinson found that with Helen Priest and Anne Wilson as co-workers, the notating of an American ballet last winter was comparatively simple and quick. The possibilities for notation at Jacob's Pillow this past summer were greatly hampered by a heavy schedule of classes and rehearsals. Teaching notation to those interested was impossible; however, notes were made on Spanish, Hindu, and ballet classes. An interesting contact at the Pillow was the meeting of and long conversation with Mme. Bartenieff^{viii}, who is well known for her notating of pre-classic dances and her work with the late Mrs. Betz.

Felicia Saxe

Since her arrival in New York from Boston, where she was on the Boston Dance Council, Felicia Saxe, who is a Master Pupil of Rudolf von Laban, has been taking part in the discussion meetings of the Bureau, joining them in working out examples of points brought up in Laban's letters, and giving assistance in translating the notes on Knut's [*sic*] Group Notation. At the moment, besides her concert recitals, she is experimenting in teaching notation along with dance to children.

Nancy Brook

A summer course from Helen Priest at Bennington College in 1940 sent Nancy Brook into the realm of dance notation research. She has reconstructed dances from the notation of Arbeau, Feuillet, Zorn, and Laban, and is now trying to decipher the pre-Feuillet system used in the Philidor manuscripts. One day she hopes to get all of this material into a book. Recently she gave a number of lecture recitals in which by means of slides, speech, and dance performance she illustrated many of the most noteworthy systems of different periods. A series of articles on notation methods appeared in the Dance Observer early this year.

ENCOURAGEMENT FROM OUR ADVISORS

Hanya Holm

Having introduced the Laban dance notation system into the curriculum of my school, I am convinced of its value. As a choreographer and dancer, having compositions recorded via notation has proved extremely valuable to me. The reading and writing of notation is of great benefit to the dance student, for it forces her to analyze movement and thereby trains her to be absolutely clear in its conception. Having gone through the sometimes wearying process of learning the mechanics of notation, great satisfaction comes with the proof that a notated dance can be reproduced with accuracy by one unfamiliar with the composition.

John Martin

In these difficult days, the subject of notation offers by far the most fruitful field for progress in the dance world. Now that creative activity is seriously curtailed both by the absence of men in the armed forces and by the absence of money in the war economy, dancers have an unparalleled opportunity to catch up on their homework, so to speak. A wealth of material, much of it pretty close to the category of masterpieces, exists solely in that nebulous world of someone's memory, and in justice to the future demands to be written down. With performances few and far between, no better way could be devised for keeping a repertory alive than to turn a corps of trained notators loose with it. That there are not nearly enough trained notators available to do the job is only another argument for the urgency of an intensive development in the field while conditions are suited to it. Indeed, now would seem to be an ideal time to push the campaign for "a scribe in every studio."

NOTICE

We are proud to announce that Associate Membership of the Dance Notation Bureau is now available.

THE DANCE NOTATION RECORD, a bulletin, will be the chief contact between the Bureau and the members, and will offer:

1. Exchange of news with our colleagues in America and at the Archives Laban, (the European counterpart of the Bureau).
2. News direct from Mr. Laban.
3. Ellucidation [*sic*] of complicated symbols and examples of their uses.
4. Notices of any new symbols, or new uses of other symbols.
5. Short articles from colleagues on interesting angles and experiences gained in teaching, notation, and research.

THE DANCE NOTATION RECORD will be issued quarterly, the first regular issue will be out in [*sic*] March first. This is an introductory bulletin.

The subscription of one dollar a year entitles you to THE DANCE NOTATION RECORD and Associate Membership.

ⁱ The DNB's first official address was at the Hanya Holm Studio. In 1940, the four founding members along with observers, John Martin and Hanya Holm, met at the Hanya Holm Studio to exchange ideas and "iron out" the differences in notation. Martin announced the formation of the DNB in *The New York Times* and Hanya Holm kindly loaned her studio address to establish the Bureau's first office.

ⁱⁱ Sometime between 1943 and 1954 (when Ann Hutchinson published "Labanotation: New Directions) a pivotal theory shift occurred. Black pins would eventually be used to indicate degree of rotation i.e. motion (from previous position) and white pins were introduced to show where the toes pointed (resulting position). Today, while black pins are still used the prevalent usage leans towards the use of white pins, as they are easier to read.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ann Hutchinson (hereafter Ann) pointed out the statement in this particular paragraph is wrong. If the turn sign is in the support column and has a heel hook attached to it, the whole body will turn swiveling on the heel. If the heel hook is on a rotation sign in the leg gesture column, the contact with the floor is on the heel, the leg will turn out or in swiveling on the heel.

^{iv} Blind turns are a separate topic and does not belong in this paragraph.

^v Ann stated, "one of the first differences we encountered in early 1940 was the question of deviation, indirect way, circumduction. Do you go toward the stated point or go around it, i.e. a bit beyond it. Laban had established that any deviation was always toward one of the eight schragers (three-dimensional diagonals.) This was used by Bartenieff in (I think) 1935 when she and Knust were translating Feuillet notation into the Laban system. This is far too limiting a use and we discarded it, clarifying that a deviation could be in many different directions." Ann further explained 'indirect way' and 'circumduction' under "Deviations" in *The Labanotator*, No. 65 October 1991, page 4-6.

(<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8Q3wiYtY7OCOTY0YjQ2YmQtMmYyZS00YWFiLTgyZjUtY2ZiNjVjODNHOWQ1/edit?usp=sharing>)

^{vi} Henrietta Greenhood was married to Bruce Gentry and changed her name to Eve Gentry.

^{vii} The long ballet Helen, Anne Wilson and Ann Hutchinson notated was *Billy the Kid* by Eugene Loring.

^{viii} Mme. Irmgard Bartenieff soon joined the Dance Notation Bureau in 1943 as a result of conversation with Ann Hutchinson at the Pillow.