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Labanotation: A New Notation for Percussionists & Composers

by Kyle Maxwell-Doherty

In 2006, my studies in percussion led me to Ghana in West Africa, where I spent the summer studying traditional Ghanaian music and dance at the Dagara Music Center¹. In the village of Media, outside the capital city of Accra, my days were filled with playing traditional songs on indigenous instruments with the musicians of the Saakumu Dance Troupe. Each morning began under the banana tree learning and practicing the Djembe, Kidi, Brekete, Gun Gon (Talking drum), and Kpanlogo drums. Master Drummer Eddie Greene began each session by leading exercises focusing on technique and sound quality for each drum. Surrounded by fellow university students from around the United States, we practiced every morning for three hours. Following our technique session, we would review the materials learned the previous day and add on. Because traditional Ghanaian music is taught by word of mouth, much of the learning was through demonstration and imitation. The afternoons were typically spent engaging in traditional culture or crafts such as Kente weaving and Batik on fabric. Each day concluded with a second session on traditional drumming. The evening session focused on performing the music we had experienced during the morning session. I knew that when I returned home, I needed a way to keep this music in my muscles and in my mind. The only way I knew to record this traditionally oral literature would be to transcribe the music into western music notation every evening with a pen, paper, flashlight, and my trusty mosquito net.

It was a few months after returning home that I realized I had only experienced half of the music. I had completely forgotten about the dance! Ghanaian drumming and dance are so interconnected that each aspect of the performance communicates with, and informs, the other. Both the Lead Drummer and the Lead Dancer can perform figures, passages, or choreography that propel the ensemble through the performance. In *Kpanlogo*, the Lead Drummer cues both the drumming ensemble as well as the dance ensemble to move from section to section with a musical cadence. This cadence exists singularly to direct the entire ensemble. In *Bamaya*, the Lead Dancer directs both the drumming ensemble and the dance ensemble through specific choreography. Similar to the lead drumming in *Kpanlogo*, this choreography is only presented when the Lead Dancer directs the ensemble to each additional section of the dance. While this is not a new concept for many of this publication's readers, it was new for an individual who had no previous experience with dance. I came to realize that Ghanaian drumming and dance has a synergetic relationship: one that I would explore when I returned to Ghana the following summer in 2007.

Flashing forward to 2010, I am now a doctoral student at The University of Arizona studying Percussion Performance with a minor emphasis in Music Theory. Required in the core curriculum is a semester of Ethnomusicology and an accompanying research project. For this, I decided to create a guide or teacher's resource for introducing Ghanaian traditional music to newcomers. Creating the musical transcription was not difficult, as most of the work was completed in Ghana years earlier. However, creating the movement portion to the guide was

proving difficult. As a graduate student, never exposed to classical or staged dance, I had no knowledge of how to document the choreography I experienced. I turned to my digital video files, numerous pages of handwritten instructions, and the occasional stick figure representations in the hopes of typing instructions in text form. This of course proved highly ineffective, and I began to search through my texts on world music. To my surprise I found a single sentence underlined with a short note scribbled in the margin reading “Look Into Laban”.

I began looking for Labanotation resources in my academic music library, which yielded no results. Not knowing exactly where to look, I found one resource online and began self-teachingⁱⁱ. Unfortunately, at that time I was not able to get my hands on any hard copy text. While the results were certainly not pretty or accurate, they represent the beginning of a long string of events that has inevitably shaped my future as a percussionist, musician, researcher, and lover of dance...and notation. (Illustration 1)

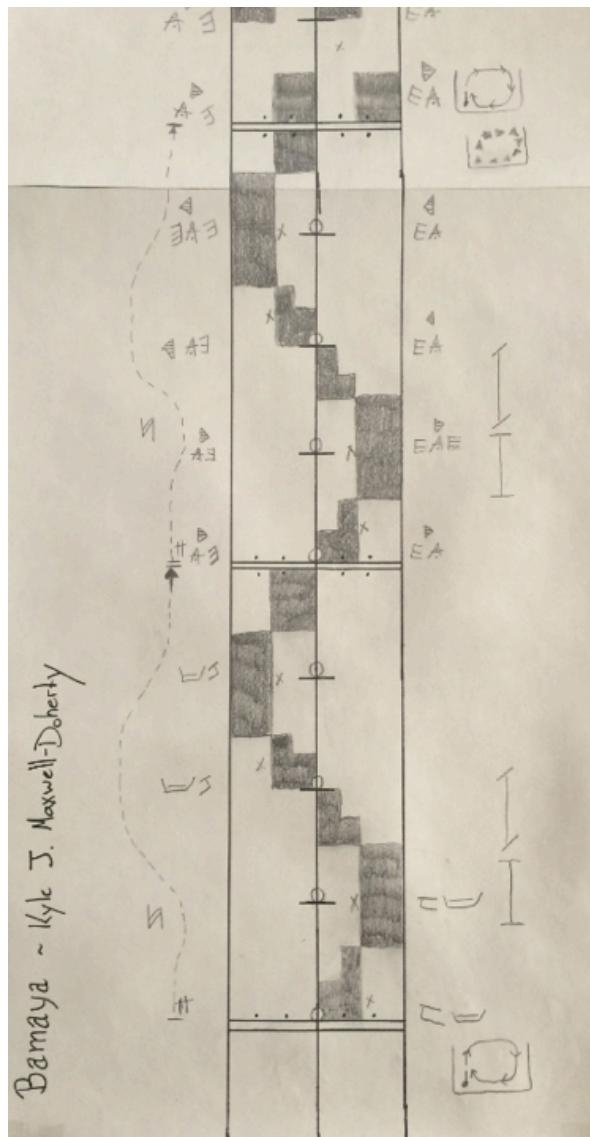


Illustration 1. *Labanotation score of Bamaya. First two measures of choreography for the dance ensemble. © Kyle Maxwell-Doherty, 2010.* As you can see, my knowledge of dance notation was not sophisticated. I was attempting to document the opening passage of *Bamaya* where the dance ensemble moves into a circle on stage while stepping to the right and left on beats 2 and 4 respectively.

My passion for all things percussion, and in particular, making music for dance has led me to focus on the use of Labanotation as music notation. As a dance musician, since 2009, I have sat for countless hours on drum thrones while watching a choreographer teach phrases and exercises in modern dance technique classes. In a dance class, I often find myself creating music for what I see; I’m following the living, visual score the dancers are performing right before my eyes. I watch for the high point in the phrase, the low point, the breath, the tension and the release, the gravity, ultimately attempting to create an aurally pleasing score to meet the needs of the dancers and emphasize the intentions of the choreographer.

While there are many accepted music notations for the percussionist, the graphic or pictographic notations are visually animating on paper. It is as if you can envision the percussionist’s performance from merely looking at the printed music score.

These observations have led me to believe that there exists a unique bridge between the body of gestural-based percussion literature and Labanotation. As musicians, more specifically percussionists, we deal with standard or traditional musical notations, as well as untraditional and novel methods created for specific works by each composer. Especially in percussion, the available notations are bountiful and vastly different from one another.

I am currently working on my thesis entitled ‘Sur Son Corps (On His Body): The Use of Labanotation in Gestural-Based Percussion Compositions’. You might wonder why a classically trained percussionist is interested in utilizing Labanotation instead of focusing on drums, music, or the like. Within the body of percussion literature, there exists a small number of works that incorporate physical movement into the musical language. Composers such as Mark Applebaum, Wayne Siegel, Mauricio Kagel, Casey Cangelosi, Emmanuel Séjourné, Thierry De Mey, and Mary Ellen Childs, to name a few, have all composed musical works that integrate movement and music. See illustrations 2 and 3.

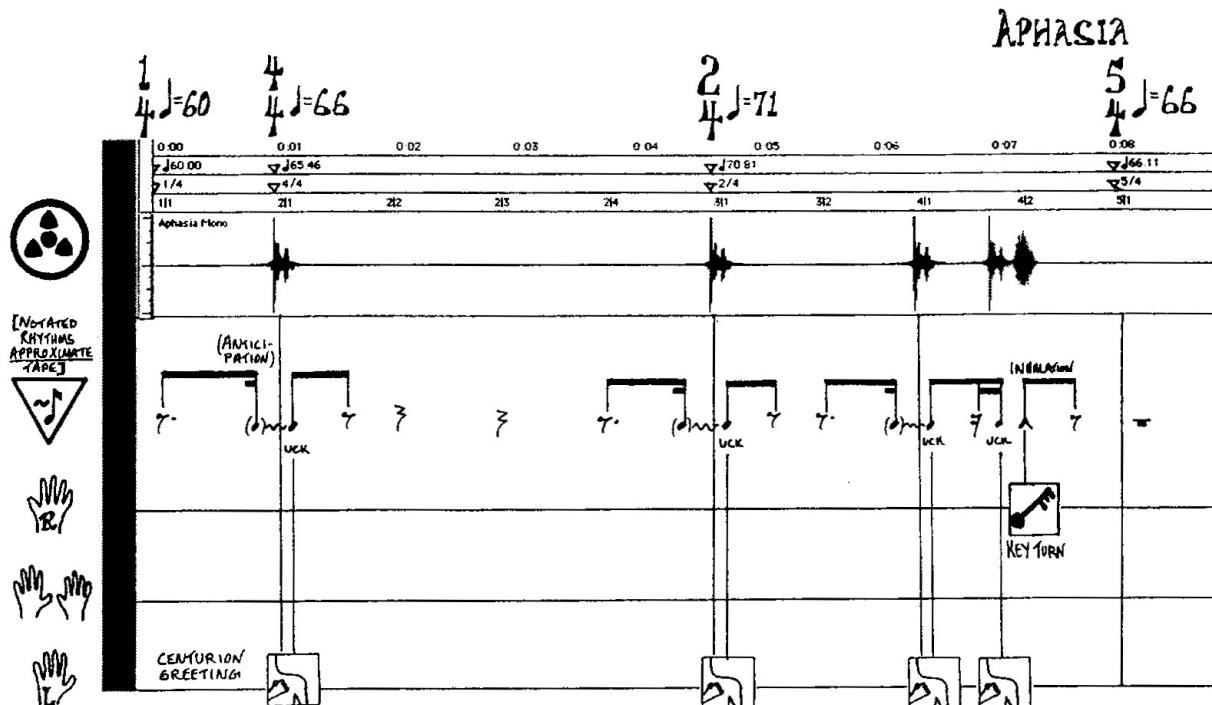


Illustration 2. Measures 1-5 of Mark Applebaum's *Aphasia*. © Mark Applebaum, 2010. In the score, Applebaum includes the gestural icon on the bottom three lines of the staff. The top gesture line reflects the right hand, the middle represents both hands, and the bottom the left hand. In the first 5 measures you will find two icons depicting movement. On beat one of measure 1, the Left hand performs the 'centurion greeting' movement as described by Applebaum. "Left arm crosses chest to place closed fist against torso near opposite shoulder (just under clavicle), with elbow bent severely, and back of hand to the audience as in a Roman centurion greeting." ⁱⁱⁱ The last presentation of movement in measure 4 is Applebaum's 'key turn'. For a video of the composer performing this work, please visit <http://vimeo.com/34303981>.

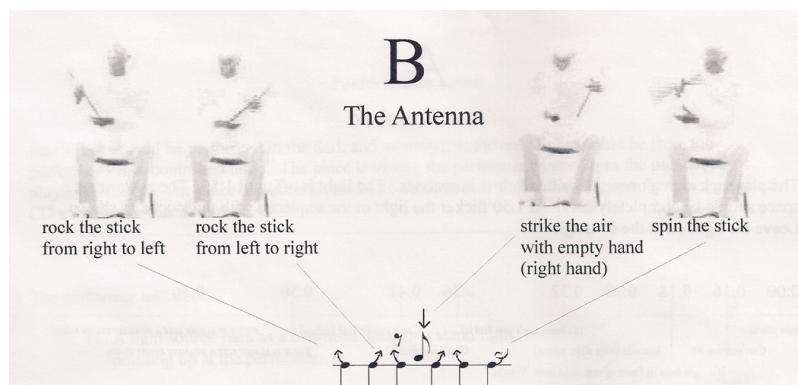
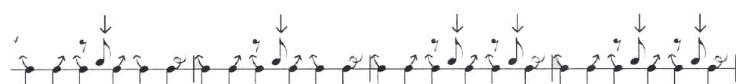


Illustration 3. Excerpt of section B "The Antenna" of Casey Cangelosi's *Bad Touch*. © Casey Cangelosi, 2013. In the score, Cangelosi includes the rhythm of the pantomime movement, presented on the staff, and the movement 'key' prior to the staff. The use of small arrows indicates how the drumstick is manipulated between the hands. The use of small arrows to indicate physical direction or movements in music notation is commonplace.

pantomime the gestures in sequence with the playback



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Regardless of genre, a composer who uses gesture in music accommodates it in his/her own notation vocabulary. I can say from experience that while all of these notations are fascinating and successful, as a performer it is troublesome to master each unique nomenclature when the ultimate goal is performing at a high level. Simply put, in the body of gestural-based percussion literature, there exists no homogenous and codified notation to document human movement as a musical phenomenon. I believe that Labanotation can successfully fill this role.

My first task is to prove the feasibility of Labanotation in previously existing gestural-based music scores. To this end, I have applied Labanotation to the musical composition of Mark Applebaum (Illustration 4). Mark Applebaum's *Aphasia* is a work featuring a single musician seated on stage executing 122 unique gestures for the audience set to pre-recorded sounds. Applebaum's score accounts for traditional elements such as meter, tempo, and duration while also incorporating text instructions and icons (pictures) corresponding to the many different gestures (Illustration 2). In effect, the icons are a simplified destination and Applebaum's notation does not document the intent, initiation, or conclusion of a given

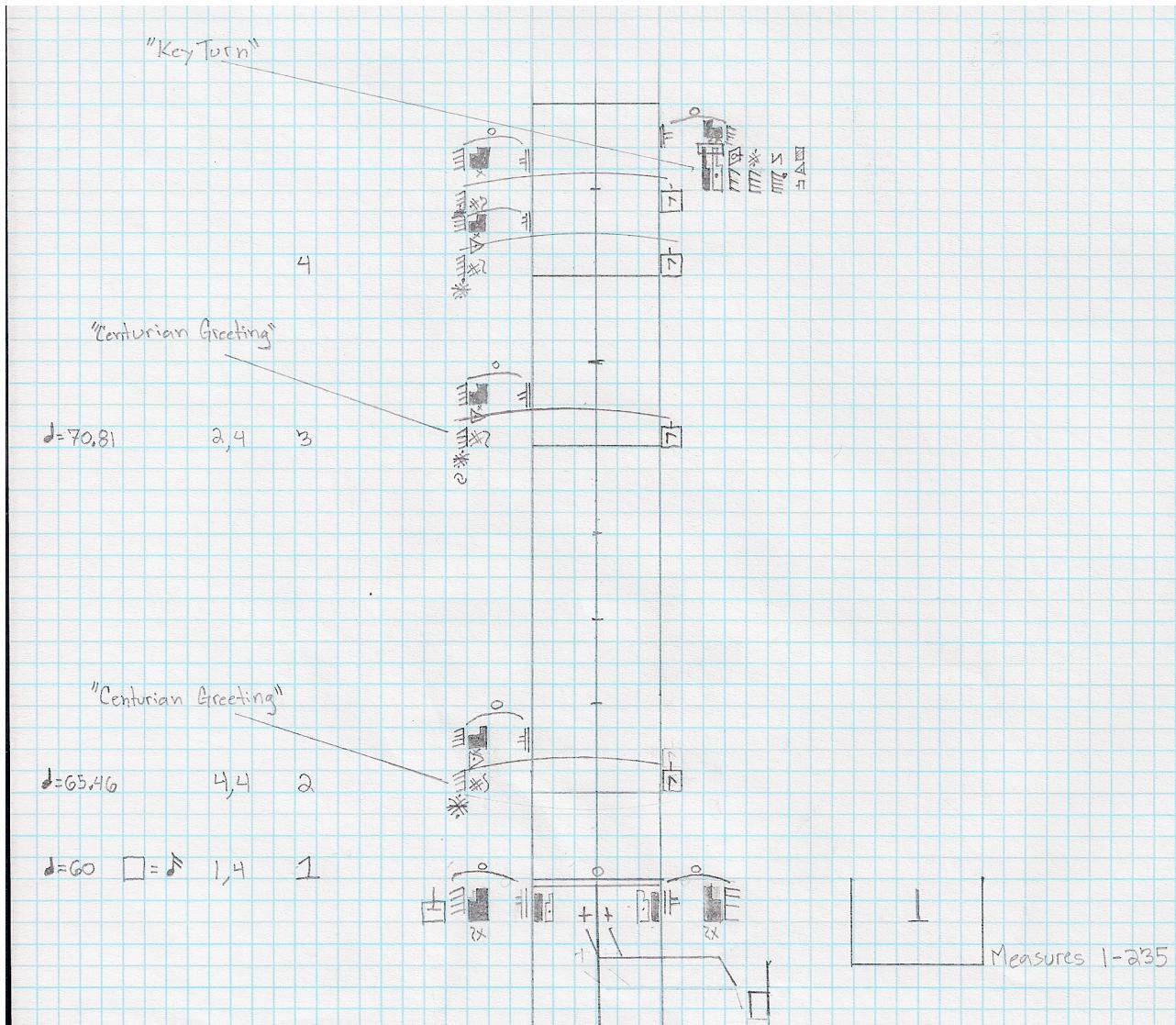


Illustration 4. *Labanotation score of Aphasia by Mark Applebaum. © Kyle Maxwell-Doherty, 2014.* Measures 1-4. Labanotation shows that the performer starts in the center of the stage, sitting on a chair, hands on thighs. It also can show the whole movement path of the 'Centurian Greeting' and the return to the starting position, which does not appear in the original Applebaum score.

movement. Labanotation's ability to capture in great detail the subtleties of gesture makes the Labanotation score a more complete, accurate, and informative method of documenting *Aphasia*. In music notation, the concept of a starting position does not exist. It is simply assumed that each performer begins the piece from a position of their choosing, unless otherwise stated. In the Labanotation score of *Aphasia*, a starting position can be seen and executed from the notation, rather than requiring a description of the opening position in the preface of the composition. The Labanotation score for *Aphasia* becomes a movement resource for the performer; a resource that documents the timing to and from each gesture more accurately and provides a highly specified graphic representation of the movements rather than copious pages of textual representations.

My second task is to notate Wayne Siegel's *Two Hands (not clapping)*. In *Two Hands*, the performer executes hand movements that are captured by a camera and then trigger sound from a computer program. If you can imagine creating music by waving your hands, you have arrived at the situation Siegel has created. In fact, the composer writes, "*Two Hands* might be said to be a musical instrument, a computer interface, a performance, and a composition." Interestingly, Siegel has yet to create a score for archival purposes of the composition. *Two Hands (not clapping)* is comprised of thirteen distinct sections, in which gestures are ad libbed in the context of pre-defined imagery and timing. Section titles include "Prayer", "Conjuring", "Fighting", and "Caressing", and provide imagery that informs the gestures, similar to the choreographic descriptions often dictated by choreographers and utilized by notators. *Two Hands (not clapping)* is particularly difficult to notate in traditional musical forms. However, I believe Labanotation can seamlessly accommodate all of these aspects into a score for performance, archival, and study. Please visit <http://vimeo.com/13509863> to watch an excerpt of *Two Hands* by composer Wayne Siegel.



Illustration 5. This image depicts the performer sitting in a chair, holding the snare drum (attached with contact microphone), directly in front of the speaker. Image created with Stage Plot Pro^{iv}.

Currently Colin Holter, a friend, colleague, and composer, has accepted the challenge of notating a new musical work in Labanotation. Together, Colin and I will construct the final Labanotation score. The score approaches human movement as sound in an exciting and novel way. Holter's score will feature the performer holding a snare drum directly in front of an amplifier with a contact microphone attached to the drum (Illustration 5). By putting a sensitive microphone so close to a speaker, this score will create a sonic landscape of feedback. The volume, texture, and density of feedback will change with each adjustment in the location of microphone in relation to the speaker. Unlike Applebaum, where gestures are performed to music, and unlike Siegel, where gestures trigger pre-recorded sounds, this score features gesture *creating* the sounds experienced by the audience. In a traditional score, the presence of the pitch 'A' on the staff indicates the resultant sound intended to be heard by the audience – but not how to produce the sound or the actions intended to create the expected sound. However, in Holter's existing sketches, the execution of the Labanotation score actually creates the sonic environment the performer and the audience will experience (Illustration 6).

By analyzing the works of Applebaum, Siegel, and Holter, this research explores the important role of gesture in its relationship to, triggering of, and creation of sound respectively. The potential of utilizing Labanotation in these three compositions demonstrates the value of a standardized system of notation for both composer and performer in its ability to archive compositions for future generations, objectively analyze gestural-based works alone and in comparison to one another, as well as inspire the creation of new works to add to this rapidly expanding repertoire.

ⁱ <http://www.bernardwoma.com/school/>

ⁱⁱ <http://user.uni-frankfurt.de/~griesbec/LABANE.HTML>

ⁱⁱⁱ Applebaum, Mark. *Aphasia*. Stanford: Mark Applebaum, 2010. Pg. 19.

^{iv} <http://www.stageplot.com/>

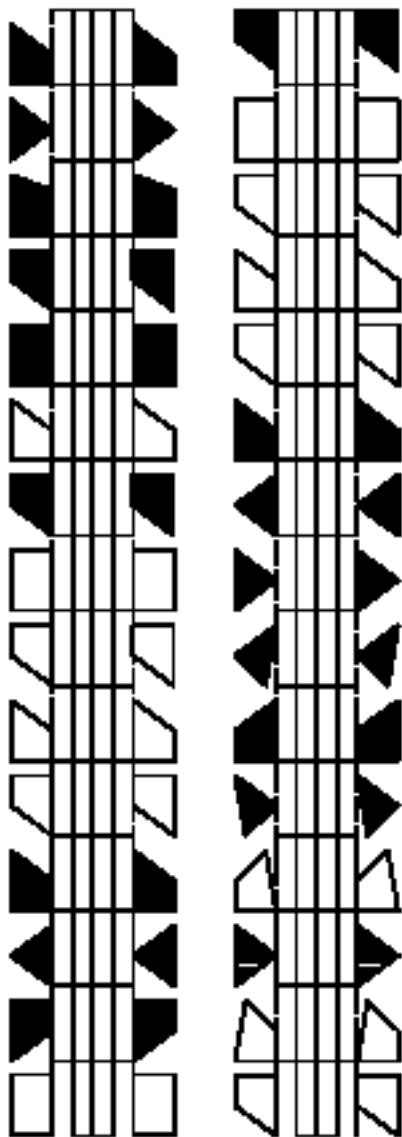


Illustration 6. Sketch 1 of Colin Holter's Labanotation Score. It should be noted that this excerpt is intended as a sketch of the composer's introductory thoughts pertaining to sound production. This excerpt is not a final draft. Please note that the directional symbols are not located in the proper columns of the staff. They should be listed in the arm column. There is also a lack of starting position, indication of the distance between the sitting performer and the speaker. This sketch simply designates the movements of the snare drum (held by the hands) in relation to the performers body.