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Why Labanotation Remains

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It is widely recognized that Rudolf Laban, who developed his work from 1910 to 1953, was one of the greatest dance artists and theorists in the dance world. By inventing a system of observing, analyzing, describing, prescribing, performing, and interpreting dance and movement, Laban Movement Analysis came to be. One of his contributions to dance, Labanotation, a notation system for analyzing recorded movement, has influenced many people in the world and is still used by historians, movement analysts, and anthropologists. His many protégés, such as Ann Hutchinson Guest, Janos Fügedi and Edward Warburton have been influenced by Laban's work and have developed and expanded upon it. They have extended it into dance education for children and adult dancers, and have used it for historical analysis of dances. How does the dance notation efficiently serve us, help us, and push our understanding of dance further? How does it work in ways that videos alone cannot? This paper will present a discussion of how Rudolf Laban's genius work is still relevant today, despite the prevalence of video and media and why his work is essential for recording and analyzing human movement even in an age of widespread technological discovery. In addition to research about the value of notation in education, the work of three important dance notators, Ann Hutchinson Guest, Edward Warburton, and Janos Fügedi, will be discussed.

The book, *Nijinsky's Faune Restored,* by Ann Hutchinson Guest is about how the author was able to present a historical reconstruction of a lost dance. She was able to find it and notate. Ann Hutchinson Guest, who is a world-renowned expert in dance notation, has captured one of the lost dances called *L'Après-midi d'un Faune, Afternoon of a Faun* by Vaslav Nijinsky. Nijinsky choreographed only four ballets and one of his creations, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune,* has only survived in memory-based versions and in recordings through his own dance notation system, which he never explained to anyone before his passing. According to *Nijinsky's Faune Restored, "*the method of notation used by Nijinsky in his score of *Faune* has similarities to the Stepanov system, which is a method of indicating spatial directions for the main parts of the body, and was built on an anatomical movement analysis and used adapted music notes indicate movements" (Hutchinson Guest and Jeschke, 7). This quote indicates that Hutchinson Guest realized how Nijinsky's notation system was practically similar to what she had been studying, so it became more accessible for her. Nijinsky's own documentation of the movements of his first ballet were considered lost to the future generation, because there was no proof that Nijinsky had provided a clarification of the 1915 version of his system of notation.

After Nijinsky passed away in 1950, Hutchinson Guest was asked to assist in translating Nijinsky's original Russian notes that contained the *Faune* score into English. Carrie Siedman states that "Ann Hutchinson Guest and another notator, Claudia Jeschke 'broke the code' of his notation system, by examining over every line and calculated each symbol, and thus made the choreography he had notated available for revival and translated into the Labanotation" (Seidman, "Recreating of 'Faune'"). This quote exemplifies the start of Hutchinson Guest and Jeschke paving the road to transcribe

Nijinsky's work. Hutchinson Guest and Jeschke kept coming back to the project to figure out Nijinsky's perspective and specific approach in analyzing the movements in *Faune.* During the process of examining Nijinsky's notation materials, Hutchinson Guest found the key to the movement content of the score in the library of the Paris Opéra. According to Jeschke, "these documents, which employed the same five-line grid that he used to score *Faune*, were transcriptions of Cecchetti method classroom exercises and reproductions of the poses in figure groupings" (Hutchinson Guest, 8). This discovery made it easier to navigate Nijinsky's notation system and brought Hutchinson Guest and Jeschke closer to translating and reconstructing the dance. Hutchinson Guest and Jeschke were successfully able to decipher Nijinsky's notation system and transcribe his score of *Faune* into Labanotation symbol by symbol. By figuring out Nijinksy's system and reconstructing it, Hutchinson Guest and Jeschke revived a lost dance and created a cohesive version of his ballet. Hutchinson Guest explains that utilizing a notation system is beneficial to analyze the qualities of phrases because it shows every little detail of the movement. "Notation is considered to be an important means to get closer to the understanding of the movement. It is not just a document, but a means of understanding basic truths and facts" (Hutchinson Guest, 11). This quote articulates how Hutchinson Guest respects and cherishes the importance of notation. She was successfully able to use the method of traditional historical research to recreate and capture a lost dance from a notation system that no one could decipher. She translated it by finding Nijinsky's Cecchetti notes to create a key and put them into her Labanotation. In 1987, the ballet piece, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune,* was translated into Labanotation and decoded by Ann Hutchinson Guest, making it easier for everybody to access, read and stage the ballet

again. In an excerpt from *dance notation* by Claudia Jeschke from The Oxford Companion to the Body, the author explains that "this approach of notation is neutral and abstract, featuring movement observation and composition, but not necessarily dance documentation; it allows describing movement beyond historical or stylistic definition of dance" (Jeschke, "dance notation"). This quote exaggerates the fact that notation expands the ability of composing even historically lost ballets like *L'Après-midi d'un Faune.* Using notation to reconstruct the lost dance has definitely served Ann Hutchinson Guest and Claudia Jeschke well because they were able to revive an important piece of history.

Another notator and important contributor to the history of dance, Edward C. Warburton discovered general motor learning improvement for third graders in an empirical study. In Warburton's article, *The Dance on Paper: Effects of Notation-Use on Learning and Development in Dance,* he mentions how notation, a highly cognitive process, helps improve physical learning. He invested his research into how "movement notation" can help people learn to dance in the same way they learn a foreign language, and how to read, write and comprehend. He asserts that, "as in the domains of language, music, and geography, it is possible that notation supports understanding in dance through the organization of key concepts in movement. Putting the dance on paper may help young children understand dance better when they see it" (122). Learning a notation system can allow readers to understand the quality of physical movement as well as the concepts of the dance movement, which helps one to apply these qualities and concepts thoroughly. Warburton believes that it is as possible for young children to develop the fluency of learning a symbolic system as it is to develop multiple natural languages for human beings to make and express meaning (122). Children can learn to talk, dance and

write faster and with better comprehension when they study notation. Warburton investigated these ideas in an 8-week instructional period, in which he divided third graders into three groups. These groups included a 'treatment-plus' group, which signified verbal description of movement concepts and notation symbols, and a 'treatment-minus' group, which was simply a verbal description of movement concepts. The last group was the 'control group,' which meant the movement instruction included the labeling of movement but did not include any of the symbolic notations or verbal descriptions that the other groups had. Warburton also implemented dependent variables, which included the ability to "1) distinguish between movement types (differentiation), 2) group movement types (classification), 3) perform individual movements or a series of movements (production), and 4) name movements and state the meaning of movements (expression)" (126). Those primary variables were also examined during the process of testing and collecting information in eight weeks. The children learned five different phrases by the examiners after they first rigorously explained their study and asked for children's participation. The main purpose of this study was to discover fundamental recognition abilities in a large quantity of people and also to investigate how quickly and precisely children could pick up the movement with or without verbal instruction and notation symbols. The course of study incorporated a few lessons and gave the students chances to create their own choreographed productions, which all the groups fully participated in because they were experiencing something new to their body and mind.

The results came after all three of the groups were tested through teaching and learning the movement phrases. The study determined that the young children who were in the treatment-plus group had a higher recognition of the movement compared to

treatment-minus or control groups. In addition to this, the treatment-plus group achieved a higher score on the differentiation and classification of the movement phrases. Warburton stated that, "on average, students in the treatment-plus group have higher recognition scores than either control or treatment-minus groups. The treatment-plus group shows significantly higher average Differentiation scores on Movement Phrase three and five" (133). To add to this statement, there was not much difference between treatment-minus and control groups.

Overall, this study showed that notation use is extremely effective and significant, as it allows children to gain a rich and greater understanding of dance. This is because children that were exposed to movement notation, demonstrated an improved physical embodiment and learning. In *Dance: Current Selected Research*, the chapter, *Constructionist Dance Literacy: Unleashing The Potential of Motif Notation* by Teresa L. Heiland, supports the idea that "if all dancers were expected to be capable of communicating with Motif Notation, we, as instructors, dancers, and supporters of our art form could likely frame a more convincing case for dance education for every child due to the cognitive aspects of dance education being clearly more tangible, quantifiable, and testable" (28). Dancers at any level are capable of producing their own effective and creative work when they are exposed to Labanotation. Labanotation provides a tool for analyzing movement into its main features. It allows readers to recognize what happens and what repeats throughout the phrase and allows people to analyze dances by seeing the differentiation of movement through notation. Thus, Labanotation has been largely influential and has given young dancers the opportunity to engage and improve their abilities by engrossing themselves in the language of dance. As stated in the

aforementioned study, young children found it easier to perceive movement perfectly when they were given verbal dance instruction that incorporated movement composition, notation, and exploration.

János Fügedi conducted a research project using video and notation to see how dancers learned movement when using each method. We physically learn a majority of movements, especially when it comes to modifying the body to achieve certain movement skills. We sometimes move our bodies or dance with our consciousness. Fügedi merged the idea of cognitive psychology with our consciousness and researched how the observation and conscious control of movement produces the domain of metacognition. He made a hypothesis in his article, *Movement Cognition and Dance Notation,* that "on reconstructing dance from notation, the result is more authentic than imitative reconstruction because the stager gets independent from the space and time difficulties during the identification of the movement sample, is disengaged from the effects of movement stereotypes, and recognizes and gets deeper in understanding the structure of movement sequences and gets deeper in understanding" (Fügedi, 400). Because dance notation is a symbolic and an analytic system, it naturally gives the possibility of high level cognitive units of the information of the movement.

Fügedi conducted an experiment in which he compared dance reconstruction from Labanotation and from video. He compared a few interpretive dance performers who learned material from Labanotation, Notation Group, and the same amount of dancers imitating the performance of the same dance material from a video, Video Group. The main task for both groups was to reconstruct a few authentic movement sequences to discover how they would obtain and process the information and perform. This research

was interesting because Notation Group had the movement sequences in notation and could not see the original performance, while Video Group had the same movement sequence on a video to learn from and imitate without notation. In one of the analyses of the reconstruction, Fügedi stated that "investigating the space—time appropriateness of reconstruction it could be stated that Notation Group achieved a significantly better result compared to that of Video Group" (401). As a result, applying dance notation to process the information of the movement sequences clearly led to a greater improvement in learning skills. He also pointed out that "the movement cognition can be developed and an outstanding tool for this development is the dance notion. Therefore the experiment proved the hypothesis" (Fügedi, 406). One of the reasons of why Notation Group had a significantly better result was that the dance notation provided information on the structures of movement and interpretation in a way that triggered one's cognition. In this way, dancers who used reconstruction were able to become self-reliant due to working through the difficulties and frustration of recognizing the movement pattern in space and time.

Dance notation opens up a huge range of possibility in the art of dance. It can preserve dance, which makes in-depth study possible, and helps to reveal dance history and dance tradition. This crucial aspect of dance could not exist today without the notation archives that include a large amount of notated material created over time. It may be that archiving is only important because we have videos and media nowadays, yet, it is hard to observe performance qualities such as breathing and buoyancy in videos because movement quality is not always clear on the screen. Labanotation allows us to understand the phrases of qualities and efforts in dance. This is important now because

videos do not usually give a three-dimensional experience, which leads to overlooked details, performance qualities and efforts. Also, over time, the oral tradition of sharing dance alters from generation to generation, which can easily be retained by notated. Videos can certainly be helpful in some cases, but they do not accurately interpret the subtle movement qualities, which can change the way the movement is seen. Therefore, dance notation has proven to be a beneficial tool for dance research and education in comprehending and analyzing movement.

Currently, Labanotation influences the dancer's training, dance history research, dance criticism, dance analysis, the creative process of choreography making and dance education. While people think notation is useful only for archival purposes, and that media and film has replaced it, notation has several other uses in dance education, such as improving dance technique, providing creative structures for children to make dances, and for dancers to clarify movement and develop specific and significant learning skills. While people think it is like Latin, a dead language, it is more alive than ever due to the interest students have in exploring multiple intelligences in dance to extend the learning in and around dance.

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