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Reflection on the Process of Learning Benesh and Labanotation

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During 2006–2007, I followed the *Distance Learning Course One in Benesh Movement Notation* and the *Elementary Labanotation*. I started with the Benesh course in March 2006. It took me some time at the beginning to get used to the symbols and especially to the writing. It felt as if I was learning a craft, a very accurate one. Where to place the lines and symbols?

I found myself rubbing out a lot until I could handle well the movement of my pencil. Then the lines started to mean what was proposed, movements started to be represented by symbols that I could slowly understand. I had mixed feelings about this situation; I liked it, because it demanded patience and concentration from me, it required time and dedication like dance does, but at the same time I thought I had to focus too much on something that did not involve my understanding of dance, my ability to draw.

After I passed the drawing stage I realized how easily my mind was adjusting to this new way of looking at movement. I was mentally following a dancer, looking at her from behind realizing all the directions, transitions and little details she would do. When I started the Laban course these difficulties were not there.

Both courses, Benesh and Laban, have a similar educational path, starting from the way symbols are placed (in the stave in Benesh and in the staff in Laban). A gradual development is present in the course structure. The Laban course started with simple movements like walking, while Benesh entered the ballet world of 1st, 2nd, 3rd etc. positions. After these basic positions, more complex arm and leg gestures like turns and jumps are explained. Space patterns, floor plans, repetition signs and other symbols that help understand the continuation and flow of the movement, or details like the fingers or head tilts guided me through the grammar of each system.

When I arrived at the point where I could read the notation I was surprised with the amount of information one could take out of it. But I was also surprised by the amount of prior knowledge needed to understand it. Not just a prior knowledge of dance in general is needed to make your trip through the notation world but sometimes knowledge of the specific style concerned is essential. I imagined sometimes how difficult it would be for a non-dancer to notate what I was doing because of the lack of sensorial information of that movement available to him. This thought reminded me of the word skills and craft always needed in dance. If the recorded movement is of a specific style, in this case classical ballet, the notator has a slightly easier job because he can make certain assumptions about the movement that he is recording. All these assumptions can be notated in BMN, but as they are an integral part of the ballet technique we can omit them from our recordings. The omission of information inside a score is an interesting issue of dance notation.

Through my talks in Paris with Eliane Mirzabekiantz and Marion Bastien, Benesh and Laban notators involved in the interdisciplinary research project, I understood that dance notations are deciphered and that a fair amount of mystery is left for the reader of the notation when reconstructing the score.

As Ann Hutchinson Guest writes in her book Dance Notation, the process of writing movement on paper (1984): 'In many notation processes it is the reader and the reconstructor who matter. Their needs must be anticipated. Laban always advised: "'Write more than seems necessary; better have too much detail than not enough.' If the information is not there on paper the reader cannot know it. Benesh preached redundancy avoidance; 'Eliminate everything you possibly can. But there is a limit".' Not too much, not too little: the right measure must be found.

While doing both courses I looked for directions and comments on movement intentionality. The word 'intention' was sometimes used in the Benesh course description. Most of the time, it was linked to explanations on ways of notating the same movement. The chosen way of notating a movement will depend on the intention given by the teacher or the choreographer. However a position might not be clear in context and so another group of signs has been developed which can be added to the basic signs to clarify the intention of the choreographer.

Through the movement's shape, placement, direction, rhythm and dynamics much information about its intention can be depicted. Still, this information would always be dependent on the reader's interpretation and of course on her/his dance background. If the intention of the movement is really important for the understanding of each action and it is really defined when transmitting the movement, then words are written in the score to make this known.

I discovered that there are no special symbols for intentions because it is a very broad matter that cannot be universalized in one set of symbols and that words are normally added to the score to address this kind of information.

Anyhow, the interpretation of the notation will depend not only on how the movement is notated but also on the skills of the reader. Interpretation is a constant issue when transmitting information and in the process of notation it is vital for both writer and reader. As Benesh explains in Reading dance (1997), '...you are not reading the notation as such [...] you are reading a language. In the case of Movement notation you will be reading a movement language [...]. And it is this language with its analysis and grammar which is difficult.'

Through this learning process I understood that skills of movement analysis, writing and reading are needed when notating movement. The next step of my research focused on the transmission of the movement and, more importantly, on where information on intentionality is placed inside this transmission.

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