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A Study of Labanotation and its Applications from 20th Century Europe to 21st Century America

Laura D'Amico
SUNY Geneseo

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sponsored by Jonette Lancos

Abstract

Labanotation is a system of dance notation with a history of use stretching from the late 19th century to today. This paper examines that history, the technical elements of Labanotation, and different applications of Labanotation. This paper examines the use of Labanotation in many different contexts, including in the SUNY Geneseo piece *Hebrides Suite*. I also examine how Labanotation succeeds at representing the three-dimensional act of dance on paper.

An Historical Achievement of Laban

Humans have recorded their stories through various media for thousands of years. Literature and music have had their own widely accepted, ever evolving symbols, able to withstand the test of time. Dance, on the other hand, has only been passed down through human interaction, making it a fragile language. It is not documented on paper as easily as words and music, and is thus easily lost and forgotten. Until the twentieth century, recording and reading a three-dimensional story on a one-dimensional surface has been intimidatingly tedious to a movement artist without a universal standard script.

Many attempts at dance notation have been made, but the form developed by Rudolf von Laban in the twentieth century is the most widely used language of dance. By the late nineteenth century—the second Renaissance for Western Europe—Germany had politically united, and it was becoming an industrial superpower. Cities like Berlin expanded rapidly, increasing transportation, igniting communication, and, of course, encouraging artistic literacy to flourish. American dancers like Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan attracted eager audiences and left North America to grace stages, parlors, and garden parties all across Europe with their new take on interpreting the body's natural way of movement in time when technology and automation were first peeking their heads through the future trenches.

As Fuller and Duncan left their homes, Laban, born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1879, left his family of military nobility and moved to Paris to study design, anatomy, and architecture, quickly finding himself caught up in the hustle and bustle of the Parisian pedestrians around him during its 1900 World's Fair (Karina, Lillian & Kant, Marion, 2003). Under the instruction of Heidi Dzinzkowska, he moved to Munich to focus on new studies in Ausdruckstanz, an expressionistic dance (UK Digital Dance Archives-Rudolf Laban). While teaching in Berlin, Laban published the first version of Labanotation, titled *Kinetographie Laban*.

Language

In Labanotation, nouns refer to specific parts of the body and their involvement in dance; my study focused on arms, legs, feet, and palm-facing. Verbs relate action, absence of action, stillness, flexion, rotation, and extension, and time functions as an adverb. Place denotes absence of action, which can sometimes be considered stillness. If the dancer is not moving, nothing is noted in the specified column. Rotation is noted in palm-facing and feet. For our purposes, flexion and extension were only used in the legs, noting plie, straight legs, and releve. Time was represented in measures, much like in music, with large, drawn-out shapes noting legato movement, and spaces representing staccato movement.

Center Line and Measure Lines

The center line is the basis of notation, representing the spine cutting down half of the body. This makes a clear visual for the reader, embodying the movement in a right or left fashion in space and time. In order to tell the reader when to start, the notator begins the phrase with a double starting line, just like in music. Along the centerline, the notator records the movement in measures, but in a vertical fashion, not a horizontal one. A new measure is notated by a horizontal slash perpendicular to the center line. If the movement or timing is difficult to glance at quickly, smaller horizontal slashes for every quarter note are also useful.

Columns and the Staff

Universally, the columns adjacent to the center line indicate the parts of the body being used. Form the center outward, the order of parts notation is this: supports (where the weight is held in the legs), leg gestures, body, and arms. Additional body parts, such as hands, feet, and head, are added accordingly.

Symbols: Direction, Levels, and Time

In place, limb directions include forward, right, left, and behind, determined by the levels in which they are used: low, middle, high, and place-high. The length of the symbol drawn on the staff represents the specific place in time intended for the movement. A symbol stretching for a whole measure is a long, sustained legato movement, while a

short symbol of the same shape with a space in between each symbol represent short, crisp movements, such as jumps.

Applications of Labanotation

Some professional dance instruction emphasizes Bartenieff Fundamentals, a system that incorporates LMA (Laban Movement Analysis) into dance. Irmgard Bartenieff (1900-1981) was Laban's student in Hamburg, and she extended his theories as she developed her own fundamental movement theories in order to rehabilitate patients during the polio epidemic of the mid-twentieth century (Pasquarello-Beauchamp, 2012). With the use of LMA, Bartenieff Fundamentals can re-pattern the neurological connections that govern movement. It is based on four principles: breath, core support, dynamic alignment, and spatial intent. Neurological connectivity can be explained through Bartenieff's work: head-tail, upper-lower body half, homolateral body-half, core-distal, and contralateral, or diagonal, movement are all movement patterns seen in the stages of motor development (Pasquarello-Beauchamp, 2012). Bartenieff's addition to Laban's work has improved the spheres of physical therapy, mental counseling, and actor training.

On stage, professional dance companies around the globe regularly use Labanotation. In order to maintain the legal rights to a piece, the dance must be written down. For example, any ballet staged from the Balanchine Trust Foundation is Labanotated and checked by a professional notator or a dancer who knows the piece in detail (Lancos, 2017). In 2015, former New York City Ballet dancer Lesli Peck staged Balanchine's historic *Serenade* on the company. Labanotation bridged the original choreographer to the dancers of today.

Examples of our study

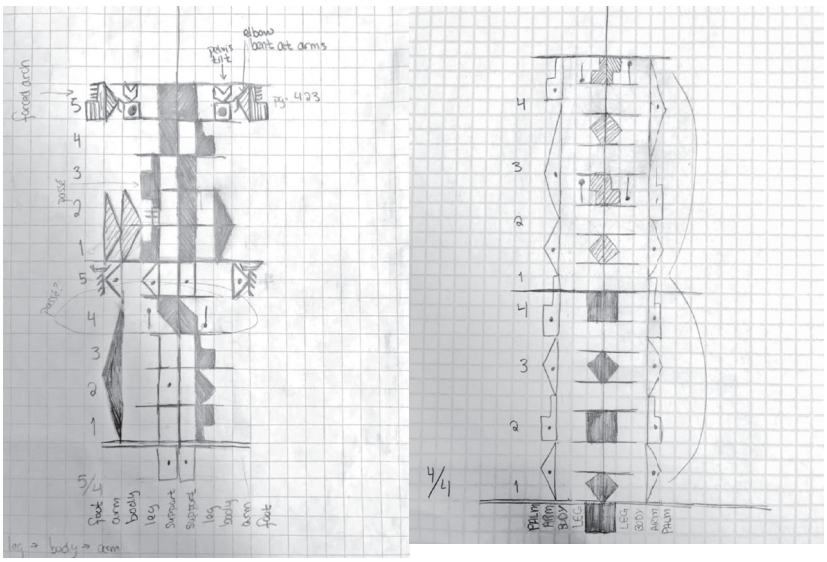

Figure 1: Example of Labanotation

Relationship to *Hebrides Suite*

Ambre Emory-Maier, director of education for BalletMet in Columbus, Ohio, staged the *Hebrides Suite*, originally created by SUNY Geneseo professor Nona Schurman in New York City in 1951. Emory-Maier regularly re-stages ballets using notated scores, emphasizing the standard goal in a professional company is to stage one minute of choreography per hour of rehearsal time. Of course, this depends on the number of dancers, their familiarity with the piece, and the complexity of the choreography. For *Hebrides*, she simply stated she has never taken on such an intellectually challenging piece: there are six simultaneous solos; the music is in 6/8; the style of dance is unfamiliar to her; and the score contains ambiguity and mistakes. Even with her extensive background and certification in Labanotation, she realizes the challenges notation puts on choreographers and dancers alike. Due to its challenging complexity, this project was meant to be taken on by a group of instructors, including Jonette Lancos, Jacquie McCausland, and Angela Caplan.

The key takeaways from working with Ambre were how *simplicity* is the key to Labanotation. Notators understand that the style of dance removes any extraneous symbols. For example, it would be redundant for a ballet dance to have small pins indicating rotation for every single step, since rotation is an integral component in the style of dance.

Labanotation also relies on pattern recognition. Much like reading music, it eventually becomes second nature to sight-read. For example, an experienced Labanotator can easily recognize a grapevine-type step with a rocking motion. The secret to being able to read quickly, much like in a verbal language, is to glance at the script and translate it to a motor function.

Translating a score from the paper to the body requires not only motor functioning skills, but also exemplary short-term memory. Just like how an actor tries to be off-book as soon as possible so they can embody their movement intentions, so does a dancer. Even more than an actor, a dancer simply cannot do their job with a printed book in hand telling them every sequential step. It is essential to be able to memorize movement patterns as quickly as possible so the artistic process can take over once the learning process is finished. This is the only way an artist can make the material their own.

Nona Schurman was famous for saying "get literate." Being able to be the first person to step into the past and fill a real dancer's original role gives an authentic persona to the work. The process is an emotionally invigorating experience, channeling a departed dancer's vision and emotions back to life through one's own body.

Conclusion

Labanotation gives new insight about how bodies interact with time and space; it provides a three-dimensional representation of a story on one-dimensional paper. Danc-

ing can lead to improvement in problem-solving skills and being able to work through counting and spacing issues more efficiently, regardless of time signature or number of dancers.

Similar to a published article in a journal, art also must be written down for the sake of ownership, reproducibility, and communication. This way, credit is given where it is due, so dancers both in the present and in the future can perform and pay homage to a different place and time, evoking unfamiliar perspectives in dancers and audiences alike. Today, dance companies all over the world are performing Labanotated scores from artists from other continents and cultures. These works must be communicated across all boundaries for the sake of furthering the ideas presented in the script.

Ultimately, dance notation has the uniquely exclusive ability to transcend evening-length concert pieces through space and time in a three-dimensional fashion.

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