

REPEATING OR REJUVENATING? THE BEGINNINGS OF EURYTHMY THAT SHAPE THE PRESENT

by Hans Fors

"Modern Dance remains a mystery. It is known the world over and, in some form or other, has existed since the late nineteenth century. Yet no one has ever been able to say precisely what it is. Nevertheless, if modern dance is mysterious, it is also glorious, and it has proved to be miraculously self-renewing."¹

While many new forms of dance were being developed at the beginning of the 20th century, the concept of dance itself underwent such change and expansion that some elusive and unusual elements were included. Some dancers even decided not to name their art form dance, as this referred to ballroom dancing at the time, whereby arms and legs were moved by the rhythm and flow of the music. They preferred to use terms such as the art of movement, the art of dance, a free form of dance, absolute dance, rhythmical dance, interpretive dance, barefoot dance, art dance, expressive dance so as to distinguish their own school of dance from more traditional forms. Nowadays 'modern dance' encompasses all these directions and styles.²

At the beginning of the 20th century ballet was no longer considered modern. Movement artists radically distanced themselves from the stiff, empty and lifeless movements taught in ballet. Qualities such as vitality, dynamics, freedom, spirituality and expression were sought, which promised to bring renewal to movement. This was all to be instantly implemented with impetuous enthusiasm.³

Around this time the first pictures of Greek vases with depictions of dancing maenads began to circulate among artists. The contrast between the human form of the Greek dancers and the restrictive use of corsets dictated by the fashion of the day could hardly be more striking. Ancient Greek culture was having an enormous impact on artistic life in Europe. A new ideal was born: the Grecian way became synonymous with a natural way. 'Greek, everything must be Greek' was a catchphrase of the time.

Two directions of renewal can be distinguished in the world of dance: the Greek model and the exotic one. The fact that the Grecian way had such a strong influence on dance has to do with the ideal of the human form that was prevalent at the time – perhaps especially among women. It was women who dominated the stage and it was women who decided to get rid of the corset. The fashion of tightly fitting clothes was coming to an end, the new ideal was to be able to 'breathe' in one's clothes and feel 'natural'.⁴ As representative of many other dancers, Isadora Duncan comes to mind.

EURHYTHMICS AND EURYTHMY

One of these was Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) who found many followers for a form of rhythmical exercise that he developed called 'Eurhythmics'. Most of them were musicians who were able to achieve an amazing capacity for co-ordinating arms, legs and head.⁵

Dalcroze had a theory that, by rekindling the meaning of rhythm, each human being would be able to further his or her social skills and contribute to the development of human society. He was a great admirer of ancient culture and would encourage his students to

imitate the poses and gestures found on classical reliefs, wearing long Greek garments. His students' parents reacted violently to such loose clothing that exposed central parts of the body, considering them daring and dangerous.

The word 'Eurhythmy' or 'Eurythmy' was well known and widely used among artists at that time, and originally used in architecture. Dalcroze was the first to coin it for his art of movement. It was probably he who influenced the Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler,⁶ who also used the term 'Eurythmie'. It is worth noting that Dalcroze was trying to define the spiritual-cultural education of the future through music and movement.

Six years later, in 1912, Rudolf Steiner inaugurated a new art form of movement that also carries the name 'Eurythmie'- spelled this way. It was in fact Marie Steiner who chose the name and Rudolf Steiner accepted it. Indisputably, the Belgian Emile Sigogne's publication Eurythmie was a strong influence on this choice.⁷ The first eurythmists were similarly influenced by the existing Zeitgeist: their costume style was Greek.

It is perhaps hard to understand why Steiner, in creating Eurythmy, allowed for such a strong Greek influence. There are ample indications that Steiner considered the Greek vogue outdated.⁸ Yet he followed the prevailing style in this. However, he initiates aspects qualifying as avant-garde at the time, which entail a radical breach with tradition and divergence from popular aesthetic taste. Further, his lectures brought new angles on the meaning of this form of movement and the ideology behind Eurythmy.⁹

Steiner too had educational ideals for future eurythmists: a broad general standard of learning and, especially, a refined understanding of culture and of the arts. Intense studies in Anthroposophy and the supersensible members of the human being were to be integrated. Overall, the image and understanding of the human being would be central to the work: body, soul and spirit - thinking, feeling and doing.¹⁰

EURHYTHMY, LABAN AND PERROTTET

MonteVerita, Ascona, Switzerland, July 1913. Through the most well known student of Dalcroze, Suzanne Perottet (1889-1983), Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) receives an introduction to 'Eurhythmics'. They had met the previous year. Perottet, who was very musical and had an obvious gift for movement and dance, had worked with Dalcroze since 1906. Without her it is hard to imagine what course 'Eurhythmics' would have taken, since it was with her that Dalcroze worked to develop his ideas. After some five or six years, she increasingly notices that, as a movement artist, she is making little progress because she continues to allow music to govern her movements. Looking for more freedom, she subsequently finds it with Laban.

Laban was Hungarian and moved around between France, Switzerland, Germany and finally England. A seeker, he was a Freemason (OTO), a Rosicrucian, and something of an occultist. His theories on movement and the dimensions of space to some extent played a role in the development of modern dance.¹¹

Laban was interested in Steiner's ideas about the spiritual world, the artistic dimensions of life and about the education of the human being. He was also interested in Steiner's eurythmy, and in the rhythm of breath and word. However, a given movement did not require an underlying meaning as far as he was concerned. Laban was seeking a renaissance in the expression of the human body.¹²

In her biography of Laban, Valerie Preston-Dunlop describes his 'religious concept', his idea that spirituality converges from 3 directions: from Sufism, from Rosicrucianism and from Anthroposophy. Laban first experimented with language, singing and movement as early as 1913. In 1915 he inaugurated his 'School for the Art of Movement, with training in the spoken word, sounding music, dance and form'.

Several different approaches to visualising music and language were made simultaneously by innovative artists such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Dennis, Dalcroze, Laban, Steiner and others.

'School for Eurhythmmy'

It is not widely known that Suzanne Perrottet started a 'School for Eurhythmmy' in Zurich in 1918. In her autobiography she says: "Now it was my school, and I called it 'Eurhythmmy School'. Dalcroze had already used the name Eurhythmmy and Laban also used that word for our work. It seemed to me to be the exact expression for what I wanted to do: Movement - Drawing - Language."¹³

The following appears in the school's literature: "Using the term 'eurhythmmy education' we strive to develop, integrate and harmonise the talents and intentions of young people who want to become artistically creative in one way or another. The wish to make music or to express one's thoughts through poetry, as well as drawing, painting and sculpting - and the inclination to do gymnastics - comes from an urge to manifest the inward quality and creativity of the soul using rhythm and beauty."

The ideal of harmony predominates with both Laban and Perrottet. Remarkably, Dalcroze uses 'rhythmical gymnastics', Steiner 'gymnastics of the soul' and Laban / Perrottet 'artistic gymnastics'.

Perrottet says: "Breathing out is practised in connection with the sounds of language and creates a foundation for well-enunciated, clearly spoken language and, further, for singing." Laban had already made his first attempts at a kind of 'cultivated speaking' in the summer of 1913. His experiments with visible speech and singing are different from Steiner's approach. Following Laban, the 'eurhythmist' could herself speak and sing while searching for the movement arising out of her experience. In Steiner's case, living images are the directing factor, and the challenge is to integrate the quality of feeling into them.

Laban worked extensively with original word-sounds, a sort of onomatopoeic poetry found similarly in Dadaism. He also used sounds from nature: the sighing of the wind, the singing of birds and the sounding vowels.

Perrottet says: "Besides daily practice, knowledge of anatomy, the background to mechanical and emotional forms of movement and suchlike, general education is necessary. There are interesting ideas about 'soul-moods' behind the term 'emotional forms of movement'".

In September of 1920 Perrottet published an article in the magazine Pro Helvetia with a more detailed explanation of her education programme. On Eurhythmmy she says: "Every human being receives many gifts at birth, a thousand capacities for thinking, feeling and willing.[...] It is the sacred task of every being to react, wanting to express the self,

allowing the innermost being to shine forth, so that it can penetrate the shell and send its rays far beyond. We want to help students to find their own balance, a harmony between the demands of spirit, soul and body. For this reason, our educational method addresses the qualities of thinking, feeling and willing. [...] The educational tools needed to help unfold strength of expression are tools derived from art: movement, sounding, speaking, the line and colour. [...] These tools teach us the laws of strength, time and space, they teach us their harmonious, rhythmical blending because they are the expression of the universal rhythm that manifests itself anew in every being."¹⁴

Using the concept of threefoldness in this way was nothing new. Francois Delsarte (1811-1871) developed a detailed threefold system of human body, soul and spirit. Delsarte is also said to have ordered the sounds of language in a threefold way.¹⁵ It is unclear whether Laban and Perrottet adopted these concepts from Delsarte, from Steiner or from both. Did Steiner know Delsarte?

THE LAST PERIOD OF EURHYTHMY

In a letter from Laban to Perrottet, a certain confusion can be detected about a different group that is traveling around Europe doing eurhythmy. In Zurich Steiner publicly presents his eurhythmy for the first time in February and October of 1919. Did Perrottet see these performances?

In a letter dated April 19, 1920 Laban writes: "Your thoughts about 'Eurhythmy' are not yet entirely clear. Eurhythmy is a word from ancient Greek, already used by Lucian in his Dialogue on Dance. Dr. Steiner didn't invent it, nor does it belong to him and he, least of all, has been able to interpret it correctly." Laban writes that he wants to publish an essay about eurhythmy and he adds: "I myself am now entirely engaged with performing, which doesn't really have anything to do with eurhythmy."

Perrottet's Eurhythmy School continues with countless courses and interesting lectures. Deepening her studies of colour, she seeks to augment the quality of movement - not so far removed from exercises practised in Steiner's eurhythmy schools nowadays.

In the end, there is too much confusion between her own, Laban's eurhythmy and Steiner's eurhythmy. In 1924 her school circulates the following letter: "Since the name 'eurhythmy' has taken on a particular connotation because of the way Steiner has used it, we have decided to change the name of our school to 'School for Movement Suzanne Perrottet.' In doing this we hope to avoid any further confusion between our method and Rudolf Steiner's system."

As with the name the school gradually disappears, so does the word 'eurhythmy'. Laban himself, as indeed Dalcroze, both stop using the word for their art forms.

DANCE COSTUMES AND VEILS

Not only were costumes Greek-derived, veils too were widely used by dancers of the time. Veils were 'invented' while looking for 'fabric with a harmonious interweaving of buoyancy and beauty that would lend maximum freedom of movement'.¹⁶ The popularity of veils made them almost a prerequisite for dancers.

It is unsurprising that these 'new' impulses for movement in dance were first actualised in gestures of the arms. Leaps and jumps still occurred but the main tendency dancers showed were flowing, surging movements of the arms clothed in veils. Using the light air-like quality of veils, a rhythmic sculptural vitality could be demonstrated.

Loie Fuller (1862-1928) was an artist who achieved a real breakthrough with veils. She tried to show a dematerialised form of the body by using waves, spirals, circles, S-forms and rolling forms. Coloured lighting transformed her into a magical, supersensible being. Her serpentine dance was a model for the 'Erdgeist' in Max Reinhardt's production of Faust in 1902.¹⁷

The Delsarte method offers a further aspect of dance defined as the art of arm movements: all movements from the shoulders upward were attributed to the spiritual in the human being. The connection with the physical went from the navel downwards through the legs. The emotional-soul quality was centred in the middle region. Who would be surprised that these dancers only moved from the middle upwards?¹⁸

Looking at Steiner's eurythmy figures, one gets the impression that the veils possess their own independent expression. Which eurythmist could ever form a veil as it looks on these figures? (compare: Goetheanum No.1/2, 31 Dec. 2000 the veil of the eurythmist doing an f sound. The veil is immobile and becomes nothing but decoration.)

In the dance world, the veil survives until around the '20s; after this it disappears. Laban, however, inclines neither to the Greek nor to the veil. He creates a kind of neutral, more practical costume.

Whoever studies texts, photos and films of the 'new' dance between 1900-1920 will discover how close the new directions were to each other. That includes Steiner's eurythmy. The context of the programmes, as well as the choice of music, were very similar. Likewise as regards stage design and the dramatic effects of coloured lighting. It was typical at the time to have a person standing in the wings or behind the stage reciting poetry while dancers were performing. It was something 'new' tried out in many places. There are old film documentaries of the Dalcroze school in Hellerau that clearly show the proximity to Steiner's eurythmy. And some of Laban's costumes are very similar to costumes used in Steiner's mystery dramas.

Is it possible to speak of the same impulse? No, certainly not, though there are similar ideas about 'the education of humanity' and all three eurythmy-impulses express a new spirituality. And no, because they maintain a distance from each other and do not wish to be confused. Every artist regarded his/her impulse as an original one: and this is the reason for the various terms for dance forms described at the beginning of this article. However, superficially these different directions seem related and they were all embedded in their time.

Whereas eurhythmics and eurhythmy gradually changed or were lost, Steiner's eurythmy hardly changed at all.

This phenomenon stands alone in the art history of the West. What I had understood to be an archetype was in fact derived from the style and aesthetics of the first two decades of the 20th century. It may be that those who feel the need to preserve this expression of the past experience a particular kind of aesthetic beauty.

EURYTHMY AND THE FUTURE

We can find all the outer characteristics or 'artistic' concepts that until now have been part of eurythmy - partly as tradition and partly as a style with a 'code' as outer support - in connection with a number of other movement artists and seekers. All those mentioned above were left behind by these artists for different reasons and at different times, regarded as artistic stages leading to a dead end.

The view that eurythmy, as it is performed today, justifies its place on stage as a contemporary and modern art form becomes questionable in view of this historical development. Instead, eurythmy has become anachronistic and imprisoned in a rigid conformism, out of which some eurythmists are trying to break with more or less success. This is happening within the performing art of eurythmy and is becoming widespread.

However, the breakthrough cannot take place on all levels simultaneously. Even though a significant majority will not be able to accept or even imagine this process, change and development cannot be arrested. Eurythmists who show an interest in contemporary trends and challenges are eroding a creed that has existed almost eighty years. The rejuvenation of an art form does not have to lead to continuous reproduction. Rather it entails looking for ways of transformation and new development as boundaries get pushed ever further, both outwardly and inwardly. The present need to define what eurythmy is - and what it is not - seems like a gesture of desperation in the face of today's ideals of tolerance and freedom.

Everyone knows that a genuine eurythmist, foregoing all outer support in the attempt to show his/her art as the moving of an incorporated etheric body, is attempting the impossible. On the one hand, the etheric body is a multi-faceted sheath replete with potential, on the other hand to move 'as if' one is an etheric body opens up complex artistic and intellectual questions that go beyond the framework of this article.

Steiner's indications on the etheric body point to a defining of inner qualities. All props and effects used to create the 'illusion' of the supersensible are meaningless in themselves. As partners in a dialogue of broader artistic dimensions, they might justify meaning. Eurythmists able somehow to consciously connect with their etheric body are able to enhance their movements with a definite quality.

In talking about an individual path, I am alluding to the archetypal quality of strength in movement that is a deep, untapped wellspring of infinite variety of gesture. I am not talking about the synchronised principle of visualisation. In connecting to this individual wellspring, all outer models become superfluous. The model is found in the abundance of individual creativity. Once this process has become an act of confidence, the need to reproduce displayed movements falls away. Out of the depths, movements arise that are so imbued with their own individual expression and strength that there is no risk of losing their original character. Conformities end here. Anything to do with 'being normal' and making choices out of tradition or conventionalism becomes uninteresting and unworthy of focus.

Observing what kinds of development contemporary eurythmists undergo as they connect with the questions of their day, engaging in its challenges, becomes ever more interesting. The danger of being anachronistic - and remaining so - diminishes.

In my view, it will be important in the near future to refrain from idealising eurythmy by displaying an attitude that is determined by overestimation. Eurythmy still has to prove its artistic independence and, in that sense, the influence that it exerts on a large community of people and artists.

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Translated by Helga Mattke-Michaels. Revised by Christiana Bryan.

- 1 Jack Anderson: Art Without Boundaries, London 1997, S. xi.
- 2 Der heutige Tanzbegriff ist derart großzügig, daß auch die Eurythmie darin Platz findet. Vgl. Anm. 1, S. 4f
- 3 vgl. Gabriele Brandstetter: Tanz-Lektüren, Frankfurt/M 1995, S. 34, 59, 66ff
- 4 ebenda, S. 61f
- 5 vgl. Rudolf Steiner: Die Entstehung und Entwicklung der Eurythmie, (GA 277a), Gespräch mit Lory Smits über die Dalcroze-Methode.
- 6 vgl. Okkultismus und Avantgarde, Frankfurt/M1995, S. 606f
- 7 ebenda, S. 608
- 8 vgl. den Schluß des fünften Vortrags des Toneurythmiekurses (GA 278).
- 9 vgl. Anm. 3, S. 37
- 10 Alice Fels: Vom Werden der Eurythmie, Dornach1986, S. 71
- 11 vgl. Suzanne Perrottet: Ein bewegliches Leben, Weinheim, Berlin1995, S. 76 und 87
- 12 vgl. Valerie Preston-Dunlop: Rudolf Laban, London 1998, S. 19f
- 13 Perrottet, a.a.O. S. 155
- 14 ebenda, S. 161-166
- 15 vgl. Ted Shawn: Every Little Movement, 1963. Vgl. auch Anm. 6, S. 600ff
- 16 vgl. Anm. 3, S. 131
- 17 vgl. Gabriele Brandstetter: Loïe Fuller, Freiburg 1989, S. 117
- 18 vgl. Suzanne Shelton: Ruth St. Denis, Austin 1990, S. 12