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Letters

Editor:

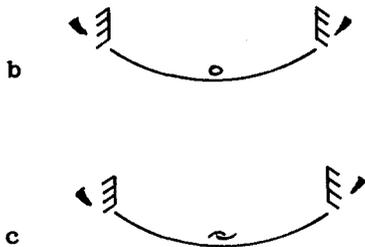
Rose Anne Thom's review of my book *A Study of Ballet Technique*, which appeared in the Spring, 1981 *Dance Research Journal* expresses much welcome praise and appreciation. As she discovered, the book is not without fault, and I was interested to see what she would find. Her quibbles are few and rest mainly on the question of how certain movements are "spelled." For those interested, I would like to take this opportunity to reply to the specific points. Readers may wish to refer to the notation examples on p. 36 of the issue cited above.

Room directions were given before turn signs because in ballet, emphasis is placed on facing the particular room direction rather than on the turning action and degree of turn which must occur for any change of front. Ballet dancers are concerned with such facings as 'en face,' 'croise,' early on in their training. It has long been established practice in Labanotation to make such abbreviations when detail is not needed and the additional indications have not yet been explained. In my study of other systems of dance notation I have been interested to see to what extent the notation is kept simple when the style and context of the movement is known.

In the development of Labanotation I and my colleagues produced increasingly refined movement descriptions so that no room was left for ambiguity. (This in response to the challenge "we can't accept your system until you prove that you can write everything." Needless to say when we had achieved a high level of specificity the same people complained that the system was too complicated!) If other systems of notation operate successfully in allowing the simple and obvious movement transitions to be understood and not stated, why were we fussing so much when such details were not necessary in general practice but only theoretically correct?

Another change in point of view has gradually come about since the early days. We now recognize that a simple notation does not express a precise manner of performance. Exact performance is left open. When precision is needed the means exists in our system for adding all desired details. To cite an example: Does the indication of a single hand clap, as in example a), mean the hands stay together after the clap? Or do they separate immediately?





Some colleagues took one interpretation as the natural and expected result. Others preferred the other. The solution was simple. Example a) does not state what happens after the clap, it is left open to the performer. If it matters, example b) can be written to show that the contact holds, or c), to indicate an immediate release.

In the book *A Study of Ballet Technique*, the *temps lié* introduced near the beginning of the book was given in its simplest form. If weight is only on one foot, an open position of the feet will obviously be achieved by transferring half the weight to the free foot. Theoretically a full notation description requires inclusion of a staple for the foot that does not move. In physical practice, when no jump occurs, this is not needed. In the book, these extra modifying signs – staples and carets – had not yet been introduced, hence their omission.

Rose Anne Thom is right in that the book alternates between the use of destination description and of the indication of the motion through which a new position is reached. Ballet dancers are usually taught to think in terms of destination, thus the majority like to see the notation written as the position to be reached.

In the *temps lié*, Fonteyn, as author of the syllabus, stressed establishing a fourth position in demi-plié. Sometimes the next movement was described as “carry the weight forward,” sometimes as “now pointe-tendue-derriere.” I tended to write what was stressed though in many instances I unified the description for the sake of consistency.

Because Labanotation can describe movement in terms of destinations (positions), or in terms of motion (the passage away from the previous situation), we are always faced with which description to use – which is the most suitable for a particular type of movement or style of choreography. Notators tend to have their preferences and notation teachers may stress one as preferable to the other in their classes. When in dance training a subtle difference in the performance of a movement is to be stressed, the ability of Labanotation to indicate such differences helps significantly in driving home the point and enriching the awareness of the student. This makes the so-called complexity of the system not only

worthwhile but of great value. But of course we all know that it is movement which is complex and no simple notation can capture subtle variations. We need the possibility to go into full detail. But let us be simple when simplicity serves.

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Editor:

Since Drid Williams refers to me in her reply to Judy Van Zile’s comments on Williams’ article “The human action sign and semasiology” (Spring, 1981) I feel I must make clear my role as her advisor in connection with her thesis for her doctoral degree at Oxford. The ‘assessment’ which I sent to E.W. Ardener at Oxford University was not an assessment of the material itself; I could not state that it was accurate since I never saw the final draft. Instead I stressed the importance of including the notation, the degree of research undertaken in its use in her thesis, the splendid start which she had made and how she had grasped rapidly the appropriate principles of the system, applying them logically to the task at hand, what she had accomplished with a limited knowledge of Labanotation, her potential as a future Labanotator, but the need for her to undertake a thorough study of the system which had been touched on only briefly for her thesis.

I was at fault in not making clear to Williams that her final notation examples might quite possibly be inaccurate. Each time a piece of notation is copied errors can creep in and this happens with even advanced notators. After a session with me, where I had stressed what was or was not correct or appropriate for a particular movement, it is very possible that a few days later the differences were not clear and the wrong version was used. In my efforts to encourage her in a period when she was very overworked, I did not stress and so make clear to her the many pitfalls which all notators face. I am considered an expert, but my notations as much as anyone else’s have to be checked and proofread by my colleagues, and it is revealing how often inadvertent minor mistakes occur.

Williams forgot that I had not seen or approved the final version of her thesis and, presuming it to be correct, did not ask the Dance Notation Bureau to check it, but only to make a neat copy, which it seems is all that they did.

As I read Van Zile’s statements the message I get is that we must all be much more careful in having the Labanotation examples we use carefully checked. I would like to add that publishers should also take the precaution of getting notation examples checked, just as the English text is edited and references double-checked. For my article “A Notator at the Hawaii Conference” the DRJ called

on Lucy Venable to check my notation and she unearthed certain instances where the notation was not clear.

In her reply to Van Zile, Williams makes many good points, but her words are charged with feeling. As an ardent advocate of the use of Labanotation, she may well feel betrayed by me and by the Dance Notation Bureau. I hope that the above explanations set the matter straight.

One last word, the notated examples which Williams included in her reply, such as indications for ‘taking’ and ‘breaking’ were experimental usages in which some new signs, with which a few Labanotators have been working, were introduced. For Williams’ needs the indications were kept as abstract as possible, not spelling out a precise movement (except for the action of blessing) but trying to capture the idea. I believe that such experimental usages were valuable in extending the system to cover such needs. An interesting article could be done on such usages, but this would be better suited to a periodical devoted to Labanotation.

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Notice of Vacancies on DRJ Staff

As with most volunteer publications, the staff of DRJ rotates regularly. Terms of service are usually three years, renewable by mutual agreement. While an editor-designate is being selected by the Editorial Board of CORD several other staff positions have also become available. The section editor positions for Book Reviews and Research Materials are open and a new position of Reports Editor has been proposed. An Associate Editor is needed in the area of Biomechanics and Kinesiology.

The staff is actively involved in soliciting materials, assisting in the review and revision process, and preparation of final manuscript. Editors gain valuable experience in writing and editing and may use a section editor position as a prelude to broader editorial responsibilities. While guidelines are available for each position, editors are encouraged to develop their areas and bring new ideas to the Journal.

Members of CORD interested in these positions should write to the editor immediately. Please state the position for which you wish to be considered and enclose a copy of your resume. Scholars wishing to serve as readers are always needed and should contact the editor stating areas of expertise. Address correspondence to Dianne L. Woodruff, c/o Dowd, 136 Grand St. 3C, NY, NY 10013. — Ed.