

THE NOTATION OF FOLK DANCE: A SURVEY

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While a great deal of time has been spent in studying the structural and formalistic approaches to folktale scholarship, almost no work has been done on the same types of approaches to folk dance scholarship, which adhere to traditional views and concepts as much as those of the folktale. The study of folk dance involves a duality in concepts: why study dance, and how should it be studied? Traditionally, dance was notated for several reasons: as a memory aid, as a guide to learning dances in a non-structured, private environment, as a means of copying down unfamiliar steps and postures in a type of shorthand, and, more recently, as a reflection of culture. In the latter case, dance has recently been considered in the same sphere as folk song and folk music, and has been recorded so that it may be integrated into the other areas of folklore studies. Cross-cultural studies have been undertaken to compare and relate cultures by means of their dance styles, moving dance from a simple art form to a cultural indicator reflecting social mores, work habits, and cultural values.

The components involved in studying dance have also developed from the simple to the more complex. While the first methods of dance notation were concerned only with steps executed rhythmically, later studies included dynamics and the use of movement and space. With the introduction of kinesiology as a formal discipline in the 1950's by Ray Birdwhistell, a new dimension was added to the study of dance. Proxemics, or spatial relationships between dancers, was also considered later.

In spite of these advancements in dance theory and style, scholars essentially repeated past works, usually introducing only a different style of notation. The stability of attitudes and manners of treating dance can be seen in the history of dance notation. While scholars introduced new reasons for studying dance and different stylistic features of it, the structuralistic approach has maintained its hold on most of the theories. The most essential quality remains single movement, and most scholars seem to be searching merely for a better way of notating the movements.

The first dance recorder to publish his method of notation was Thoinot Arbeau, who introduced his technique in 1588.¹ Arbeau's system consisted of drawings and descriptions of steps, which were each allocated a specific name. These names would then be placed in the musical scale next to the note which corresponded to the movement. Another early method of notation which has been attributed to Arbeau in some historical accounts is that of "letter substitution". In this technique, names of steps were referred to by their first letters, such as r for reverence, a low bow, v for volta, a quick turn, and s for simple, a step forward. Thus a dance involving six steps forward, a turn, and a low bow would be written 6s, v, r.² Both of these methods, however, are severely limited in their effectiveness. They assume a common terminology among dancers, which may exist for ballet, but is a remote concept in folk dance study. Then too, direction, formation, and other body movements are all elimin-

ated, while the steps alone are presented.

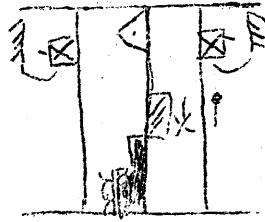
The notational technique published in 1700 by Raoul Feuillet was the first to incorporate "track drawings," an important innovation which was adopted by later notators as well.³ This system is characterized by dotted lines, which represent the footsteps of the dancer. Steps are viewed from the dancer's point of view, a method which does not require the reader to exchange left and right directionals as he would if he were viewing the steps from the audience's position. However, this type of track drawing was utilized only in terms of footwork: body movement was not yet considered important enough to be included in dance notation. Then too, rhythmic correspondences between steps and music were not considered, reducing this method to a memory aid for those already familiar with the dance.

The next method of dance notation to appear was known as "Stenochoreography," or dance shorthand. Introduced by both Arthur Saint-Léon and Albert Zorn in the second half of the nineteenth century, this technique featured skeletal stick figures, adding musical notes to clarify rhythm.⁴ However, stick figures required that the movements be viewed from the audience's perspective, forcing the dancers to exchange left and right as they executed the steps. Stick figure drawing was also time-consuming, and was unable to record intricate steps and floor patterns. The third dimension was completely obliterated in this type of notation, as was movement of any kind. Rhythm was not connected to the figures as timing for movement, and therefore steps could not be correlated to the music. The main advantage of stick figures was that they showed the position of the entire body: movement was to come later.

Later was 1928, when Rudolf Laban reverted to track drawing to incorporate movement with body positions. Laban felt that the main importance of dance notation was to establish a "literature of movement and dance" in order to "(facilitate) the communication of movement ideas to other people."⁵ This would be beneficial for the advancement of a great art form, Laban thought. That this system was designed for ballet and modern dance rather than folk dance is immediately evident: while all physical movements are recordable, there is no provision for cultural peculiarities that would manifest themselves in folk dances. This scientific technique is based on a system of symbols, arranged on a vertical staff which is read from bottom to top. These symbols represent spatial orientation on a temporal continuum, adding the concept of dynamics as well. This is a result of Laban's belief that dance was more than just positions: by emphasizing movement Labanotation provides a continuous flow of energy, equating the importance of transition between positions with the positions themselves.

The vertical staff is divided into two sections, the left and the right. The left section includes the left hand, arm, leg, body division, and division of weight, while the right section includes the right counterparts plus the head. The weight of the body and the leg movements are close to the center dividing line: the other parts of the body are in second columns on either side on the center ones. The basic symbol is the rectangle, alternately transformed to represent forward, backward, or diagonal movements, while the triangle is used for sideward movements. Levels of movement are indicated by shadings -- upwards is a striped symbol, downwards is a blackened one, and a horizontal movement is a clear symbol. The staff is divided horizontally into bars of music, with the beats marked off

evenly within each bar. This allows for the coordination of movement with rhythm, adding stress and dynamics as well. An example of Labanotation, depicting one measure of an Italian tarantella, is shown in Figure 1.



Certain important advantages were encompassed in the Labanotation system, especially the previously mentioned notation of movement as well as of position. The steps are seen from the dancer's point of view, obliterating the necessity of the juxtaposition of right and left. The visual symmetry imposed by the vertical staff facilitates the learning of the dances as well. This system is the most complete method of dance notation even today, in that every movable part of the body is included in a non-verbal form. By the use of symbols, Labanotation is able to cross language barriers, allowing for a flow of exchange between choreographers in different countries. However, great disadvantages reduce the positive attributes of Labanotation. The great amount of diacritical marks and minute symbols requires a long time to learn the system, as well as to transcribe a dance. While the notation would be excellent in recording a dance already known, it would be impossible to record an unfamiliar dance quickly. Then too, although body movements may be communicated well, the emotional content of the dance is completely disregarded. Thus while Labanotation is excellent for ballet or modern dance, where body movements are used to express emotions, it would not convey the mood of a folk dance, which relies on the dance's meaning and purpose.

In 1935 an article appeared in the Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society which, had it been widely accepted by dance scholars, would have changed the course of dance study immediately. The author, Cesare Caravaglios of the University of Rome, seems to be the von Sydow of folk dance scholarship, combining common sense with fresh ideas which were later developed by other scholars. Caravaglios noted that while methods of transcription had changed over the years, the goal of folk dance scholarship remained constant: the concentration on steps and their relation to the music. Even the notational techniques had not varied greatly, consisting of dotted lines representing footwork, verbal descriptions of musical and dance patterns, letters representing the names of steps, and a combination of music and dance on one scale. None of these, Caravaglios stated, allow for emotional movements and reactions, which characterize ethnic groups. In addition to the details of a dance, its characteristic traits must also be recorded, such as gestures, the manner in which the body is held, and any instinctive motions. These reveal differences in culture that footwork alone would never uncover; for example, body stance would be a reflection of that society's manner of walking. Caravaglios felt that gesture in particular was the most important facet of a dance, enabling the student to see "why a certain type of dance with well-defined ethnic characteristics, passing from one country to another...may vary the forms of the gestures, while remaining identical as regards its music; how, in short, it has assumed the ethnic gestures of the new race which has taken the dance to itself."⁷ These variations reflect psychological

differences in cultures, since gesture originates from a group's psychological basis. The culture's climate, nature, and daily life would all contribute to this psychological unity, which would manifest itself in dance gestures. Both this and the physiological origin of dance movement must be studied in a "historico-comparative" method, which unfortunately Caravaglios does not describe. He does, however, state that the "sound-film" is the only acceptable manner in which dances may be studied, allowing for slow motion poses as well as for background material such as music, costumes, and physical settings. This may be supplemented by a table of additional information which would explain intricacies in the steps as well as the meaning of the dance.

Caravaglios discusses the origins of dance as well as its functions and techniques, stating that dance is a result of three factors. These are the "primal nucleus, of ancient origin," any "additions and modifications made...through time and space," and the "introduction of outside elements, borrowed from other dances."⁸ Consequently, he concludes that dance must be a "collective creation," of anonymous origin, which has been transmitted orally and visually through time and space. Any recorded version of a dance is but one rendition of a constantly evolving process, which reflects the cultural background of its executors. Thus Caravaglios reshaped the goal of folk dance studies, providing a new direction which was summarily ignored until the present time.

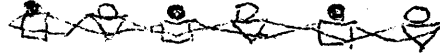
The very next innovation in folk dance scholarship, in 1950, was a new method of linking steps with music. Ideally, the "comparative choreography" of Gertrude Kurath was intended to aid in the discovery of "psycho-religious functions" of dance, as well as to establish its cultural significance. However, after stating the choreographer's essential goal, she devotes her time to a new system of notation. She sees three main elements in folk dance study -- the temporal, the spatial, and the motor -- which are reflected in rhythm, structure, ground plan, steps, and gesture. While Labanotation provides an efficient record of these components, field work requires an easier script, which she proposes for work with American Indian dances. In Kurath's system, symbols based on stick figures are used correspondingly with musical notes. This is accomplished by turning the musical staff in a circular or linear pattern, according to the floor plan of the dance, which she considers the most important of all the elements in dance. Perpendicular symbols (|) represent a shuffling step in a dance, with chevrons (V) indicating flexion in the knees. Diacritical marks denote direction, while figures at the beginning of each phrase stand for the position of the male and female dancers.⁹ In one example, Kurath places the letter S on opposite sides of a circular plan to indicate the stoves in a longhouse, where the dance takes place.¹⁰ Repeat signs (·//·) are used in each phrase to inform the viewer that the steps are continued until the music changes. Kurath claims that since the Indian dancer would never count the number of steps composing a phrase, she would be imposing an artificial standard on the dance were she to include a specified count of steps. However, from a non-Indian dancer's point of view, this would be quite confusing, since timing would not be felt instinctively. Although Kurath introduced her method as a simplified technique that was able to replace Labanotation, her transcription is neither easy nor complete, compelling the recorder to turn the page continually to follow the musical staff, while omitting gesture and dynamics. On the whole, it is useful only in order to show the floor plan in relation to the music. Kurath must have realized this

herself after further experimentation, for in a study of the Iroquois Eagle dance in 1953 she changed her technique completely. In that study, dotted lines were used to trace the paths of dancers in maps of ground plans, while stick figures were used for individual positions and poses. Verbal descriptions of the dance steps were included, as was a musical staff with one horizontal line of symbolic notation moving from left to right below it.¹¹ This composite of techniques was changed again in a study Kurath conducted in 1964 on the precortesian dances of Mexico. Here photographic pictures were used to demonstrate gestures appearing in statues and art work, while Labanotation was used generally to transcribe body positions, flexion, and gesture. Thus the new method of transcription which was introduced in 1950 not only did not alter the course of folk dance scholarship, but looked towards the past for a new direction in which to turn.

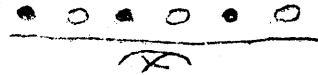
A new notational system, introduced in 1955 by Rudolf Benesh, proved to be nearly as popular as Labanotation with dance recorders. Benesh intended his method of transcription to facilitate remembrance of dance patterns, but also to allow for research and analysis of different dances. This type of notation is "choretic," describing movement as well as positions. It is, according to Benesh, complete, simple to read and write, and fast, enabling the viewer to notate immediately from the performance. Benesh uses the five-line musical staff as a background for his symbols, with each line representing a major element in dance: the feet, knees, waist, shoulders, and head. His symbols are essentially dots and dashes for direction and crosses for flexion, with levels being marked by position on the staff. This notation is also seen from the back, a much simpler method than en face viewing. However, this system presents certain problems in both rhythm and directions. Movement is not shown well in the restricted staff, and, even when musical notes accompany the symbols in an adjoining staff (as is normally the case), there is a disparity between rhythm and dynamics that is not solved. Then too, the movement of the staff from left to right is awkward when the movements of the dance are from right to left. Benesh notation was originally intended for ballet; however, many of its supporters feel that it would be efficient in the study of ethnochoreology, or the "scientific and aesthetic study through notation of all forms of movement"¹² on a cultural level. Here the Benesh system fails, as did Labanotation, with its inability to record emotional content and dance interpretation, and remains merely a fairly effective system of dance transcription.¹³

While it has been exceedingly difficult to do research in the Rumanian sphere of dance scholarship, since all the sources are in Rumanian, their attitudes and theories towards dance are much broader than that of preceding studies. In an article in Revista de Folclor in 1956, one contributor stated that the Rumanians disapproved of the intricate methods that had been adopted lately in the transcription of folk dance, by which I believe he was referring to Labanotation and the Benesh system. While the Rumanians have their own system of notation, they also have a different manner of presenting dance: perhaps the difference lies in the fact that their system was specifically designed for folk dance, rather than for ballet or modern dance. The transcription was devised by Vera Proca, and is based on both rhythm and dynamics. Letters and symbols are both used; for example, D and S (based on the Rumanian drept and sting) are used to refer to left and right for couple dances and for groups of both sexes, while their Greek counterparts, Δ and Σ , are used

for direction in men's dances. Stick figures are also used, although they are frequently abbreviated. For instance, an alternating line of men and women, with hands in a front basket position, would look like this when drawn out with stick figures:



but could also be abbreviated to this form:



indicating that men and women alternate in a straight line, with their hands crossed in front of them. This type of notation, combined with simple diacritical marks, provides a complete transcription of the dance in a much quicker and simpler manner than had been used previously.

However, the Rumanians do not merely notate the movements of a dance. In an early study of Rumanian folk dances, introductory passages discussed types of dances that were most popular, the physical and social settings in which they took place, and the regions in which they were of particular importance. Formations and interpretations were also mentioned, as well as any social interaction that occurred in the dance itself, such as commands by the leader, songs between participants, and calls from onlookers. Any ritual ceremony connected with the dance was described, as well as proverbs and customs that are dance-oriented. The accompanying musicians and the essential characteristics of Rumanian folk music were also discussed. Finally, pictures of traditional dance costumes were inserted. In the description of each particular dance overall character and meaning were discussed, as well as particular formations. The dance itself was described, and the accompanying music was added to the end of the section. While the Rumanian method of dance description is a far more complete and detailed process than has been presented here, any further information must first be translated into another foreign language or English in order to be easily accessible to dance scholars. Based on the little information that could be gathered, however, it would seem that modern scholarship has much to learn from Rumania.¹⁴

In the 1950's dance notation continued to flourish, with many new theories and systems of transcription presenting themselves. The Exhibition of Dance Notation, which took place in London in 1957, was the natural show-place for these innovations. In an article in the Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, Belinda Quirey commented on the exhibition, stating that any means of notation would necessarily be inadequate in that it would attempt to reduce space to the two-dimensional world of paper. She stated that just as music had certain characteristics, such as pitch, duration of sound, and amplitude of vibrations, so dance also had its essential traits. These were body-location, body-shape, duration of movement, and dynamics. Quirey used this division as a basis for criticism of Labanotation, claiming that while Laban dealt only with body shape, body location was the more important factor in Western European folk dances.¹⁵ Quirey is justified in her criticism in that formation is essential in folk dance; however, she negates her statement by extolling one of the new methods of notation presented at the exhibition, that of Noa Eshkol.

The lack of formation, or body location, was not the greatest defect in Eshkol's system: it is virtually unreadable, except to the highly trained recorder. Eshkol herself claims that the notation is for movement, or

"any event which can only be expressed as a relation body-time,"¹⁶ rather than for dance, which would involve aesthetic, emotional, and stylistic concepts. The graph is the background for her body and time lines, the first of which includes six sections representing different body parts. These include the weight and front of the body, the left leg and foot, right leg and foot, the head, torso, and pelvis, the right arm and hand, and the left arm and hand. Movement is seen by symbols, which represent the three types of circular movements possible: rotatory, plane, and curved. These are determined by angularity and spatial relationships of body parts, and are measured by a system of numerical magnitude. For example, if one equaled forty-five degrees, a curved movement of ninety degrees would be represented as 12. Sequences of these symbols, tied together with numbers which reflect the magnitude of the angle, constitute the Eshkol system. The failure of this method of transcription was included in Eshkol's definition: it disregards emotional, aesthetic, and stylistic variations, which are the mainstays of dance. In addition, position is completely ignored, while only motion is recorded. Thus while this notational system may be effective in recording pure movement, it is unsatisfactory and inconvenient as a method of dance transcription.

In the 1960's much more work has been done with dance as a cultural indicator, although the importance of transcription still lingers on in different forms. A dance data guide, written by Joann Kealiinohomoku in the early 1960's, stresses the social context of dances, including the meaning and traditional content of each dance as well as its spatial, temporal, and stylistic characteristics. This is presented as a combination of a list of questions to be used in field work and an outline of those traits which should be recorded, such as dance accompaniment and communication between dancers. Each movable part of the body is itemized to call the notator's attention to them, including facial expression for the first time in dance notation.¹⁷ However, she relies mainly on previous methods of transcription for notating purposes, combining Kurath's ground plan designs, stick figures, and Labanotation's designation of flexion. She does state that her guide is not complete and correct for every situation, another innovation in a field where every new method disclaimed its predecessors. In fact, Kealiinohomoku herself abandons the restriction of her guide for a later study in which she compared Hopi and Polynesian dance styles.¹⁸ Using dance as an indicator of cultural traits, she discussed gesture, performers and performance style, choreography, and ground plans in both societies. Although she concluded that differences in these elements reflect cultural differences, her information is not presented clearly enough to emphasize these dissimilarities. As a result, the reader is involved in an interesting study which fails to carry through its main intentions.

The relationship between dance and culture was not studied scientifically until 1968, when Alan Lomax, Irmgard Bartenieff, and Forrestine Paulay collaborated on just such a topic. The shift to dance style from a study of folk song style and culture was not a large one: Lomax stated that "analogous patterns will be found at the same level in different communication systems."¹⁹ In fact, dance would be an even better reflector of social and cultural factors than song, since it is a primary rather than a derived manner of expression. Lomax advanced his theory that dance reflects the preferred dynamic patterns which appear in daily life, serving primarily as a "representation and reinforcement of cultural pattern;"²⁰ and only secondarily as an emotional outlet. Individual variation in

movement is not as prevalent as that of culture groups, Lomax felt, and to test this theory he introduced the study of choreometrics, which measured cultures in terms of dance styles. He believed that dance controlled the "continuities of all behavior, for example, tempo, energy, flow, length and complexity of statement, level of group contact, voice set, sex role, stance, and the like,"²¹ and that the value of dance analysis was in the identification of this behavior in order to compare and evaluate it. More formally, Lomax stated that the intention of choreometrics would be to test the theory that "dance is the most repetitious, redundant, and formally organized system of body communication present in a culture."²² This intention reflects the influence of the study of kinesics, which stresses body movement as a means of communication and role establishment. As an example of the way in which choreometrics functions, Lomax demonstrates how work positions and social formations carry over into dance. The dances of the Eskimos reflect their way of life in that gestures and positions are similar to those used in daily work routines, while the role of women and amount of group organization is also closely paralleled to working conditions. In this way, Lomax hoped to map similar movement style groups, as he has previously done with folk song style groups.

Technically, choreometrics rejects Labanotation, in that a step-by-step analysis would be too culture-bound for comparison. Instead, more general terms would describe the dynamic qualities appearing in the culture. Then too, Labanotation reflects individual patterns, not cultural ones, and the high degree of idiosyncratic variation recorded would confuse a cross-cultural study. The notational method that Lomax uses is an adaptation of Labanotation to cultural, rather than personal style; however, the choreometric coding book is in itself a limitation in a cultural study by prescribing a rigid checklist, which includes such categories as Active Body Parts, Body Attitude, Spread of Flow Through Body, etc.²³ Movies were also used in the study, but not as intensively as the coding book.

On the whole, dance scholarship has not changed greatly in the past four centuries. While the function of dance notation has changed from that of a memory aid to that of a component in a study of cultural values, the concentration on recording pertinent details persists. Whether stick figures, Labanotation, or coding books are used, their primary goal remains the notation of observable patterns in order to conceptualize the purpose of dance. Perhaps a more profitable system would involve studying the purpose of dance as a determinant in movement, rather than vice-versa. While steps, formations, postures, and movements have all been studied, the emotional content of dance has been completely ignored. Scholars have subjugated the aesthetic and the emotional to the scientific and mechanical aspects of the dance, which may be a grave error in the study of an aesthetic occurrence. While motion pictures are undoubtedly the best manner of recording field data, they have rarely been used in a pre-dance context, in order to study impetus and emotional involvement. However, just as folktale scholarship progressed from the study of motifs to that of the tale-telling community and its psychological involvement with its stock of tales, so folk dance scholarship will, hopefully, advance towards the study of the dance community and its psychological, physiological, and emotional involvement with its dances.

NOTES

1

Philippa Pollenz, "Methods for the Comparative Study of the Dance," American Anthropologist 51:3 (1949), 429.

2

Ibid., p. 429.

3

Ibid., p. 430.

4

Ibid., p. 431.

5

Ann Hutchinson, Labanotation (New York, 1954), Foreword.

6

Ibid., p. 128.

7

Cesare Caravaglios, "The Collection and Transcription of Folk Dances," Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society 2 (1935), 133.

8

Ibid., p. 135.

9

Gertrude Kurath, "A New Concept of Choreographic Notation," American Anthropologist 52:1 (1950), 121. Symbols denoting a line of men and women, in alternating sequence, moving in a forward direction would be as follows: $\circ \uparrow \circ \uparrow$. A man and a woman facing into the center of the circle would be symbolized as \downarrow and \downarrow .

10

Ibid., p. 121.

11

Gertrude Kurath, "An Analysis of the Iroquois Eagle Dance and Song," Bureau of American Ethnology 156 (1953), 234-5.

12

Marguerite Causley, An Introduction to Benesh Movement Notation (London, 1967), 77.

13

However, Benesh movement is highly regarded in the ballet world -- dancers of the New York City Ballet Company who wish instruction in dance notation are taught this method.

14

Rumanian dance notation, or "Romanotation," is also referred to -- in English -- in Viltis 23:6 (March-April 1965).

15

Belinda Quirey, "Dance and Movement Notations," Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society 8:2 (1957), 109-11.

16

Noa Eshkol and Abraham Wachmann, Movement Notation (London, 1958), 2.

17

Joann W. Kealiinohomoku, Dance Data Guide. Unpublished paper, 1966.

18

Joann W. Kealiinohomoku, "Hopi and Polynesian Dance: A Study in Cross-Cultural Comparisons," Ethnomusicology 11:3 (September 1967), 343-58.

19

Alan Lomax, Folk Song Style and Culture (Washington, D.C., 1968), 222.

20

Ibid., p. 223.

21

Ibid., p. 235.

22

Ibid., p. 224.

23

Ibid., p. 265.