

Waldorf Education and the Laban Connection: Excavating the Shared History of Steiner Based
Movement Forms and the Laban/BF Framework.

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I am a mom of five sons. The oldest 8 and the youngest 2 with triplet 6 year olds in the middle. Happily we live near one of the only public Waldorf Charter Schools in the Eastern US. The reputation of a Waldorf education and it's child centered, art and nature focused curriculum, led us to enroll our children at the "Circle of Seasons Waldorf Charter" School in Fogelsville, PA.

When I went in for my first parent teacher conferences in the fall, the kindergarten teacher's assessments of the triplets was not what I expected. She assessed my sons' ability to balance, to throw and catch a ball, to cross the midline of the body with gesture and functional activities and to move with upper/lower developmental patterns. She connected these physical milestones and skills to how she felt they were doing in regards to their socialization, peer interactions and preparation for academic work.

My oldest son's second grade teacher spoke about the three dimensionality of movement activities and discussed how in second grade in art, movement, and math, the students would be working with the planes. "Where am I?" I thought to myself. This is my language, this is Laban isn't it? I realized that at the very least it was a teaching methodology that is valuing movement as a place of discovery and holistic expression and dealing with movement as a primary foundation for all learning.

When I began to share with my sons' teachers insights from my Laban work and research, neither of these educators had ever heard of him. Where then, was this vocabulary that they were using coming from? Where were these movement insights and movement commitments coming from? I began to do a bit of research into the relationship of the two Rudolfs: Rudolf Steiner, a philosopher and occult spiritualist, founder of the Anthroposophy Society and of Waldorf education, among many other things, and Rudolf von Laban, the dancer choreographer and theorist on whose shoulders we all stand here today.

Rudolf Steiner 1861-1925

- 1888 Publishes his first book based on Goethe's ideas of science and art. Steiner would write over 40 books, numerous articles and give over 6000 lectures. (Nobel,1985)
- 1907 publishes his article on education "the Education of the Child,"
- 1911 Steiner lectures near Asconia, Switzerland the site of Monte Vertia an artist/anarchist colony. Ida Hoffman and Henri Oedenkove the founders of Monte Vertia are influenced by this lecture. Steiner goes to Monte Verita.¹
- 1911 Established the movement form Eurythmy with his second wife Marie von Sivers
- 1913 begins the construction on the "Goetheanum" at Dornach, a building designed by Steiner as the hub for the Anthroposophical Society and its cultural events including drama's written by Steiner, Eurythmy performances and the setting for many Steiner lectures and training series.
- 1919 Established the Waldorf School, the basis for a world- wide system of education.
- 1923 Steiner solicits Count Fritz Von Bothmer to establish a physical education program for the students at the Waldorf School. This becomes Bothmer Gymnastics. This form continues to be developed through 1938. Bothmer Gymnastics along with Eurythmy continue to be taught in the Waldorf education model.²

Rudolf von Laban 1879- 1958

- 1913- 1917 Laban was asked to run a summer dance program at Monte Verita.
(Bradley, 2009, pg 9)
- 1915 Establishes a training center in Zurich, later moves it to Munich
- 1920 Publishes his first book "The World of Dancers"
- 1926 Publishes "Des Kindes Gymnastik and Tanz" Gymnastics and Dance for Children

The biographies and accomplishments of both men are much more diverse and complex than this of course. But I want to highlight the simultaneous areas of shared inquiry and moments of potential encounter that may have occurred. Both men visited Monte Verita, the anarchist,

nudist, artist colony. It is unclear if they met there, but it is clear that both men had significant influence on the community developing there, and in this way may have potentially influenced one another.³ They are each, at the same moment in history, publishing their thoughts on the power of the moving body, speaking about their movement ideas, developing new movement pedagogies, and presenting movement performances. Both establish centers for training in Switzerland and Germany, 1913/1915 Durnach/Berlin and Zurich/Munich respectively. At roughly the same time both develop practices around children's movement training. Steiner was guiding the development of Bothmer Gymnastics and Laban was publishing his book *Gymnastics and Dance for Children*.

What I have observed from these synchronicities is three fold. First that not only is there contemporaneous work on these subjects, but that there are compelling similarities in the basic world view/spiritual vision that underpins each man's thinking. This is reflected in complementary philosophies about the nature of movement and education that lead me to view them as allies in thinking. Secondly, that there is some evidence of shared substance, that Laban's "Dance, Sound, Speech" courses offered in Zurich and explored at Monte Verita in the 1910's bore a striking similarity in the way they were conceived, taught and experienced to that of Eurythmy developing at the same time. While the focus on music and speech at this time is interesting, if not long standing for Laban, the exploration of Space Harmony (a term used by both, but having more of a specific definition for Laban) remain a central element to the movement ascribed to both men to this day.⁴

Eurythmy and Laban's "Dance Music Word"

Eurythmy, which was developed by Steiner and his second wife Maria, has roots in the Delsarte training Marie had received that put primacy on reflecting the music or poetic accompaniment. Eurythmy continues in this tradition by creating a movement vocabulary connected to tones and chords of the music and sounds of the voice or words of the text. This movement vocabulary also includes actions correlating to archetypal human emotions from joy to pain. The application of Eurythmy can be spiritual, therapeutic, pedagogic and performative, with the potential and

perhaps intention of being some degree of all four of these elements at the same time in each setting that it is experienced. This range of intention is what led Steiner to describe Eurythmy as a physical art, but not as dance.⁵ It also reflects Steiner's philosophy of embracing the wholeness of man by uniting mind and body, art and science, the spiritual and physical in an 'experiential' way. Rudolf Steiner described Eurythmy in a lecture on August 26th 1923,

This is the essential point – that Eurythmy is visible speech, visible music. One can go even further and maintain that the movements of Eurythmy do actually proceed out of the inner organization of man.

In the 1910's, the same time Steiner is developing Eurythmy Laban is using a pedagogy entitled "Tanz, Ton, Wort." Dance Music Word (McCaw 2010, pg 27.) He writes a prospectus for his own Course entitled "Dance Sound Speech" to be held at his new school in Zurich that includes these thoughts;

"The gap between body and intellect is being bridged and so the original aim of man comes into being the only aim of the future: 'the whole man'.

The Laban courses are serving this aim as they offer the opportunity not only to the artists and those who wish to become artists, but also to the non-professionals to get to know and learn and master the three main fields of movement sound and speech.

Our present time teaches us that we not only need strong intellectual but also physically capable men. No more one sided super development but that of the whole human being. (McCaw, 2010,pg 27)

In the broadest view what Eurythmy and Laban Movement practices share is a commitment to uniting the inner and outer self. A desire to connect to the environment and find through movement spatial harmonies and rhythms that have implications beyond the individual and can when experienced be enlightening to the participant. Laban wrote, "Our body is a mirror through which we become aware of the ever circling motions of the Universe." (Laban 1966, pg 26.)

Granted, there are significant difference in the movement systems. When observing a Eurythmy performance or class, or a Bothmer Gymnastic class on YouTube, the physical material looks very much like a product of the very early 20th century. Laban's "Dance Sound Word" pedagogy did focus on embodying the external sound like in Eurythmy, and may have looked likewise. But quickly Laban's approach to movement shifted beyond the relationship to the sound and music

accompaniment to one of an inner motivation, expressionism in dance. Facilitated by his theory of Space Harmony, Laban's movements evolved beyond defined actions or prescribed vocabularies to be explored.

The two Rudolf's thoughts on movement for children

Steiner's educational philosophy is unequivocal in understanding physical movement as an underlying essential for all learning and in asserting that all learning benefits from engaging the physical body. That is why in a Waldorf curriculum it is very likely for a math lesson or any other concept to be introduced through movement. (Oppenheimer 2007, pg 25)

What is fascinating to me and potentially overlooked in our modern day practices is the reason for Steiner's commitment to the additional movement activities Eurythmy and Bothmer Gymnastics. They do not come in service to learning other subjects, but are modes of study in and of themselves and provide the child with an arena for distinctive personal growth. Steiner required Eurythmy at the Waldorf School for all ages and instigated the development of Bothmer Gymnastics to focus on the needs of growing children at different developmental stages. There is a clear belief, that beauty as reflected in the clarity of spatial design, attunement to rhythm in sound and actions, and intentional coordination of a community of movers imprints positive messages on the growing child and in Steiner's own words provides an important training ground for the training – "empowering of the child's will". This is an essential aim of the Waldorf education. Steiner Wrote:

Gymnastic exercises must for example be composed so that the following feeling in the young person appears at each movement and at each step: 'I can feel strength growing within me.' And this feeling must fill the whole inner being as a wholesome joy, as pleasure. In order to think up what would fulfill these requirements, one must definitely possess more than a rational anatomical and physical approach to the body.(Nobel 1996, pg 245.)

By introducing a creative artistic element into the process of knowledge, the material can be given a concrete living form and thereby the interplay and unity between form and content, as between nature and spirit, the inner and outer can also be experienced by the person (Nobel 1996,104)

In Laban's Book entitled *Gymnastics and Dance for Children* published in 1926 and translated by Stefanie Sachsenmaier and Dick McCaw, we can read a similar understanding of how movement can play a vital role in education:

This coming closer is based on our understanding that only with a body whose soul and spirit are in harmony can we provide that measure and conscience towards which we inwardly aspire as the ultimate aim of the cultured whole man.

There is above all a fundamental conviction that life does not exist just to be endured, but in creating a free life which in itself contains the urge to balance inner and outer life beautifully and harmoniously. In order to introduce young people to gymnastic experiences one should not work simply with theoretical concepts and cold utilitarian approach... One has to smooth the way for the instinctive strivings of these children and to show them the joys and sorrows of human destiny in the constraints and possibilities of body movement. (McCaw 2010, pg 78.)

These educational ideas are still revolutionary in a society that continues to relegate physical knowledge and bodily experiences to a mechanical realm, and views the body as something to train rather than a dynamic part of who we are, a body mind and spirit. This shared perspective alone makes Laban and Steiner important allies in understanding and communicating a holistic role for movement experiences.

The similarities don't stop with just content, theory or in pedagogical approach. The focus in these years of both men on spatial pulls, expansion and contractions, directions and planes, may also come from the fact that both men studied architecture, and were interested in innate natural forms occurring in nature. So are these similarities in their philosophies just the common ground of the intelligentsia of that day evolving independently in the milieu, or did they have any influence on one another?

Steiner was senior to Laban and had established himself as an influential thinker, lecturer and author well before Laban ideas are introduced through publication or performance. Steiner is known for his wide ranging spiritual and philosophical ideas on science, society, and education

which, were inspirational and transformative for many artists including Kandinsky among other.

Dick McCaw notes in the *Laban Source Book* that

In his work [Laban's work] of the 1910's and 1920's there are references to Laban's interest in Rosicrucian thinking, and you may detect connections with the theosophy of Rudolf Steiner. (McCaw, 2010, pg 17)

Preeminent Laban Scholar Valerie Preston Dunlap stated in a presentation in 2008, that in the year 1911, Steiner, Dalcroze and Kandinsky were all calling on artists to find a way to embody "the underlying spiritual dimensions in their art" and that Laban's "spiritually imbued space harmony praxis was to form a major part of this endeavor." (Preston-Dunlap 2010, pg 42)

While Laban may have been inspired by Steiner's thinking either directly or through other associations, it is possible that there was a cross fertilization of ideas and movement practices from the younger man to the older as well. Steiner's ideas continued to find new applications in Eurythmy and other movement practices developed at the Waldorf School contemporaneous to Laban's activities. Steiner's wife Marie, the principle instructor and developer of Eurythmy, had been influenced by Delsarte, Delcroze and perhaps Laban. Belief in the importance of human movement in education, seeing movement as a way of uniting oneself to both the cosmos and one's own soul, was certainly an important part of these ideas. Laban continued to explore movement potential in this same vein long after Steiner's death. In part he did this by continuing to apply in an undualistic manner the scientific and artistic method to movement that sought human wholeness on all levels; the Goethe ideal that Steiner spent his life promoting.⁶

Laban and Steiner's movement forms are undoubtedly cousins, responding to the same cultural climate, sharing histories and lineages, and perhaps even influencing one another as they developed. But devoted practitioners of Waldorf education may not have directly engaged with the Laban/BF framework either. After all they have two well-developed physical traditions stemming directly from Steiner and may not see a need to embrace modalities outside of the Steiner inspired sphere. Most private Waldorf schools offer Eurythmy or Bothmer Gymnastics or rely on the work of *Spatial-Dynamics* as developed by Jaimen McMillan and *Movement for Childhood* exercises designed by Waldorf educator Jeff Tunkey. Both of these later systems clearly base their work directly on Steiner's theories as well as the two earlier movement forms.

In addition, while Steiner's theories on education are finding scientific evidence to support its methodologies, educators in the Waldorf community have had to be protective and perhaps even insular in their work in an attempt to maintain the distinctiveness and vision of the educational experience for the children.

But as public Waldorf schools around the country begin to negotiate the philosophical straddle of maintaining a vibrant 100 year old educational traditions with a changing demographic of families enrolling in Waldorf Schools and as they grapple with the oversight of public school assessment and governmental standards, the opportunity for aligned movement practices such as Laban/BF to be included in the Waldorf curriculum may now be ripe. This is not to reinvent traditional Waldorf movement forms, but to offer support for shared educational goals, through a movement framework that is related and sympathetic to the Steiner world view. A Waldorf school that seeks to empower and equip the student through developmentally appropriate movement material and that sees the body as more than a machine to be trained but as an expression of the inner being as articulated by Steiner, will find an advocate and asset in the Laban/BF movement practitioner and the Laban/BF theory.

I want to conclude with one last quotation on the role of the teacher in childhood education. I believe this quote could have been uttered by either man and I want you to guess who you think wrote this.

The educator who deals with children in any form is a gardener. He has before him a plant given by nature which he cannot force into blossoming in a way that is out of the ordinary. He will never be able to turn the buttercup into an orchid; but he can give the buttercup its place in life as much as the orchid where it can grow and bloom properly and where the heart rejoices in its presence... The Educator is a gardener not only in his selection of the means by which he fertilizes and cares for his plants but also in the patience with which he allows his plants to grow without demanding any distortion of form. (McCaw 2010, pg 73.)

Rudolf von Laban

NOTES

1. This information was found in a Blog by Historian Annalisa P. Cignitti, discussing the history of Monte Verita: <http://www.rocaille.it/il-monte-verita-ad-ascona/>
2. More information on Bothmer Gymnastics can be found at: <http://www.bothmer-movement.eu/uk> and at <http://www.movementforchildhood.com/movement-articles.html> specifically in the article “Space is Human” by Paul Mathews.
3. Valerie Preston Dunlap 2009, discusses Laban’s spiritual bent and time at Monte Verita
4. The website for Bothmer Gymnastic describes themes of spatial tension, and spatial harmonies, as does the website for the school of Eurythmy in Chestnut Hill, New York <http://www.eurythmy.org/>
5. <http://www.waldorfanswers.org/Resources>
6. Valerie Preston Dunlap 2009 discusses Laban’s spiritual bent, and Agnes Nobel, 1996 describes in detail Goethe’s influence on Steiner’s thinking.

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