

Getting music to move

By Jacqueline Vann

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As a child learning the piano and violin I only ever played with a fraction of myself, I now realise. By that I mean I used my eyes to read the music and my fingers to press the keys or strings, while counting was a mathematical affair with minims and semibreves lasting as long as two and four crochets respectively. I didn't really listen to the sounds I was making, I had a fairly rigid body and an incomplete understanding of the music I was trying to play. I did have a good sense of pulse and sang in tune and so grew up labelled "good at music" and yet I instinctively knew that there was a whole chunk of experience missing.

It wasn't until my '20s, when I came upon a method of learning music called Dalcroze Eurhythmics, that the missing pieces of the jigsaw fell into place. I realised then that what I lacked all those years ago was, in the views of its creator, Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, a good dose of rhythmics before beginning any instrument. What I needed was to *feel* music in my body first.

Music and movement might have been part of the musical upbringing for many of us as very young children. But at the beginning of the last century the 'original' music and movement was rapidly developing with great effect in Switzerland and, within a decade, establishing itself in Britain.

Jaques-Dalcroze was a music professor at the Geneva Conservatory, where he spent much of his time trying to "find both cause and cure for his students' persistent difficulties". These he defined as a lack of feeling for the music they were playing, difficulty resolving the simplest rhythmical problems and often being unable to hear the harmonies they wrote.

At that time, psychologists and educationalists were beginning to look at the child as a whole being. While in Europe dance, gymnastics and physical education were flourishing, in America and Germany other researchers were emphasising that the nature of rhythm was fundamentally a motor function. For sound to be produced there must be corresponding movement. The more Dalcroze explored the problems of his students the more he was drawn to a physical solution.

One commentator, Giles Comeau, wrote; "The study of music must be done through the body, since of the three fundamental elements of music – melody, rhythm and dynamic energy – the last two are entirely a function of movement and find their ideal example in the muscular system...the body is capable of producing all the nuances of tempo (allegro, andante, accelerando, ritenuto) and all the nuances of dynamic energy (forte, piano, crescendo, diminuendo)".

Jaques-Dalcroze experimented by using movement as an approach to understanding these notions which, up until then, had only been taught in an intellectual way, one which led to the creation of technicians rather than musicians. Comeau again: "With this method, musical concepts are experienced and internalized by what Jaques-Dalcroze called the sixth sense, the kinaesthetic sense. The body, or more specifically the action of the body, is at one and the same time the source, *the instrument* and the basic requirement of all understanding." Learning is deep, profound and very personal.

He coined the umbrella name of Eurhythmics to cover several branches of study, of which the most central is 'Rhythmics'. This is a way of

developing physical skill in, and awareness of, musical events such as pulse and bar-time etc. Other key branches are Solfa (ear-training) and Improvisation. He argued that the body must know what these events feel like and that it's not enough to have just an intellectual and aural understanding of them.

In rhythmic pupils build up physical experience and physical understanding at an unconscious level first of all. The movement is not a prescribed dance form but whatever movement vocabulary the students themselves bring. Pupils learn from each other and expand their movement vocabulary by imitating one another and by being encouraged and challenged to try new ways of doing things. At times objects will be used such as balls, hoops, scarves and elastic. These objects help us to feel musical events more clearly as well as extending our movement vocabulary further – a ball bounced on the first beat of the bar can help us feel the emphasis and weight of a first beat as well as encouraging us to feel a sense of bounce in our own body, a moment of tension and release, which we can later adopt in our playing. Bit by bit all this accumulated unconscious experience is made conscious and the appropriate musical signs and symbols are introduced.

Key to all this is achieving everything with minimum effort - to use, as far as possible, the body effectively. As a result the teacher is frequently drawing the pupils attention to posture, to where the weight of the body is and suggesting ways to eliminate any redundant movement. This has very important implications for the instrumentalist later on.

A study of rhythmic generally begins with an exploration of pulse, leading to divisions of the beat (quavers, semiquavers, triplets etc) and enlargements of the beat (minims, semibreves etc). This naturally leads onto notation. Notes are given names such as *walk* for crochets, *jogging* for quavers, *skippy* for a dotted quaver/semiquaver and *stride* for minims, etc. This is not, as one Ofsted inspector seemed to think, liable to confuse the pupil. The names take advantage of the very natural movements children make when young and, most importantly, such names deflect us from seeing notes as fractions or doublings of another note. They are experienced as notes in their own right, with their own *quality* based on their duration (*stride* is one giant step taking up, roughly, twice as much space as a *walk* or *crochet* step). The notes are not only stepped. *Walks* and *strides* can be clapped as well as being expressed in movements.

From here, notes are combined to explore simple, then increasingly more complex, rhythms – stepped, clapped or moved. This in turn will lead to bar-time, phrasing and form. Jaques-Dalcroze left no musical event free from its own exploration in a physical, whole-body way including unequal beat, 2 against 3, canon, dynamics, polyrhythm - to name but a few.

The Dalcroze method builds up the most fabulous bank of motor skills available for students to apply later on in their music making. It also helps, however, in developing the necessary skills for a good musician. Listening skills become highly developed and the pupil is alert and ready to respond. In a typical Dalcroze lesson the class is lead from the piano or other instrument (including voice) and it's quite possible to guide much of the lesson with music rather than words. With my youngest pupils of 2-3 years old I have aural cues for stand up, sit down, find a good space, come and sit down by the piano, stretch, flop, turn around (loudly, softly, slowly or quickly), find a partner and get ready. All of this demands that the children listen but it is fun to do and there is no effort on their part. They are simply

having their ears kept gently alert and ready. Just what we need for being a good musician.

Other skills developed in the learning process include how to release tension, how to work as part of a group or ensemble as well building up the confidence to work alone. Memory is expanded, concentration and focus developed, reactions speeded up. Pupils learn to react visually, as might be necessary if they are having to watch a conductor, for example, or aurally if they are accompanying a singer. Coordination is developed in all sorts of ways by means of games involving feet and hands, left and right, voice and body. Sometimes different parts of the body are required to do the same thing (clap and step a crochet beat), sometimes they must do different things at the same time (step crochets while clapping quavers). Pupils are asked to create and make up things for themselves from a simple rhythm or a sequence of bar-times to something more complex like a movement piece expressing a variety of musical events. They also learn to communicate their ideas clearly to others in the group.

While Jaques-Dalcroze began with his conservatory students he quickly came to realise that to start young would be most beneficial. This should not, however, suggest that the method has less to offer older children, music students and fully trained teachers and performers. The Swiss composer, Frank Martin, who was a contemporary of Jaques-Dalcroze and dubious about the personal benefits to him, was bowled over when he first joined in a rhythmic class - so much so that he trained in Eurhythmics as a result.

The goal of Eurhythmics is to enable students at the end of their studies not to say "I know" but "I feel. Emile Jaques-Dalcroze wrote in 1898, "I look forward to a system of music education in which the body itself shall play the role of intermediary between sound and thought, becoming in time the direct medium of our feelings...the child will thus be taught at school not only to sing, listen carefully and keep time, but also to *move* and think accurately and rhythmically. That would constitute at once instruction *in* rhythm and education *by* rhythm".

Quotes taken from *Dalcroze Today - An Education through and into Music* by Marie-Laure Bachmann and *Comparing Dalcroze, Orff and Kodály - Choosing your approach to teaching music* by Giles Comeau. Both are available from the Dalcroze bookshop, Tel: 01932 348 754.

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