

Chapter 16

An Application of the Work of Rudolf von Laban to Propel Musical Line

Motion comes from emotion.

Children use kinesthesia to learn about their world. But Western education attempts to train the mind, and pays little attention to the kinesthetic sense.

Robert M. Abramson
Dalcroze Eurhythmics, video

While it has lately been popular in certain quarters to equate body movement with the “natural” and the “authentic” in human behavior, there is actually very little instinctive about the way we move. Due to the nature of the human brain, as mentioned earlier, voluntary movement must be learned through interaction with other human beings within a social context. Consequently, body movement is a highly structured, culturally coded form of symbolic communication, equivalent in its sophistication to the better-known extension systems of language, music, mathematics, and so on. As part of the extended world, human movement has become an abstraction of the real, biological world. Paradoxically, body movement is at once natural and contrived, visceral and symbolic, personal and social, ever present and constantly disappearing. (pp. 84–85)

Carol-Lynne Moore, Kaoru Yamamoto
Beyond Words

Musical rhythmic movement consists of linking up durations, geometry consists of linking up fragments of space, while living plastic movement links up degrees of energy. (p. 10)

Economy and balance: such should be our motto. We must economize our nervous expenditure, which expresses itself in angry starts, sudden, irregular, impatient movements, depression, hypersensitiveness. We must economize our time, cease work before the point of fatigue is reached, anticipate the moment when rest becomes necessary. And we must economize our will to progress, moderate our appetites, and balance our desires of creation with the means at our command. (p. 12)

Emile Jaques-Dalcroze
Eurhythmics Art and Education

It goes without saying that a musical phrase is movement, and vice versa. As singers, our movements relay our innermost rhythm, musical line, and textural colors. At times, our movement courts the singers to move their sound in response to our gesture, and at other times, our conducting mimes the sound that is in our inner musical fantasy world. The ability to move freely is a prerequisite for the study and understanding of music phrasing. The ability to reacquaint oneself with the infinite vocabulary of movement is an essential readiness for music making. The body must be reacquainted with its full movement potential so that through movement, one can elicit, evoke, excite, awaken, mirror, court, and reflect the sound of each piece.

As children, each one of us experienced the **entire** world of movement. In our play we ran, we jumped, we swung. We leaped and rolled and tumbled, skipped and hopped. We moved by ourselves and with others. We played circle games. Play was movement. Serious play was on the playground and in the home. Life was play, and play was movement. Movement was our lives. As we grew older and more mature, we began to move less and less. Play became a less prominent part of our life. Movement no longer felt natural and spontaneous. As our bodies grew, we

moved less and less. The world we grew into did not encourage movement. Consequently, as we grew older, we settled upon a limited, yet efficient movement vocabulary that would get us through our day-to-day life. Can that spontaneous movement of early childhood be rediscovered? Yes! Is that rediscovered movement world necessary for the development of the beginning conductor? Yes. The work of Rudolf von Laban can reawaken life movement experiences so they can be used in singing.

Rudolf von Laban

Rudolf von Laban was born in 1879 in Bratislava, Hungary, the son of an army general. His early years were preoccupied with observing movement. As a child, he spent considerable time drawing and visualizing patterns in space. His desire to understand both physical and mental effort led him to a lengthy course of study in painting, sculpture, and stage design in Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. As part of his training, he studied various cultures, particularly the natives of Africa, the people of the Near East, and the Chinese.

In 1910, Laban founded his first dance group and school in Munich, where he developed one of his favorite genres: the movement choir. During World War I, he lived in Switzerland and continued to develop his ideas. In 1919, he formed a stage dance group, the Tanzbuhne Laban, which specialized in expressive dance. Through that ensemble, he created many full-length dance compositions (*The Swinging Cathedral*, *Die Geblendeten*, *Gaukelei*, *Don Juan*, and *Die Nacht*).

In 1926, Laban founded the Choreographic Institute in Wurzburg, which he later moved to Berlin. That institute specialized in the development of a dance notation system, originally known as *Eukinetics*, which was published in 1928 as *Kinetography*. In the United States, his work is known as *Labanotation*.

Laban became director of movement at the Berlin State Opera in 1930 and subsequently was recognized as one of Europe's most famous choreographers.

Unable to continue work under the Nazi regime, Laban and some of his pupils sought sanctuary in the United Kingdom. Laban introduced modern educational dance into the schools as a new creative subject. In Manchester, England, where he lived from 1942 to 1953, he helped establish the Art of Movement Studio with Lisa Ullman. Concurrently, he established the Laban-Lawrence Industrial Rhythm, which developed new approaches for the selection, training, and placing of workers in addition to developing working processes based upon the movement of man. Through that work,

Laban developed the effort graph as a means of recording the kinesthetic quality of individual performance in industry.

In 1946, the Laban Art of Movement Guild was formed. That guild supported the movement training center for movement study and educational dance based upon Laban's concepts. Laban lectured on a regular basis at his studio, and at the same time, he lectured at colleges and universities.

In 1953, Laban moved to Addlestone, Surrey, where he established archives for his own work and the work of the Art of Movement Studio. In 1954, the Laban Art of Movement Centre was formed as an educational trust to perpetuate his work and to promote and provide education in the art of movement. He continued to work at Addlestone until his death in 1958.

Philosophical Basis of the Work of Laban

For Laban, the act of moving was a link between the physical and mental experiences of life. He believed that through the act of moving, one experienced an interaction of mind and body. He also believed that movement was everywhere; movement could be seen, organized, and understood in a still leaf, in a child at play, in a simple walk, and through all aspects of our daily lives.

To Laban, the central issue underlying the understanding of movement was that persons needed to visually, physically, and internally experience the energy of movement and then develop the ability to describe those movement experiences. He believed that after helping a person recall experiences from his or her "movement thinking," that person could enrich his or her movement vocabulary by experiencing similar experiences. For example, Laban believed that a person could recall movement experiences from earlier in life. The person could (a) be helped to recall the total experience of skipping, (b) be guided to make a self-analysis of the skipping, and (c) provide a vocabulary that describes the experience of skipping to heighten the skipping experience. Laban believed that everyone experiences all the subtleties and complexities of movement during early childhood but that not everyone recalls all of those movements in later life.

Part of the Laban movement analysis is to identify which specific movement experiences a person is not recalling and then provide prescriptive movement instruction to reawaken those movements in that person. Those who instruct and guide movement must have a comprehensive variety of movement experiences themselves to effectively diagnose, prescribe, and

teach movement. Moreover, to teach movement with meaning, movement experiences should be guided through the use of specific movement themes, known as the **Efforts in Combination**. While Laban never made an application of these principles to music, since 1979 it has been my work to extend his philosophy into the various aspects of music making.

The Laban Effort Elements: Flow, Weight, Time, and Space

Movement is more than a change of location of the body or a change in the position of the body limbs. There are changes in speed, changes in direction, changes in focus, and changes in the energy associated with different movements. Consequently, there is a constant fluctuation in levels of exertion. Laban defined exertion in movement as the *interrelationship of flow, weight, time, and space*, which he called the **Effort Elements**. For each of the four Effort Elements, Laban identified a pair of extremes, which he called "qualities," with the idea that the quality of each element of a given movement could be described in relation to its placement on a continuum that extends between those two extremes.

Flow is the variation in the quality of bodily tension that underlies all of the Effort Elements. The extremes of flow are free and bound. **Free flow** allows body energy to move through and out beyond the body boundaries without any restriction. Ideal free flow movement is difficult to stop. A person experiencing total free flow would be difficult to stop, weightless and unhampered by tension. **Bound flow** movement is restrained and can be stopped easily; it forces the mover to contain energy within the body boundary. A person experiencing extreme bound flow would be tense to the point of motionless. Between the two extremes of free flow and bound flow are infinite gradations of tension.

Weight is the sensation of force or burden exerted in a movement. The extremes of weight are light and heavy. **Light movement** can be described as delicate and overcomes the sensation of body weight. **Heavy movement** is forceful and uses the sensation of body weight to make an impact. A person must sense the quality of his or her movements as being either light or heavy. Central to one's understanding, and consequently to one's understanding of rhythm, is the ability to sense involuntary changes in one's own body weight as well as the ability to change weight at will.

Time relates to the expenditure or duration of time in a movement.

The extremes of time are sustained and quick. **Sustained time** is prolonging, lingering, or decelerating. **Quick time** contains a sense of urgency and rapidity. For musicians, the Effort Element of time is closely related to tempo.

Space is the manner in which energy is focused in a movement. The extremes of space are either direct or indirect. **Indirect movement** involves a flexible but all-encompassing attention to the environment. **Direct movement** involves a channeled, singularly focused awareness of the environment. The element of space is closely related to the concept of focus. Is the space in which a movement takes place focused or spread? Do all body parts focus to a central point, or are they dispersed?

One might think of the Effort Elements of flow, weight, time, and space as the how, what, when, and where of movement.

Experiencing the Efforts in Combination

It is easiest to gain an understanding of the Effort Elements through their various combinations as suggested by Laban. It is difficult to experience flow, weight, time, or space separately. By adjusting the relative intensities of flow, weight, time, and space within an activity, one can relate an infinite variety of movement possibilities. Laban assigned an action verb to each combination of three of the Effort Elements. Central to his theory is the simultaneous concentration on the three elements of weight, space, and time taking over, or predominating, changes in flow. Laban's action verbs, which describe combinations of the Effort Elements, along with movement examples for each verb are shown on the next page. The abbreviations denote S = Space, W = Weight, and T = Time.

For each of the Efforts in Combination, the elements of time, space, and weight interact to produce the illusion of flow. That is, the perception of one's rhythmic and gestural flow is a by-product of the interaction of time, space, and weight. Flow cannot exist alone. It is the result of infinite combinations of time, weight, and space, which produces an infinite variety of movement. The genius of Laban is the ability to observe how the combinations of time, space, and weight can be varied to produce what is perceived as flow. These principles are important to conductors to make them aware of the infinite potential of their own movement and to reawaken movement within themselves that may not have been used since childhood, or to reawaken movement that may not be part of their current life experience.

Laban Efforts in Combination to Describe Movement

Laban Action Verb (Elements)	Qualities	Movement Examples
float	indirect (S) light (W) sustained (T)	treading water at various depths
wring	indirect (S) heavy (W) sustained (T)	wringing a beach towel
glide	direct (S) light (W) sustained (T)	smoothing wrinkles in a cloth ice skating
press	direct (S) heavy (W) sustained (T)	pushing a car
flick	indirect (S) light (W) quick (T)	dusting off lint from clothing
slash	indirect (S) heavy (W) quick (T)	fencing serving a tennis ball
dab	direct (S) light (W) quick (T)	typing tapping on a window
punch	direct (S) heavy (W) quick (T)	boxing

Laban believed that to become adept with movement, one should develop a daily routine of exploring the Efforts in Combination. In the initial stages of movement exploration, the "labeling" and understanding of the Effort Element content in everyday life activities provide the foundation of movement

understanding because it grows out of one's personal experience. Laban believed that we have all experienced a complete spectrum of movement possibilities as children, but we have forgotten those movement experiences because the routine of our daily lives has minimized our daily movement experience. For each of the Combinations shown on the previous page, there are suggestions of life activities that would reawaken that particular Effort Combination within the conductor. Mime each of the suggestions for each category and discover how a change in one or more of the individual Effort Elements changes the movement. Add your personal experiences to each list.

EXPERIENCES OF EFFORTS IN COMBINATION

Float

indirect (space)

light (weight)

sustained (time)

- tracing a picture with a pencil
- floating in a pool on your back
- vaulting over a high bar by means of a pole
- using a bubble wand
- spraying a room with air freshener
- lying on a waterbed
- falling into the first moments of sleep
- reaching for an unfamiliar cat
- staggering
- swinging on a rope swing
- blowing bubbles
- Other:

Wring

indirect (space)

heavy (weight)

sustained (time)

- twisting a washcloth dry
- twisting a sweater dry
- twisting hair in the morning
- twisting a face cloth
- drying out a sponge
- twisting off a bottle cap

- opening a cardboard can of prepackaged cookie dough
- washing socks
- playing with a hula hoop
- drying your hands under a blower
- tightening a jar cap
- turning over dirt with a trowel
- squeezing juice from an orange
- twisting a twist tie on a garbage bag
- using a screwdriver
- pulling out the stem of an apple
- spinning a dreidel
- opening a can of sardines
- using a melon baller
- opening a stuck faucet handle
- massaging a muscle
- Other:

Press

direct (space)

heavy (weight)

sustained (time)

- kissing a child gently
- pushing a shopping cart loaded with groceries
- ironing a shirt
- pressing a button on a drink machine
- pushing a child on a swing
- squeezing a tennis ball
- pressing on the floor when doing a handstand
- closing an overloaded suitcase
- pushing a lawnmower in high grass
- pushing a lawnmower up hill
- using a paper cutter
- using a hole punch
- pushing in a laundromat coin cartridge
- moving a piano
- pedaling a mountain bike up hill
- applying the brakes on a car
- kneading dough for bread

- removing a childproof cap
- walking with an umbrella against the wind
- washing a window with a squeegee
- stapling papers
- using a clothespin
- ringing a doorbell
- pushing in a thumbtack
- using a screwdriver
- packing trash in a filled garbage bag
- using a mechanical hand drill
- going through a revolving door
- closing a car trunk lid when the trunk is very full
- making mashed potatoes
- buckling a seat belt
- Other:

Glide

direct (space)

light (weight)

sustained (time)

- reaching to shake hands
- wiping up a spill with a paper towel
- pushing off from the side of a pool and moving forward
- ice skating
- erasing a blackboard
- dusting or wiping off a table
- drawing a violin bow across one string
- spreading butter or jelly on toast
- gently scratching your arm
- sliding down a banister
- coasting down a hill on a bicycle
- roller-blading or roller-skating
- throwing a paper airplane
- sliding in socks on a newly polished floor
- painting a wall with a roller
- opening a sliding glass door
- smoothing the sheets when making a bed
- dusting furniture with a feather duster

- putting a ring on your finger
- closing a zip-lock sandwich bag
- turning a page in a book
- smoothing cement with a trowel
- water skiing or snow skiing
- icing a cake
- drawing a circle with a compass
- playing a glissando on a piano
- sliding on an icy sidewalk
- shaving
- Other:

Dab

direct (space)

light (weight)

quick (time)

- putting the final touches on the frosting of a cake
- tip-toeing
- playing darts (moment the dart is released from the hand)
- using a paint brush to make dots
- poking someone's arm with a finger
- dipping a cloth in a pail of water
- breaking a balloon with a pin
- knocking ash off a cigarette
- dotting an "i"
- applying antiseptic on a small cut
- tap-dancing
- pushing a button on a remote control
- typing
- finger-painting
- using touch-up paint
- testing hot water with your finger
- cleaning cobwebs from the ceiling
- powdering on make-up
- using white glue
- cleaning a child's sticky mouth
- placing a cherry on a sundae
- Other:

Flick*indirect (space)**light (weight)**quick (time)*

- removing an insect off the table
- turning a light switch on or off
- leafing through the pages of a book
- lightly keeping a balloon in the air
- brushing debris off a desk or table
- shooing a fly
- wiping sweat from the brow
- shooting marbles
- touching a hot stove
- throwing a frisbee
- snapping your fingers
- opening "flip-top" toothpaste
- brushing snow from a windshield
- lighting a cigarette lighter
- taking a basketball foul shot
- striking a match
- folding egg whites
- throwing rice
- popping soap bubbles
- Other:

Slash*indirect (space)**heavy (weight)**quick (time)*

- swinging a baseball bat
- fencing
- casting a fishing line
- golfing
- opening a cardboard carton with a utility knife
- wielding a knife like a butcher
- tearing a piece of paper
- using an axe to chop wood
- slamming a door

- shaking catsup from a new bottle
- employing self-defense maneuvers
- sweeping a sandy floor with a push broom
- beating a hanging rug clean
- cutting vegetables
- Other:

Punch

direct (space)

heavy (weight)

quick (time)

- plumping a pillow
- boxing
- using a punching bag
- applauding loudly
- hammering a nail
- pounding a fist on a table
- striking a stapler to get the staple in a hard wall
- digging a hole
- Other:

Application of Laban Efforts in Combination to Musical Phrase and Direction of Musical Line

Notice that a variation of one or more of the qualities will result in a different intensity of the movement experience. After experiencing the Efforts in Combination shown above, the reader is encouraged to perform the imagery exercise below. Without pause, the reader should perform quickly each pair of movements shown. If the exercises are performed correctly, the mover will feel a sudden shift of energy between the two movement experiences of each pair. Each exercise should be performed first with external body movement and then with no external body movement so the mover can internalize the various combinations of movements and, more important, the changes in energy between the two movements in each combination. The quality of the time element of each of the movements should be varied, as should the direction of each movement.

Laban did not specifically assign names to each of the combinations listed below. The terms “flick,” “dab,” etc., have grown from the wide body of Laban practitioners who have found these labels useful and in keeping with the integrity of Laban’s philosophical beliefs. Laban believed that language could be more exacting about the action than it could be for the more subtle shades of experience. Transitions occur when one moves between effort actions by changing one of the Effort Elements. For example, one may progress from punching (direct/heavy/quick) to pressing (direct/heavy/sustained). Transitions often involve the changing of a single component; it is possible, however, to change two or three components simultaneously.

MOVEMENT IMAGERY EXERCISE

Punch/Press

Punch/Slash

Punch/Dab

Slash/Wring

Slash/Flick

Wring/Float

Wring/Press

Float/Flick

Float/Glide

Glide/Dab

Glide/Press

Dab/Flick

When proceeding through the various **Core Vocal Exercises** later in this book, always listen for musical line—that is, whether the vocalic flow of the choir is moving forward. If not, there are several possible solutions for this problem. The use of one or all of them may be used.

One could consider associating movement with the sung vocalize. Many times, however, the lack of forward motion could be attributed to a lack of

knowledge or fantasy concerning the shape of the phrase. To accomplish this, one may affix the appropriate Effort in Combination to the appropriate portion of the phrase. For example, in a four-bar musical example, one might tell the choir to feel "two bars of float and two bars of press." Depending on the musical intent of both the music and the conductor, appropriate Laban efforts can be associated with a musical phrase to bring about the desired movement within the phrase being sung.

Summary

In singing, Laban's theories of movement can help singers reacquaint themselves with their movement potential. Rhythm, which comes from a source within us, can be manifest as external movement. That external movement can be labeled to help us appreciate the infinite possibilities and experiences of rhythm manifest as movement. Rhythm is a manifestation of tension and release that provides points of reference commonly referred to as "meter." Rhythm phrases, then, are movement manifestations of the Efforts in Combination. But more importantly, a realization of the energy of the Effort Elements within oneself is actually a manifestation of color through rhythm.

The vocal color of a choir is directly affected by one major factor: the **breath** of the singers. Within that breath, the rhythmic life of the piece is transferred to the choir. The rhythmicity of the breath transfers rhythmic opinions and biases concerning phrase direction directly to the choir. That rhythmic (movement) vocabulary can be expanded through one's facility with the Efforts in Combination.