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The Counterpoint in Eurhythmics

Dorothea Weise

Originally, music choreography works of rhythm are closely tied to music and seek the most comprehensive possible transfer of all musical parameters into spatio-temporal as well as dynamic correspondences. Following the boundary-expanding developments in music and dance from the 1960s onwards, other intermedial forms of reference have become conceivable. Dorothea Weise breaks these down exemplarily and presents a system (to be questioned critically and thought through further).

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Eurhythmics congresses offer an opportunity to become familiar with the variety of contents taught by the different eurhythmics institutes. Besides the various workshops offered by the teachers, I find the students' live presentations particularly interesting. These presentations reveal a number of different stylistic approaches and, as such, a very broad spectrum of performance concepts. There is already formal variety in the transformation of music into movement with maximum precision and detail. The performances themselves vary from abstract dance to expression-oriented dance (cf. character dance in ballet) and scenic representation. Some on-stage performances can occur without a single note being played; stylistically, such performances can vary from abstract to scenic. Furthermore, there are compositions in which the relationship between music and movement is defined differently: the audience is requested to organize their perceptions on their own because what they hear is not reflected simultaneously in what happens on stage.

The main characteristic of eurhythmics is the interplay of music and movement. I would now like to take a closer look at this relationship.

We are all familiar with the history of eurhythmics, which evolved from the initial effort to transform musical events into movement with maximum precision – a process that was strongly catalyzed by the evolution of expressive dance and in contact with this dance form – towards the strengthening of the role of movement. In this context, “strengthening” means “increasing autonomy”. As mentioned above, a possible result of this evolution is a composition of movements without any music. And this is what Mary Wigman claimed when she said: ‘Free yourself of the music! That’s what you should all do! Only then can movement evolve into what everybody hopes it might be: free dance, and pure art!’ And yet, as a student of Laban’s, Mary Wigman had internalized a strong sense of form, inspired by musical rules and careful treatment of musical parameters.

However, growing independence can also emerge as a second part related to the sound of music, i.e., counterpoint.

The concept of counterpoint – which originates from music theory – has recently become more and more important in theatrology and dance science. It is used to describe the different character of the actual on-stage performance as related to what can be heard. Nonetheless, in this particular context, the concept of counterpoint takes an altogether different meaning.

Whereas traditional counterpoint is developed within a single perceptive system – the ear –, the counterpoint that may exist between music and movement presents an entirely different challenge to both the creative artist *and* recipients. Also, the concept of counterpoint implies a relationship between both parts as the basis of what happens on-stage. Counterpoint does not signify doing “something different, no matter what” or something “against” music.

Structural overview:

Before I make some in-depth remarks on counterpoint in music and movement, I would like to describe a number of prerequisites of aural and visual perception. After all, counterpoint is first perceived as a whole in the recipient’s mind. The performing artists themselves are primarily busy with making their own contribution to the overall performance. After that, I shall make a few comments on the potential that counterpoint has for the design of a performance. And finally, I shall make an attempt to classify a number of possible forms of counterpoint, with a particular focus on the composition of movements based on a given selection of music. However, this scenario might also be transferred to the inverted relationship and improvisation in music and movement.

Aural and visual perception

As a general rule, the entire complex of our perceptive organs is dominated by visual perception. This is not particularly surprising when one considers the enormous strength of the visual element on our culture, an element that presents continuous new challenges to our eyes. Seeing is active: our eyes observe our surroundings, we focus on them, and by moving our skull, we select a particular detail. We can differentiate between foreground and background, colors, light and shadows and at the same time, we can perceive changes in our peripheral visual field. Theatrologist Gerald Siegmund describes seeing as a subject-object relationship in the sense of a distanced discovery of the outside world. By closing our eyes, we can divest ourselves from permanent visual perception. By contrast, Siegmund says that aural perception is characterized by a stronger emotional quality due to the fact that it both wraps and penetrates us.¹ When it comes to hearing, though, only trained persons can differentiate in a manner similar to differentiation that is perfectly natural for visual perception. In his book, *The Soundscape*, author and aural perception enthusiast R. Murray Schafer describes 100 exercises that are intended to provide a contribution to aural education. However, Schafer’s contribution is vastly

¹ Taken from the lecture “Das akustisch Imaginäre” by Prof. Gerald Siegmund (held at “tanz im august” at the *Theater Hebbel am Ufer*, 08/20/2009).

different from the ear training offered in music education. Schafer also wants his readers to open in aural perception the options they have in visual perception: by listening to what we wish to focus on, we can create our own, individual soundscapes.²

How do the two perception processes become one? If we see something, do we necessarily hear something when we see, even without being synesthetes? Do we see when we hear? Let us take the example of a telephone conversation with an unknown person. We hear that person's voice. Since the voice is part of a person and we have a certain amount of experience concerning the congruence of the sound of voices with age, gender and personality, as we speak on the phone our inner eye develops the image of the person we are only hearing. Among the elements our inner eye is seeing might also be the color of that person's hair, his/her face and figure. If we finally meet that person, we may be surprised. Likewise, when we switch off the volume of our television and keep following the action on the screen with our eyes, we might be able to associate that action with familiar sounds or noises. In a telephone conversation, we add an "actor to the inner stage". And when we watch a movie with the volume switched off, our "inner ear" complements it with fitting sounds. That fill-up or complementing of perceptions might be the result of our tendency to place the elements of incomplete perception into a meaningful whole. And yet, the examples mentioned here are taken from the real world, a world in which sounds and visible objects are coupled in a specific and necessary manner. We thus add aural and visual perception to form a union that makes sense to us.

In the world of abstraction, though, things become more complicated. Or don't they? Among the criteria used to recognize musicality, American music psychologist, John Sloboda, especially notes the ability 'to make sense of music.' This particularly implies the ability to grasp the emotional quality of music. The sensual component of an abstract language – be it dance or music, fiction or painting – is a key to spontaneous understanding. However, not every work of art provides each one of us with an appropriate "docking station" for immediate exploration via that work's sensual effect. Anna Teresa de Keersmaker's work, "Song" is developed almost entirely without music: a group of 10 dancers experiences various pieces of music which are not audible to the audience. The dancers silently gather into formations that are suddenly and quickly abandoned to form on-stage circles. Some elements are repeated, others are not. Anyone who is not familiar with visual perception implying an aural element will feel lost in this piece and will leave the theater unnerved. So far, this has happened to many

² Schafer, Murray: Anstiftung zum Hören, HBS Nepomuk 2002

a spectator. I read frustration in the resentment these spectators testify when walking out and disappointment about the fact they can neither understand this creation nor follow the language de Keersmaker uses in it. The inner ear could not go into action, the inner stage could not be brought to life by means of complementary images, and the emotions could not be nurtured in affirmative ways. An interesting element here is the principle of what I'd like to call "hidden counterpoint": the entire choreography is based on songs by the Beatles (a fact provided by a rehearsal report in *ballettanz*³ magazine, but not mentioned in the program notes). Precise investigation on the effect of sounds in the body, the principle of unison, the effect of rhythms and especially a trip through the body by means of various "guidings", are the coordinates with which the dancers meticulously develop a second part that complements the (inaudible) first part. *Punctus sine punctum* is a possible denomination for this variant of two-part polyphony which opens up the space for the spectators' acoustic imaginings. In this piece, visual perception alone does not provide the required key for spontaneous sensual understanding no matter how strongly aural and visual perceptions are coupled. If the spectator does not have a reference point – in this particular case music – there might not be access to the on-stage happenings and to counterpoint.

Counterpoint

The concept of counterpoint (*lat. contrapunctus*) has several meanings in music theory. Its main characteristic is the equality of rights in two-part polyphony. This equality is generated by writing a counterpart to a given melody according to the principle "tone against tone". A crucial element is to achieve a horizontal-linear (melodic) independence and to simultaneously ensure vertical harmonics in the musical interaction with the first part. The second part follows the first part by observing strict rules, which admittedly varied over time due to the different evaluations of consonance and dissonance. As a result, we hear a polyphony whose individual – and uniquely structured – melodic and harmonic parts form a convincing whole.

Due to the common harmonic substructure, our ear merges the independence of both parts into a harmonic structure, and well-trained listeners are able to follow either both parts or the individual parts separately and alternately.

Here are some important characteristics of counterpoint *beyond* the context of music theory:

- Both parts are independent;

³ As reported by Thomas Hahn in the July 2009 issue.

- The second part relates to the counterpart (vertical orientation);
- The second part is developed in a meaningful manner (horizontal orientation);
- Together, both parts add up to a meaningful structure.

How about the principle of counterpoint if both parts take place within different media? How can the recipient's perception compose a "harmonious structure" of music and movement, in particular if the musical part develops differently than the "part" of the movement? For a start, let us now have a look at the result of an almost perfect congruence of music and movement in Jiry Kylian's choreography "No more play" accompanying Anton Webern's op. 5, 5 Movements for String Quartet.

Where is congruence to be found here? The principle of *Punctus contra motii* is applied, i.e., there is one movement for each tone. Timbre, dynamics, articulation, pitch and duration are transmitted accurately and placed into space in such a way that a moved score is unfolded in front of the spectator. Music and dance merge into a unit, and only a few minor divergences by the dancers awake us from the almost meditation-like state caused by this perfect symbiosis. The fascinating element of this dance interpretation is undoubtedly the unconditionality with which even the most tenderly crafted string sounds are transposed into images of movements that are just as tender and ephemeral as the music. And although the dance movements are abstract in nature, occasionally we do see sequences of action or event fragments such as attraction, rejection, fight and harmony... What we see affects our aural perception, and since both impressions are so congruent, we experience what Gerald Siegmund calls 'certainty of meaning'. The congruence of both sensual perceptions causes a harmonious overall impression. If we apply strict criteria, the rules of counterpoint are fulfilled here already. The dancers follow their own course in an extremely tight relationship with music. They are independent and yet they cannot deviate at all. Aural and visual perceptions form a harmonious overall impression. However, this form of transformation is not identical with counterpoint in scenic productions. If we use Siegmund's concept of 'certainty of meaning' as a starting point, it signifies the principle of confirmation. The musical events are reflected in the choreography, and within the limits that other media allow for, this essentially answers the musical message in an affirmative way. The audience can indulge in the performance.

Audiences raving with pleasure – this is something that many creative stage artistes have worked against for decades. Congruences of content of music and dance are massively criticized as redundancies. The independence of dance has been growing for quite some time

now, and the strong potential of tensions created by the juxtaposition of diverging messages are being increasingly discovered.

As in the collaboration of John Cage and Merce Cunningham in the early 1950's, there are random encounters between musical and dance events whose structural relation is missing altogether. This extremely autonomous coexistence of two forms of art ultimately plays with the perception of observers and listeners trying to find sense in the performance they experience. Another result of this is the birth of forms of consciously guided counterpoint relations between music and movement. The tendency to dissolve the boundaries between the arts couples new relation systems to one another: there is spoken language in a dance, the music turns into a performance, and the body turns into *body art*. Peter Brook even defines the sheer walk over the stage as an act of art, provided that, as he says, 'you celebrate it!'

At the end of the 1990's, a whole generation of choreographers (Meg Stuart, Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy etc.) preferred the presentation of absence to the presentation of dance movements. Empty stages and works with very little action make audiences rave. In recent years, however, William Forsythe, Alain Platel, and Jan Fabre show pieces with a tremendous amount of simultaneity and virtuosity. These works challenge our perception in new ways.

Let us first consider the effect this has on the recipients. Incongruent messages can have two consequences:

- Focusing: one level of perception/action is temporarily blinded out in order to create a harmonious image
- Following both sensual perceptions activates the observers' "inner stage" and generates individual ideas and fantasies, the audience creates a "harmonious overall structure" on its own.

The original musical concept of counterpoint is altered/opened by the impact of both parts on different perceptive systems. For the observers, this process opens a new, inner "playground" not unlike an imaginary stage, which is filled with images according to the individual contexts. The audience is requested to add its own creativity in order to process the various impressions synergetically and to turn the sum of various (perceptive) elements into a whole.

In our daily lives, we are permanently faced with the parallel existence of different sensual perceptions. We react to this by means of selecting and focusing. We automatically handle the relationship between foreground and background and temporarily "delete" entire ranges of perception in order to give structure to the deluge of stimuli. This process occurs in relation with our current situation, which can be characterized by action, need, imagination or feeling.

If we enter the particular space called theater, our perception become more acute, we open ourselves to new impressions and to a world not characterized by reality – an exciting situation that awakens our attention.

Let us now change perspectives and turn our attention back to the relationship between music and movement and ask ourselves the following question: Given this (far more open) creative situation, how can one formulate useful principles that open creative spaces?

Principles of intermedial counterpoint

I should like to quote the author that my thoughts are based on. In his article, ‘tanz den kontrapunkt’ (published in *tanzaktuell* magazine), the composer Steffen A. Schmidt makes historical reflections on the counterpunctual relationship between music and dance. Schmidt derives three forms of counterpoint, which I would like to introduce briefly:

1. Expressive counterpoint

The main characteristic of expressive counterpoint is the different way of arranging time. Music and dance are essentially structured by the parameter of time. Both media are experienced in a “processual” manner and can be structured counterpunctually by means of different tempos and rhythms: both forms of time are conflicting, as they can “either approach or move away from each other.”⁴

In the following example (video), taken from the overture of Henry Purcell’s opera “Dido and Aeneas” (staged by Sasha Waltz), we see the agility of classical leg exercises hindered by the surrounding water because the bouncing semi-quavers played by the string section advance are far quicker than the dancers’ legs in the aquarium.

2. Performative counterpoint

The lessening abstraction in dance language and the conquest of profane movements inspired by everyday life opened up new possibilities of independent stage scenarios in the early 1960’s. The confrontation of works of classical music with on-stage happenings that take place in an altogether different location questions the original message and opens up spaces for visions and utopias.

3. Physical comment

⁴ Schmidt, Steffen A. in: *tanz den kontrapunkt*, tanzaktuell 10/06, p. 15

When offered in danced or choreographed form, the feelings, mental images and imaginings a person experiences when listening to music can provide a sort of physical account of the listening experience. The vigor of physical expression, which follows dynamics that are different from that of the music, generates tensions and displacements in the perception of music and dance. Pina Bausch used this form of counterpoint masterfully.

Like all categorizations, the following list is also characterized by the interpenetration of the mentioned forms. It is to be remembered here that categorizations are mainly the result of the analysis of existing forms; on the other hand, the forms are not the result of a given division. And nonetheless I would like to attempt such a categorization. The element of synchronization as congruence of music and movement is integrated into the categorization and serves both as a starting point and as basis for knowledgeable counterpunctual creation.

Conditions of the following categorisation:

1. We base our thoughts on the working form called “composition of movements into music“, the most frequently used form of on-stage performances in eurhythmics.
2. Music is an extremely vast term, which we will not differentiate any further here. Since not every form of music is appropriate for every form of relation, the mere consideration of the existing performance options implies both possibilities and limitations in the selection of music.
3. The creation of movement contains the request of a distinguished and sensible handling of movement language. The diversity of the existing forms of appearance makes it difficult to find the right denominations, nonetheless I would like to risk differing movement language in three categories: abstract, profane and scenic. In fact, almost every movement contains each of these groups and with very less effort a movement can be shifted from one into another category, which opens up a widespread creative space for movement composition.
4. Each categorisation trying to classify complex phenomena animates disagreement or the verification of its failings. So also this!

Forms of relationship between music and movement – a proposal

Intermedial relationship	Subform	Aspects of the composition process	Aspects of perception
Synchronization / Translation	Maximum	Maximum precision in the transformation of all parameters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High degree of congruence between music and movement - Double message - Certainty of meaning
	Partial	Precise transformation of the development of characteristic single parameters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accentuation (exaggeration) - Reduction - Foreground/Background
	Energetic	Transfer of the energetic effect of musical parameters (e.g., tempo, dynamics, timbre)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Music propels movement - Merging despite difference
↓ Language of movement: abstract – profane – scenic ↑			
Counterpoint / Interweaving relationship	Counterpart (strictly polyphonic)	Second part is composed in countermovement, based on classic principles of transformation	Aural and visual perception complement one another to form a whole that preserves both parts' independence.
	Varying	Close relationship with the first part by integration of characteristic features but with an independent development (e.g., inversion of dynamics, chronological shifts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Characteristic elements do appear, but not at the same point in time ⇒ effects: recognition / anticipation / playing with expectations
	Confrontational	Juxtaposition: the second part disturbs the first part (knowing the reason why)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Incongruence: conflict between aural and visual perception - Search for meaning and the “stage of the imaginary” (how does this fit together?)
Aleatorics	With or without knowledge of the other part	The second part is not relation oriented, but developed in a “horizontally” harmonious way	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Congruence between music and movement by chance - Recipient is motivated to provide meaning/sense on his/her own

In the light of the development of stage arts, artistic and creative work with music and movement which goes beyond the inner circle of experts can no longer limit itself to a merely reproductive level. Both systematic – and at the same time explorative – investigation of other forms of relation is equally necessary to open up a broader range of interpretation and to cope with the current aesthetic questions of stage design.

The mastery of reflection – taught as one of the basic elements of all eurhythmics classes – provides an excellent basis to feel both inspired and encouraged to expand the entire creative spectrum whilst treating music carefully. The principle of analog transfer is thus accompanied by the following question: In which other way(s) can we reveal the music's secret? Maybe we can do so occasionally by means of a counterpart, a part which appears on our inner stages as a vigorous partner of the music itself.

This text is based on a lecture held in Vienna during the European Eurhythmics Days 2009.

Further reading

Brandstetter, Gabriele (2012): *“Listening“ – Kinesthetic Awareness im zeitgenössischen Tanz* in: Stephanie Schroedter (Hg.) (2012): *Bewegungen zwischen Hören und Sehen. Denkbewegungen über Bewegungskünste*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, p. 113-127

Hector, Maria: *Verflechtungen von Raum und Zeit*. Bachelor-Arbeit 2019, <https://shortest.link/61S->

Jordan, Stephanie (2000): *Structural Categories for Relating Music and Dance* in: *Moving Music. Dialogues with Music in Twentieth-Century Ballet*. London: Dance Books, p. 73-89

Kim, Jun Hyun (2012): *What Music and Dance Share: Dynamic Forms of Movement and Action-based Aesthetic Empathy* in: *Bewegungen zwischen Hören und Sehen. Denkbewegungen über Bewegungskünste*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, p. 201-215



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