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Dance Rhythm

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Abstract. This chapter proposes a theory of dance rhythm as distinct from rhythm in dance. First, it distinguishes natural and intentional rhythm, constructed from combining theories by Dewey and Margolis. It then defends this account by exploring musical and non-musical connections between rhythm and dance. It argues that dance rhythm can arise in conjunction with music, or that it can – though need not – follow music, or that it can set the musical rhythm, or be completely independent of music, though natural or internal bodily rhythms can underpin both. Finally, it asserts the existence of dance that might be naturally rhythmic, but not in a way essential to dance *qua* dance.

I. Introduction: The Difference between Natural and Intentional Rhythm

Dance encompasses a large range of phenomena including social dance, concert dance, dance as therapy, education, or exercise, political dance, and religious dance. All forms of dance are considered art for purposes of the discussion to follow, where *art* refers to any culturally developed and skilled activity. This chapter provides an account of intentional rhythm in dance (“dance rhythm”) where rhythm as it pertains to dance refers to a regular, repeated pattern of beats and emphases in movement.¹ Rhythm is then divided into natural rhythm, and intentional rhythm found in art. Dance rhythm (intentional rhythm that belongs to a dance that is part of its essential features) is thus distinguished from rhythm in dance (natural rhythm which is not part of a dance’s essence and which occur due to the natural rhythms of the body). (For the remainder of this chapter these terms will be used according to the meanings provided here.)

Natural rhythms include the rhythm of the tides, seasons, the pulse of a heartbeat, and the rhythm of sexual reproduction.² Natural rhythm is given to us in the world or found to be there. It has not been developed by training and does not necessarily occur in the cultural world in which

dance, music, and poetry are distinct practices with varying methods of teaching and performance. In the human person natural rhythm means rhythm at the level of human biology, as Margolis argues – though he might not agree that what he calls a encultured human person can ever act at the biological level alone.³ Thus rhythm in dance captures the idea that a dance might have natural rhythm from a dancer’s breath or pulse, without this contributing to the dance’s distinctive features. *Qua* dancer, these do not count as dance rhythms unless they are focused on or enhanced by the thought process of an encultured *person*.

This chapter takes its cue from Dewey's view of art as intentional transformation, and Margolis’ sense that this transformation is by the culture-influenced self. Dewey considers a child learning to cry on purpose to get a parent’s attention. Since “the relation between doing and undergoing is perceived” rather than merely a “blind” expression this means that “there is now art in incipency”, he writes. “An activity that was ‘natural’—spontaneous and unintended—is transformed because undertaken as a means to a consciously entertained consequence. Such transformation marks every deed of art”.⁴ Dewey argues that what makes the new kind of crying *art* is that it is performed with the agent’s awareness of its role in human intercourse.⁵ However, this chapter rejects the thorough-going Intentionality with a capital “I” that Margolis champions, where the actions of persons are understood primarily as those of cultural agents rather than as individuals.⁶ Transformation is a metaphysical transformation of the natural into the artistic, through awareness and purposes of the artist in a cultural context. It is thus more deeply rooted in artistic practice than Danto's transfiguration of the commonplace.

This account of intentionality differs from that of Langer, for whom the ordinary is transformed into art by the creation of symbolic forms of human feeling. In contrast, this chapter acknowledges that social dance involves transformative intentionality as well; dance rhythms

occur in both high art dance and in other forms.⁷ Intentional rhythms are those created by human persons to develop, diversify or attend to the range of natural rhythms, for purposes reflecting the particular genre of art. Though constructed or person-made, room is allowed for intentional rhythms of proto-persons in the animal kingdom. Natural, bodily rhythms are also transformed by dancers into ones serving artistic, social or other purposes.⁸

When dance self-consciously transforms ordinary movement, reflexively listening to and responding to natural, bodily rhythms, it is showing something implicit, of which audience and dancers are not normally aware. The task dances of the Judson Dance Theater, where a performer came onstage, made and ate a sandwich and walked off, had the rhythm of eating and of walking – not stylized, but part of the postmodern dance movement, seeking to eliminate the division between art and life. My claim is that the intention of focusing on sandwich-making as dance transforms mere movement, and transforms natural rhythm into dance rhythm if the dance encourages focus on natural rhythm *as* dance rhythm. This is what I mean by intentionality – pragmatism in philosophy, and the postmodern movement in art, has meant that appreciating ordinary experience can transform the natural elements of human life and experience into art. It may transform it into a unified and heightened experience (Dewey), in a cultural world with culturally developed capabilities and practices (Margolis), or it may focus attention upon the aesthetic value of the ordinary (postmodernism). Thus the Judson Dance Theater dance is no longer just the making of a sandwich and its movement should not be interpreted as such. Rhythms not there to be attended to are rhythm in dance but not dance rhythm – for instance if the intended focus was the sandwich-making rather than the rhythm of walking to the table.

This account of dance rhythm is humanistic in holding that the human act of converting mere movement to dance transforms natural into intentional rhythm. Dance rhythm is thus

similar but not identical to Hamilton's dynamic, humanistic sense of rhythm as "order-in-movement" in which perceivable "accents are imposed on a sequence of regular sounds or movements".⁹ The account presented in this chapter separates natural rhythm from intentional rhythm in order to isolate the underpinnings and connections between mere sound and mere movement before they have been transformed into music and dance. There is an organic connection between music and dance at sound and movement levels, and this would be overlooked if natural rhythm were not addressed.

We now explore some of the rhythmical connections that exist between music and dance, highlighting the intentional/natural rhythm distinction.

II. Musical Connections

Dance and music are intimately connected, and it is often hard to tell whether there is a dance-music synthesis; or whether the dance is following the music, or vice versa. This essay holds that, in all three cases, the type of rhythm is intentional insofar as it occurs in dance and music *qua* dance and music. Any types of natural rhythm that underlie the dance or music are contingent upon movement and sound, rather than upon movement transformed through human intentionality into dance, or sound similarly transformed into music.

First, there are dance-music syntheses and collaborations where the components are in tandem or in combined practice. In the West, for example, dance occurs together frequently with music (baroque music and dance, or the waltz). Indeed, Western dance and music were originally integrated, and their separation a later development. Most dance scholars place Western dance's origin in Ancient Greek rituals that integrated religion, theatre, and music.¹⁰ In non-Western countries such as those in Latin America, dance and music also arose together. Dance-music syntheses occur in social dance, competition, and in concert dance that emerged from social

dance. Samba, tango and salsa are all heavily intentional rhythm-infused forms of dance embedded in a clear and identifiable musical style, essential to their national cultures.¹¹ In these dance-music syntheses, rhythm is intentional rather than natural; dancers and musicians have integrated these artforms in a purposeful way.

Second, dance is often set to music, and following the music can be an object. As in social dance, a dancer must dance on the beat, and the simplest kinds of dance to perform are to or with music that has a regular, metric, rhythmic pattern (as in a country square dance). Indeed, dancers often choose music that makes them want to dance, and often this is music that has an intentional, recognizable, and repeated structure of beats and emphases in sound. When dance follows this type of music it is certainly dance rhythm as defined above. Following the music is more difficult where complex rhythms, such as those by Stravinsky, Cage, or Webern, are involved – as in the choreography of Jiří Kylián who set *Symphony of Psalms* and *Svadebka* to Stravinsky, and *Stepping Stones* to Cage and Webern. It can assist the audience to both perceive the intentional rhythms of the music in an enhanced visual rather than auditory way, as well as to see the new dance rhythms that result.

Some forms of dance interact with music. In African dance-music syntheses or collaborations, for example, the master drummer is in charge of leading improvisations, influenced by feedback from the dancers.¹² Thus even when dance follows music there may be a dynamic relationship. Again, this decision to follow a repeated pattern of beats and emphases is part of the intentionality that is inherent in dance rhythm.

Finally, there are also dance-music syntheses and collaborations, such as in jazz, where the band follows the chorus and tap dancers rather than the other way around.¹³ Some large, classical ballet companies have orchestras that are expected to follow the dancers. This seems

also to be true in the many cases where musicians serve as accompanists to the dancers in a supporting role.

The vast majority of dance-music syntheses and collaborations do feature intentional rhythm, and the idea of a dance-music piece with only natural rhythm but no dance rhythm or music rhythm in it strains credulity, especially because music rhythm, as mentioned earlier, may not require that the pattern of beats or emphases repeat. We leave the possibility of non-musically rhythmic music for another occasion.

III. Dance Rhythm Need Not Be Connected to Music

Dance transforms internal bodily rhythms – pulse, heartbeat or breathing, or a natural walking pace – into dance rhythms, in the way that Dewey and Margolis consider characteristic of art. It also uses natural rhythms of the tides, rainfall or falling leaves or snow – Native American rain dance simulates the pounding of rain, and thunder. Contemporary dance often focuses on internal bodily rhythms, to develop them into dance movements understood viscerally and kinesthetically. Dance scholar Sondra Fraleigh notes that early 20th century modern dance made much use of breath rhythm, notably through the teaching of Doris Humphrey.¹⁴

The rhythm of these natural breaths is transformed into art, or dance rhythm, by focusing on the rising and falling of one's chest, and representing breaths in movement that encompasses other parts of the body. The regular pulse of a dancer's resting heartbeat might be the impetus to begin a slow, steady movement that accelerates as she dances, possibly in syncopation with the body. A dancer might set a baseline with her feet that mirrors bodily pulse and then counter it with the upper body. Likewise, a dancer might breathe in a certain way while still, then accelerate rhythmic movements as his breath quickens. Or he may keep the original rhythm of resting breath in his bodily movements even while his breathing rhythm changes. A dancer might

also look for rhythmic inspiration in the ebb and flow of waves against the shore, moving in a pattern that represents the feeling of their movement with his arms and legs, perhaps rolling on the floor in the way the waves collect and roll energy and small stones and shells. Thus the dance might end up a dance rhythmic variation on the natural rhythms of pulse, breath, or the movement of the waves and tides.

Dance in which natural or cosmic rhythms are focused on, or revealed, has been part of spiritual and religious practice in both Western and non-Western cultures. Ellis reports that early Christians danced as part of their religious practice.¹⁵ The Indian dance of the Siva seeks to align human dancing with that of the gods, in turn maintaining the movement of the cosmos.¹⁶ One might ask how a dancer can know or intuit the rhythm of the cosmos and the gods in order to align with them, but dance creation is often a mystical process. Planetary movement might be represented in a rhythmic 360-degree rotation of torso, arms, head and legs.

In music and poetry also, transformation of internal bodily rhythms can create music rhythm and poetic rhythm. Music transforms the energy of waves and the sound they make when they break upon the shore. In poetry, the rhythm of speech might already have stops, starts, and breaks that are dependent upon and also transform the breaths people need to take to say a phrase. The same may be inferred for musicians who play wind instruments or who sing. Thus it may be that dance rhythm, music rhythm, and poetic rhythm are connected to similar internal bodily or natural rhythms. Dance rhythm is also caused by music rhythm or poetic rhythm in the sense that it follows or represents these rhythms.

In the early 20th century Jacques-Dalcroze promulgated the ideas that music relies on internal bodily rhythms and that movement, gymnastics, and dance could help musicians to learn their own rhythms rather than relying on external rhythms set by a music teacher or score.¹⁷ His

movement training method for musicians was called “eurhythmics”, and it was used to develop both rhythmic ability and expressivity. First, a music student needed to register the rhythms of the human body.¹⁸ For a musician to reach the highest level of artistry, however, her body had to transform these rhythms into an expressive art even while maintaining a natural effect in their expression.¹⁹ Thus Jacques-Dalcroze believed that musicians should experience their own natural bodily rhythm in order to create intentional rhythm in performance. These intentional rhythms, this chapter holds, thereby become music rhythms through intentional variegation and enhancement under the rules of the genre of music in which it takes place.²⁰

Even if music and dance are connected at their originating root level of the natural, or of an earlier point in history where they were synthesized, they can develop and change enough from there throughout time to be relations rather than clones. In 1913, for example, Mary Wigman performed *Hexentanz* without music. Merce Cunningham was also known to rehearse his dancers without any music and then add the music later (even as late as the initial performance). He did this so that dancers would not dance *to* the music in the sense of following it.²¹ Emanuel Gat’s *Silent Ballet* is a recent (2008) example of a dance that occurs in silence. Dancers often create dances without music. Establishing that dance rhythm can occur without music is not yet to establish, however, that dance can eschew intentional rhythm altogether. The next question to be addressed is whether there can be such a thing as dance without dance rhythm.

IV. Dance without Dance Rhythm

This section now claims that dance can lack dance rhythm if it fails to have intentional regular, repeated pattern of beats and emphases in movement, even though there is some unavoidable natural rhythm in the dance due to internal bodily rhythms. In Balkan and in Greek

dancing, for example, some dances start with a long piece of instrumental music that has no identifiable beat and that is both slow and uneven enough metrically that the dance movement to it might be non-dance rhythmic. There might also be dance that follows funeral wailing that does not have a repeated, intentional dance-rhythmic structure; likewise dance movement that followed free-style poetry.²²

Another example might be Steve Paxton's contact improvisation, a form of creative contemporary dance with the primary aim of transferring energy and movement dynamics between dancers and developing new movements in concert. Contact improvisation requires no explicit adherence to a pattern of beats and is free enough to allow any participant to move however they please in contact with another person. It is not clear that dances created in this way must be intentionally rhythmic.

A dancer can create a movement with a primary purpose that includes avoiding intentional repeated pattern of beats or emphases. There would still be rhythms of dancers' breath and walking, but these would be unintentional and incidental. Thus Lauri Stallings and glo's *And All Directions I Come to You*, for Creative Time's Drifting in Daylight event in New York City, 2015, aimed to interrogate how we associate with one another in public space in "a constant flow of intuition and place...by letting time happen to offer emancipatory moments and a gathering among strangers...".²³ Intentional repeated patterns of beats were not a primary concern. Thus one can find dances that lack the sort of dance rhythm proposed by this chapter, in which rhythm is either changed in some way from its natural state or the primary purpose of the dance is to highlight its rhythmic nature. It follows that dance rhythm is not a necessary condition for dance writ large, although there may be rhythm in dance that is unavoidable due to dancers' identity as both persons and biological organisms.

In conclusion, the primary theory of rhythm advocated by this chapter is the concept of dance rhythm, a sort of rhythm that is not simply the rudimentary kind found in the processes of the natural world, the truth of which has been shown through the use of danceworld examples. Dance is a minded activity of the human person that has social, political, entertainment, and artistic human purposes that can and does involve the use of rhythm. There is no dance at the level of biology only, and no dance rhythm at that level. Neither must dance, *qua* dance, involve dance rhythm, since dance is a kind of activity that can, but that need not, include intentional, repeated patterns of beats or emphases in movement. Finally, dance exists that has contingent and non-essential elements that may have natural rhythm as defined earlier. When it does this is merely rhythm in dance.

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¹ For an alternative account of rhythm in dance see Sheets-Johnstone, M. (2005), "Man Has Always Danced: Forays into the Origins of an Art Largely Forgotten by Philosophers", *Contemporary Aesthetics* 3 [online]. Available from: <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=273&searchstr=maxine+sheet+s-johnstone>, accessed 2015.

² See Dewey (2005/1934), pp. 153-155.

³ See Margolis (1995), p. 224.

⁴ Dewey (2005/1934), p. 65.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ But see Bresnahan (2015).

⁷ See Langer (1953).

⁸ See Bond (2013), p. 178.

⁹ Hamilton (2011), pp. 26-27.

¹⁰ See Jowitt (2014), and Hamilton (2007).

¹¹ See Chasteen (2004).

¹² Malone (1996), pp. 14-15.

¹³ See Malone (1996), p. 94ff.

¹⁴ Email communication to the author.

¹⁵ Ellis (1976), p. 9.

¹⁶ See Coomaraswamy (1918) and Mathur (2002), p. 9.

¹⁷ See Jacques-Dalcroze (1921), and Jacques-Dalcroze (1980/1930).

¹⁸ Jacques-Dalcroze (1980/1930), p. 7; see also p. 183.

¹⁹ Jacques-Dalcroze (1980/1930), p. 86.

²⁰ See Louppe (2010), particularly p. 50 and p. 83.

²¹ For more on Cunningham's methods see Kostelantz, ed. (1998).

²² This chapter relies on an account of dance rhythm that might diverge from an account of music rhythm or poetic rhythm through differences in understanding what "rhythm" refers to in music, poetry and dance. Hence the possibility that there might be rhythm in dance that is not only not dance rhythm, as this chapter understands it, but that uses music rhythm or poetry rhythm in it, in the sense that these disciplines understand rhythm.

²³ See <http://www.lauristallings.org/world-premiere-2015/> and <http://creativetime.org/projects/driftin-daylight/>, accessed 2015.