

Music in the body

Music and movement for the Early Years using Dalcroze Eurhythmics.

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Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, (1865-1950) was a Swiss music educator who believed that experiencing the elements of music with the whole body led to a deeper understanding of those elements. Through Eurhythmics, (music through movement) Dalcroze sought to deepen a student's sensibility towards music. He believed that a student performs better in all aspects of his life through an improvement in the connections between mind and body.

In a Dalcroze session, all elements of music are taught through movement. Students experience music and movement concepts (for instance pulse; pitch; duration and tempo; accent; silence; dynamics; phrasing; articulation; sustained legato and the relationships between time, space and energy) through music and movement games and activities. The ability to feel music with the whole body allows auditory memory, communication, expression and creativity to develop, as well as increased confidence, coordination, concentration, listening skills and group awareness. A strong sense of pitch is developed through solfa. Building up the range of the voice gradually, the student develops a keen sense of intonation, a confident singing voice and the vital musical skill of inner hearing.

Dalcroze came to his conclusions about the need to integrate mind and body, and to use the whole body for learning after some experiments with his harmony students at the Geneva Conservatoire. Initially they seemed unable to hear their harmony exercises in their heads, and completed their work through knowing the rules. So Dalcroze formulated exercises to improve their inner hearing, for instance singing certain notes of a phrase in one's head instead of out loud, or singing scales starting on degrees of the scale other than the tonic to improve the harmonic awareness. But he soon realized that many of his students also lacked a strong rhythmic sense, yet they tapped their feet or nodded their heads whilst taking part in musical activities. So he experimented with walking the pulse or an ostinato whilst singing, and thus began a lifelong development in understanding of the nature of musicianship and the way our bodies can be trained to internalize any element of music.

We now have scientific evidence to prove much of what Dalcroze realized about the kinaesthetic sense and about multi-sensory learning (although neither of these terms were used when he was working). When a child is born, the neurons are not connected or organized, and the more senses that are involved at any one time, the more dendrites (extensions between the neurons) are formed to make connections. The dendrites become lubricated with myelin if they are used repeatedly, and this speeds the connections transmitting the nerve impulses. In a music and movement class, the kinaesthetic sense and hearing are almost always combined, and with frequent use of props, the senses of touch and sight are also engaged. A skilled teacher will provide a stimulating and fun environment in which to learn.

In the workshop I felt it was important for the very able delegates to experience some exercises which would give them a chance to feel the physical responses at an adult and reasonably challenging level. So after a quick physical warm up, they had a taster of three different kinds of exercises used in the Dalcroze work.

The Follow is used to allow an experience of any element of music without the need for theoretical understanding. In a Follow, the student steps with the music, feeling free to incorporate the whole body in the movement, and could experience

accelerando and ritardando; a range of dynamics; a new rhythmic element, or in this case, simple changes between a walk (crotchet), jogging (quavers) and strides (minims). These are known as the natural locomotor movements.

The spatial element is always there in the Follow, as we weave between the other students, and may be asked to travel backwards, sideways or on the diagonal. I introduced a quick response element to the Follow, by asking the delegates to change to stepping on the spot if I played repeated notes. This was the first of many times during the session that they felt their concentration being stretched and pulled back to focus!

A Quick Response exercise was next, so that this feeling could be built upon. A large, heavy gym ball was bounced around the circle, and the participants had to respond two beats after the beginning of a signal, having learned the appropriate action for each signal – either change the direction, bounce the ball in front of yourself instead of to your neighbour or toss the ball up in front of you. Memory and social awareness are working hard here.

Exercises in Canon came next. Again, memory and concentration are vital, with the added difficulty that one must perform one task whilst listening to the next. We started with the game 'Switch' – the leader, (who can be a child with a strong sense of pulse) taps one part of the body. When he moves to another part, the class joins in on the first. This can be done with a random number of pulse beats, or with a set bar time. It is a good way of introducing a new bar time. The next canon was similar, except that the participants had to step instead of tapping on their body. The final canon consisted of alternations between the locomotor movements for a bar each.

In order to give the participants a rest, I demonstrated some of the aspects of early childhood movement development which are easy to incorporate into a music and movement session. As the strength in the core muscles develop, babies learn to sit and roll, and pull themselves along on their tummies. This important stage of development sensitizes our bodies to heat and cold, and stimulates the inner organs. When a child has the strength to crawl, both hemispheres of the brain are stimulated simultaneously, with balanced, coordinated movements of eyes and limbs. A few months later, once a child has found its feet and built up some speed, galloping follows quite readily. Before skipping can take place, both legs have to acquire similar strength to perform the step/hop action on both legs. This elevation on only one leg is hard, and takes time to develop, so many children who have not had the benefit of frequent practice (unconscious at this stage) may still find skipping challenging at the age of five or more.

One of the most relevant ways to introduce children to a variety of movements within an Early Years session is to sing songs about animals, and add movement elements either within the structure of the song or afterwards. This way, by slithering like snakes, crawling like bears or galloping like horses, children who may have missed out on important developmental stages can experience them and catch up physically. We discussed the fact that a crocodile does not crawl cross-laterally (with the left foot and right hand moving together) so for older children, changing from crawling like a bear to crawling like a crocodile on a signal can be an interesting coordination exercise.

The Dalcroze Eurhythmics Early Years teacher is aware of the basics of early childhood movement development, and ensures that the games are:

- age-appropriate, and often created by the teacher who uses her own improvisation skills to suit the needs of each class
- a mixture of adult- and child-led activities, allowing for the children's skill base but also their creativity to develop
- challenging, increasing in difficulty as skills are learned and remembered

- memorable and enjoyable, creating a great sense of fun and love of music and movement
- multi-sensory, encouraging the development of a range of learning styles

If as movement teachers we have an awareness of the different aspects of movement, then we can ensure a full and varied curriculum. So we can categorize movement in the following ways:

- body awareness - where is my shoulder ?
- body boundary - where does my body end?
- spatial awareness – movement within the space and around objects
- directionality – movement in different directions, and in curved or straight lines,
- awareness of over, under, behind
- balance and control – vital for the development of a wide repertoire of speed and shape
- laterality – development of both sides of brain and body
- rhythm – preparation/action/recovery

This last point is fundamental to the Dalcroze work. Dalcroze realized that the essence of rhythm is the relationship between the space, energy and timing of our actions. Therefore he found ways for his students to analyse and practice the way they prepared their movements, and the way they followed through after executing an action. Students of Dalcroze are aware of body use and posture and spend time improving the quality and flow of their movement. If they are instrumentalists, this impacts on their playing too, allowing an understanding of tension and release to develop, which can lead to a wide range of articulation and expression.

On the question of the acquisition of pulse, Dalcroze came to the conclusion that we do not always acquire a strong, internalized sense of pulse if we only ever have someone else's pulse imposed upon us. So we try to give pupils plenty of opportunity to choose their own speed and encourage them to keep that constant. This way, pulse is acquired slowly but surely. Related to this is my theory that the best combination within a pre-school setting for a music curriculum is not only to have structured music sessions as often as possible, but also to have a designated 'music table' during free play time. Here, instruments and props from the structured sessions will aid children's memory, so they can re-visit songs or dances they have experienced. Ideally an adult is there to give the child someone with whom to communicate musically. This gives further opportunity for ideas to embed, and with the skills acquired during the structured sessions, creativity can follow.

The workshop sessions finished with a sequence of exercises based on the theme of 'Dogs' which were designed to give the delegates experience of some more of Dalcroze's concepts. Firstly there was an opportunity for an individual to set a pulse. Next was an 'inhibition' exercise. If a child has to wait - in this case, for the ball to stop rolling and the music to stop, and for their partner to say 'Fetch!' – he begins to learn to control the natural impulse to act instantly. The final exercise was about Time, Space and Energy. I used the book 'Hairy Maclary SIT' to show how a child can learn to judge the distance needed and energy required to arrive at a set point at a set moment. In this case, the 'dogs' had to go from one mat to another during the recurring chorus in the book. The task of landing on the new mat on the last word was quite challenging for some!

Had time permitted, I would have shown how to compare basic notation of crotchets, quavers, minims to our natural movements, giving a young child the physical understanding that there is a precision to the doubling and halving of time in music which is not random, but can be practised and internalized in movement before an instrument is picked up

A Dalcroze training is not just for young children. There are many complex musical concepts which can be incorporated into exercises for the enhancement of musicianship even of advanced students and professionals. Some of these are polyrhythm; changing bar times; additive rhythm; anacrusis, crasis, metacrusis; unequal beats.

Expressive exercises are a vital part of a Dalcroze training, and the extension of all the above exercises - the coming together of all elements of music and movement. In expressive exercises, the student finds ways to show in movement - through gesture, locomotor movement or whole-body shapes and movements - the music which is being studied. A piece of music can be analysed in detail through movement, leading to choreography which develops an understanding of the piece on many different levels, and aids memory of the piece. Because this expressive work is often a whole-group activity, an added result is an improvement in ensemble and social skills.