

Essay

From Hellerau to Here: Tracing the Lineage and Influence of Dalcroze Eurhythmics on the Family Tree of Theatre Pedagogy

Andrew Davidson 

Guildford School of Acting, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 7XH, UK; a.davidson@gsa.surrey.ac.uk

Abstract: Actor training in Western culture evolved as an oral tradition. Formal education appeared in the late-nineteenth century with the work of Konstantin Stanislavski. Despite its relatively brief history, the family tree of theatre pedagogy now consists of many contrasting branches. Several branches contain the creative and educational DNA of an approach to Western music education known as Dalcroze Eurhythmics. Emile Jaques-Dalcroze was a Swiss pianist and composer whose work at the Hellerau Institute near Dresden in Germany had a significant impact on the Modernist movements in theatre and dance, 1911–1914. Historical records show that this embodied method of music learning was disseminated by Hellerau graduates in drama schools and theatre companies around the world. This essay traces four branches on the family tree of theatre pedagogy that are directly influenced by Dalcroze Eurhythmics. These branches include the legacies of Stanislavski in Russia; Jacques Copeau and Suzanne Bing in France; Rudolph Laban and Yat Malmgren in Germany and England; and Sanford Meisner and Anne Bogart in the United States of America. This essay is written from the author's perspective as an actor trainer and music educator in a higher education conservatoire. It offers historical contexts for contemporary pedagogies in actor training.

Keywords: Dalcroze Eurhythmics; actor training; music education; Hellerau; theatre pedagogy



Citation: Davidson, Andrew. 2023. From Hellerau to Here: Tracing the Lineage and Influence of Dalcroze Eurhythmics on the Family Tree of Theatre Pedagogy. *Arts* 12: 134. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12040134>

Academic Editor: Michelle Facos

Received: 18 May 2023

Revised: 25 June 2023

Accepted: 28 June 2023

Published: 30 June 2023



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1. Introduction

The process of training actors in contemporary Western culture includes handing down tacit knowledge acquired through lived experience (Prior 2012, p. 5). Despite this oral tradition, the lineage of a given pedagogy can be challenging to articulate. Historically, the actor in ancient Greece developed vocal and physical athleticism, and found a place within the group dynamics of the chorus (Benedetti 2007, pp. 7–9). Similarly, contemporary student actors are expected to engage as members of a team, to set aside competition with their peers, and to work toward an ideal version of themselves (Britton 2013, pp. 313–29). During the Middle Ages in Europe, the actor came to be viewed as a craftsperson enrolled in a watch-and-learn and trial-and-error apprenticeship, often within their own performing family (Taylor 1999, p. 73). Today, student actors continue this practice through observation of the self and others, testing the dimensions of the fictional role they are playing against case studies in the world around them (Carnicke in Hodge (2010), pp. 107–9). In modern Russia, at the end of the nineteenth century, Konstantin Stanislavski radically reformed the craft of acting as it was then conceived (Benedetti 2000, pp. 3–5). He replaced a cult of personality, clichéd character, and self-indulgent extemporizing with a process of inquiry and empathy that demanded collegial respect for fellow actors and the work of the playwright. In the present day, Stanislavski's analysis of the psychological motivations of character, known as The System, still offers the student actor a reliable set of fundamentals as it did throughout the twentieth century (Carnicke 2009, p. 226). In recent decades, research into the final years of Stanislavski's life has revealed the development of Active Analysis, a rehearsal process that rejects the Cartesian split between mind and body, and embraces a holistic view of psychophysical performance (Carnicke in Hodge (2010), pp. 17–19).

The tradition of passing on tried-and-trusted skills and experience continues today. This is made explicit in institutional titles such as ‘conservatoire’ and ‘conservatory’, which refer to maintaining an artistic practice (Davidson et al. 2022, p. 42). Unlike formal training in music and dance, which has existed for several centuries, drama schools are a relatively recent invention (Prior 2012, p. 33). Despite this brief history, the family tree of theatre pedagogy now consists of many contrasting and interweaving branches. From my own perspective as a teacher in a higher education conservatoire, several actor training pedagogies appear to contain the creative and educational DNA of a unique approach to Western music education known as Dalcroze Eurhythmics (see Juntunen (2016)). Historical records show that this “process for awakening, developing and refining innate musicality” (CMU (Carnegie Mellon University) 2023) was established first at the Hellerau Institute in Germany (1911–1914) and disseminated by its graduates in drama schools and theatre companies around the world (Davidson 2021b, p. 193). In order to understand how Dalcroze Eurhythmics came to influence actor training, this essay begins with a brief historical sketch of its initiator, Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950). It then provides an overview of his educational approach and maps out some lineages that stem from his practice. Finally, it traces four branches on the family tree of theatre pedagogy to identify prominent international practitioners in actor training who were influenced by Dalcroze Eurhythmics.

2. Emile Jaques-Dalcroze

Emile Jaques-Dalcroze was a Swiss pianist and composer whose multi-faceted work across the performing arts and education had a significant impact on the Modernist movements in theatre and dance (Bud et al. 2018, pp. 228–29). As the son of a Pestalozzi school teacher and a Swiss clock salesman, he inherited a fortuitous balance of freedom and discipline. During his student years in his hometown of Geneva, he was a member of the *Belles-Lettres* student society. In a touring company of like-minded artists, he wrote and performed music, theatre, and opera. He played the title role in Molière’s *Les Fourberies de Scapin*; Nicole in Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*; and Gringoire in an adaptation of Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Lee 2003, p. 97). In 1884, he studied acting in Paris with Got and Talbot, two former leading players of the *Comédie Française*. It is likely that Talbot taught the techniques of François Delsarte, whose System of Oratory was then the dominant theatre pedagogy (Odom 2005, pp. 139–40). In this period, Jaques-Dalcroze wrote of his quest to find truth in performance and expressed his dissatisfaction with the theatrical artifice of the day. Decades later, as a respected music educator, he wrote that an actor’s fundamental goal must be to develop mastery of the mind–body connection, and that the most effective means to this end was an immersive training in musical rhythm (Jaques-Dalcroze [1921] 1967, pp. 60–64).

In 1892, at age 27, Jaques-Dalcroze was appointed Professor of Harmony at Geneva Conservatoire of Music. Young enough to question the received wisdom of the day, he rejected the notion that cognition stood above all other modes of learning. Having developed a watchful eye for human behaviour as an acting student, Jaques-Dalcroze applied that same sensibility to the observation of his music students. He took a psychophysical approach to discovering their educational needs as living, breathing, embodied artists (Dutoit 1971, p. 9). For Jaques-Dalcroze, rhythm was the common ancestor to all the arts due to its ubiquitous presence in music, speech, movement, painting, architecture, etc. This belief led him to devise whole-body exercises in rhythmic movement, ear training and sight-singing, and instrumental improvisation that connected the creative mind to the music-making body (see Schnebly-Black and Moore (2003)). As a skilled piano improviser, Jaques-Dalcroze kept verbal instructions to a minimum. Instead, music itself became the channel of communication between the teacher and student. Within an “active, reactive, and interactive” learning environment, his students developed their physical capacity for responding to sound, and their aural awareness of the ways in which music moves

(Davidson 2023, p. 16). For Jaques-Dalcroze, movement was “a concrete tool used to experience, analyze, and understand the abstract art of music” (Davidson 2021b, p. 190).

3. Dalcroze Eurhythmics

The word rhythm comes from the Greek, *rythmós*, describing the motion of a river. Hence, the word Eurhythmics means “good flow” (Lee 2003, p. 1). From its earliest days, Dalcroze Eurhythmics has been a kinaesthetic pursuit. “When the whole body is engaged in the learning process, the student develops a physical understanding that matches their aural understanding and informs their intellectual understanding” (Davidson 2021b, p. 190). It consists of three distinct yet interrelated areas of study, rhythmics, solfege, and improvisation. Rhythmics engages the whole body in the physical exploration of musical rhythm, melody, harmony, form, etc. Classes embody relationships between time, space, and energy, culminating in physical analysis of musical repertoire. Solfege is the study of pitch through ear training and sight-singing. Exercises incorporate game-like qualities of vocal, visual, and kinaesthetic playfulness. Classes explore scales, intervals, and harmonic structures, toward the complexities of modulation, chromaticism, and atonality. Improvisation fosters musical communication in real time. The listening student shows through movement what they hear in the improvisor’s music. “The teacher sees what the student is listening for and listening to, based on how they move.” (Davidson 2023, p. 11). Improvisation classes engage with the aesthetic and kinaesthetic building blocks for quality music making. For Jaques-Dalcroze, “to think and shape while in the process of performing was his picture of a complete musician” (Schnebly-Black and Moore 2003, p. xiii).

Dalcroze Subjects are a non-hierarchical collection of topics that immerse students in the physical exploration of a musical element before encountering it in a piece of musical repertoire (CIJD (Collège of the Institute Jaques-Dalcroze) 2019, p. 31). Polyrhythm, for example, challenges the student to perceive and perform two or more rhythms simultaneously (Jaques-Dalcroze [1921] 1967, p. 70). It would seem that many exercises devised by Jaques-Dalcroze “revolutionized traditional European forms of movement, in that they consciously followed a polyrhythmic structure. Before the First World War, only very few artists could master such movement patterns” (Fischer-Lichte 1997, p. 7). Such innovations prompted neuroscientist and psychologist Édouard Claparède to write that Jaques-Dalcroze had demonstrated “the psychological importance of movement as a support for intellectual and affective phenomena” by artistic rather than scientific means (McCormack 2005, p. 132). Today, the social and health sciences have confirmed many of Jaques-Dalcroze’s intuitions (e.g., Fitch (2018)). However, critics in his time considered the use of the human body for pedagogical and artistic experiment to be immodest. Such reactionary attitudes spurred Jaques-Dalcroze to continue his work outside a narrow-minded institution (Davidson 2021b, p. 191).

4. The Hellerau Institute

A bespoke educational forum was proposed to Jaques-Dalcroze by a pair of German industrialists, Wolf and Harald Dohrn (see Heinhold and Großer (2007)). In 1909, they founded and funded a Modernist utopia in a sunny field near Dresden, the garden city of Hellerau, which sought to restore harmony to work and community life. Jaques-Dalcroze was appointed Artistic Director of the Festspielhaus Hellerau where Dalcroze Eurhythmics would offer an artistic antidote to the industrial age (Davidson 2021b, p. 192). The visionary designer Adolphe Appia was Jaques-Dalcroze’s closest collaborator at Hellerau. Appia sought to demonstrate that the actor’s body should be the measure of all things in performance, in contrast to the artificial constructs of traditional theatrical conventions (see Beacham (1994)). Establishing a theatre space with no proscenium arch was a radical way to reunite performer and audience. Concealing electrical fixtures behind white gauze walls to diffuse light throughout the space was an aesthetic *coup de théâtre*. The Festspielhaus was the first attempt in theatre history to integrate body, space, and light. Today, this is commonplace, but, at a time before terms such as ‘embodied cognition’, ‘modern dance’, or

‘black box theatre’ had been coined, this was revolutionary. However, with the outbreak of the First World War, and the untimely death of Wolf Dohrn, the Hellerau experiment was abandoned and the Dalcroze diaspora scattered across the globe.

5. A Family Tree of Theatre Pedagogy

To illustrate the influence of Dalcroze Eurhythmics on actor training, Figure 1 brings together four selected branches on a family tree of theatre pedagogy. Each branch follows the lineage and legacy of a specific practitioner who studied with Jaques-Dalcroze at the Hellerau Institute in Germany. In the top-right corner is an eastern European branch, along which Sergei Volkonski brings Dalcroze Eurhythmics to Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre, and it is subsequently passed to others in Russia and Poland. In the top-left corner is a French branch stretching from Jaques-Dalcroze in Geneva to Suzanne Bing in Paris and continues to echo in the Modernist reinventions of mime and mask. In the lower-left corner is an Anglo-German branch, via which Suzanne Perrottet, student and colleague of Jaques-Dalcroze, works alongside Rudolf Laban. Laban’s legacy is passed to Yat Malmgren, fuelling his work at Drama Centre London, and on to Tony Knight with whom I studied at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) in Sydney, Australia. In the lower-right corner are two different forks of the American branch, heavily influenced by Elsa Findlay, teacher of Dalcroze Eurhythmics at the American Laboratory Theatre and the Martha Graham Dance Company. Findlay’s legacy in theatre can be traced via Richard Boleslavsky to the musicality of Sanford Meisner’s acting technique. Findlay’s legacy in dance can be traced via postmodern choreographer Mary Overlie to theatre director Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints. Each of these four branches is discussed in greater detail below.

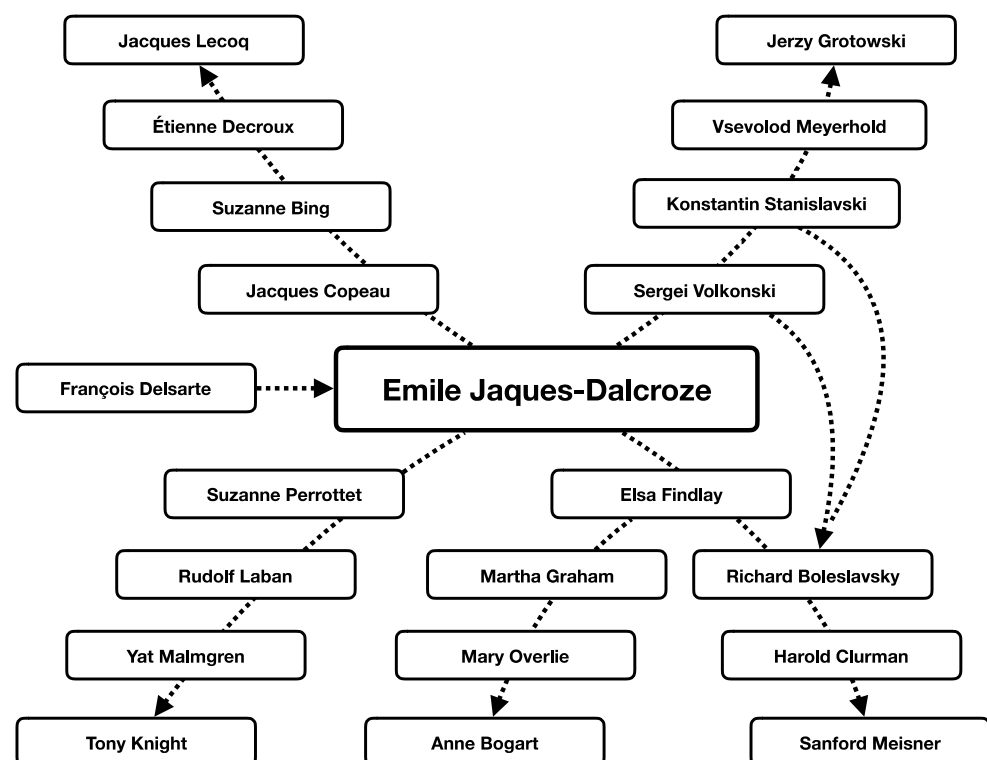


Figure 1. A family tree of theatre pedagogy (Source: Author).

6. Four Selected Branches

6.1. A Russian–Polish Branch

Stanislavski co-founded the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in 1897, ushering in significant changes to the acting profession (Benedetti 2000, pp. 16–19). His naturalistic approach to acting was based on observation of human behaviour and detailed physical formation

of character. His love of singing, which he had studied in his twenties, led him to experiment with musical rhythm in pursuit of character (Davidson 2021b, p. 186). Given these curiosities, it is no coincidence that Dalcroze Eurhythmics was adopted by the MAT. It was introduced by Sergei Volkonski who took special leave from the company to study with Jaques-Dalcroze at Hellerau (Morris 2017, p. 53). Just as Jaques-Dalcroze trained musicians to meet polyrhythmic expectations, Stanislavski found a means for actors to meet the demands of multi-layered thoughts, words, and actions. The System, as it came to be known, embraces elements from Dalcroze Eurhythmics, most evidently the concept of Tempo-Rhythm (Stanislavski 2017, pp. 483–528). Tempo-Rhythm exercises explore the relationship between inner emotion motivated by a given tempo and external action elicited by a contrasting tempo. Though Stanislavski's writings do not cite the influence of Jaques-Dalcroze, scholars assert that Tempo-Rhythm would not have emerged without it (e.g., Morris (2017)). Records confirm that classes in Dalcroze Eurhythmics were held at the MAT from 1910 until the late 1930s (Lee 2003, p. 122).

Following this rhythmic thread in actor training, Dalcroze Eurhythmics provides a backdrop to the career of Vsevolod Meyerhold, Stanislavski's most radical colleague and student. Meyerhold developed Biomechanics to expand the possibilities of theatre through whole-body expression. His goals are in parallel with those of Jaques-Dalcroze, physical balance and control; rhythmic awareness of space and time; and responsiveness to the scene partner and audience (Leach in Hodge (2010), p. 32). Further echoes are found in the work of Polish theatre practitioner Jerzy Grotowski. Having studied the methods of Stanislavski and Meyerhold at the Lunacharsky Institute in Moscow during the 1950s, Grotowski evolved various athletic approaches to actorly rhythm, one of which is the *plastique études*. Drawing on Jaques-Dalcroze's realizations of music through movement, known as *plastique animée*, Grotowski's *plastiques* call for isolation in the body, dialogue between body parts, relationships to others and the space, and an impulsive sense of flow (Slowiak and Cuesta 2007, pp. 108–12). Figure 2 illustrates this Russian–Polish branch.

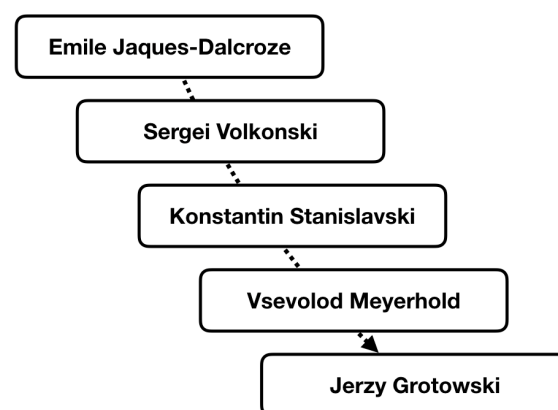


Figure 2. A Russian–Polish branch on the Hellerau tree (Source: Author).

6.2. A French Branch

Jacques Copeau was a significant early supporter of Jaques-Dalcroze (see Evans (2017)). In 1915, Copeau visited the newly established Institute Jaques-Dalcroze in Geneva. He was impressed with Dalcroze Eurhythmics as a training process and considered it an expressive alternative to the actor training prevalent in France at the time. Copeau founded *l'Ecole du Vieux-Colombier* in Paris and included Dalcroze Eurhythmics in the curriculum. Although Copeau taught some classes, the main protagonist on this branch is Suzanne Bing, Copeau's partner in business and in life (Morris 2017, pp. 77–94). As an acting teacher, Bing was a significant pioneer. Building on the work of Jaques-Dalcroze, she developed her own approach to rhythmic training for actors which extended further into psychology and sociology than Dalcroze Eurhythmics for musicians had ever needed to. Bing balanced the dimensions of the Dalcroze Subjects with the rhythms of human behaviour. By the

1920s, however, her innovations had eclipsed Dalcroze Eurhythmics with *Musique Corporelle* (Kusler 1974, p. 115). Figure 3 illustrates its nine elements.

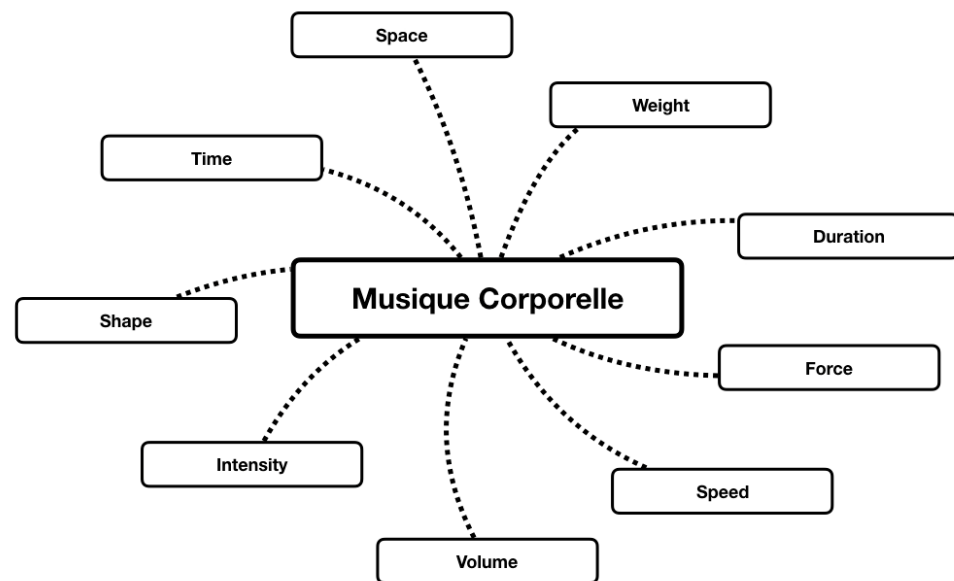


Figure 3. Suzanne Bing’s nine elements of *Musique Corporelle* (Source: Author).

In contrast with Jaques-Dalcroze, Bing used theatrical texts in her classes rather than musical repertoire. This guided her students to identify rhythmic elements within a wide range of dramatic situations. It was Bing’s conviction that the actor’s need to speak comes from a personal, inner impulse rather than an objective, external form, such as a musical subject. The pedagogies of Copeau and Bing influenced French approaches to mime and mask, including the work of Étienne Decroux and Jacques Lecoq (Morris 2017, p. 91).

6.3. An Anglo-German Branch

Suzanne Perrottet took up the violin as a child and began her musical training with Jaques-Dalcroze at Geneva Conservatoire. Her apprenticeship in Dalcroze Eurhythmics took her to the Hellerau Institute where she became one of its most renowned faculty members (see Odom (2015)). As her teaching contract ended, her connection with Rudolf Laban began. Laban was a painter and dancer with no musical training. He gives no credit to Jaques-Dalcroze in any of his written works, but it is clear that Perrottet’s influence as a music educator was of great benefit to his work (Lee 2003, pp. 80–83). Laban’s system of movement analysis evolved across his lifetime to investigate all aspects of physical labour, communication, and expression. The Eight Efforts (Press, Glide, Punch, Dab, Float, Wring, Flick, Slash) are well-known territory in drama schools, offering insight into time, space, weight, and flow (Newlove 1993, pp. 78–85).

Laban’s last student was Yat Malmgren. Following an international career as a ballet dancer for companies including Ballet Joos, Yat (as he is known in English) established an approach to actor training at Drama Centre London (see Mirodan (1997)). This rigorous, sequential method of character analysis produced five decades of famous names in British theatre and film. Drama Centre’s program was terminated in 2022, but the work of Yat Malmgren continues to be taught by graduates in private practice. It integrates Laban’s factors of time, space, weight, and flow with Carl Jung’s psychological functions of thinking, sensing, intuiting, and feeling (see Hayes (2010)). Supported by William Carpenter’s approach to text analysis, this system was completed by Yat after Laban’s death and documented by Christopher Fettes (2015). A key component of this work on character analysis is the six Inner Attitudes shown in Figure 4.

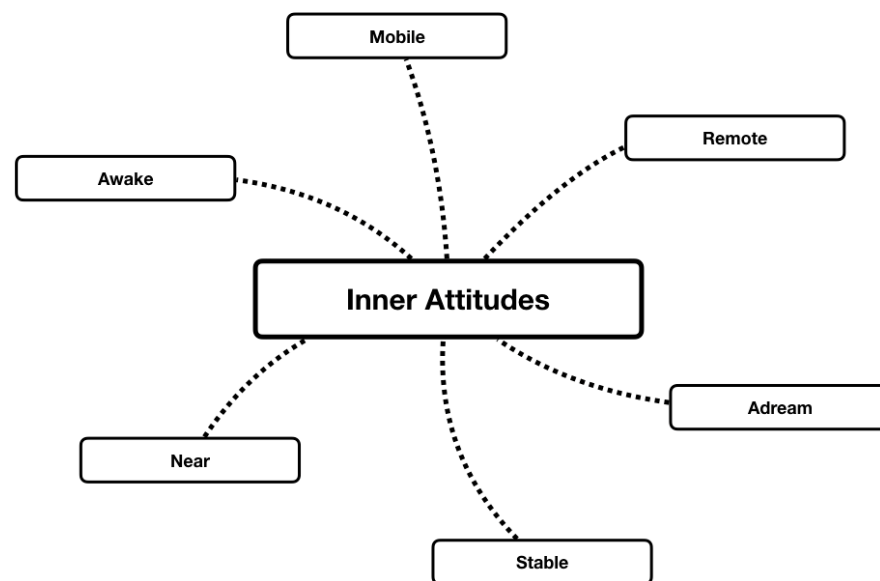


Figure 4. Yat Malmgren’s six Inner Attitudes (Source: Author).

Yat Malmgren’s focus on the inner life of a character might appear antithetical to Jaques-Dalcroze’s whole-body externalization of music. Vladimir Miroduan suggests that Suzanne Perrottet and Mary Wigman “found in Laban’s approach, based on the inner, a more congenial medium than Dalcroze’s exercises”, and that Kurt Joos declared, “the influence of Dalcroze on Laban was nothing” (Miroduan 1997, p. 103). However, this outright dismissal of a lineage seems at odds with more recent research (see Lee (2003); Odom (2015); Morris (2017)). Miroduan concedes that “Dalcroze’s influence is felt in [Yat’s] system not directly through Laban, but through the way in which his ideas were filtered by Stanislavski” (Miroduan 1997, p. 103). From my perspective as a theatre practitioner and Dalcrozian, I assert that there are riches to be unearthed from a study of the Inner Attitudes of a piece of musical repertoire.

6.4. Two American Branches

Sanford Meisner was a young musician and actor when he first learned the basics of Stanislavski’s System. Meisner Technique evolved from this Stanislavskian base. It prioritizes the actor’s skill for listening and is influenced by Meisner’s own early training as a classical pianist (see Davidson (2023)). Meisner’s early mentors, Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg, were co-founders of the Group Theatre (see Clurman (1975)). They both studied at the American Laboratory Theatre (The Lab), established by former MAT member Richard Boleslavsky. As a champion of Jaques-Dalcroze, Boleslavsky engaged Elsa Findlay, a graduate of the Hellerau Institute, to teach Dalcroze Eurhythmics at The Lab (Odom 2019, p. 16). This branch can be traced in the literature on Method Acting (Krasner in Hodge (2010), pp. 145–47) and cross-overs between theatre, music, and dance in New York City in the mid-twentieth century (see Willis (1968)).

Elsa Findlay also taught the Modernist dancer and (then) emerging choreographer Martha Graham, who had a wide-ranging influence on generations of American dance artists. This influence includes the work of Mary Overlie whose Six Viewpoints evolved from the postmodern performance art movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Overlie writes that the six viewpoints are a teaching philosophy for choreographers which “begins with taking theater apart. [I]t is necessary to be practiced at deconstruction or separating the whole into its essential parts” (Six Viewpoints 2023).

Anne Bogart collaborated with Mary Overlie, not as a dancer but as a theatre maker and director. She developed what is now known in actor training as Viewpoints (see Perucci (2017)). In *The Viewpoints Book*, written by Bogart and her colleague Tina Landau, Viewpoints is described as a “clear-cut procedure and attitude that is non-hierarchical,

practical, and collaborative in nature” (Bogart and Landau 2005, p. 15). Figure 5 illustrates the nine viewpoints. They are a means to enable the study of specific qualities of time and space in performance. This approach is in parallel with the Dalcroze Subjects, exploring a specific element in isolation before identifying it in repertoire (CIJD (Collège of the Institute Jaques-Dalcroze) 2019, p. 31).

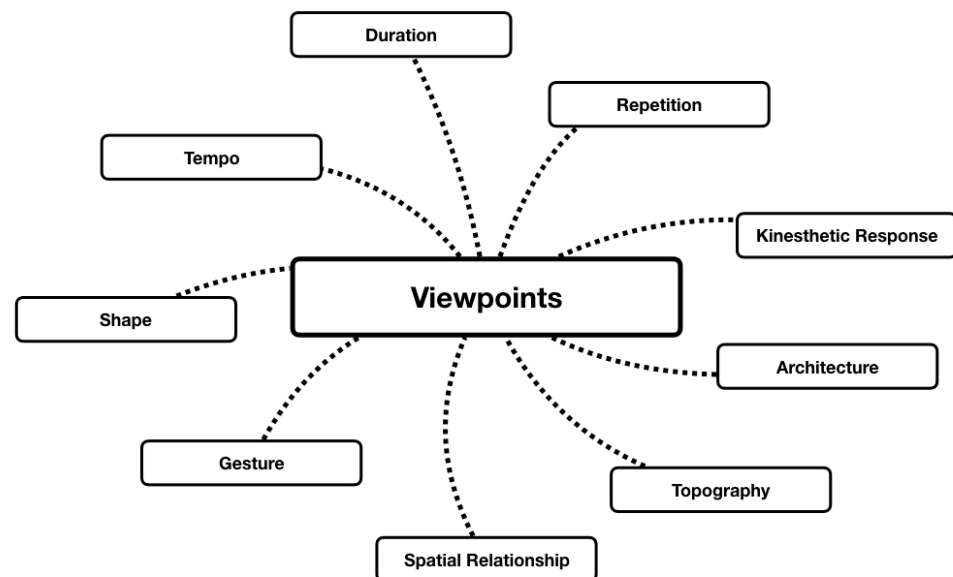


Figure 5. Anne Bogart’s nine Viewpoints (Source: Author).

Of the practices discussed on these four branches of the family tree of actor training, Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints appears to have the greatest kinship with the work of Jaques-Dalcroze due to its non-hierarchical nature. Having recognized this family resemblance many years ago, I feel confident that I am bringing Hellerau’s lineage and influence full-circle when I incorporate Viewpoints in my Dalcroze Eurhythmics classes for acting students (see Davidson (2021a)).

7. Conclusions

This essay has sought to trace the lineage and influence of Dalcroze Eurhythmics on the family tree of theatre pedagogy. It has set out an historical backdrop to actor training and characterized the nature of theatre pedagogy as a process of passing on knowledge, skill, and experience from one generation to the next. It has illustrated historical and pedagogical connections from the work of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze at the Hellerau Institute to some of the leading players of actor training in Russia, Poland, France, Germany, England, and the USA. Of the earliest practitioners discussed, “neither Stanislavski nor Laban gave Dalcroze written credit in their major theoretical works”, and these broken branches on the tree have obscured our view of “the Dalcrozean lineage of modern theatre” (Lee 2003, p. 125). In retracing these roots, the essay has revealed a supporting cast of theatre artists and acting teachers who have actively engaged with the practice of Dalcroze Eurhythmics. Through essays such as this, I seek to reinvigorate theatrical interest in the interdisciplinary nature of Dalcroze Eurhythmics, demonstrating its application beyond an education *in* music toward an education *through* music.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: This essay is based on a paper given at the Congress of the Institute Jaques-Dalcroze (IJD) in 2019, and an online lecture for Hamburg Open Online University (HOOU) in 2021. Any errors of fact are my own.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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