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Artistry in Eurhythmics Teaching: Lasting Impressions of Fleeting Moments

By Matthew Thibeault

Eurhythmics offers a committed teacher many possibilities for deepening his or her practice. Because Eurhythmics differs radically from standard practices in music education, achieving expertise requires special work. This work is intellectual as well as musical, and is strengthened through reflective practice with willing students. Broad brushstrokes may be easily grasped, but the journey towards artistry in Eurhythmics is one that interweaves music, curriculum, human development, and a sense of adventure and possibility.

Certain noteworthy moments in my Eurhythmics education have helped me in my journey. In this article, I will explore two memorable instances of teaching. Each stayed with me in various ways: through memory, in talking to friends, and in lessons with my own students. In the first case, an unusual offhand comment caused me to rethink some of my preconceptions of Eurhythmics; in the second, the actual lesson was simple, but making it work and understanding its implications was a challenge that would engage me in for several years.

A Koan from Madeleine Duret

During the 2001 CMU Dalcroze International Week, Madeleine Duret, Eurhythmics professor at the Institut Jaques-Dalcroze in Geneva, invited me to join her for lunch in the faculty dining hall. We discussed her teaching, her love of Pittsburgh, and her disappointment that “there is no good food.” I asked about her piano playing, telling her how impressed my roommate had been with her fugal improvisations. I asked about practicing, and she answered: “I don’t practice improvisation at all anymore. I can’t. I find it boring, alone at home. The only time I can improvise is when I am in the classroom, when I see bodies moving that I can react to.”

I had been one of those bodies a few days earlier during a Eurhythmics lesson based around quick reaction and mixed meter (2/4, 3/4, and 4/4). Madeleine provided improvisations built around recurring motifs. Most impressive was the pacing: the striving, laughing at the clumsiness that our movements sometimes revealed, as well as our joy when we achieved something — all propelled by her constantly shifting playing. By the end of the lesson, we had arrived at a fixed choreography to a piece from Bartók’s Mikrokosmos for which all our improvised movements had been a preparation.

When Madeleine declared that she could only improvise when she saw bodies moving, I probably nodded in agreement; she said it in such a matter-of-fact way. In truth, I had no idea what she meant. The notion that she could only improvise when she saw students seemed puzzling. I understood the need for inspiration in improvisation, and I knew that her piano skills were well-developed. Madeleine no longer struggled with the technical challenges that I did. But what kind of person needs moving bodies in order to improvise?

In the months that followed, I began to consider this statement as a koan. The Rinzai school of Japanese Zen Buddhism maintains a curriculum that monks must navigate as a path to enlightenment (Hori, 1994; Wikipedia, 2005). Statements such as, “Does the dog have Buddha nature?” or “Two hands clap and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand?” are given to monk students, meditated upon, and tested through interactions with the master. Answering the koan usually involves changing fundamental assumptions about the view of reality posed by the question. Though often simplistic in language and form, a koan is transformative, requiring work and a willingness to understand the world in a new way.
Although not in a question form, Madeleine's statement, "The only time I can improvise is when I see bodies moving in the classroom," has the feeling of a koan in its mystery. It invites contemplation and asks us to think in new ways about the whole situation of the Eurythmics classroom.

**Two possible views of the classroom**
What interests me about Madeleine's statement is how it problematizes a world we think we know. A classroom where students move to musical improvisations seems easily explained. The teacher plays, and the students move. This stimulus-response conception mirrors classic psychology, where a child, stimulated upon seeing a lit candle, responds by reaching towards the flame. He or she then receives a burning stimulus that results in a response to pull his or her hand away from the flame. This first description fits our observation of the classroom, with Madeline's playing stimulating a movement response from her students, but her suggestion that she can only play when she is reacting to students invalidates this commonsense notion. A stimulus doesn't need the response to occur in order for it to exist, but Madeline needs her students in order to play.

A slightly better view might be that Madeline is only able to improvise when she watches students because their variations are the source of her inspiration. A good Eurythmics teacher, in this model, would use the students as a reservoir for ideas. In a classroom full of moving bodies, the teacher is presented with all kinds of motions and movements: the lifting of an arm might inspire a glissando, a misstep might inspire an idea for a new rhythm, or a student's incorrect march to a legato improvisation might inspire a change to staccato. Perhaps this is Madeline's point.

Although possible, this second explanation is unsatisfying in at least three ways. First, the notion that natural variation and errors are fuel for improvisation seems to emphasize students who make obvious mistakes. Second, the random nature of the inspiration also seems to make this specific source (students) less critical; it suggests that Madeleine might get similar and adequate inspiration from sneakily listening to a baseball game or viewing postcards sitting on her piano. Finally, a teacher who takes this much inspiration from students offers too much control of the lesson to unplanned occurrences. In both these views, Madeline might make use of her students, but they are not yet indispensable.

**Towards a conception of Eurythmics**
I began my analysis with two versions that don't work: Madeleine improvising as a stimulus that her students react to, then moved to:

Madeline basing her improvisations upon her students' movements and reactions.

In order to better address this koan, fundamental assumptions about the Eurythmics classroom deserve reexamination. Although we are closer to an answer, we need a deeper analysis of what is happening in order for Madeleine's response to make sense.

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One source of help is John Dewey's idea of the organic circuit (Dewey, 1973/1981). In this, a direct critique of the S-R model, a constant interconnection exists between the organism, their thoughts and intentions, and the environment. Dewey reminds us that a more accurate analysis will always account for the environment, the coordination of the senses, and the purposes of those involved. In Madeline's class, the improvisations were done for movement, and we need the students for the movement. This conception helps, but one central assumption still needs to be corrected.

By asking about piano improvisation, I missed the point. In choosing to ask about "piano improvisation," I was focusing on one side of a false dichotomy in a way that blocked understanding. I wasn't seeing piano improvisation, I was seeing a Eurythmics lesson, one that incorporated piano improvisation as a central

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1. It is interesting to note that many intellectual similarities exist between Dewey and Jacques-Dalcroze. Indeed, Jacques-Dalcroze might be called music education's own Dewey, which has significance since Dewey was anointed the "patron saint of American education" by Bennett Reimer (Reimer, 1998). An example is that Dalcroze's mentor in psychology, Claparède, was Piaget's mentor. Piaget, in turn, cites Dewey as the source of his educational philosophy. There are enough similarities that they deserve their own paper.
means for communication. Madeleine was teaching
and talking with her students through her playing.
What she was doing was musical, but it had a critical
social component. Seen this way, we finally arrive at a
point where playing at home makes as little sense as
would a conversation alone at home. Years after I first
heard it, what Madeleine said finally makes sense.

Meaningful Eurhythmics improvisations are initiated
by, and because of, the presence of students. What is
played is dictated by their needs and abilities, which
are constantly monitored.

When a teacher watches her
students, she listens to her own
playing through their movement.
If she aims to increase
the energy level through
dynamics, the students should
show whether they are achieving
this. Dewey would note that
Madeleine’s ideas were devel-
oped in concert with her
students’ movements. They
provide her with feedback on her own intentions as
well as inspirations through their own movements. Her
improvisations are not a stimulus. They are a link in
a transaction, an organic circuit among the students,
the classroom, the music, and her conception of the
direction the lesson takes.

In stating that Madeleine’s improvisations depend
upon her students, we have tentatively found an
explanation that brings sense to a puzzling statement.
Solîge, improvisation, and Eurhythmics each depend
upon a student who is attentive to the teacher, attentive
to the music, and attentive to the other students.
Eurhythmics requires teachers to foster interactions
that make intelligent use and organization of the
resources of the classroom, shaping challenges on the
fly because every moment in a classroom is unique.

As Dewey wrote in words that Jaques-Dalcroze would
certainly have admired, “In quality, the good is never
twice alike. It never copies itself. It is new every
morning, fresh every evening. It is unique in its every
presentation. For it marks the resolution of a distinctive
complication of competing habits and impulses which
can never repeat itself.” (Dewey, 1988/1922, p. 146)

Madeleine’s lesson was inspiring to us not only because
it was imaginatively conceived and used good music.

Her lesson was successful because she had a strong
conception and good music, but most importantly
because she was aware, attentive, and took action to
ensure that the transactions among her students and
the music were rich. She did this by listening, looking,
being open to change, and constantly making adjust-
ments. Her improvisation went beyond the music,
comprising her plans for the music, her hopes for her
students, our actual behavior, her sense of the overall
time available, and probably a dash of inspiration and
luck. She created a classroom where music and move-
ment were inseparable and
honored, as Jaques-Dalcroze
hoped for when he wrote, “I
look forward to a system of
musical education in which
the body itself will play the
role of intermediary between
sounds and thought, becoming
the direct medium of our
feelings...” (Jaques-Dalcroze,
1921/1980).

Marta’s Piano Pedagogy
During my first summer at CMU, I spent a day as a guest
in Marta Sanchez’s advanced piano improvisation class.
There was a casual atmosphere; someone would play,
followed by a short critique with the class and Marta.
Two moments stood out.

For the first, Marta brought a student over to the piano.
She placed a simple piece in front of him and said,
“Play.” An organist, he had no problem sight-reading
the material. Once he was about 3/4 finished, however,
Marta took away the music. When he stopped playing
and looked up at her, she said, “Finish it.” He waited
another second before Marta explained, “You know
how it is going, so make up an ending. Finish it.”
With a bit of difficulty, he composed a new ending.

Marta then sat at the piano and proceeded to play
part of a Beethoven sonata from memory. She turned
to the class and said, “Well, I like this piece. But I
want to make it mine, so I,” and then she played the
same passage, but transposed to another key, then
again in a third one. She looked at the class and said,
“see?” then proceeded to play the piece, transforming
it to a minor key. “So,” she said, “I play it in major, in
a few keys, in minor, I analyze it, then it’s mine.” At
this point, she played an improvisation that was
immediately recognizable as a close cousin of the Beethoven piece, but was obviously her own, uniquely combining Beethoven's ideas and her imagination.

**Three Curricular Views of Marta's Lessons**

In order to better understand what I take to be the significance of the two vignettes presented above, I will invoke three views of curriculum presented by Elliot Eisner: the explicit curriculum, the implicit curriculum, and the null curriculum (Eisner, 1979). The explicit curriculum refers to publicly acknowledged goals and aims that exist in a classroom. The implicit curriculum is what is learned as a result of the classroom culture. The null curriculum acknowledges that what is left out of a curriculum can be as profound as what is present, and that for what is not present is an important aspect of curricular assessment.

The explicit curriculum in Marta’s lesson concerns the importance of improvisation, composition, and re-composing pieces. Like much Eurhythmics practice, it applies these techniques to pieces from the Western art tradition, something that is rare in other music education settings. A student who is asked to finish a piece is being asked to solve a musical problem in a way that can deeply involve his or her own identity. This is something explicitly proposed by Jaques-Dalcroze: “Pianoforte practice, undertaken without a certain aural culture, utterly oppresses the individuality and does away with the spirit of inquiry. The duty of a pedagogue is to teach children to become – and remain – themselves.” (Jaques-Dalcroze, 1930/1980).

The implicit curriculum here concerns the role of the musical work. In most current practice, the performance of a piece exists as an end. Play the piece well and all is accomplished. Marta's example challenges this view. Perhaps, in Marta's view, if we can play it well, rather than saying that we know the piece we may say that we've met the piece. To know it requires more work, until we understand how it functions well enough that we can emulate it or replicate it – until, in Marta's words, “we own it.”

Another implicit aspect of Marta’s practice is the idea that Western art music should be viewed as offering the same vibrant opportunities as jazz, bluegrass, or rock. Musicians can, and should, improvise, rethink things, experiment, jam, and otherwise put their own mark on the music they make. This sense of play and possibility is, to my mind, one of the most revolutionary aspects of a Dalcroze classroom when compared with standard practice in American music education.

Although we could discuss the absence of rap (and certainly Eurhythmics focuses on some kinds of music more frequently than others), the null curriculum here is best talked about in terms of what Marta includes that is so often left out of standard music education. Many teachers would find the idea of rewriting the ending of a piece shocking. The untouchable nature of the musical work in contemporary American music education is a given, where, as noted philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote, “The supreme reality of art is the isolated, self-contained work.” (quoted in Small, 1998). Music is entirely about composed works, exemplified by written scores performed as accurately as possible by the musician. Many terms, from the “dumbing down of performers” (Seaton, 1991) to the “eye bound musician” (Leong & Odam, 2002) exist to describe this situation. They share the idea that musicians exist for music, through service to precomposed and written works (Goehr, 1992; Small, 1977).

Marta's example shows how Dalcroze Eurhythmics can turn this idea on its head. It is liberating to think that one has a right to reimagine musical works, with new endings, beginnings, new orchestrations, and improvisations based on composed works possible. Just as Mahler would re-orchestrate works he was conducting, or Stokowski reimagined Bach’s Toccata in the movie Fantasia, students and teachers can be invited to dissolve the wall between musical object and performer. It should also be noted that, in addition to the examples provided here, improvisation in Dalcroze practice also extends to group work (Brockmann, 2000).

**Conclusion**

If musicians are liberated to make decisions that change the musical work, and if they realize that they are encouraged to rethink and remake their musical worlds, then they have an opportunity to express.

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2. I experienced this intensely during preparation for my senior recital as an undergraduate, when I decided to improvise a cadenza for a concerto. I spent weeks playing with the themes and ideas, trying out new possibilities and generally playing with the piece. The difference was extraordinary. I took this knowledge back to my performance, with a renewed sense of what was going on and why.
musical creativity on many uncommonly explored levels. Teachers and students of music can, and should, express their ideas in more ways than one, namely, simply becoming proficient at realizing scores. They should be writing music, making music, taking opportunities to critique and understand a piece.

My own development has been aided at fundamental levels by keeping in mind my experiences with Madeleine and Marta, as well as with the many other teachers and students who have shaped my growth in Dalcroze Eurhythmics. Many other moments have also been indelible, helping me to coordinate my own hopes with methods for exploring and achieving them in teaching. I have attempted here to convey a sense of the way that movement and music are connected, ways that were not obvious to me when I first began my Eurhythmics training. The meaning of Eurhythmics is both dense and deep, and like a great work of art, I expect to explore it often throughout my own development as a teacher.

As with Marta’s making a piece her own, a teacher can make a lesson his or her own. It is one thing to simply replicate a great lesson taken from a workshop. It is another to know it deeply enough that you can make it yours, able to achieve that end through different music, or using the same music in a variety of ways. Herb Henke, who had been present at the Madeleine Duret lesson described earlier in this paper, did just this. When we arrived at our afternoon improvisation class, he had devised a lesson on the same metric principle that Madeleine had used, incorporating a clapping exercise.

Dalcroze Eurhythmics offers teachers an invitation to the rich practices and curricular conceptions I have described. The work is subtle and challenging, but also rewarding. Dalcroze Eurhythmics goes beyond giving a teacher new tactics, by allowing a teacher to rethink their practice in ways that profoundly challenge the practice of music education.

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References