

**Performance Studies Network International Conference**  
**AHRC Research Centre for Musical Performance as Creative practice**  
**University of Cambridge**  
**14-17 July 2011**

**Summary of Special Session**

**Shaping music, shaping you: optimising music performance potential through body movement/dance**

**Presented by Marilyn Wyers & Neil March**

Marilyn Wyers, and Neil March presented this Special Session. The main argument posed addressed the challenge of how music teachers can optimise music performance potential in their students suggesting that one possible solution could be the use of a body movement/dance approach. In the words of one of the participants, ‘the session was a refreshing combination of different modes of presentation: explanatory text, framed video footage, demonstration and a physical workshop which allowed participants to experience at first hand some of the techniques and tasks Marilyn uses in her work, and gain even in a short time, something of the bodily understanding that is the goal. A key part of this experience was the music of Neil March, whose compositions seek to ‘embody’ the shape of organic, everyday gestures and interactions’.

The purpose of the session was to

- Share research-in-action
- Physically explore body movement/dance techniques and tasks that addressed the music performance skill of shaping phrase through ‘Diversions’, a new piano solo piece written by Neil March
- Consider possible learning connections between shaping phrases through body movement/dance and improving the shaping processes involved in music performance.

After a brief introduction to the somatic foundation supporting Marilyn’s work which draws on Dalcroze/Laban/Bartenieff principles, participants were able to experience a journey from initial self-consciousness, inevitable in the setting, to a real enjoyment and immersion in the physical tasks, alone and with partners. One participant commented, that ‘the effect was an increasing connection with an organic sense of movement and communication, give and take, ebb and flow, and participants noticed the alterations in perception and quality of concentration that this gave’.

Following a brief physical warm-up, the first body movement task highlighted the influence of breath on perception and actioning the shape of music in performance. Participants were invited to focus and connect with their natural breathing rhythms and energise different parts of the body by breathing into those parts, consciously releasing any tension or unnecessary gripping in the joints and muscles. It was clear that participants noticed many areas in the body that needed releasing as faces visibly softened and shoulders perceptibly relaxed. Participants were then invited to move different parts of the body freely as they exhaled with the goal of releasing further tension, exploring personal space and strengthening body consciousness and proprioceptive systems. Linking this with sound, Marilyn played a series of harmonic progressions on the piano taken from Howard Skempton’s *Toccata* and asked participants to change between inhalation and exhalation/movements when they perceived a

harmonic change. Participants were asked to notice how they were shaping their bodies in space, notice how their breath supported their movements and to remember the sensation. Comments about this task reflected the importance of breath for all musicians. One participant said that

*'musicians move themselves rarely, not even to do sport. They mostly begin to practise without a physical warm-up, repeating and repeating passages over and over without taking a break to stretch, release tension or embody what they are trying to achieve. Very often when facing difficult passages they hold their breath which doesn't seem to help at all. It seems that attempting to shape music without being conscious of the movement of breath cannot be effective'. (Ya-Wan Chen)*

During the session it was made clear that using body movement/dance to support music performance education is nothing new. Great music educators such as Dalcroze, Orff, Kodaly and Suzuki were mentioned and issues were raised regarding the role of the body in music performance learning and teaching in the 21st century. Is it important? What is the point of it? Where can body movement fit in to established and already overcrowded syllabi and course programmes? These were some of the questions posed and resulting discussion suggested that perhaps the use of the body in the music learning process can be an important tool that Western culture has tended to either forget or to minimise and that perhaps, among other things, this is due to the dualistic notion of learning that still permeates our cultural system and has relegated the body to a lesser part in comparison with the rational brain (Hétu Manifold, 2008)

In support of the use of body movement in the learning process, discussion was drawn to recent neurological research that has begun to study the imbalance between mind and body and is promoting a more equal use of both together. The work of neurocognitive scientist, Jessica Phillips-Silver was mentioned and two of her studies 'Feeling the Beat' (2005) and 'Hearing What the Body Feels' (2007) were used to provide empirical evidence that suggests that the way humans move their bodies influences their auditory perception of rhythm and that the interrelationship between music and body movement is fundamental to music processing throughout life.

It was also pointed out that music psychology research over the past decade has shown a renewed interest in the relationships between the body and music performance. Notably, Jane Davidson's work on the use of body movement in performance argues that body movement has multiple functions and that interdisciplinary links between music, dance and drama can be helpful to reconcile technical and expressive skills in music performance teaching and learning situations (2001).

Further insight into Marilyn's work was given by a brief overview of an empirical research project that involves 6 performance students at Goldsmiths, University of London. The main research questions posed in this project are

- Can body movement/dance be used to support the music performance learning process?
- If so, how can it help improve a sense of shaping phrase in performance?
- What do students say about their experiences of doing body movement/dance tasks? and
- Did they perceive any desirable changes or differences in the way they shape music in performance?

In order to investigate these questions the methods used included

- Practical workshops
- Individual interview
- Inter personal recall

Examples of the data collected were given and video footage of the practical workshops was shown and discussed. In particular two clips were shown illustrating students physically exploring the sense of musical shaping in response to Neil March's piano piece 'Diversions'.

With regards to the last two research questions examples were given of student's verbal responses taken from individual interviews. It was reported that one student, Minna, for example said that the body movement/dance tasks:

*'left me energised and gave me a good feeling about me and my body and moving around with my body as I was performing. It was like opening lots of doors to see how your body responds to all sorts of different kinds of impulses, such as sound, other people's movements'.*

Additionally it was reported that Jacq commented:

*'I think the ball exercise really helped in phrasing, we physically shaped the musical phrase that you played and I got a kind of feel of rhythm and weight that I tried to transfer to my singing....yes, it helped because when I looked at myself in the mirror during my individual practise session I looked and felt more relaxed and natural yet active and alive, less stiff and tense and more able to make an emotional contact with my body'.*

The next part of the session dealt with the notions of shaping music and shaping movement. A working definition was given in terms of shaping movement as the way we contour our bodies in three dimensions in time and space. It was explained that this definition is taken from Laban Movement Analysis and refers to the aspect of human movement which allows the mover to 'accommodate to the plastic character of objects in space, to their volume, or contour, their three-dimensionality and consequently to mould space into plastic forms whether in clay as the sculptor does, in thin air, as the dance, mime artists and story teller do, or in thin air and sound as the musician does (Dell, 1977).

It was observed that anatomically speaking, movement shaping and shaping music requires the constant blending of the muscle group functions in many joints to allow the body's fullest adaptation. For example, a pianist might make their way through a challenging virtuosic passage by moulding their body in the shape of whatever empty space is created by the assortment and combination of notes/sounds in the passage. In other words, shaping the notes/sounds by adjusting/adapting their movement to follow the dictates of the notes/sounds on the piano's form establishing a bridge between themselves and the instrument. Suggesting that the form of the piano doesn't change during a performance but the form of the musician's body does.

To clarify this rather 'fuzzy' idea of shaping music participants were asked to take a few minutes to discuss in small groups their ideas/understanding about shaping music. Participant's comments included:

- *It's like an amoeba, not fixed, continually moving, adapting, changing shape*

- *It's like molecules stuck together, that keep growing and shrinking*
- *It seems to me to be related to form, in Portugal, where I come from we don't have a separate word for shape, we use form to refer to the shape and structure of something*
- *To me it appears to be some kind of pathway, an aural illusion of line/accent/colour/texture/weight*
- *It's seems to me to represent sonic flow in a natural context such as the shape, movement and sound of waves as they continually build and disperse in different ways*

In order to explore the notion of shaping music physically the next part of the session was dedicated to body movement/dance tasks that addressed the skills involved in shaping music phrase. This was done through live performance and non-score based perception and analysis of Neil March's piano piece *Diversions* (the full score can be viewed as a separate attachment). To enable participants to familiarise themselves a little with the piece, Marilyn played a short extract from the opening followed by an explanatory talk by Neil regarding the background to the work, compositional processes and the collaborative relationship that has emerged between himself as a composer and Marilyn as a performer.

*Diversions* was composed in late 2009 and can be seen as part of a sequence of solo piano works beginning with his *Sonata for Piano* (2008) written for Coreen Morsink, followed shortly by *Momenta* (2008) for Emma Firth and subsequently *No Surrender* (2010) for Marilyn Wyers. These pieces are not meant to form any sort of group or 'suite' of individual movements. On the contrary they are distinct individual works.

*Diversions* was an attempt to address the lack of textural and registral contrasts of the first two works whilst remaining consistent in the perpetual development of his harmonic language and adherence to certain compositional principles. He was also mindful of his desire to follow logically from the overtly soundbite constructed *Sonata for Piano* and the subtly variation-based *Momenta* by combining elements from both approaches. For example, whereas *Momenta* begins with 16 bars of music and then reconstructs them with each bar subtly altered pitch wise and/or rhythmically, *Diversions* opens with a short main theme which repeats numerous times throughout the piece and is altered on every occasion of its appearance.

Equally, in the sense that it deploys relatively brief periods of contrasting material, it is the earliest indication of his more recent tendency to link the separate soundbites through short but clearly identifiable 'transitions'.

Neil pointed out that the short opening theme is important because it deploys the principle of the democratic distribution of the 12 pitches available to the conventional piano but also make a strong statement about his harmonic/aesthetic leaning via its use of compound whole tone, jazz-inflected but nevertheless atonal harmony. In these two opening bars the seeds for the entire piece are sown.

Like most of his works, he makes a point of clearly marking each section A, B etc. However, these should not be mistaken for 'rehearsal marks'. They are where he places the beginning of each 'soundbite'. In this work, for the first time he has also marked out a series of 'transitions' that link together the material in each distinct section, now also a feature of his work. To illustrate, Marilyn played soundbites C and D and the transition between these two soundbites. Soundbite C lasts a mere 5 bars but makes an important statement, contrasting the thicker textures that dominated his previous two piano pieces with two-part counterpoint, then two-note chords set against one-part lyricism before suddenly large bass clef chords appear in

the two-bar long transition and a pronounced silence punctuates the end of that passage and the opening of the D soundbite idea.

At this point Marilyn invited the participants to do a physical movement task that attempted to embody shaping the texture of Neil's soundbite and transition ideas in this passage.

Subsequently, Marilyn asked participants to physically explore the ametricality of *Diversions* through the notion of 'inner-pulse' rather than an outer imposed 'beat'. This was done through the natural human movements of walking, clapping and passing a ball. This led to the final task in which participants were asked to identify the departure and arrival of phrases as they listened to the opening of the piece. This was done with a partner and a metre long wooden dowel, which the participants, facing each other, held between index fingers. The purpose was to for partners to shape the movement of the dowel in time and space indicating their perception of the departure and arrival of phrases as Marilyn played the opening page of *Diversions*.

Neil concluded his talk by mentioning the influence of likening musical textures, densities, registers and timbre to broad concepts of body movement such as time, space, shape, energy, weight, flow etc. and that consequently this connection has taken on a more conscious meaning in his more recent works.

The session ended with an opportunity for discussion and reflection that helped to identify what had been experienced and recognise possible learning connections and opportunities for optimising student's music performance potential through body movement/dance.

A final thought was, that perhaps

*'the body is as much a part of finding out about music as it is a means for its actualisation'*.  
(Eric Clarke, 2002)

Submitted by

Marilyn Wyers: [edp01mw@gold.ac.uk](mailto:edp01mw@gold.ac.uk) & Neil March: [neilpaulmarch@aol.com](mailto:neilpaulmarch@aol.com)

Goldsmiths, University of London, July 2011

Thanks to the following participants for their reflective comments that enriched this summary:

Dr. Karen Wise  
Research Associate  
AHRC Research centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice,  
Faculty of Music, University of Cambridge

Dr. Ya-Wan Chen  
Gifted Education and Talent Development Laboratory,  
Binningen,  
Switzerland

Dr. Xuefeng Zhou  
Post Doctoral Fellow  
Music Department  
Sheffield University

Dr. Hooshyar Khayam  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Composition and Ensemble Studies  
Faculty of Music  
University of Art, Tehran

## **References**

- Clarke, E., 2002 in J. Rink Performance Studies, OUP  
Dalcroze, E.J., 1921/1988 Rhythm, Music and Education, Salem, New York, Ayer Company Publishing  
Davidson, J., & Correia, J.S., & Pitts, S., 2001 Reconciling technical and expressive music skills. Journal of Aesthetic Education, Vol 35/3. 51-62  
Dell, C., 1977 A Primer for Movement Description, Dance notation bureau press, New York  
Laban, R., 1988, Mastery of Movement, Northcote House Publications, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
Hétu-Manifold, L., 2008 Applying Jacques-Dalcroze's method to teaching musical instruments and its effects on the learning process. Retrieved April23, 2011 from [www.manifoldmelodies.com/docs/Manifold\\_Dalcroze\\_Voice](http://www.manifoldmelodies.com/docs/Manifold_Dalcroze_Voice)  
Phillips-Silver, J., & Trainor, L.J., 2007 Hearing What the Body Feels, Cognition Vol 105, 533-546

## **Music**

Neil March 2009, *Diversions*, Unpublished

Howard Skempton, 1987, *Toccata* in Collected Piano Pieces (1996), Oxford University Press