

Choric Art: Charting the History of the Movement Choir

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When I began the research for this presentation, I was interested to try to discover experiences in Laban's early life which may have pointed towards his innovative idea of the movement choir. I was in search of the seed that spawned the idea of what we call today community dance - which we will experience here this afternoon, almost a century later, in the form of the movement choir.

If we turn to Laban's biography, *A Life for Dance*, there is a significant account of an early teenage experience which offers a clue to his later work with large numbers of lay dancers. Laban's father, a high-ranking officer in the Austro-Hungarian military was appointed governor of a remote garrison in Bosnia. On a summer holiday with his parents, Laban describes his experiences:

My father taught me the life of a soldier
 [...] Soon I imagined myself a better judge
 than any staff officer of tactics and strategy,
 from company and battalion exercises to the
 manoeuvres of huge corps. It was splendid
 to see our soldiers spreading out over the hills
 [...] to bar the enemy's way [...] and then
 how wonderful it was when my father immediately
 ordered the artillery into position on the hillside.
 Horses panted, soldiers surged forward and
 gun carriages bumped over the field. It was as if
 everyone was flying and tearing about in
 wonderful designs [...] And the pleasure I got
 from my own physical exertions became associated
 with my admiration for the splendid display of
 movement.
 (1)

We have here a dynamic picture of what could be called a military movement choir. But it was to be more than a decade later that Laban began to devote his life to dance and begin to earn a living - somewhat like his father - master-minding the movement and formations of large numbers of people not, in his case, at war in Bosnia but on the streets of Munich in the exotic festivities of carnival (1910-12).

We take a 10 year leap now over the long years of Laban's work in Ascona to create the new Central European modern dance. We arrive in 1920 and witness the hugely successful reception of his first book, *Die Welt des Tanzers*. At this point Laban began to rise to prominence as the founding father of the new modern dance form; he was able to form his first small flagship dance company in Stuttgart and the phenomenon of the idea of the movement choir began to emerge in the German dance culture.

In 1922, Laban opened his first official dance school in Hamburg. In addition to a programme for the training of professional dancers, a parallel curriculum was created for the training of lay dancers designed for the



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development of his idea of the movement choir. Some of those first dancers in the company will be known to you: Sylvia Bodmer, who formed the Manchester Dance Circle in 1942 and taught on the Laban International courses; Kurt Jooss, internationally-known choreographer and creator of the famous work *The Green Table*; Albrecht Knust, legendary figure in the world of Labanotation; Martin Gleisner, movement choir choreographer and author of the book, *Tanz für Alle*; and Dussia Bereska, Laban's collaborator for many years who set up schools in Rome and Paris. It was a group of these dancers who became the prime movers in the promotion and development of the movement choir. The year, 1922, could be starred as the birth of the idea of what we call today 'community dance'.

There has been, and there is still, much discussion about the nature and purpose of a movement choir. Can we offer a definitive description? As a beginning, I quote from Laban's own account.

When [...] a number of young people from all walks of life had come to our courses [...] to refresh themselves through physical exercise [...] nobody had ever heard of a movement choir [...] Gradually, out of our exercises, grew at first modest, and later more extensive [movement] plays which not only appealed greatly to the participants but also to the occasional visitor. [...] they were really quite different from what had so far been called dance. The movements were simpler and the basic ideas of the plays were not show or stage based. We conquered space in common swinging and leaping, in measured, slow stepping or sprightly walking and running. [...] The sensitivity and spontaneity of expression of the participants was greatly heightened and clarified through moving together in common rhythm.

I quote this following statement because - though written in 1922, it is relevant today:

It was a time when the world was filled with vague unrest on the one hand and a forced desire for unlimited amusement on the other. In both these mental attitudes, there was a lack of dignity and innocent enjoyment, of healthy delight in physical ability and of natural poise, which is implicit in the human form [...] The discovery and practice of this ideal bearing in states of collectedness, and in vital dynamic movement became the basis of our first movement choir plays.

He goes on to say: "We were solely concerned with experiencing in ourselves and in togetherness the increased vigour of the spiritual-emotional-physical forces which are united in dance.

Why? Because we were drawn to it, we benefitted from it, and we were inspired by it." (2)

However, within the year, Laban had modified this position. After the first official performance of a movement choir work, *The Dawning of the Light* in Hamburg, 1923, he witnessed the growing popularity of the idea of choric art and saw the gradual emergence of a presentation style which he believed to be worthy of an audience.

The classes for the training of lay dancers at the Hamburg school continued to flourish and Laban began to incorporate small movement choirs into his more ambitious choreographic works. At the same time, members of his original company began to set up their own schools and classes across Germany. Their work as movement choir leaders resonated closely with Laban principles but, as we shall see in later illustrations, the choral work inevitably differed according to the personalities of each leader.

A given feature was an over-arching choreographic form, as was simplicity of movement content, repetition and unison work, but gradually, variations began to occur in: the size of the group - some movement choirs were small, with up to a dozen group members; the facilitation of increased creative contributions from the participants; the age range - Lisa Ullmann records of her first movement choir experience: "When I got there, I found a hall full of people of all ages and shapes" (3); and to Laban's dismay - some movement choirs were used for the purpose of left-wing political propaganda. This prompted him to announce publically that the movement choir was: "not [to be] in the service of some

particular mythology or biased form of ideology." (4)

The photographs belong to the history of the movement choir giving powerful illustrations of the strength of its impact and the commitment and enthusiasm of engagement in choric dancing.



Photo 1: *The Swinging Temple* Here we have a glimpse of *The Swinging Temple* created in 1922 - given the constraints of dance photography of the time, the photograph gives only a flavour of style and historical period. Though it was composed for Laban's theatre company in Hamburg, it can be seen as a choreographic prototype for movement choir works. It was described as an abstract work - a dance symphony which presented: "the gradual transformation of disharmony into harmony, of chaos into cosmos". (5) The dancers wore different coloured costumes of black, red, yellow blue, white and green and, true to Laban's belief that modern dance should not follow the constraints of a given musical score, these early works were accompanied by percussion, piano and in some instances the incorporation of a speech choir.

We turn to a press description to reveal an indication of the flow and dynamics of the work. I quote from a report in a German newspaper:

From a wild dark maelstrom, spots of colour disengage, coalesce in groups. Groups woo each other, repel each other, bond to each other in loitering play, and once again tenderly disengage from each other. A bright strident rhythm forces all the colours under its spell into a frolicking game. The struggle that erupts between red and black is subdued and calmed. Nonetheless there is not the harmony to enthrall all. Joined in two circles, the colours stand against each other. A deep conflict remains [...] But the deep inner feeling of harmony surges up in all. The circles disengage and are engulfed anew. Abruptly - a sound that is all compelling puts them in the spell of its symmetry,

its harmony. Thus the wild maelstrom ends in reconciliation. (6)

At the same time that the school was underway in Stuttgart, Laban was appointed choreographer at the Mannheim Theatre. We see from this next photograph that he was also working with community projects.

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Mannheimer Bewegungschöre Laban

Photo 2: Mannheimer Bewegungschöre Laban. Here we see a movement choir of around 40 young dancers - the chorus of boys orientated towards forwards-deep, the chorus of girls, reaching in the counter-direction, backwards high. It can be seen from the photographs that follow that the attraction of the new modern dance appealed predominantly to the young. Embodied in German culture at the time was a call to health, fitness, the outdoor life and a concern for the pursuit of the spiritual. Classes with Laban fitted the bill perfectly - I quote from Sylvia Bodmer: "I will never forget my first class with Laban. Up into the air, down onto the floor, leaping, spinning and turning, around one's body, under one's body over one's body! A whirlwind in the room." (7)

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Photos 3 and 4: Herta Feist's groups, Berlin, leaping and whirling. I spoke earlier of the ways in which each individual movement choir leader came to express their own style and movement preferences. There is a lightness, quirky elegance and upbeat quality in the illustrations of Herta Feist's work - a real contrast to the more weighty look of Laban's compositions:-



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Photo 5: *The Death of Agamemnon*. This is a fragment from *The Death of Agamemnon*, created in 1924 for the Hamburg movement choir. Here we see the group rehearsing outdoors - a year later - presumably for a further performance. This

is a very clear illustration of what Laban saw as an essential movement choir principle - the arrangement of participants into specific groups of deep, medium or high dancers. This was, of course, a device to create visual interest but for Laban, it also mirrored the structure of the traditional singing choir with its divisions into bass, baritone and tenor, alto, mezzo soprano and soprano. Additionally, it had a more significant purpose. I quote again from Sylvia Bodmer: "Each dancer has, according to type, a different part of the trunk from which the movement is initiated and from which it grows and radiates outwards. The high dancer leads his movement from the so-called *centre of levity*. The medium dancer leads his movements from the so-called *centre of the torso*. The deep dancer [...] from the so-called *centre of gravity*." (8)

In his movement choirs, Laban divided the groups according to types and through this he achieved a response of personal involvement and individual freedom. It was an unforgettable experience for me to be made aware of my potentials as a deep dancer. I have found the possibility of unfolding and deepening my personality and through this, of developing my own

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ideas. The experience, not only in dance but also in other fields, of being fully 'involved' has given a new dimension to my outlook on life.'

We can clearly see a balance of men and women in the works for both the theatre company and the movement choirs. But Laban was also committed to popularising dance for men. We see from these following illustrations that Albrecht Knust and Martin Gleisner had no difficulties in attracting young men into their movement groups.

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Photos 6 - 11 showed Knust's choir group in Hamburg; Knust was Laban's assistant and rehearsal director.

9-11



12 Photo 12 showed Gleisner's book cover - Martin Gleisner, talented dancer, choreographer and inspiring teacher, dedicated to the idea of the social/communal import of choric dance, published a widely acclaimed book on the movement choir, *Tanz für Alle*, in 1928.



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Photos 14 and 15: rehearsals for *Titan*. By 1928, Laban's career as the figurehead of the new modern dance was ascendant. For the Magdeburg Dance Congress, scheduled to run for four months in the summer of 1927, he planned an ambitious movement choir performance involving 25 dancers from his company and 40 dancers from choirs across Germany. Accompaniment for *Titan* was sparse - a woodwind melody, a kettle drum and silence.

About *Titan*, Laban wrote: "A genuine belief in the power of unity, in an unspoiled core within the human being gave me the inspiration for a dance play, telling of the strength in the common hope which lies in a common will to achieve something better [...] The purpose of life as I understand it is a care for the human as opposed to the robot. [He envisaged] an image of a mass of life in which all the celebrants in communion of thought, feeling and action, seek the way to a clear goal, namely to enhance their own inner light". (10)

It was perhaps this very philosophy, embodied in his most ambitious movement choir *Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude* (*The Spring Wind and the New Joy*), that brought about his downfall at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. The mass of 1,000 dancers, formed from choirs across Germany, came together to perform four 'reigens' of *Tauwind* which ended in a grand harmonious finale. Present at the dress rehearsal were Hitler and Goebbels; the work did not meet with approval. Goebbel's diary records the response: "Freely based on Nietzsche, a bad, contrived and affected



Photo 13 – showed the Hamburg Men's group 1928 (9)

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piece. [...] I do not like it. That is because it is dressed up in our clothes and has nothing whatever to do with us". (11)

Laban's career in Germany ended there - his work was banned, his schools were closed. Mary Wigman, former pupil and renowned teacher, dance soloist and choreographer stayed on.

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Photos 16, Entrance; 17, groups; 18, finale circles; 19, German Eagle from Wigman's work for the Olympics

Two years later Laban's arrived in England, emaciated and depressed. Yet, by 1942, we see evidence of his influence at work in three areas: the industrial war effort; the State Education system; and in the enthusiastic reception of his idea of the movement choir.



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The day was produced by Geraldine Stephenson and in true Laban style, her choir, involving around 400 dancers working in 14 centres across Great Britain, came together to rehearse before the performance. (13)

Photo 25 (previous page): An illustration from *Kaleidoscopia Viva* of the final Purcell chorus. A slow camera setting has produced a wonderful example here of 'cosmic' harmony. For Laban, the symbol of the circle formation was another important feature of movement choir work: the 'round dance', the circle - symbol of unity, wholeness and eternity.

I want to finish this presentation by paying tribute to Sam and Susi Thornton. It was through their direction of the Laban International Summer School courses that the tradition of the movement choir has been sustained and can look forwards towards the future. The summer courses began in 1979 and many of you here will remember them vividly. They were truly international - with participants arriving from Scandinavia, Europe, the Antipodes and Asia. The courses ran for eight days and culminated on the last day with all dancers working together to participate in a movement choir. This last day was anticipated with great enthusiasm and excitement. We knew that this would be a special dance experience and we knew that the traditional ending of the choir would culminate in a huge group circle - in a silence which connected all and was filled with communal significance and strong emotion. Thus, from 1980 to 2009, Sam Thornton composed, directed and established the Laban International Courses (Linc) tradition of the movement choir. A selection of some of the titles of the choirs will call up memories of those experiences: *Pictures at an Exhibition*; *Carmina Burana*; *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*; *Missa Criola*; *African Sanctus*; and *Stillness and Stir* - performed at the Royal Albert Hall in 1985. The movement choir was performed in silence - with the accompaniment of a single voice reading a long metaphysical poem by Laban of the same title. (14)

[a filmed excerpt from the opening chorus of *Carmina Burana* (15) was shown]

Photo 26: The finale of the Linc millennium movement

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choir

It has been interesting to research for this lecture,

because as a member of many of those movement choirs, I would wonder in what ways they might be different from Laban's original ideas. I discover that they differ predominantly in one aspect - that the Linc movement choir was produced as a day of dance rather than a work which was brought to fullness over a period of time.

I summarise by recalling aspects and features of the movement choir envisioned by Laban:

1. that it was a celebration of communal thought, feeling, action and joy in the harmony of movement;
2. that it had sensitivity and spontaneity of expression heightened and clarified through moving together in common rhythm;
3. there was simplicity of movement in unison swinging, leaping, stepping, gesturing and running;
4. there was a concern with experiencing alone and together the increased vigour of the physical, emotional and spiritual forces which are united in dance;
5. that it had a means of touching and enhancing one's inner light;
6. there was a care for the human being as opposed to the robot;
7. that it was not necessarily designed for performance to an audience.

These hallmarks of the movement choir were written by Laban in 1920. This year, Sam and Susi Thornton have produced an account of the guiding principles that inform their own movement choir work. It will become clear that their position is 'Laban-authentic' and closely reflective of the original movement choir principles. I quote:

1. The whole group dancing together is an experience of heartbeat, common rhythm, a great belonging. Everyone experiences the build up of energy which this dancing engenders; faces light up, people give themselves to this moment of wholeness and harmony.
2. Movement choirs bring dancers to the familiar[...] travelling through space by walking, running jumping. The work needs to be simple, uncluttered, repetitive. It will offer unison movement to reinforce the wholeness and oneness.
3. They require sensitivity, offering the opportunity to give and receive, showing generosity and withdrawing from competition.
4. The movement choir touches, in some way, on the best of human attributes and helps to bring a meaning to life.

And finally a comment from Susi Thornton "movement choirs are very much needed in these days of speed, electronic devices, adulation of left-brain thinking, self-centredness and individualism." This resonates with Laban's prophetic statement: "A care for the human being as opposed to the robot".

This brings me to the final part of the lecture - a tribute

to Susi Thornton. She has worked tirelessly, alongside Sam, as co-director of the Laban International courses to sustain the Laban legacy and currently, to point the movement choir towards the future. In 2011, Susi created the Movement Choir Project, designed for the training of movement choir leaders. Its aim is to promote the idea of the movement choir to a larger general public across the country. To date, under the title of 'Dance in a Day', the project has produced choirs in Surrey, Devon, Gloucestershire and Northern Ireland. Future projects are planned for Bedfordshire and London - and a development of the choir today is planned for another performance next month in Surrey. A very successful beginning!

Photo 27: The 2011 *Missa Criolla* movement choir at

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Egham in Surrey

It seems to be the case that Laban's role - as originator of community dance as we know it today, creator of the movement choir and founding father of dance in the State Education System - has been forgotten. But, as we see, the history of the movement choir runs from 1922 to this afternoon and we hope with the new cohort of movement choir leaders, that the tradition will continue into the future. We look forward to being part of that history when we dance together in the movement choir at 2.00 p.m.

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