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# Music and Movement – Music and Dancing – Dancing, Movement and Music

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*Nathalie Dolmetsch*  
*Transcribed by Anne Daye*

## Music and Movement - Music and Dancing - Dancing, Movement and Music

Dancing may be considered as coming roughly under these three categories. The first is elementary<sup>o</sup> and can include the old-fashioned P. T exercises to music. In the second<sup>o</sup>, grace is implied, and a feeling for the interpretation of music, whilst in the third a homogeneous whole is required.

One of the secrets of true dancing seems to lie in a fluidity of movement. There is a feeling for the music which is difficult to describe and of which the spectator is not consciously aware, though it is infinitely grateful to the subconscious.

Nowadays, it is clearly demonstrated, when you look for it, in the distinction between one ballet dancer and another. They both keep time, but in the one the actions are merely accurate, whilst in the other every movement bears a subtle mathematical co-relation to, or subdivision of the music, giving that fluidity in which every part of the movement flows with the music. One is scarcely aware that it is accomplished because the whole is so integrally knit together.

Before all this can happen the body must be straight, with the supple straightness that can take a curve (but not an angle), legs, arms, head, feet and hands being part of the complete line. This where ballet, in its regime of loose-jointedness sometimes carries it to the point of angularity.

A natural dancer, such as Isadora Duncan it seems, had the grace and fluid body-movement that made her able to charm, though she had not the mechanical technique. Our aim, I think, should lie between these two extremes. N.D.

The historical dances we study had the dual purpose of being enjoyable to the dancers and a pleasure to watch for the spectators. Partners would take turns in dancing for each other.

The Italian Treatises convey more of the subtleties of style and histrionic effect than those of other nations.

Here are a few quotations:

Domenichino says in 1416, 'Well did the wise Aristotle treat somewhat of bodily movements, practised with virtuous ardour, without which it would never be possible to know how to convey with subtlety, the exquisite shades of meaning that can be expressed by this bodily mobility, moving from place to place with measure, memory, agility and fluent grace.'

Domenichino again: '...And note that...it is needful to have a consummate and easy agility and bodily grace'.

Much more could be quoted on the same lines from him and his successors.

According to Guglielmo Ebreo (1463): 'There is need for great concordance and beauty in the music and the measure, which sweet concordance will charm the senses, with a suave sweetness, inspiring the dancers to sympathetic gesture and movement.'

Note, by the way, the mention of gesture. The Basse Danse, being the slowest, is treated by all as the most difficult to dance gracefully. Domenichino makes it say, of itself, '...in my employ few succeed: for those who can dance and play me well must perforce be gifted of Heaven'.

The English are particularly sparse in their instructions as to style, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Beyond telling you 'and you must raise your body', from time to time (this does imply that you do lower it in between) they give only names and order of the steps, and not always even that.

The poets are a little more helpful. Sir John Davies, in his Poem of Dancing has many inspiring similes. The sun, for instance, is likened to a reveller in rich array, who:

'Doth dance his galliard in his leman's sight,  
Both back and forth, and sideways passing light.  
His gallant grace doth so the gods amaze  
They all stand still and at his beauty gaze.'

It is not until we get to Beauchamp's dance notation that we get clear indications of the constant use of pliés relevés and all the other dance refinements, such as the use of arms, which obviously cannot have sprung into being with the invention of notation, but must have had a long history behind them, if we are to believe what the ancients tell us concerning the grace of bodily movement in dancing.

### From an Anonymous 18<sup>th</sup> Century Dance Manual

The majority of young people go to dancing masters to learn this or that step which they have seen performed; but they don't realize that dancing (like every other art) is subject to general rules, and that to make a single change of step, you must have already performed even simpler things; that a step is composed of several movements, which have all a particular impact, and that one can only put the whole together when one knows its details; that the body, the head and arms have also movements proper to them, and for these to be able to move freely you must have acquired sufficient facility with your legs to be able to use them without their causing contractions above the waist; leaving the body free from all stiffness.

It is not sufficient to perform the steps; you must, besides, dance for your lady, offering your hand gracefully, and leading her gently to her place, she being scarcely aware of it, giving value to the smallest detail, and to the dance the elegant style it deserves.

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## Notes

The short piece entitled 'Music and Movement - Music and Dancing - Dancing, Movement and Music' by Nathalie Dolmetsch has recently been passed on to The Historical Dance Society by Louise Bailey, her daughter. The original, a typescript with pencil annotations, is preserved in the HDS Archives. The transcription represents the original with a few corrections.

Although clearly a first draft, as suggested by the titles, the topic remains relevant to historical dancers today. Finding 'the grace of bodily movement in dancing' is surely an essential goal when realising dance steps from written or notated sources, while remaining a quality we can easily see in good dancers but have difficulty putting into words.

The article is undated, probably being written as Parkinson's disease began to limit her activities from the middle of the 1960s. Like Mabel Dolmetsch before her, Nathalie had endeavoured to communicate their pioneering discoveries in music and dance in written form as well as in performance. It is timely to offer a biography of Nathalie Dolmetsch, founder of the Historical Dance Society (formerly the Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society) to place this short, previously unpublished, piece in a wider context.\*

*Anne Daye*

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\* The biography of Nathalie Dolmetsch by Anne Daye will be published in *Historical Dance* online shortly.