

Labanotation and Asian dance: selected examples

by Judy Van Zile

Since 1971 I have been teaching Labanotation at the University of Hawaii, and both my students and I have used notation in research. The unique opportunities in Hawaii to apply notation skills to a tremendously wide variety of dance forms, and the geographically broad - ranging research of students, have provided many opportunities to apply Labanotation not only to dance forms of the Western world, but to those of the East as well.

Because of the success in the varied applications of the notation system, I am convinced of its suitability to virtually any form of human movement. I would like to share with you information on a number of specific projects, as well as selected notation examples.

A fascinating study evolved at the University in the area of Balinese dance. A graduate student who had lived and studied dance in Bali, and who knew the Balinese language, wished to translate a Balinese dance treatise into English. As she worked with a University language teacher she realized that a literal translation of terms did not create an accurate picture of the intended movement, so she decided to do two translations - one literal and the other descriptive, based on her understanding of the movement patterns indicated by the terms.

I then posed the question: what would happen if the same process were done using Labanotation? She proceeded

to translate the entire text in four ways - literal and meaningful versions in both verbal and symbolic systems (see *Ballinger 1977*).

Two features emerged. First, the short - hand methods we resort to, in applying verbal terminology (in any language) to movement, may be meaningful to the native practitioners of a dance genre or to those who have already learned the movement. But they are often not fully communicative in representing precisely what is happening to anyone else. Second, while these terms may not be totally descriptive, they often do give clues to what is most important to the native practitioner and the genre, and hence, to elements that should receive attention when learning, performing, and notating the movement sequences.

Many classical Asian dance forms employ precise prescribed hand/finger/thumb positions. Although often complex, all can be easily and very accurately described in Labanotation. In my own work I have notated a number of such positions used in the *bharata natyam* tradition of India.

Although the notation for the positions may appear cumbersome, it very accurately conveys the desired result. And once the positions have been fully described, it is possible to establish an abbreviated notation that can be subsequently used in scores (see *Van Zile 1982a*). These same positions would require numerous photographs and extensive verbal descriptions to capture the same amount of details that can be conveyed in relatively few notation symbols.

In some Asian dances the dancer also functions as a musician, frequently playing a drum while dancing. In documenting these dances, an indication of the rhythmic pattern for striking the drum is often insufficient. Also needed are documentation of the choreographed movements

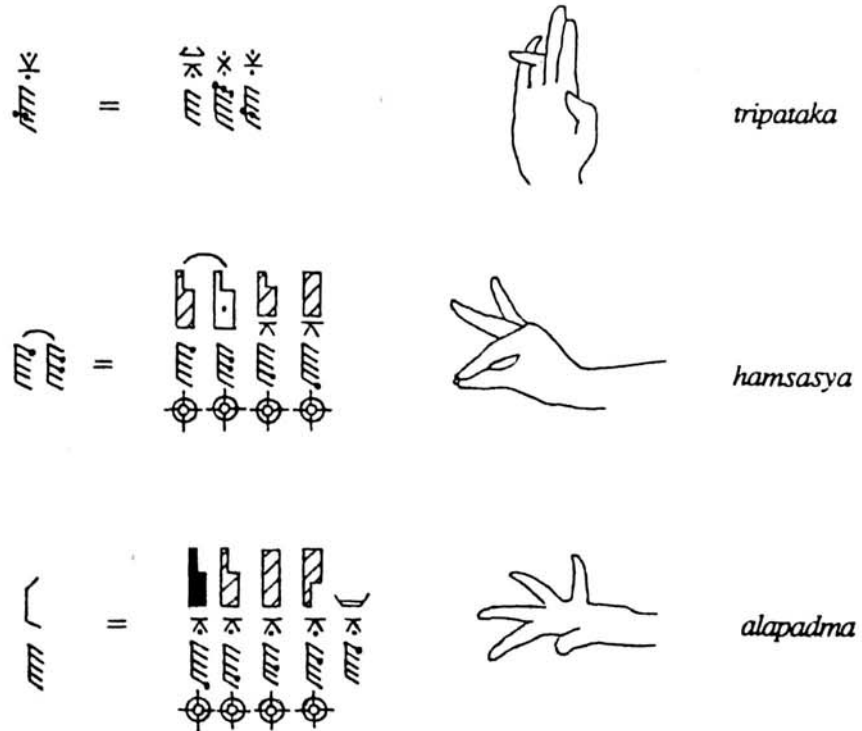
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used in striking the drum, the body part or portion of a drum stick or other implements, doing the striking, and the part of the drum on which the striking occurs.

A student project involved the notation of a Korean drum dance in which the dancer fastens a large hour-glass shaped drum to her waist *Eardley 1972*. Based on existing principles of the Labanotation system a special key was established in which symbols used to delineate five different ways of striking the drum were created. These symbols were then used as needed in the score. They easily conveyed all the necessary details for the proper playing of the drum.

In 1976 the University of Hawaii hosted an institute on the performing arts of Okinawa, featuring guest master teachers of music and dance from Okinawa. Several projects documenting various dances were undertaken, but to me one of the most interesting projects centered around music. One of the researchers was involved in learning a particular style of classical drumming - a style in which the visual aesthetic is as important as the resultant sound. Movements are highly choreographed, and the drummer must be equally comfortable in producing stylized movement as well as sound.

Together with a notation specialist the researcher produced extensive documentation of the drumming technique-via Okinawan terminology and symbolic notation, translations of the Okinawan terminology into English, general verbal descriptions of the movement patterns, still



Three *bharata natyam mudras* in Labanotation and in line drawings (from Van Zile 1982a and Bartenieff, et al 1984). The symbols to the left of the "equal sign" are abbreviated versions of the notations used in the scores; the symbols to the right of the equal sign are the fully written out positions. The Labanotation contains greater detail of finger placement than it is possible to show in a single line drawing.

photographs, a video tape, and Labanotation scores (see Sutton 1980).

The Labanotation scores provide an invaluable record of the special movement involved in the drumming - one which can be read by Labanotation practitioners who have never actually seen the drumming performed. And from this record the movements can be as accurately learned as the sound can be from the music transcription.

Several students at the University of Hawaii have pursued projects relating to choreographic analysis. In a master's thesis a student related dance to tribal classification

through an examination of selected dances of the Paiwan aboriginal people of a particular county in Taiwan (*Kwok 1977*).

She was concerned with whether the dances could be classified on the basis of distinct tribal and sub-tribal boundaries and, if so, would these agree with other classification systems. In the course of her research a number of methodological approaches to movement analysis emerged.

One component of the movement analysis was the determination of the major characteristics of the dances studied. The student began by identifying repeated patterns, which she referred to as motifs. She discovered that these could be grouped on the basis of similar features and produced a series of charts indicating the taxonomy of the dances observed.

She then tallied the number of times each pattern was used and determined which patterns were used in all regions studied, and which were distinctive to a particular region. A similar analysis was done for arm motifs, group formations, and floor patterns. This led to the delineation of a frequency distribution based on the established taxonomy.

Once motifs were determined the student examined choreographic structure. Were there any rules governing how the motifs could be put together to create a dance? Although her informants could not articulate such rules, they intuitively knew that certain things could go together and certain things had to follow each other in a particular manner.

When she examined complete dances she was able, based on the defined taxonomy, to evolve a number of formulae for producing a dance. There was, indeed, a structural basis for the choreography.

She concluded her study by compiling the data to produce a map of tribal groups based on dance characteristics. Although limitations prevented the work from being definitive, the groupings concurred with classifications presented by some scholars using criteria other than dance.

A master's thesis completed in 1979 (*Ohtani*) further supports the notion of a structural basis for choreography. Following her intuition as a performer, the student marked phrases in Labanotation scores of several Okinawan dances - those places in a dance where one would stop at the end of a teaching session, where one feels a sense of completion before going on to something else.

She then examined exactly what was happening at these

dividing points. She discovered that there does, indeed, seem to be a consistency in what kinds of things are happening that makes us feel that a phrase is beginning or ending - a formulaic basis for choreographic structure.

The value of Labanotation in tracing the roots of a dance form and comparing it with other dance forms is demonstrated in an article by a group of researchers dealing with mohiniyattam from Southern India (*Bartenieff, et al 1984*). The article provides an initial effort in relating mohiniyattam to kathakali and bharata natyam.

Labanotation has also been used by indigenous researchers pursuing studies on their own dance forms. I Made Bandem has used Labanotation to document the dances of Bali, M. Soedarsono to document those of Java, Mohd Anis Bin Nohr to document those of Malaysia, and Louise Chen to document those of China.

My own research has led me to extensive use of Labanotation in documenting bharata natyam from India (*1982*), bon dances from Japan as they are practiced in Hawaii (*1982b*), and several traditional court dances of Korea.

Perhaps the most significant testimonial regarding the values of using Labanotation came from a Korean dance teacher (*see Van Zile 1984*). During a major research period spent in Korea I notated one group dance and one solo dance. Upon returning to the United States I gave the scores to a student who was totally unfamiliar with Korean dance, and asked that she learn the dances from the scores.

This she did, teaching the group dance to other students, and performing the solo dance herself. Performances of the dances were video taped, and I took the tapes with me on a return trip to Korea to show to my Korean teacher.

The initial reaction was interest, curiosity, and disbelief - disbelief that Labanotation could be used to notate **their** dances. My teacher was truly amazed that someone who had never seen Korean dance could learn so much from a notated score. The final testimonial came when my Korean teacher said, "Now I understand the value of notating the dances."

Very often it is assumed that because one knows how to dance well one should immediately be able to learn how to notate the dances one performs. Unfortunately this ignores the issue of how long it took to become an accomplished dancer.

Because a dancer is consistently involved with performing, the "knowing" of the dance and its movements is often based on a kinesthetic, or muscle, "knowing." The

ability to notate movement is based on a conscious intellectual understanding of the movement - a mode often bypassed by the performer who knows the movement directly through muscles.

Hence, it is necessary to take time to bring the understanding of dance to the conscious level, and then to translate this understanding into the symbology of Labanotation. And this also assumes a full knowledge of the symbology and the rules for applying the notation system.

The process of learning Labanotation can be compared to the process of learning a new language. The learner knows the meaning to be conveyed - in this case the movement - but must master the new language and become fluent in the translation process. While doing so, the speaker - or dancer - gains a deeper understanding of the intended meaning that increases ability as a performer as well as teacher. The principles underlying the system of Labanotation provide for an understanding of movement that is invaluable to performers, critics, historians, teachers, and anyone deeply involved with dance.

It is important to keep in mind that Labano-

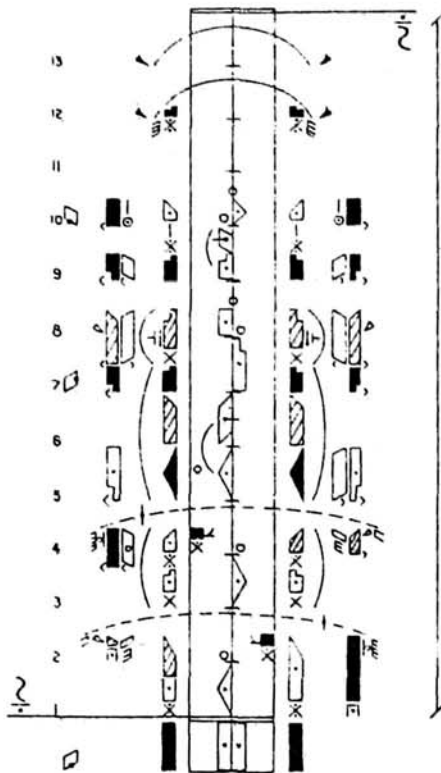
The diagram illustrates the notation for a Bharata Natyam Alarippu. It features a central vertical staff with various symbols and lines. To the left of the staff are musical notations for accompanying talam syllables, including notes and rests, with labels like 'TAT TĒ', 'DIT TĀ', and 'TĀ TĒ'. To the right of the staff are various geometric shapes and lines representing movement and sound accompaniment. The diagram is divided into sections labeled 69, 70, 71, and 72.

Excerpt from a *bharata natyam alarippu* (from Van Zile 1982a). Notations to the left of the staff include musical notation for the accompanying *talam* syllables recited by the *nattuvanar*, and syllables recited internally by the dancer. Note the ease with which movement and three levels of sound accompaniment can be compared.

tation need not replace any indigenous forms of dance notation. Rather, they can work in tandem. As pointed out earlier in the projects on Balinese dance and Okinawan music, indigenous systems provide valuable information about what is important within a particular dance tradition. In Labanotation, just as in verbal language, there are often many ways to say the same thing, each way providing slightly different emphasis and pointing to important components. And, as with a verbal language, there are good translations

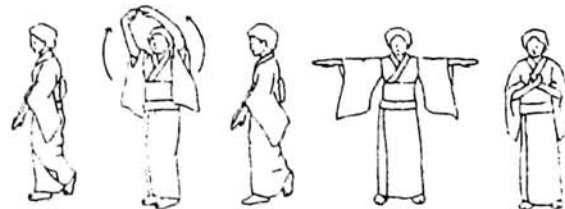
and not such good translations.

Labanotation should never be looked upon as an end in itself. It is, rather, a very powerful tool for the study of dance. It can provide a written document that can be understood by dance researchers throughout the world, whether or not they share a verbal language. And this documentation can then provide the basis for a wide range of important dance studies. ■



Begin with back to center of circle. Dance progresses slightly clockwise around the circle.

Counts	Movement	
1-2	Step left to left side and touch right toe alongside left. Left arm extends to forward left diagonal high, right to forward left diagonal, parallel to floor, both slightly bent. Left palm faces away from body, right faces floor. Fingers of	right hand are just below left elbow.
3-4		Repeat to opposite side.
5-6		Step left to left side and pivot clockwise until right shoulder is to center of circle. Both arms swing down to left side and then up to forward left diagonal high.



	Step forward on right. Both arms drop forward low, palms facing back	
8	Close left foot to right. Both arms make a slight arc away from the body on their way to forward high. Palms face away from body.	wise until back is to center of circle and step right to right side, finishing with both feet in a small stride. Right arm goes to forward right diagonal, left to forward left diagonal, parallel to floor. Palms face the floor.
9	Step forward on left. Both arms drop to forward low, palms facing back.	11 Hold.
10	Pivot quickly counterclock-	12-13 Arms go to forward low, bent slightly, and clap two times.

Soma Bon Uta, a Japanese *bon* dance performed in Hawaii (from Van Zile 1982b), with movements written in verbal descriptions, Labanotation, and in line drawings. Note that the Labanotation score contains the greatest amount of movement detail.

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