

**Developing the Expressive Perceptions of Young Conductors With
Laban Effort/Shape Theory
(Laban informational hand-out)**

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In short – I believe that developing a Laban vocabulary will help conductors clearly define and describe not only conducting gestures, but elements of any form of expressive movement. The better conductors are able to recognize expressive qualities in movement, the more likely they are to recognize and develop similar movements in their own conducting.

Brief background of Rudolf Laban

The work of Hungarian born Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) is largely associated with the discipline of dance. He was both an influential dancer and choreographer, but perhaps his most lasting impression was made through his studies of natural movement and the resulting theories that he devised. His system of analyzing movement was based on the premise that physical movement was the outward expression of an inner impulse. According to Groff (1995), “The (Laban) framework helps artists map the relationship between inner intent and outer expression. By differentiating the world of inner impulses, the artist gains clarity and mastery of expression in performance” (p. 30).

Laban’s theories provide a means by which artists can specifically define and thoroughly explore expressive movement. They are based on natural movement principles to which all living things conform. Laban presented these principles in a highly structured and clearly defined manner, which enables teachers and researchers to

observe and discuss the basic elements of movement. His movement theories led to the development of a system of notation, known as Labanotation or kinetography, that is used by choreographers to document movement as composers document music. Labanotation has also been used for documenting other forms of movement, but is most commonly found in the discipline of dance.

Elements of Effort

1. Weight - our ability to move our body weight against the natural laws of gravity. May be strong or light.
2. Space - the distance reached and direction towards which the body moves; determines *where* in space. May be direct or flexible.
3. Time - the amount of time that passes during the execution of a specific motion; determines *when* in time. May be sudden or sustained.
4. Flow - the order in which the body parts are set into motion. May be free or bound.

Use of the Torso in Flow

Movements beginning in the center of the body and moving out towards the extremities appear to flow more freely than do movements of the extremities alone with the center of the body remaining still.

1. *Centralized flow* begins in the torso and extends outward into the limbs. The outward journey of any movement, from the torso to the periphery, is centrally guided.
2. The return journey, from the extremities to the torso, led by the hands and/or feet is peripherally guided. As conductors, we tend to be peripherally guided.
3. The natural reaction of the torso is to retreat quickly backwards in danger and, when danger has passed, explore more cautiously forwards. The body contracts away from danger and the spine assists by curving to protect the torso.
4. There is vulnerability with exposure of the torso. Centralized flow demands exposure of the torso and may therefore be perceived as being more genuine than movements of the extremities alone.

Shape

1. Sphere of movement (or kinesphere) – area in which all effort occurs; with limbs extended, the imaginary inner wall of this sphere can be touched by hands and feet, and all points of it can be reached.
2. The sphere of movement consists of countless three-dimensional planes, which can be divided into three general pairs of directions:
 - a. up/down
 - b. left/right
 - c. front/back
3. Shape - the execution of individual and combinations of movements within the sphere. Movements may occur on a combination of many planes.
4. Trace forms – shapes we leave behind in space or the creation of spatial patterns.
5. Shadow forms - may exist as a contradiction to the intended gesture.
6. Effort/Shape Theory - a means to explore expressive movement through internal effort that is externalized through the creation of shapes in space (or trace forms).

Similarly: Conducting must first be an internal image of the music – physical conducting is merely an externalization of the internal impression of sound.

Positions

1. Movement instruction is often focused on positions of the body rather than the nature of the change between them (ex. Ballet positions, conducting patterns). However, positions are static and cannot define movement.
2. Positions are important, but the essence of expressive movement lies in what is communicated as we move *through* positions. Expressive content changes as a change occurs in the movement between positions.
3. Positions or “patterns” must be broken to expand trace forms into the sphere of movement. Repetition lacks expression.
4. Transitions between use of effort elements must flow well for the greatest expression.
5. All of the effort elements (especially flow) are apparent in the change from one position to another. The quality of these elements will either create or inhibit the flow of transitions.

References

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Purposes of this study were to (a) determine if Laban Effort/Shape instruction affects young conductors' ability to perceive expressive movement, (b) determine if Laban Effort/Shape instruction affects young conductors' comfort level with evaluating expressive movement, and (c) discover trends in subjects' motivations when making evaluative decisions.

Measurement instruments included a test of videotaped examples containing twelve silent examples of movement disciplines including conducting, dance, figure skating, and mime. Subjects rated the expressiveness of each example, rated their comfort level with the task, and wrote about what motivated their evaluative decisions.

After Effort/Shape instruction subjects were able to perceive varying levels of expression and their comfort level increased significantly over time. Treatment subjects became more critical of conducting examples than other disciplines and utilized specific Laban terms rather than general terms. The use of Laban vocabulary coincided with an increased comfort level and heightened ability to distinguish between levels of expressive movement.