

Meaningful Movement Matters: Music and Movement With the Elderly

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TERRY BOYARSKY is a pianist, Dalcroze Eurhythmics teacher, ethnomusicologist, and a teaching artist for the Center for Arts-Inspired Learning and Ohio Arts Council. She is certified by the National Center for Creative Aging, and participated in the OAC's "Artful Aging" Artist Residency. She has successfully completed two levels of Orff Schulwerk teacher education and has been a frequent presenter at AOSA national and chapter conferences. Terry collaborated with Taipei puppeteer Mi-Chen Chiu and Cleveland dancer Tom Evert to create *Young Dreams – Life in 3 Parts*. Her ensemble, *Russian Duo*, performs in concert series and schools across North America.

ABSTRACT

This article discusses some non-traditional practices of Dalcroze Eurhythmics with the elderly population. Sacred Dance for older adults is examined for inner significance, rather than performance values. Movement and music sessions within a retirement community are discussed as they relate to three levels of care: the advanced dementia unit and assisted and independent living residents.

By Terry L. Boyarsky

Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) was a composer, pedagogue, innovator, and experimentalist. Although he worked to train and develop the musician, he wrote often about the possibilities of using music and movement to develop the whole person. He considered joy to be a great impetus for learning: "This joy is the product of a joint sense of emancipation and responsibility, comprising a vision of our creative potentialities, a balance of natural forces, and a rhythmic harmony of desires and powers" (Jaques-Dalcroze, 2000, p. 175).

Sacred Dance for Elders

I always felt a close kinship between my professional Dalcroze Eurhythmics world and the more personal world of Sacred Dance—both explore music through movement but from different vistas. Here we will look at two special elderly populations with regard to using music and movement to enhance the quality of life.

The study and practice of Sacred Dance, which varies from simple to complicated, propels participants towards an inner journey of consciousness, authenticity, and healing. Aspects of the sacred unfold when an individual comes

under the ideal of “Know Thyself.” Sacred Dance also helps develop self-observation, awareness, inner peace, focused attention, and sensitivity.

Sacred Dance participants seek an environment in which they can experiment with movement and stillness, sound and silence, in a meaningful, non-threatening way. Meaning is derived from working together in a group, developing trust, feeling safe to look within in a gentle, vulnerable fashion. Participants wish to find something deep within, connect with others, and be touched by a higher force or spiritual influence. According to Dalcroze, “One of the essential qualities—if not the essential quality—of rhythm is its power of conveying the presence of life” (Jaques-Dalcroze, 2000, p.316).

A special feeling can develop when many people dance together to create ceremony or ritual. Here, the personal and the communal are interrelated and interdependent. As in chamber music or choral singing, each individual has a role and together they create something more exquisite. One person may be responsible for a certain expression, yet sensitivity to others enables a flowing tapestry of sound. Participants are stretched while finding themselves in relation to a greater whole.

Many older participants opt out of these movement sessions because they lack stamina or have a limiting medical condition. Witnessing their inability to benefit from singing, dancing, meditating, collaborating, and challenging their minds and bodies was a poignant experience for me.

Ohio Arts Council “Artful Aging” Program

This year I was invited to be the artist-in-residence at a retirement community for the Ohio Arts Council’s pilot project, Artful Aging Ohio. This opportunity inspired me to use choreography and various tableaux I had modified for the elderly, so they could access the stimulating and valuable experiences Sacred Dance offers.

The activities were based on small elements of music making and movement to evoke interest, delight, active participation, brain stretching, interaction, and problem solving. They were simple enough for the lay person to understand and perform, yet interesting enough to intrigue the senior adult. Whatever the individual level of skill, experience, and/or talent, activities were premised on everyone making and experiencing music together, and all musical activity was connected

Figure 1. Seated Residents Moving to the Music.



SOURCE: GOLDEAN GIBBS. OHIO ARTS COUNCIL. USED WITH PERMISSION.

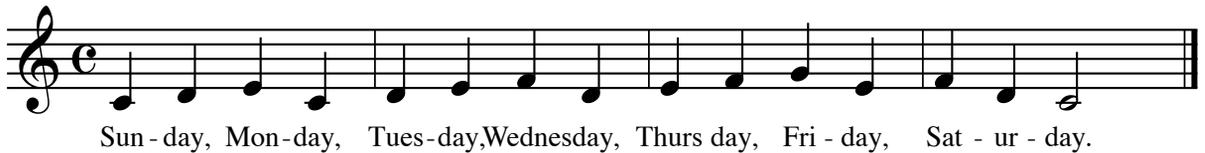
to a concomitant movement. The sessions were implemented with most participants sitting in a circle in chairs or wheelchairs, which facilitated observation of their progress, ability, and attitude as well as their connection and collaboration (see Figure 1).

Advanced Dementia Unit

The advanced dementia residents convened every day for two weeks. At first many were passive, confused, closed off, and shut down. Each day brought a noticeable increase in the level of energy, singing, recognizing how to play certain games, passing objects in rhythm, and helping each other remember what to do. “Quick reaction” exercises were especially effective. They responded to my singing and piano playing, as well as verbal instructions and modeling. Torsos, heads, arms, legs, fingers, ankles, wrists, and elbows moved in rhythm. They delighted in playing percussion instruments and performing rhythmic patterns. Many responded by saying what fun it was to do music and asking when I would return.

A former school principal with severe dementia became animated during the activities. She was in a wheelchair, had cataracts, her speech was limited, and her hands were arthritic. During the sessions she was alert, happy, and singing with full voice perfectly in tune, echoing rhythms, and even getting

Figure 2. Oral Tradition Days of the Week Song.



SOURCE: TERRY BOYARSKY.

annoyed at her neighbor's mistakes. She enjoyed the "solos" and additional musical responsibility I gave her, including joining me in demonstrating some of the activities.

The physical comfort of holding props, such as a teddy bear or baby doll, prompted smiles and spontaneous comments. During a baby bouncing activity while reciting, "Riding to Boston, riding to Lynn, riding to Akron but don't fall in!" half of the participants interjected "Wheee!" when the "baby" falls in. The activity released long-forgotten memories associated with caring, comforting, and crooning. "The best means of training the attention of children is to play intelligently with them. Games should be joy-giving; I look upon joy as the most powerful of all mental stimuli" (Jaques-Dalcroze, 2000, p.100).

What works with preschoolers often is successful with severe memory loss residents. For example, I teach 3-year-olds a song about the days of the week (see Figure 2). When residents sang the same song,

they appeared to be accessing information they had used all their lives. Although I had to direct some of them, we were able to divide up the song (two beats per person, one day per person). They seemed to comprehend it, together creating a whole (song) out of pieces.

Sparkling moments were an everyday occurrence as people came alive. One day I introduced the traditional song, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain*, with everyone bouncing a stuffed animal, shaking it in the air, and then passing it to the next person on musical cue. They all seemed to know the song; they joined in, bouncing, lifting, passing, sharing, singing the lyrics—their bodies, souls, and hearts remembering—as they became whole again.

When residents felt like part of a group they became more energized, positive, and social. One day I suggested the group "paint" their neighbors with the colored scarves they were using to express the qualities of my improvised music. A tiny, frail, withdrawn woman in a reclining wheelchair finally responded to being painted by giggling, something others had not seen her do in a long while.

Staff members who attended the class to assist, observe, and learn were impressed with the changes within each hour—and over the two weeks. They noticed more involvement, more spontaneous verbalizing. Many residents actively participated. Those withdrawn became more engaged, and many were able to express themselves when requested to improvise or demonstrate initiative (see Figure 3). Many remembered and related their experiences in prior sessions.

Often residents spent the day sitting or lying alone in their rooms with a TV on, no longer able to swim, walk, dance, or perform other rhythmic activities. For those who no longer understood speech, touch and eye contact were the only way to penetrate their world. Activities including body percussion helped them "wake up their bodies" with touch. I went from person to person, singing, making eye contact, clapping their hands, looking for a match

Figure 3. Engaged and Involved in a Passing Game.



SOURCE: GOLDEAN GIBBS. OHIO ARTS COUNCIL. USED WITH PERMISSION.

or an echo. Residents alternated clapping hands in specific rhythmic patterns with their neighbor.

Any use of the voice is equally important when we consider how isolated—from society, interaction, family, themselves—many of these residents are. Verbalization was good, conversation was better, and singing brought them back into community. Simple humming games and toning, an esoteric healing practice that uses the voice to vibrate and activate different parts of the body, were fun, comforting, and invigorating.

Assisted Living Residents

I met every day with the assisted living residents, ages 82 to 102. Some were deaf, used oxygen tanks, and/or exhibited the beginning stages of dementia or memory loss, and all used walkers. I was more verbally explicit about why moving to music benefited more than just the body; why the rhythmic puzzles created more synapses; how important it was to use the voice in singing, chanting, and shouting. They enjoyed more sophisticated music and movement activities because they were more flexible, physically and mentally. This group was able to make musical decisions and artistic choices. One day we choreographed a dance—the group chose and organized movement possibilities available to a dozen seniors with walkers, set it to music, rehearsed it, discussed modifications, and finally performed it twice to my improvised music. They appreciated the opportunity to make aesthetic choices and the memory challenge that moving in new pathways created.

Each day people became animated, offered new ideas, or had an “aha!” moment, which added to the general merriment and positive energy. The residents also knew each other well, and I was the outsider, which made for an interesting mix of reactions and interactions. One 90-year-old woman shared her feelings after I asked the group to sing with their eyes closed. “I so enjoy your sessions,” she said. “I will never again listen to music in the same way. Now I am *part* of making the music!”

Independent Living Residents

The independent living group was too busy to commit to attending sessions, in spite of the fact they had enjoyed the kickoff concert with my ensemble, Russian Duo (www.russianduo.com). They seemed fearful and cautious, even suspicious, about singing

Figure 4. Residents Sharing Impressions After Making Music.



SOURCE: GOLDEAN GIBBS. OHIO ARTS COUNCIL. USED WITH PERMISSION.

and moving to music. Some stayed outside the circle and watched. Unlike their counterparts in other units, they were concerned with being embarrassed in front of their peers. It was difficult for them to be beginners again.

Once they joined the circle, they participated wholeheartedly. I pointed out connections between Russian Duo’s chamber music and the kind of music we were making. In one sequence of activities, they came up with proverbs, transferred those rhythms to body percussion, practiced them with percussion instruments, created a form, and then layered them. I improvised music on top of their percussion piece to create an orchestra of sound with a rhythm section. This process required continual participation from everyone, renewed attention at every twist, group collaboration on artistic choices, and physical coordination to perform the rhythms with body percussion and percussion instruments. After we performed together, they shared comments and feedback about our music and process and related it back to the Russian Duo concert (see Figure 4).

The independent living residents—and similar groups—were able to participate in the artistic approach professional chamber musicians use because all the arts share similar creative journeys. The group was capable of greater physical and mental challenges, although a few residents were

reluctant, and in some cases adamant, about what they could or would be willing to try.

At the end of the first session, in which we choreographed a song using silk scarves, I asked them to compare how they felt then with how they had felt when they first came in. Some of the responses were, “I feel more alert,” “More contented,” and “I hate to say it, but I have less pain.”

Effects of Music and Movement in a Retirement Community

An artist-in-residence at a retirement community provides the staff a new perspective on how the arts can enhance the quality of life, and showcases the positive effect an experienced musician’s art form, with all its joy, rigor, and complexity, can have on the elderly. It is not enough to sort of sing a song, or approximate a rhythm. It is the beauty of the melody that both calls and expresses, even for the most devastating memory loss patients. It is the physicality of movement and beat that calls to the attention. They reach deep into the Being to involve people in a life energy they once knew.

Dalcroze was interested in the mind-body connection and spent his life exploring these interactions, creating exercises, and observing the results: “The perfecting of physical resources results in clarity of perception” (Jaques-Dalcroze, 2000, p. 83).

Musicians, teachers, and therapists understand how to facilitate integration between mind, body, emotions, and spirit. The aim is neither beauty nor

accuracy but something more illuminating: Music itself calls to all parts of a human being. We must recite a proverb with inflection to give it meaning, and play a percussion instrument with rhythmic integrity to bring energy. Although listening to music from the past has been shown to activate deep memory (Music & Memory Project: www.musicandmemory.org), the listener is still passive. Participation, involvement, and the exchange that comes from making music in a group bring us back into the flow of life.

Conclusion

Exploration of music through movement benefits musicians, both aspiring and professional. Broader application of these practices and principles to other communities, such as the elderly, can enhance human values and meaning. Sacred Dance sessions tap into the energy of the Circle, where all are equal, where there is flow, touch, and open(hearted)ness. These movement classes affirm the experience of being alone together, allowing participants to connect with self and others. Joyous self-expression flourishes in a safe environment that revitalizes spirit and affirms life. Effort and focus on a unified goal create peace and harmony. The demand of rhythmic movement calls us to be in the “here and now”—the only moment where we are truly alive. ■

Brief video clips of activities referenced in this article are available at www.aosa.org under Publications<The Orff Echo<Echo Extensions.

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