SING THE BODY

Using breath & vocalization for connected, musical dancing.



A core element of my work as a teacher and dance artist is breath-connection, all that can be motivated from, contained and expressed in the inhale, the exhale and the space between, from the purely physical to the musical and emotional. Contributing to this focus has been my exposure to a diverse range of contemporary and classical dance techniques, flamenco dance, Pilates, Alexander Technique, acting, singing and piano study. For many years in my choreographic work, performing and teaching I have been experimenting with, and refining methods in this area as well as extending it to vocalisation techniques for rhythmic and melodic connection to music.

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What is the optimal play of breath in a *tendu* from prior to its initiation to its full execution and return, in the suspense before a fall in a contemporary class, in the dropping of the foot for a resonant percussive dance stomp? In other words, how are these actions born in the breath preceding their execution and then carried by the inhales or exhales that follow? I don't pretend to be reinventing the wheel here; breath connection is not news in the worlds of dance or somatics. But I propose an in-depth exploration of how breath is integrated into and affects the modulation of muscular force, the felt experience of the movement, its emotional expression and musicality.

I ask students to investigate with me the aspect of breath connection inherent in the multi-layered endeavour of moving the dancing body naturally, expressively, rhythmically, musically. It is not an adjunct to technique, but at the center of both it and the expression it serves, while at the center of expression is the self that breathes. Just as our breath reflects and affects our ever-changing physical and emotional states, so can it be harnessed as a tool for execution and expression, to access our dance from the inside out and transcend the mechanics of movement.

Breath connection thus intersects with the actor's work which is also a part of the dancer's; that of "playing" his/her emotional instrument. In my experience of acting, I found I could bypass heady attempts to access emotion from memory, just by changing my breath. As obvious examples, if you want to feel nervous, hold your breath up high in your chest, to relax, let it go flowing down into your abdomen. The emotional quality of a push hand gesture is completely different when done on a sharp exhale than when done on an inhale. A movement or percussive phrase can have very different expressive interpretations by changing what I call its "breath score."

In terms of musicality, too many times I have watched dancers "correctly" moving through counts but with little apparent connection to the music. For a dancer to be musical, melody, phrasing and rhythm must be felt viscerally and sung internally by the breath so that it can then 'sing' through the body.
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It is the study, exploration and teaching of Flamenco dance that brought to the foreground for me the concept of the dancer as both musical instrument and musician. In addition to its particular play of breath and energy from suspense and containment to release, Flamenco brings with it the fascinating challenge of bewilderingly complex rhythms. Counting is useful in the initial process of understanding rhythmic structures but can limit us to a mechanical, and one might say "left-brain" approach, rather than a full-self engagement with the music.

Internalising rhythm, phrasing and melody through conscious breath-connection and vocalization encompasses a more integrated kind of listening and musical response. Flamenco dancers often vocalize their footwork rather than count it. Coming from the Ballet and Contemporary Dance world, I finally understood why this might be only after an initial period of conscientiously counting the intricate beats, off-beats, triplets and quadruplets in say, a 12/8 rhythm phrase, which generally led to smoke coming out of my ears but not necessarily very musical footwork!

Some strains of music training have long incorporated rhythmic vocalization. Indian *tabla* players were traditionally required to spend years learning a highly codified language of rhythmic vocalization before actually playing the instrument. As dancers don't have that kind of time to devote to such study, I propose a less codified approach wherein the sounds one makes can be freely chosen - they can be ta's, deda's, umbah's, hmmm's, bedum's, anything - as long as their sense of time, quality and dynamic is rhythmically, musically specific. Students are often rather at sea with this at first. Yet, I remind them, we do this all the time without realizing it whenever we "lala" or hum along perfectly in sync to the entire recording of a favourite song.

Thus, whether focussing on footwork in a flamenco class or a movement sequence in a Ballet or Contemporary class, I ask students first to breathe, vocalize, sometimes actually sing, the rhythmic phrase, pattern or melody before sending it to their feet. The inner clock can also be accessed and strengthened by clapping the beat at the same time. This work develops a heightened capacity to hear, listen and connect on different, simultaneous levels; to the music, to oneself - both the clock and the rhythms or melody one is playing over it. A method I propose for percussive footwork composition is to simply sit with a chosen piece of music - or even in silence - and scat sing until you hit upon something you want to work into a memorized phrase or pattern, and then compose the footwork to that. This helps to lead one out of the comfort zone of pre-learned rhythm patterns and into potentially more original compositional and improvisational territory.

As with other percussive dance forms, Flamenco obliges us to become an actual dancing-musician onstage, but I suggest that all dance forms bring this obligation. As dancers we embody rhythm, melody, phrasing – music – even when dancing in silence. I propose to students that we take the "to" out of the phrase "dancing to the music", and that the music must ultimately be our own. The music in a technique, composition or improvisation class might be a Bach fugue, a Flamenco Seguirilla or an Irish jig but it is our own process of listening, hearing, breathing, "singing" within it and letting it sing within us, that makes it our personal response to that music; hence our own song and our own dance.

Deborah Greenfield, 2015