



SPECIAL ISSUE

Dalcroze Eurhythmics in music therapy and special music education

Conference report

WAOUH! IJD Congress 2015

‘Interactions between pedagogy, art and science and their influence on learning through and into music for today and tomorrow’

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Christine Croset gained her licence in Dalcroze Eurhythmics in 1983. Since then she has taught in state schools and in 2002 began working as a teacher trainer in the Haute Ecole Pédagogique du Canton de Vaud, Switzerland. She has written a collection of Eurhythmics teaching materials for little children and their teachers. In 2013, Christine graduated with an MA from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Geneva University in teacher training. Since then, she has been working to relate Dalcroze pedagogy to scientific perspectives. Christine participates in international conferences and other speaking engagements, and publishes research articles.

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To celebrate the 150th anniversary of the birth of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), two congresses were held back-to-back last year, one in Geneva, Switzerland and the other in Vienna, Austria. This report focuses on the Swiss part of this ‘Hot Dalcroze Summer’. The IJD Congress was organised by the Institut Jaques-Dalcroze, which –

being founded in Geneva in 1915 – was also the cause for a centenary celebration to accompany the 150th anniversary of Jaques-Dalcroze’s birthday.¹

The congress intended to provide a forum for studying the connections between pedagogy, art

¹ The aim of the Institut Jaques-Dalcroze is to train Dalcroze Eurhythmics practitioners and to take legal responsibility for ensuring standards of practice are maintained by those qualified to use the name ‘Jaques-Dalcroze’. See www.dalcroze.ch

and science and their impact on learning through and into music, now and in the future. Around this theme, no fewer than 400 people from 25 nationalities gathered. For these students and professionals – often isolated and scattered around the world – the opportunity to develop, share, comment and discuss proved rich and joyful. Each session provided experiences that continue to ripen and provide inspiration.



Photograph 1: Delegates sing together between sessions

The beautiful diversity of the presentations was a reflection of Dalcrozean thought, which centres on a fundamental, shared fact of human belonging: whatever our origin, we all have a body with which to experience the world, together with a spirit and emotions which, when harmonised, make us feel well. With his tradition of rhythmic education, Jaques-Dalcroze invites us to take our share of freedom and connection with others and with oneself, with this almost ‘magic’ tool of music as support. According to him, the exercises devised by Eurhythmics practitioners should help create “a fast and light system of communication between all the agents of movement and of thinking” (Jaques-Dalcroze 1909: 67). However, it should be noted that if in the active experience of music the connections between body and music intertwine and reinforce each other, it is due in large part to the skills and keen analysis of the teacher.

This practical side of the approach was fully present at the IJD Congress, during which Dalcroze techniques were presented and worked with very effectively by expert practitioners. In this way, delegates were able to experience Dalcroze classes and build their music and movement skills, such as: ear-training exercises combined with polyrhythmic movement, association-dissociation games, reading music or improvisation. Even silence and stillness were sometimes included, since “to be silent means to live inwardly” (Jaques-Dalcroze 1981/1945: 28; translated by John Habron).

The range of people who can benefit from Dalcroze Eurhythmics and Dalcroze-based approaches is striking. In Geneva, we witnessed Eurhythmics practitioners working across the lifespan, with babies and the very old. In terms of the latter, a recent randomised controlled trial has shown the effectiveness of Dalcroze Eurhythmics for maintaining the health of ‘seniors’ (Trombetti et al. 2011). In particular, dual-task and shared attention games help to reduce the risk of falls and other problems associated with age. Other participants involved in Eurhythmics range, from young pupils in state schools and music schools, to professional musicians, people with special educational needs and dancers. All can be touched and supported by, and engage in, the “internal energy created by music”, as Ruth Alperson, one of the presenters, said.

But how? The answer is definitely to be found in neuroscience, at least in part. This scientific field has long been present in Dalcroze congresses and, in fact, Jaques-Dalcroze’s intuitions led him to study tension and relaxation in movement, exchanging knowledge with psychologists and neurologists of his time, such as Édouard Claparède (1873-1940). In Geneva last summer, neuroscience was represented by Prof. Didier Grandjean, Director of the Neuroscience of Emotion and Affective Dynamics Lab (NEAD) at the University of Geneva and Dr Daniel Schön from the Brain Dynamics Institute at the University of Aix-Marseille. Grandjean’s presentation included ongoing research with the Institut Jaques-Dalcroze to investigate how body schema (body awareness) of Eurhythmics pupils develops as they practise it (Labbé & Grandjean 2014). Schön focused on the link between music and language, in particular the use of rhythmic cues in the speech development of deaf children.

Yet, historically speaking, the story of Eurhythmics is also undoubtedly associated with artistic practice, such as dance. This was exemplified in a fascinating presentation by Selma Odom, dance scholar and specialist in Dalcroze histories. Drawing on extensive archival research, she discussed the lifework of Suzanne Perrotet, one of Jaques-Dalcroze’s pupils. Furthermore, Suquet (2006) notes that when Jaques-Dalcroze calls us, through the active experience of rhythm, to “perceive the variations in intensity of muscle tone, [being] in a way the palette of the dancer”, he was tapping into a contemporary current. That is, it was at this time (1906) that Sherrington, one of the founders of neurophysiology, brought “together under the term ‘proprioception’ all means of

perception contributing to this sixth sense that is today called 'direction of movement' or 'kinaesthetic'" (Suquet 2006: 411). So, is Dalcroze Eurhythmics a scientific or an artistic discipline?



Photograph 2: A workshop at the IJD Congress

It may be that there is no opposition here; rather, a dynamic tension. This is certainly a characteristic of this discipline, which often deals with both an element and its opposite, working within this tension to seek ways to balance or harmonise them. For example, in Eurhythmics, teachers use both intuition and rationality. A Eurhythmics lesson is both a highly structured experience and completely open to spontaneity, including predictability and improvisation, automation and flexibility. The subject matter alternates between order and disorder, control (mastery) and letting go, careful preparation and immediacy. Music, which activates these experiences and possibilities, is both regulatory and stimulatory. Finally, the practice of Eurhythmics demands much concentration and a serious commitment, but is at the same time a source of laughter, playfulness and fun.

This is certainly one of the points that charmed the congress participants; the organisers proposed a daily 'surprise event' (flash-mob), which featured a particular facet of Eurhythmics in a spectacular and playful way. Examples of these included the delegates, led by some Institut teachers, performing 'on the fly' a vocal polyphony, resulting from rhythmic patterns and simple, funny lyrics; professional students playing and dancing with their pianos in the atrium with virtuosity and stunning musicality (jumping onto it, lying under it, and striking, rubbing, pushing and pulling it); or old songs of 'Monsieur Dalcroze' (always enjoyable!) rearranged by three pianists and Institut teachers and being sung with delegates joining in the chorus.²

² For a highlights video 'IJD 2015 WAOUH' see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzeHuYtr5AY>

The congress was organised by the Institut Jaques-Dalcroze, supported by several higher education institutions in Geneva, and held at the University Medical Center. Participants chose from six parallel sessions (workshops, video screenings, short talks, posters, papers and round tables) and no fewer than eighteen plenary sessions were held. Added to this were improvisation classes, evening performances by delegates, the Institut and the Haute École de Musique de Genève (HEM). A system of simultaneous translation (French to English and vice versa) was much appreciated.

Participants were left with a mosaic of impressions: the diversity of repertoires (music and dance) from Huapango (folklore of Mexico) to contemporary music (Reich, Pärt, Piazzola) through the Classical string repertoire; the magic of musical silence revealed by Paul Hille; Dalcroze Solfège techniques revisited by Jeremy Dittus, offering exercises as effective as they were up-to-date; an important discussion on '*Product or Process in Dalcroze Pedagogy*', led by two American rhythmicians (Dittus & Bauer 2016); the forced immobility of those who chose to picnic outside some workshop rooms, to be sure of securing a place within! And hovering over all this, one could see the light, colourful and joyful movement of fans, commissioned especially and wisely offered by the organisers during this Hot Dalcroze Summer!



Photograph 3: Closing ceremony

This exciting and thought-provoking congress demonstrated that, more than one hundred years after it originated, Dalcroze Eurhythmics continues to contribute effectively to various fields: music education, pedagogy, the arts and – of course – the overall experience of health and wellbeing. For Jaques-Dalcroze, "what counts is Man [sic] himself, and the avowed aim of his [sic] work will be to enable that being to achieve fulfilment" (Bachmann 1991: 11). The IJD Congress 2015 helped us understand how Dalcroze Eurhythmics can play a

part in the wellbeing of humankind, promoting “freedom of thought and action” (Jaques-Dalcroze 1919: 163)³.

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³ Translated by Marie-Laure Bachmann.