Motion Bank – A Notation Response.
Victoria Watts. February 2011

Two articles posted on the Goethe Institute website recently call out for an informed response from the notation community. Most professionals who work with dance notation acknowledge the very important contributions that developments in multimedia and digital audiovisual technologies have made to dance documentation. Many notators have collaborated with software developers and computer scientists in order to explore how these distinct areas of expertise and enquiry can intersect in mutually supportive and challenging ways. It is both strange and unhelpful then to read poorly informed journalism that seems to set up notation as a straw man to justify and promote an exciting project that stands quite firmly on its own merits.

"Motion Bank – a Data Bank for Dance" (Staude) and the related article "Choreologists and Kinetographers Notate Dance" (Jeitschko) both contain misleading information about the practice of dance notation.   The latter article is littered with egregious factual inaccuracies. The first article makes the claim that systems of graphical dance notation are no longer necessary in the age of video and new computer technologies developed for dance preservation. However, this contention rests on a misunderstanding of the purpose of the *Motion Bank/Synchronous Objects* project and a misapprehension of purpose and value of graphical dance notations.

It is my understanding that this new project is fundamentally concerned with data visualization. It translates all sorts of quantitative and qualitative data about the choreographic work and makes a range of quite beautiful and fascinating images. This is an amazing tool for showing the dance in new ways and for bringing to light curious adventitious artefacts that emerge from the analysis. However, to claim that these patterns constitute a score similar to notation for music, or that for dance, is to forget that the primary aim of sheet music is to enable a musician to recreate the music it prescribes. The rich visuals of *Synchronous Objects* cannot function like a score in the same way nor, as I understand it, are they intended to. By contrast a dance notation score does not intend to visualise patterns and structures in the dance. It does not even 'represent' the dance such that a reader can 'see' the movement. In between thinking about how dance and notation marry against Derrida's deconstructed relationship between speech and writing in my recent article "Dancing the Score: Dance Notation and Différance" (Watts) I also explain that the dance score is a recipe for a performance and the information it conveys can only be accessed through the reader's own actively embodied participation. It is important to understand that neither Benesh Movement Notation nor Labanotation makes any claims of interpretation or

translation. They offer a number of quite flexible ways to document and to recreate human movement that allow for greater or lesser degrees of interpretation in performance depending upon the choreographer's intention and the notator's choices in analysing those intentions.

I take the point made about general levels of illiteracy in dance but it would seem to me that to claim a project like *Motion Bank,* with its emphasis on data visualization, promotes literacy in dance is rather like claiming that picture books promote literacy in language. Again, this is in no way a criticism of the *Motion Bank* project, which I happen to find enthralling. Rather, I suggest that to dismiss out of hand the highly evolved practice of dance notation – the one true literature that Western theatrical dance can claim – while arguing for the importance of movement literacy seems wilfully contrary.

Jeitschko's brief article on dance notation, written to coincide with the presentation of the German Dance Award 2010 to Georgette Tsinguirides, ballet mistress/choreologist at the Stuttgart Ballet and with the avowed intention to discuss how choreographic masterpieces can be preserved and transmitted to future generations, manages to misrepresent the entire field of notation practice. The factual inaccuracies it contains are unforgivable and I wonder whom exactly the author consulted. Certainly, no-one at the Benesh Institute was contacted for information. I propose to address her errors one by one in the order they occur in the original article.

The earliest graphical notation system for dance in Europe dates back to the 15th century, not the 17th as claimed in the article. Any undergraduate would also correct the author for suggesting that this coincided with the golden age of ballet. The notation system that was prevalent in the late 17th and early 18th century was know at the time as Feuillet notation but has since been acknowledged as the primary work of Pierre Beauchamps. Ann Hutchinson Guest has written several highly informative books and articles on the history of dance notation. While I disagree in places with her interpretation of the historical narrative, her scholarship is meticulous in terms of primary resources and anyone who wants to know more about the ingenuity of the dancers, scientists, and musicians who have developed systems for recording dance movement would be well advised to begin by consulting her work (*Dance Notation;* "Dance Notation"; *Choreo-Graphics*).

The author makes an odd parallel in suggesting kinetography is equivalent to Labanotation and choreology is otherwise know as Benesh Movement Notation [BMN].   There are two different though similar versions of Laban's notation system. Kinetography Laban is the version that evolved in Europe during and after the 2nd World War. Labanotation is the version that developed in the USA and the UK during the same period. Practitioners were unable to communicate during the war for fear on behalf of the authorities that the symbols hid coded classified information.   Decisions each group made about how the system

should be refined occurred in response to quite different dance cultures. From the 1960s through to the late 1970s notators working with both variants of the system met regularly in order to harmonize use of symbols and their interpretation in movement. Much was achieved but some differences, pertaining to fundamental concepts of analysis, remained irreconcilable. Consequently Labanotation and Kinetography Laban are far from synonymous. It is also worth noting that Benesh Movement Notation is no longer officially called choreology. Although Rudolf Benesh did originally refer to his and his wife Joan's invention as choreology it was later conceded that this term could and should rightly be applied to a range of analytical practices in dance. By 1986 it was agreed that practitioners of Labanotation and Kinetography Laban were as much choreologists as those notators who worked with BMN and notators who used BMN in contexts that were not dance based should not be referred to as Choreologists (Grater).

Although BMN does make use of a five-line stave similar to that seen in musical notation the Labanotation and Kinetography Laban stave consists of just three lines running vertically up the page—a central time line that also marks the bisecting of the body into right and left halves and two further lines that help to guide the eye in reading the placement of symbols in columns that represent various parts of the body. There are plenty of books and online resources that will explain the basic principles of each system to anyone who is interested and I recommend the following: LabanLab is hosted by the Ohio State University and provides a fabulous interactive way to explore the fundamentals of Labanotation (Marion and Boggia); *Labanotation* is a very comprehensive text that is still clear enough in its explanations to be of use to an absolute beginner (Guest *Labanotation. The System of Analyzing and Recording Movement*). For those interested in learning more about Benesh Movement Notation I recommend *Movement Study and Benesh Movement Notation: An Introduction to Applications in Dance, Medicine, Anthropology and Other Studies* (McGuiness-Scott) and *The Encyclopedia of Benesh Movement Notation* due to be published shortly by the Royal Academy of Dance. For anyone fluent in French I suggest looking at a visually rich and factually informative site called *Notation*. This is one of the rare online resources that devotes equal attention to Labanotation and to BMN (Bastien and Mirzabekiantz).

Any preference for using BMN in ballet companies has much to do with the institutional history of the system. Having first been adopted by Britain's Royal Ballet BMN was initially tested most rigorously in relation to the ballet genre. With the support of Ninette De Valois at the Royal Ballet, and as the works of Kenneth MacMillan became popular worldwide, the notation system spread to other ballet companies and its usefulness for a ballet repertory company became evident. The mapping of a musical score, or any kind of sound score or rhythmic framework, against a dance notation score can be done with relative ease regardless of the system used. Although Labanotation and BMN conceive of time rather differently, visually, in the way they represent it, both systems account

for time in a way that is easily understood in relation to music. Following this point, I also reject the author's uninformed implication that while Labanotation "very clearly takes space into account" BMN then does not. It is next to impossible to imagine how anyone could describe forms of western theatrical dance without taking space into account. Labanotation and BMN conceive of the space around the body in different terms but with comparable care and attention. Further, one of the strengths of the Benesh system is the highly sophisticated approach it offers to describing the performance space and to articulating group forms.

Neither BMN nor Labanotation would have found support in the professional dance world were it really the case that only the notator can make use of her own scores. This is an absurd and wholly unsubstantiated proposal. For example, nearly all of the French contemporary choreographer Angelin Preljocaj's repertory is notated by Dany Lévêque.   Her BMN scores are regularly used by Naomi Perlov, Youri Van Den Bosch, and other qualified notators to stage the choreography for other companies. Or consider that Yuri Uchiumi (formerly Ballet Mistress/Notator with English National Ballet) is about to teach Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon* from the BMN score in Japan. She has seen the Royal Ballet production but never before been involved in notating or rehearsing it. She is part of a team of people employed by the MacMillan Estate to stage his works for companies around the world. Antony Tudor stipulated in his will that a Labanotation score should always be available for reference when his works are being staged. And Doris Humphrey's works are frequently staged internationally because her son makes the Labanotation scores readily available.

While the notation process is labour intensive it need not be prohibitively expensive especially in consideration of the role the notator and the score-in-progress can play as part of the creative process. A notator may be more expensive than a digital camera set up in the corner of the rehearsal room but a notator is also more effective in capturing the salient details of the choreography. And the notator can rehearse new cast members into their parts far more efficiently than a partial video recording can. I'd also suggest that a notator's salary is far more affordable for most dance companies than the scale of investment required for Forsythe's *Synchronous Objects* project. And again, *Synchronous Objects* will not help the rehearsal director figure out where dancer x put his hand and how dancer y cantilevered his weight in order to achieve that intricate piece of partnering. The dance notation score will.

At the end of the article Staude reports comments by Gregor Zöllig, director of Tanztheater Bielefeld, who feels that notations are "no longer up to date" because a choreography becomes a different work when performed by a new cast. Consequently he claims to prefer film or video. How odd. A film captures a single performance, complete with everything good and bad each performer brings to it. And yes, if a company could afford several cameras and trained cameramen and an editing suite to put it all together that would be a wonderful

way to archive performances. It would not be a wonderful way to create a working tool by which dancers might learn their parts relatively unhindered by the quirks of their predecessors. Moreover, when a notator is employed in a company full-time the kind of changes that occur over the life of a dance, when new casts are rehearsed or when the choreographer decides to tweak something here or there, can be notated, dated, appended to the score in a way that doesn't erase the previous version of the choreography but rather supplements it.

Finally, I want to mention that the binary both these articles draw between new forms of documentation and data visualization for dance and proven systems of graphical dance notation is wholly artificial. Notators can and do work in concert with innovators in the field of dance technology and view their domains of expertise as complementary rather than competing. As a case in point I draw readers' attention to the very exciting collaboration that has been taking place around documentation and analysis of Emio Greco's work. Labanotation, Benesh Movement Notation, a variety of approaches to choreographic analysis, and cutting edge digital technologies have been brought together as part of an ongoing research project. Initial findings are discussed in *Capturing Intention* (DeLahunta).

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