

**MJS Movement**

**Choreology©**

*A Practical Method of Notation for Dance*

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## *A Practical Method of Notation for Dance*

### Contents

#### **Foreword**

#### **Chapter 1: Analyzing Music**

Defining Time Signature

Charting Highlights

#### **Chapter 2: Assigning Movement to Charted Music**

#### **Chapter 3: Defining Movement**

Classical and Lyrical

Tap Combination

Stage Direction

## Foreword

Until now there has been only one form of dance notation, called *Labanotation*<sup>™</sup>, which has reigned in the dance world for more than fifty years. This form of technical shorthand for dance has long served professional dance companies who have been trained to read it. But the need for a more accessible form of dance notation has become evident as the number and variety of performing companies have grown exponentially.

I have designed a unique and much more accessible form of dance notation called *MJS Movement Choreology*©. As a professional choreographer and teacher I realized that dancers in private and public school performing companies were wasting valuable time in rehearsals arguing about how the choreography had originally been presented. With *MJS Movement Choreology*©, even a dancer with no prior training in notation can archive choreography using this method, which will increase the dance company's productivity immensely. This method does not require any additional training and is therefore more "user friendly" than most other forms of notation. *MJS Movement Choreology*© does require a little understanding of terminology and counting, which are both part of accredited dance training.

I became interested in dance notation when *Dance Masters of America*<sup>™</sup>, a national organization that certifies dance teachers by test, asked me to teach at a national convention. In addition to teaching classes, I was contracted to provide a notated version of the dance routines

that I was presenting. (My own teacher had used dance notation in her classes, so I was acquainted with the method.)

Throughout my career as a performer, dance teacher, and choreographer I have experimented with my own method of notating choreographed pieces to present to teachers and students. These methods are, in my opinion, more concise and easier to understand than methods I have used in the past. The technical language is written so that dancers can read it with little or no confusion. *MJS Movement Choreology*© captures choreography in written form beginning with music analysis.

Once the selected music has been analyzed, movement can then be assigned to each designated part of the score. With a technical manual written for each piece of choreography, all members of a dance company are able to “stay on the same page” during a rehearsal. There is no need to waste rehearsal time trying to remember the choreography. This is a more organized way of conducting rehearsals and leads to a more professional look in the final result.

What makes *MJS Movement Choreology*© unique is that it is “user friendly.” The user does not need any prior understanding of the method to use it. *MJS Movement Choreology*© includes tips on selecting music, guidance in music analysis, concise counting methods, and the choreographer’s stage directions. This manual is aimed at communicating a choreographer’s vision to a company or individual so that in his/her absence the piece can be rehearsed without confusion. Rehearsal time should be spent rehearsing and not arguing about how the choreography was originally presented. By using this manual a performing company can have seamless rehearsals by revisiting the “blueprint” made possible by *MJS Movement Choreology*©.

# Chapter 1: Analyzing Music

## Defining Time Signature

Constructing a choreographed dance involves three basic elements:

- 1.) Choosing music or sound to be danced to; or, in some cases choreographers choose to not have music at all (no music is called *a cappella*)
- 2.) Conceptualizing movement dynamics to chosen music or sound
- 3.) Assigning and notating steps that involve those dynamics.

In all cases the performer will always have a way of conducting time as it relates to the sound (or lack of sound), and this is set by the choreographer and is called sound analysis. We will first describe how to analyze music as opposed to sound. Upon selecting music, the choreographer should take into consideration the company's (corps) and/or individual's (solo) specific abilities. A company may have strength in slow, fluid moves (*adage*) as opposed to quick footwork (*allegro*); therefore, the appropriate music selection would parallel those specific technical abilities within the group. In both instances, it is usually the responsibility of the choreographer to know the company's strengths and weaknesses and to select music that will best show the company's ability.



1 / 11 / 11 / 11 / 11

Using either method, *Happy Birthday* would contain eight bundles of three counts. The performer would keep time or relate movement to music by counting one-two-three/ two- two-three/ three-two-three and so on until the end of the measure. Similarly, bundling the song *America the Beautiful* would look like this:

1      2  
1111 / 1111

The performer would count one, two, three, four, / two, two, three, four / three, two, three, four / four, two, three, four; then at the end of a measure, start over with one, two, three, four and so on throughout the dance. The performer can also choose to count one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight / two, two, three, four and so on depending on the choreography.

### Charting Highlights

The next step in analyzing the music involves marking any places in the music that stand out as being high or low points. In the song *Happy Birthday*, the emphasized word would be highlighted like this in lyrical charting:

3    1-2-3      1-2    3    1-2-3      1-2    3    1-2-3      1-2-3  
happy birthday to / you / happy birthday to / you / happy birthday dear / Jane /

3      1-2-3      1-2-3  
happy birthday to / you

And it would look like this in the bundling method:

4 1 2 3 4  
1 / 11 / 11 / 11 / 11

This is how I would chart the song *America the Beautiful* highlighting the highs and lows using the lyrical method:

4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4

Oh / beautiful for / spacious skies for / amber waves of / grain for / purple mountain's

1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4

Majesty / above the fruited / plains

And this is how it looks with the bundling method:

1      2  
1111 / 1111

Highlighting charted music will of course vary with different choreographers.



Turns			Footwork			Dynamics			Exit		
3	1-2-3	1-2	3	1-2-3	1-2	3	1-2-3	1-2-3	3	1-2-3	1-2-3
happy birthday to / you			happy birthday to / you			Happy birthday dear / Jane			happy birthday to / you		

Now, let's look at how our earlier example *America the Beautiful* would appear after applying

the choreology method:

	Upper body only	turns	pose	upper body
4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4
	Oh / beautiful for / spacious skies for / amber waves of / grain for / purple mountain's			

Upper body	turns	pose	dynamics	footwork
1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4
Majesty / above the fruited / plains / America / America / God shed his grace on				

	floor work	turns	pose
1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4	1-2-3-4
thee and / crown thy good with / brotherhood from / sea to shining / sea			

## Chapter 3: Defining Movement

## Classical and Lyrical

Converting these conceptualizations to movement involves notation based on dance theory. Various abbreviations used in the combinations described in this chapter are explained at the end of the chapter. We will begin with a dance routine to our previously charted *Happy Birthday*. The movement appears over the charted music. For example:

	stp1	stp2	stp3	stp4	stp5
	three step turn	pose			
	rt-lft-rt to>1	f> 1			pique' to >2 lft ft on ct1
		2 <sup>nd</sup> arabesque	rvrs stp 1	rvrs stp 2	grande jete en tournant
		rt ft derriere	to >2	fc>1	landing in wide 4 <sup>th</sup> plie on ct1 hld cts23
3	1-2-3	1-2-3	1-2-3	1-2-3	1-2-3      1-2-3

Happy / birthday to / you happy / birthday to / you happy / birthday dear / Jane /

	Stp6	stp7
	stp rt ft x lft ft on ct3	exit pas couru
	3 chaine's cts 1&2&3&	w8
3	1-2-3	1-2-3
	happy / birthday to /	you

At this point watch the ancillary DVD to see finished product.

Now lets use this same application on our second charted musical selection *America the Beautiful*.

(Performer begins standing center stage in first position with head lowered.)

Head slowly raise to erect position for first 16 counts.

Arms raise from en bas to 5<sup>th</sup>

4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4

Oh / beautiful for / spacious skies for / amber waves of / grain for / purple mountain's

en haut      4 chaine' turns      pique on      chasse' pdb glissade      pique en arabesque  
for next 8 cts.      To left      arabesque      grande jete'      run to >4 for 8 cts

lft ft and run

upstage to >3

only      turns      pose      dynamics      footwork

1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4

Majesty / above the fruited / plains / America / America / God shed his grace on

*Lft. Ft derriere, brisee' brisee' brisee' vole' for 8 cts*

4 chaines 4cts

pique en

arabesque

to W8 exit

1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4      1-2-3-4

thee and / crown thy good with / brotherhood from / sea to shining / sea

Tap Combination

Because tap dancing deals with rhythm and syncopation in a different way than other forms of dance, I find it necessary to notate it in a different format. To begin, the charting of the music to be used is simplified by using the bundling method. For 4/4 music we would bundle in fours, for example: 1111 / 1111 / 1111. For 3/4 music we would bundle in threes, for example: 111 / 111 / 111.

I have chosen the music *Moondance* by Van Morrison to accompany this tap combination. The charting would look like this: 11 / 1111. Notice the lyrics are not a factor in this charting; instead we will use counts. Each stick in the bundle represents eight counts. Now we apply steps to the charted music. Notice that the music used as introduction is held one count of eight and one count of seven. So the music for the introduction would be counted as 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8, / 2,2,3,4,5,6,7; then there is a pick-up of &8 that will have assigned choreography to begin the dance.

Next we apply the choreographed steps above the charted music like this:

Intro            spk hl drp flp flp cramp roll

Hld 1ct 8

And 1ct 7

11 /            11

So far the notation would be considered incomplete because it does not detail the counts. This detailing is called syncopation and is used mainly in tap dancing. Tap could be considered playing drums with your feet as it is percussive rather than lyrical. To detail the counts enabling the performer to fully understand the syncopation of the choreographed steps we simply divide whole counts into fractions in much the same way a musician follows whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, and so on. For example:

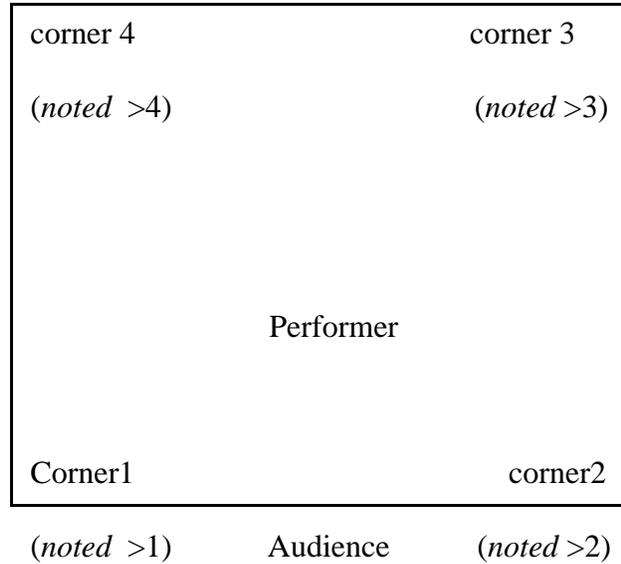
1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8 divided in half would be 1&2&3&4&5&6&7&8 giving sixteen beats to the measure. To go further we can notate 1&a2&a3&a4&a5&a6&a7&a8&a giving us sixteen beats to the measure. Taking the counts a step further we would have 1e&a2e&a3e&a4e&a5e&a6e&a7e&a8e&a giving 32 beats to the measure. So the notation for the tap combination would look like this:

Intro	step 1	step 2	step 3
Hold	L R	R L R L RRL	R R R L rvrs
	stp hl dg	spk hldrp flp flp crmprlchg	spk stp hldrp hldg
12345678 / 2234567	& 8	& 1 &2 &3 &a4	& 5 & 6 &7&8
step 4	step 5		
R L R RL R	L RRL RRL RRL		
spk hl slam bc lng	stp rloff rpt rpt		
& 1 2 &3 4	5 &a6 &a7 &a8		

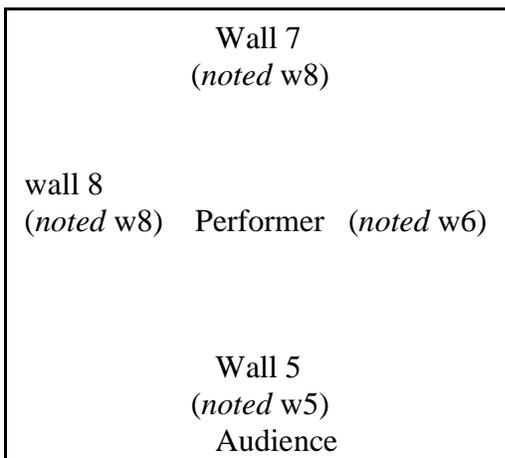
At this point you should watch the ancillary DVD to see the finished product. The abbreviations used in this text are defined

### Stage Directions

There are seven steps to this dance routine using mostly classical ballet theory, which is always in French. We will break these assigned steps down and explain notated stage directions, abbreviations, and theory. There are eight directions in which a performer can face or move toward. The following diagram will explain how these choreographic directions are notated:



Now that we understand four of the eight stage directions used in the choreology technique, let's take a look at the remaining four:



We also use the stage directions *upstage* and *downstage*. In the early days of theatrical history Shakespearian actors performed on a stage that was slightly pitched towards the audience for

better viewing. The direction *upstage* denotes the highest or farthest part of the stage from the audience, or the back of the stage that incorporates corners 3 and 4, and wall 7.

In this chapter I have used several abbreviations that are standard in the field:

Ast-at same time

Rt-right

Lft- left

Hd- head

Ft-foot

spk-spank

Brsh-brush

Hl-heel

tn-turn

edo-en de hors

edd-en de dans

pr-pirouette

cr-cramp roll

cts-counts