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Alwin Nikolais' Choroscript

Alwin Nikolais was a prominent American artist and choreographer who achieved worldwide acclaim for his innovative dance works in the 1950s through the early 90s. His signature usage of sound, lighting, scenery and props, as well as his unique choreographic philosophy, set him apart from other modern choreographers during that period and still influence the multimedia works of today. This report will provide historical background on Nikolais and examine his virtually unknown notation system called Choroscript, a unique and intuitive movement analysis system he created in his early career.

Of Russian and German descent, Nikolais was born in 1910 in Southington, Connecticut, to parents who encouraged him and his five siblings to study music. He studied piano at an early age, and he presented puppet shows for family and friends in the backyard (The World of Alwin Nikolais). As a child he had found a puppetry manual hidden under a carpet of his home when it was being redecorated. Nikolais' exposure to music and puppetry in his youth had a profound influence on his choreographic aesthetics and philosophy later in his career (Gitelman 7-11).

At the age of sixteen, he started his performing career at a local movie house accompanying silent films on the piano and organ. He also studied acting, gave piano lessons and accompanied dance classes. At 21, he saw his first dance performance by German dancer Mary Wigman and became interested in dance and choreography (The World of Alwin Nikolais). Mary Wigman was a modern dance pioneer who had studied with Rudolf Laban and Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, and she had a widespread effect on modern dance in the United States. After seeing Wigman's performance, Nikolais studied dance and percussion with Wigman's former student

Truda Kaschmann, while he directed local and regional plays and marionette theater productions under the Works Progress Administration.

From 1937-1939, Nikolais attended the Bennington College Summer School of Dance in Vermont and studied with the great modern dance legends, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Hanya Holm, Charles Weidman and Louis Horst (Lamhut 3). He was introduced to Labanotation during his studies at Bennington College.

Alwin Nikolais was inspired to form his own dance company and school in Hartford, Connecticut, for a few years before serving in the U.S. Army in WWII from 1942-1945 (Lamhut 3). During my research for this project I had the privilege of communicating with some of Nikolais' close associates. In an interview with Ruth Grauert, Nikolais' assistant for over 40 years, I learned that Nikolais began to work on his own dance notation system during the war "in the fox holes and lulls in battle," and that "the systematic concentration on such abstraction helped him maintain his sanity amidst the horrors." He called his system "Choroscript."

After the war, Nikolais moved to New York City and studied with and assisted Hanya Holm, another disciple of Mary Wigman. In 1948, he became director of the Henry Street Playhouse and began the first intensive dance study program of its kind. Nikolais founded the Playhouse Dance Company in 1951, which was later called the Nikolais Dance Theatre (Lamhut 3). It is interesting to note that the first members of the company included two women and eight men—the male company members were WWII veterans that were supported by the GI Bill to study the arts upon their return to the States (Lamhut interview).

The phrase "Total Theatre Concept" is used to describe Alwin Nikolais' works—he not only choreographed movement for the dancers, or "motion" as he preferred it to be called, but he also composed the sound scores, fabricated intricate lighting designs, projections and scenery, and realized fantastical costuming and props. It was a total theatrical experience, thought through completely from

beginning to end (Siegel 11-12). Nikolais has been called the Father of Multimedia, as he was first in the modern era to incorporate several art forms into one performance experience, and he should be remembered and revered as such (Lamhut).

It is not clear how Nikolais felt about Labanotation as a dance notation system and why he chose to create his own system, other than that he thought certain aspects of Labanotation were difficult (Nikolais, "A New Method" 63-64). Perhaps he felt the "block" symbols in Labanotation were too abstract, so he substituted them with the more familiar musical notes, to make them easier to read and more comprehensible.

In my research I had the chance to interview one of the founding members of the Nikolais Dance Theatre, Phyllis Lamhut. She explained to me the Henry Street Playhouse dance curriculum in the late 1940s-early 50s: the dancers would have technique and improvisation classes in the morning, then they would alternate afternoon classes in percussion, pedagogy, drama, stagecraft and Choroscript movement analysis notation. Phyllis remarked that learning Choroscript was invaluable for her because she also learned how to read music in the process. She said the notation was good for analyzing modern dance technique, and that the dancers enjoyed their time in the studio studying Choroscript. She is now a professor of dance at New York University and continues to use the system on her own while taking notes in classes—she said it just "comes out" of her.

Ruth Grauert, who taught Choroscript at Henry Street Playhouse, said that Nikolais had completed the notation system prior to becoming director, so she studied the system herself and came up with her own lesson plans and assignments. She also said that the notation was taught between three to five years at the Playhouse. Although the early Nikolais dancers were taught how to use Choroscript, the system was never used outside of the classroom—Nikolais' dance works were not

notated. He eventually relied on the use of film and video to preserve his works, and Choroscript was left to the memories of those who studied at Henry Street Playhouse. But one can catch a glimpse of Nikolais' genius when investigating the greatly detailed system he created.

There are some similarities between Choroscript and the Dalcroze, Stepanov and Nijinsky notation systems that have already been presented in class. The Dalcroze illustrations resemble those drawn by Nikolais, and they share similar movement concepts. The Dalcroze and Stepanov systems utilize drawings of wheel planes that were also central to Nikolais' system. The Stepanov and Nijinsky systems used musical staves, like Nikolais', although they were read horizontally, and Choroscript flipped the staves on end to be read from bottom to top. In Cheryl Corbett's October 19th presentation on Stepanov, she noted Arbeau's Orchesographie system, which was also a vertical musical staff system, but it was read from top to bottom. It's interesting to recall from Xiao Han Yan's presentation on the same day that Nijinsky worked on his notation system during WWI, similar to Nikolais' experience in the Second World War. After learning about some of the other notation systems, I'm realizing how Choroscript is much more user-friendly and intuitive in its graphic representation.

I was able to do most of my research on Choroscript because of the help of an archivist/librarian named Judith Connick at Ohio University. She provided me Nikolais' 67-page unpublished manuscript on Choroscript, a 10-page lesson written by Nikolais, and four articles written about Choroscript in the 1940s-50s, which are held in an extensive archive documenting Alwin Nikolais' and Murray Louis' careers. The following section outlining the basic components of Choroscript was compiled from Nikolais' manuscript and lesson, as well as his "Choroscript" article published in Theatre Arts journal. Ruth Grauert's article called "Choroscript" was also a key source for this section.

Basic Components of Choroscript

SYMBOLS & DIRECTIONS

The basic symbols of Choroscript (Figure A) relate very closely to music notation, and the directions (Figure B), indicated by the stems of the note symbols, are quite intuitive.

VERTICAL STAVES

The musical staves were turned vertical in order to allow for the natural viewing and progression of notated movements, and the time value of the steps is indicated by musical notes and rests. The time signature is noted at the beginning of the staff, and measures are used to help keep time. The two, five-line staves represent the various body units—the extremity staff on the left, and the trunk staff on the right (Figure C). Any notes within the staves that are lined up horizontally indicate movements happening simultaneously.

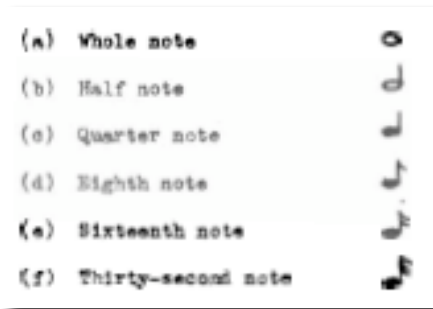


Fig. A—Symbols



Fig. B—Directions

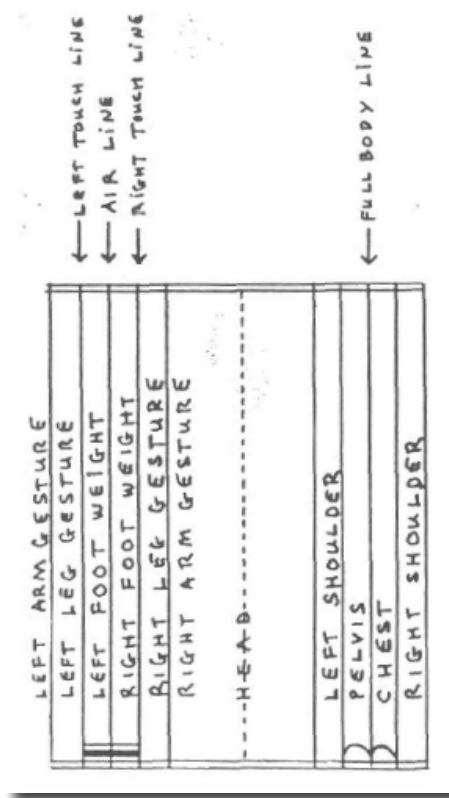


Fig. C—Vertical Staves

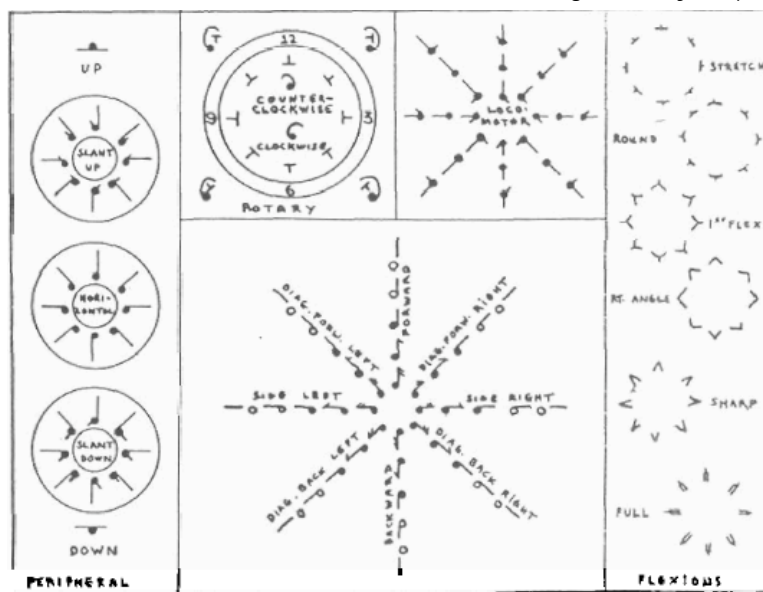
THE BODY GRAPH

In the left column of the Body Graph (Figure D), you can see all 26 fundamental directional locations that are established around the body. The position of each body part can be defined in terms of these "space stations." The three basic types of movements are described below: peripheral, locomotor and rotary.

Accidental symbols are used to add more information to the basic symbols whenever necessary. The symbols of these movement categories are shown in the Body Graph.

- Peripheral movements describe actions of a body part that is attached at one end by a joint, and the other end moves from one point to another point, like on an imaginary sphere surrounding the body.
- Locomotor movements describe when the body or a body part moves through space in one piece without any focal change. Notice that the stems emanate from the center of the notes, which differentiates them from peripheral movements.
- Rotary movements are actions of the body or a body part rotating within its own space on a central axis within itself. The curving symbol is intuitive—it shows the rotation as being clockwise or counter-clockwise, and the small "T" symbol shows where to finish the rotation.
- Accidentals—Flexion/Extension, Curving of the Path, or Isolated Movements of Smaller Body Parts call for Accidental symbols that modify the movements listed above.

Fig. D—Body Graph



The peripheral, locomotor, rotary and flexion/extension accidental symbols are also illustrated in the Analysis Chart below (Figure E). Examples of peripheral movements are shown in the left-most column—movements of the arms, legs, head, etc., which are attached at a joint, or a fixed point. Rotary movements are shown in the next column—an arm, leg, head, etc. turning within its own space. The third column consists of locomotor movements—the whole body moving in one piece to a new location without focal change, or movements by the head, torso, pelvis, etc. that shift that body part in space. The column on the right shows examples of flexion and extension—when an arm or leg bends at the elbow or knee joint, or when the torso contracts or expands in an angular manner.

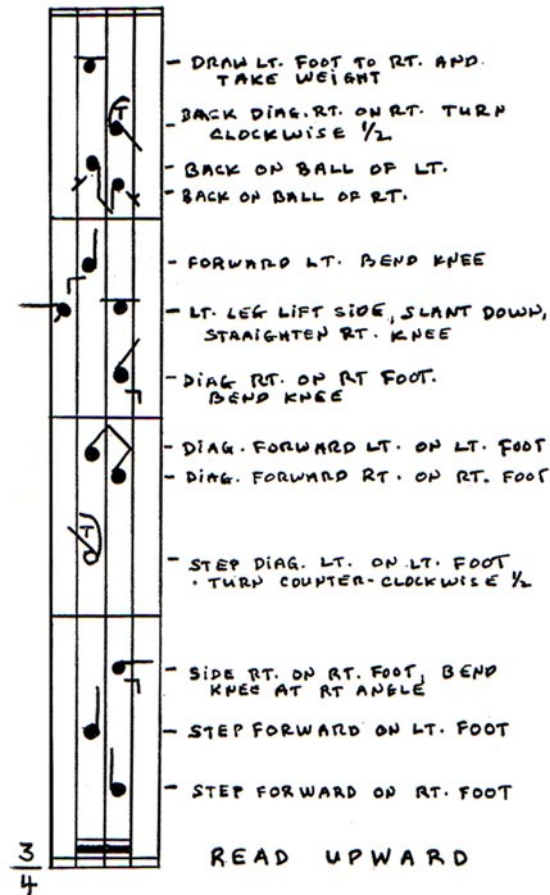
Fig. E—Analysis Chart



PEDAL LOCOMOTION EXERCISE

Below is a pedal locomotion exercise provided by Nikolais as a simple example of Choroscrypt notation (Figure F). Because of my limited access to the Choroscrypt materials, I was unable to perform the exercise without some hesitation and puzzlement. I felt that I was missing some essential information that would allow me to know exactly what movements to make with every part of my body, and in which direction I should face. For instance, "What 'shape' do I make during the turns, a pirouette-shape on relevé with leg in retiré? Turned in or turned out?" And so on. Because of these questions, I assume there exists a more thorough explanation in the successive lessons that Nikolais created, and that a familiarity with his particular movement style would have been an important precursor to the study of this system.

Fig. F—Pedal Locomotion



Because Choroscript is such a detailed system, it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe every symbol and indicator that Nikolais invented. The unpublished manuscript is 67 pages in length, and there are at least 21 lessons on the notation system, all found in the Ohio University archives. From the brief overview of Choroscript presented here, one can see how inventive and meticulous Nikolais was, which was demonstrated in every facet of his creative expression throughout his 60+ year career.

My wish is that all who are interested in dance, or the performing arts in general, will discover the genius of Alwin Nikolais as I have during the process of researching Choroscript movement analysis notation. I have acquired an extreme sense of awe in coming to know Nikolais' innovation and ingenuity, yet I have been touched by his humility, openness and wonderful sense of humor demonstrated in his writings. He was truly an amazing man.

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Appendix—Choroscript Movement Study

