François Delsarte’s ideas of expression inspired Swiss composer Émile Jaques-Dalcroze to emphasize the body and movement in his experimental music teaching beginning around 1900. Using piano improvisation to help people hear and respond to music physically, he transformed solfège lessons into group experiences of walking, breathing, singing, conducting, and gesturing. Dalcroze, like Delsarte, gained a reputation as a master teacher and innovator in music education. Dalcroze-based teaching continues to explore core practices of this heritage today.

1 Introduction

The careers of Delsarte (1811–1871) and Dalcroze (1865–1950), whose names are often linked in histories, reveal striking parallels. Their individual paths offer insight into music education at different moments in nineteenth-century France. Both benefited from traditional conservatory training, gaining knowledge they took for granted such as solfège and harmony, by methods they later questioned. Both took special interest in performance practice, attending to matters of inflection, nuance, prosody, gesture, and attitude, convinced of the importance of the voice and movement as keys to artistic expression. Both learned from and with their advanced students. In this article, I trace some of the steps Dalcroze took, following the model of Delsarte, to develop his way of teaching. I focus specifically on the role of Delsartean concepts in the emergence of the Dalcroze method, which is named Eurhythmics in English and variously in other languages.

Dalcroze taught for almost sixty years and published for even longer – a vast number of music compositions, pedagogical works, articles, reviews, and several books of essays and memoirs. I began to investigate the transmission of the teaching through his writings and those of many colleagues and successors in Europe and North America. My project grew to blend archival research with fieldwork, which included observation and participation in lessons, interviews, and reconstructions of exercises from the past, often with the help of current Dalcroze specialists.

Dalcroze came of age as an artist in the post-Delsartean music world of Paris. He studied there for two extended periods, in 1884–1886 and 1889–1890, building on his childhood foundation at the Conservatoire de Musique de Genève (Berchtold 2000, Brunet-Lecomte 1950, Spector 1990, and Tchamkerten 2000 for biography). He composed an opéra-comique at eighteen, flourishing under Hugo de Senger, the teacher who also inspired young Adolphe Appia, the stage theorist-designer who became one of Dalcroze’s closest colleagues.
From 1884 to 1886, he lived in Paris, drawn to music and theatre. He studied piano and harmony with Félix Le Couppey, Antoine François Marmontel, and Albert Lavignac, masters of the Conservatoire who were particularly interested in pedagogy. He simultaneously pursued elocution lessons with Edmond Got and Talbot (Denis Stanislas Montalant), Conservatoire-trained, long-time actors of the Comédie-Française. Sarah Bernhardt particularly remembered Talbot for having his students learn breath control by delivering their parts lying flat with a marble slab on their stomachs (Bernhardt 1924: 60–61).

In 1886 Dalcroze served as musical director of a small variety theatre in Algiers. Fascinated by North African drumming and dancing, he found there “many occasions to make contact with Arab musicians” (Jaques-Dalcroze 1942: 39). He considered these experiences the birth of his curiosity about rhythm. Around this time Émile Jaques adopted the pseudonym “Dalcroze” by which he is widely known.

He studied two years in Vienna with composer Anton Bruckner and with Adolf Prosnitz, an expert on early keyboard music, who emphasized improvisation as an essential skill. In 1889 he returned to Paris to study composition with Gabriel Fauré, who became his mentor and friend. At the same time he studied theory intensively with Mathis Lussy, the Swiss master who taught over forty years in a Paris convent and wrote books on musical expression, notation, and rhythm. For Dalcroze, Lussy’s ideas of time, space, and movement opened the door to future exploration.

As a chansonnier, Dalcroze had a parallel apprenticeship in popular music, performing in venues such as the Chat Noir cabaret. His style of entertainment mixed songs with informal remarks and jokes, poems and dramatic texts, and featured his dazzling improvisations at the piano. He had a voice which, though unremarkable, people adored, and he composed prolifically, sometimes several songs a day.

2 The Delsarte Connection

It is difficult to find out how Dalcroze learned about Delsarte’s approach to expression, body attitude, voice, and gesture. Delsarte, after damaging his voice while training as a singer at the Conservatoire in Paris, performed intermittently in the theatre and on the concert podium. In the 1840s he established himself as a teacher of singing and declamation, attracting students such as feminist writer Angélique Arnaud and operatic singer Alfred-Auguste Giraudet, who, among others, wrote books on Delsarte’s teachings.

Karl Storck, a musicologist who knew Dalcroze personally, wrote that Dalcroze learned Delsarte exercises while he was in Paris but did not indicate with whom he studied (Storck 1912: 24). A later biographer, Irwin Spector, asserted that Dalcroze studied with Delsarte himself, but this certainly did not happen since Delsarte died in 1871, the year Dalcroze turned six years old (Spector 1990: 10).

Dalcroze may have gained knowledge of Delsarte from his teachers Got and Talbot or from his actor-cousin Samuel Jaques, who also trained in Paris. He could have had direct contact with singer Alfred Giraudet, who was teaching Delsarte’s work during the 1880s. Whatever the case, we know for certain only that Dalcroze’s personal library included books on Delsarte by Angélique Arnaud and Giraudet, in which he underscored key words and phrases. Dalcroze referred to “Delsarte” a number of times in his writings and in the margins of his unpublished lesson plans, collected into ninety bound volumes which are preserved at the Institut Jaques-Dalcroze in Geneva. Such records offer
the most direct evidence of Delsarte’s influence on the development of the Dalcroze method.

In 1890 Dalcroze at twenty-five launched his career in Geneva, soon juggling the roles of teacher, pianist, singer, composer, conductor, writer, and editor. By 1892 he was appointed to teach harmony and solfège at the Conservatoire. Though he concentrated on music, his interest in movement continued to grow. A flyer for his “Cours pratique” in his private studio in 1894 announced the “practical study of rhythm, based on walking and dancing” along with “pulmonary gymnastics” based on the practice of the French singing teacher Ferdinand Bernard.

Working as pianist with bel canto singers, Dalcroze gained deep understanding of voice and gesture which he used in composing for the stage. He married one of his closest colleagues, the Italian soprano Nina Faliero. Much of his art music was composed for her, and from the mid-1890s they toured Europe to perform together. At home in Switzerland, he joined forces with singers, writers, artists, dance teachers, and theatre people to produce concerts and stage productions of his music, including choral works and operas as well as variety shows.

The culmination of these experiences was directing the huge numbers of people who took part in historical pageants such as *Poème alpestre* (1896) and the *Festival vaudois* (1903), which he composed and conducted. For these works he taught on the spot, to achieve the best performances from young and old, amateur and professional. This practical imperative convinced him that people learned more quickly by combining singing and action. He later wrote that these collaborations gave him crucial movement experience that stimulated experiments in his music classes (Odom 1990).

Dalcroze was impressed by how dramatic situations and games could make music study accessible to children. In the mid-1890s, Dalcroze began to give recitals of his children’s songs, which became immensely popular throughout Switzerland. He published numerous songs, including several collections with detailed directions for staging.

### 3 Gesture Songs

In 1904, Dalcroze gained a gifted colleague who contributed substantially to what he was trying to do. Dutch music teacher Nina Gorter met Dalcroze through her interest in his songs for children. She moved from Berlin to assist Dalcroze in Geneva, and soon the emphasis on movement and gesture in his work intensified. While he was brilliantly spontaneous, Gorter was methodical. She wrote down his exercises and tested them herself. Formulating the work, which Gorter made her mission, was crucial in giving the new method coherence and identity.

They wrote a guide for staging *Six Chansons de gestes: études callisthéniques* (1904), a collection of songs with movement for the hand and arm, the head and eyes, and the torso. Gorter brought to this project knowledge of women’s physical training as well as American Delsartean expression, possibly gained from Harriet Davis Güssbacher, who announced that she was introducing the work in Germany around 1899. Delsarte manuals such as those published by Genevieve Stebbins in the 1880s and 1890s may have been available to Gorter. As Delsarte had done before him, Dalcroze brought insights from performance experience to the work of the classroom. Between 1903 and 1906 Dalcroze transformed his teaching and stage experiences into a method of training physically that addressed mind-body connections in music.
Photographs illustrate examples such as his song “Ondine,” described as a plastique for a girl wearing a “supple and light long gown” (Jaques-Dalcroze and Gorter 1904: 10). The authors say that these are not attitudes to be imitated, but rather a “glimpse of the direction in which the personal study and research of the teacher should be directed” (4). These words evoke the Delsartean principle of inner searching by the individual. Similar views had already been expressed by Isadora Duncan, by this time based in Germany, in her 1903 lecture Der Tanz der Zukunft / The Dance of the Future. In the school she hoped to found, she stated, “I shall not teach the children to imitate my movements, but to make their own” (Duncan in Cheney 1928: 61).

Dalcroze, as editor of the journal La Musique en Suisse, published a long article on Duncan in 1903 by Albert Dresdner, a German art historian who advocated music, gymnastics, and dance as the basis for education. Dresdner was one of the first to recognize in Duncan’s dancing the traces of her background in Delsartism. He also praised Nina Gorter’s sensitive staging of Dalcroze’s songs in Berlin. Dalcroze, through his collaboration with Gorter, was drawn toward the values of Delsartism and Duncan’s dancing at exactly the time he decided to focus on what movement could offer to teachers of music.

Gorter put great effort into helping to prepare the series of method books which Dalcroze began to publish in 1906. Gymnastique rythmique, the first and largest volume of Méthode Jaques-Dalcroze, suggests formal gymnastics and physical culture, yet the purpose of this manual is the “development of rhythmic and metric musical instinct, the sense of plastic harmony and balance of movements, and for the regularization of motor habits” (Jaques-Dalcroze 1906: vi).

4 The Physical Essence of Rhythm

Gymnastique rythmique contains descriptions of exercises, along with rhythmic and movement notations, 80 drawings of positions and actions, 120 photographs, and a set of anatomical plates. The introduction begins by incorporating a quotation of Delsarte’s Law of Correspondence in the following way: “The gift of musical rhythm does not stem solely from reasoning; it is physical in essence. ‘To each spiritual function responds a function of the body; – Delsarte said – to each great function of the body corresponds a spiritual act’” (Jaques-Dalcroze 1906: xi).

Dalcroze explains balance and harmony as the classical values underlying his approach: “Musical rhythm is like a reflection of bodily movements, dependent on good balance and the general harmony of those movements” (xi). He enlists Delsarte’s concept to support his claim that “to regulate and improve movement is to develop the rhythmic mentality” (viii). Dalcroze sees his task as enabling people who have difficulties with rhythm “to take possession of” their bodies in order to move them at will (xii).

In the first part of Gymnastique rythmique, students are instructed to wear simple, light, “well-ventilated” clothing: knit jersey tops and “for the lower parts of the body, ample bloomers, stopped just above the knees,” to ensure free play of the joints (2–3). Lessons begin with a warm-up of breathing, balance, strength, and flexibility exercises based on Swedish, or Ling gymnastics, a comprehensive system of exercises which were introduced into Swiss physical education for women and children in the 1890s.

This approach became popular in England and the United States, influencing Genevieve Stebbins among many others. Unlike the stylized movements of dancing, Swedish gymnastics
took a functional approach to body training, using movement accessible to all. Those who did them could gain an understanding of body mechanics and alignment as well as muscular control. Dalcroze also borrowed from gymnastics teaching the use of commands or cues to produce quick reactions and responses from students.

Dalcroze elaborates his version of Delsarte’s Law of Correspondence in *Gymnastique rythmique* by investigating the connection of feelings and physical movements with musical phenomena. The purpose of his “rhythmic walking and breathing” exercises is to encourage the flow of communication between the sensing, moving body and the creating, thinking brain. Examples of walking and breathing exercises span 17 “lessons” of increasing difficulty (Jaques-Dalcroze 1906: 25–228).

One of Dalcroze’s key exercises is walking to generate the feeling of the beat. The process of lifting one leg to step, falling forward and catching the weight, and then going on to the next step – activity familiar and automatic from childhood – demonstrates the body’s way of dividing time into equal parts. When the first of two or more steps is accented, the resulting pattern produces metrical rhythm or measure.

He introduces movements for slower and quicker note values, ways to step rhythmic patterns, and arm gestures for beating time and conducting. For rests, the body remains alert in the ending position of the last step. Nuances such as crescendo-decrescendo require that people control force or energy as they move through time and space.

People learn to internalize the beat, measure and rhythm by engaging in a process that is both analytic and integrative, concerned with understanding the parts as well as the whole. While locomotion carries the body from a balanced position outward into space, rhythmic breathing is a more inward activity which can awaken the torso or center of the body. In these exercises, contraction and relaxation in the abdomen or chest are timed and controlled, sometimes in relation to gestures, such as lifting and lowering the arms.

Breathing is intimately connected with the voice, the source of song and speech inside the body (120). Dalcroze associates sounds with different types of movements; for example, explosive consonants such as p, b, t, and d are linked with contractions of the abdominal muscles. *Gymnastique rythmique* thus builds on traditional diction and voice instruction to offer a detailed, subtle exploration of movement impulses and musical phrasing in the body center. To try one of his exercises, lift your arms to shoulder height as you inhale, then lower them as you exhale (repeat several times). Notice the difference if you do the opposite: exhale as you lift your arms to shoulder height, and inhale as you lower them.

To build skills of coordination, attention, and concentration, exercises for “independence of the limbs” include activities such as beating two against three. “Stopping” exercises alternate walking with stillness. The task is to “continue the movement mentally” while being still, so as to be able to resume the original tempo or pattern at the right time without hesitation. Through physical practice, students gain the ability “to think movements without doing them” (38–40). Conversely, in “hearing” exercises, they listen to an example and “realize” it immediately, improvising movement without stopping to think or analyze.

Many of these exercises and concepts have persisted for more than a century of Dalcroze teaching – not literally, as written, but in variations handed down through the interactive process of learning and teaching. Teachers use piano improvisation and verbal instruction to enable students to embody experiences, so that they in turn can move, sing, and play musically. Instructions such as “internalize the phrase” or “externalize a feeling” are distant echoes of Delsarte’s Law of Correspondence as Dalcroze applied it in the field of music (Odom 1995).
5 The Plastic Expression of Music

Dalcroze concludes Gymnastique rythmique with slow movement exercises for “the plastic expression of music” (229–78). He states that sustained movements and attitudes are the most difficult of all to master, requiring balance and muscular control, since muscle groups must adjust constantly to create a harmonious flow of action.

Illustrations and instructions for the slow movements closely parallel activities shown in Delsartean manuals of the late nineteenth century. Dalcroze’s exercises study tension and relaxation, shifting the body from side to side or forward and back; walking slowly, prolonging the contact of the foot with the ground; and turning, kneeling, or lying down and rising with timings such as moderato, adagio, and lento. The slow movements depend on sustained weight transfers, to which the performer can add gestures of lifting and lowering the arms, circling, curving, and falling. He includes photographs of key students such as Suzanne Perrottet, who began teaching with Dalcroze while still in her teens. They demonstrate how thoughts and feelings – happiness, adoration, deception, sorrow, shame, disdain, curiosity, sadness, and fatigue – can motivate expressive attitudes which can be varied “to infinity” as teacher and students invent other possibilities.

An example I reconstructed is titled “Qui vois-je?” or “Whom do I see?” This exercise combines a short dramatic text with photographs and directions.

The teacher counts from 1 to 16.

**Whom do I see?**
From 1 to 4. – Simultaneous movements.
The right leg steps back, supporting the body weight;
the torso leans backward;
the hands rise shading the eyes;
the eyes look forward into the distance.

**Oh joy! It’s a loved one!**
From 5 to 8. – Simultaneous movements;
the arms lift as a basket;
torso arched;
the head lifted in the air.

**I go to meet him!**
From 9 to 12. – Four steps forward (starting on the left),
the arms stretch forward, the gaze forward.

**Joyous embrace!**
From 13 to 16. – Stop on the left leg forward;
the two arms cross the chest as to embrace, the gaze lifted.
Repeat starting with the left foot.
*(Gymnastique rythmique 1906: 262–63, my translation)*.

6 Educating the Nervous System

The interactive lecture-demonstration, with Dalcroze at the piano and participants moving and singing in an open space, came to be the preferred strategy for showing the new work. On the cover of La Vie Illustrée, Dalcroze directs his advanced students at the Paris Conservatoire in May 1907. In the article, the interviewer quotes him as saying “rhythm must be so completely internalized that it can be executed effortlessly, even when unanticipated. In my system, as soon as one movement is automatic, I add a different movement that goes with it and so on” (de Weindel 1907: 101). His awareness of the ear-brain-body connection led him to question how people acquire musical knowledge and how teachers can facilitate that process.
Dalcroze knew how to reach his students’ imaginations not only through his music but also through the rich array of ideas and images he introduced into teaching. His lesson plans include exercises he called “sudden emotions” and “attitudes”: eagle’s wings, the warning, flames, the amphorae, awakening to music, lifting a stone, scattering flowers, drawing in the air with the arms. Suzanne Perrottet was among the group of “Dalcroziennes” who toured European cities to give lecture-demonstrations, performing barefoot in tunics in the manner of Isadora Duncan.

Another was Marie Rambert, who studied and taught with Dalcroze from 1909 to 1912 before leaving to work as Vaslav Nijinsky’s assistant when he choreographed Le Sacre du printemps (Odom 1992b). The Dalcroze method rapidly gained the reputation of providing a whole new approach to movement training. The growing clientele for the teaching, in addition to conservatory students and children, included teachers and musicians, male and female, who attended summer courses held in Geneva from 1906 to 1909. A society was organized in 1907, and groups demonstrated the work in France, Holland, Belgium, and Germany.

Dalcroze exponents performed in many of the cities where Isadora Duncan, Maud Allan, the Wiesenthal sisters, and other dance innovators appeared during this period. Annie Beck, a young Dutch pianist, came to study with Dalcroze because she had been inspired by Duncan’s dancing. Beck’s own gifts for improvisation and choreography soon became evident (Odom 1998).

Perrottet, Rambert and Beck were close colleagues, and as women in their early twenties they accompanied Dalcroze to Germany in 1910 to create a training college in Hellerau, a garden city north of Dresden. To this school’s purpose-built studios came hundreds of professional students, from countries as far away as the United States and Japan. Here, Dalcroze focused on developing movement improvisation as a pedagogical tool and creative method.

The connections of time, space, and energy in music became clear in a context where bare feet and leotards liberated people to experience movement in fresh ways. They walked, ran, skipped, and jumped; they made impulses “travel” from one body part to another; they explored movement on stairs and levels designed by Adolphe Appia, who had already taken part himself in Dalcroze’s new teaching. He wrote several articles about it and in the process helped to articulate its modernist aesthetic. In particular, he advocated the radical simplicity of leotards, even as costume for the stage. Many other articles in the international press introduced images of Hellerau students, such as a young man performing a sequence of expressive attitudes in The Musician for January 1911.

In the summer of 1912, a three-week festival demonstrated Hellerau’s educational and artistic work. A program of “plastic music representations” culminated in a staging of the Descent into the Underworld scene from Gluck’s opera Orpheus and Eurydice. Thanks to dramaturg Richard Beacham, I had the opportunity to direct movement for a reconstruction of the full-length Orpheus that Dalcroze produced with Appia’s designs and Beck’s choreography at Hellerau in 1913 (Odom 1992a). Photographs of the original production capture the moment when the women Mourners, draped in classical tunics, manipulated lengths of fabric hanging from the shoulder to extend and enlarge their gestures. One imagines that their intense tableaux embodied Eurhythmics and at the same time resonated with the ideals of expression associated with Delsarte and Duncan.

A workshop with New York area Dalcrozians brought me the chance to try another reconstruction from the Hellerau period, this time Dalcroze’s score for “The Singing Flowers.” This choral work evoked ancient ritual in a sequence of mysterious-sounding harmonies.
Prince Sergei Volkonsky, former Director of the Russian Imperial Theatre, described this composition:

Several groups kneel in circles, heads together. One of the circles rises with soft singing, holding hands, bodies and arms stretching upwards as the singing increases, until the circle of supple bodies bends backwards and opens up like a basket. At the climax, the chord changes and the movement reverses, the basket closes, the knees bend, and all kneel down again. The human flowers grow, open, take a break, and close again. Gradually the chords change more quickly, the flowers open and close more often, the final chord of one becomes the beginning of another, and finally all five flowers grow simultaneously and open in a joint chord: a hymn of life and light (Wolkonski in Feudel 1960: 22).

Volkonsky studied the Dalcroze method at Hellerau and organized its successful introduction in Russia. Equally fascinated by Delsartism, he published his book on teaching gesture for the stage in 1913. Possibly he lectured on Delsarte during one of his sojourns at Hellerau, because Beryl de Zoete as a student there made detailed notes on Delsartean topics and sources (Odom 2005: 149).

7 The Dalcroze Heritage

There are countless stories of artists and teachers who came in contact with the Dalcroze method in these early years. Suzanne Perrottet and Hellerau-trained Mary Wigman, for example, moved on to study with Rudolf Laban and then pursued independent careers in dance, while generations of other teachers up to the present have continued the work of Dalcroze teaching (Odom 1986, 2002, and 2003a).

Meredith Monk, the contemporary American composer-choreographer, says the sisters Lola and Mita Rohm, who were her Dalcroze teachers when she was three years old, “taught an integrated feeling about music and movement. I have retained this and never separated from it throughout my working life” (quoted in Kreemer 1987: 253–54). For her “the rhythm of the piece is the primary concern” and “my movement has always had a human and gestural aspect to it rather than abstract, geometric shape.” Her research on creating with the voice connects her to the legacy of Dalcroze and Delsarte.

People with Dalcroze backgrounds have led careers in music, dance, theatre, physical education, therapy, and other fields. They elaborated Dalcroze’s practices and invented their own, adapting to new working environments in schools and conservatories around the world. Through their evolving, eclectic ways of combining music and movement, Dalcroze specialists still concentrate on the body as the primary instrument of expression. To me it seems that they also reveal the enduring traces of François Delsarte.

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