

An article based on a work of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze
“La Technique de la Plastique Vivante”

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I welcomed the opportunity to review the article “La Technique de la Plastique Vivante” *The Technique of Living Plastic* by Emile Jaques-Dalcroze. The full version of the article was published in the *Review Geneva* but I have no date. However, from reading the work I would say that this article predates the author’s text “*Exercices de Plastique Animée*,” which was published in 1916.

Plastique Animée has played a major importance in my professional life for more than thirty-five years. It first began when I was a student of Mlle. Hussy in Geneva. Mlle. was an 85 year old disciple of Jaques-Dalcroze who spoke in a murmur, and lived with what probably was a severe case of osteoporosis. Nevertheless, she, with her deep blue “ancient eyes,” full of wisdom, knowledge, and a vast experience possessed an insightful and forward thinking mind in addition to a very warm heart. She was a woman who knew and appreciated artistic subtlety both in music and in movement, and completely understood M. Jaques and the work he did in *Plastique Animée*. My interest then continued as the founder/director of the touring group *l’Ensemble Jaques-Dalcroze* through my twelve-year tenure as professor of Jaques-Dalroze Studies at Ithaca College.

As in all of his writings, which includes this article, M. Jaques aspired to take his readers, his students, beyond the straight and narrow of current day thought and experience and to seek new directions where they would challenge the conventional wisdom, craft healthy experimentation, and position the “experience” as the crucial element in all education. He always spoke of a better humanity, a new world order where the arts regained their primary importance in society and reigned supreme over the hearts, minds, and souls of all people, and in his time, he was not alone in his view. Most of the “makers and shakers” in the capitals of Western society were espousing many of the same ideals, but we later learned that many of those principles, and morals were distorted and corrupted and eventually led the world to its second “great” war.

In this article, M. Jaques first establishes an argument for the necessity of movement education in general and specifically for fusing movement education with music education, thereby generating a new joy and giving rise to an enlightened spirit. He offers a scenario where movement education, not to be confused with sports education, becomes a means to nourish the human body, to revitalize it, shape it, and enhance its natural beauty; render it supple, buoyant, and responsive. He continues by insisting that if music were integrated as an equal partner in the practice of honing the physique it would serve to educate and enlighten the mind, inspire and rouse the soul, and broaden the horizon for a new humanity, a new world order. He called this practice “Plastique Vivante” but he would later christen it “*Plastique Animée*.” He saw this marriage of music and movement within the educational process as the best great hope for a return to our human roots, and our shared values as members of society.

Back in the early 1900's the gentry and aristocracy became fascinated with what they called "tableaux vivants." This is a form of art where individuals would create little "scenes" by dressing up and striking poses behind a curtained 7' x 4' box depicting famous works of art or characters in famous scenes. The guests would gather in the parlor or ballroom where there could be as many as seven or eight of these beautifully decorated "sécrites la cachette" (secret hiding places) complete with drawstrings to open the curtains. The guests would travel *en masse* from scene to scene revealing from behind curtains the live dramas fixed in time and space and having a completely delightful evening. Perhaps Jacques-Dalcroze took this idea one step further by infusing music and movement into the "tableaux vignettes," thereby creating a new art form he called "Plastique Vivante" and eventually "Plastique Animée," "Living Plastic." Admittedly, it loses its charm when translated to English as most of French does.

My first encounter with this art form took place watching the PBS Masterpiece Theater production of "The Duchess of Duke Street" in the spring of 1976, my first year as an assistant professor at Ithaca College. The series took place in the early 1900's and told the story of Rosa Lewis, the legendary cook who ran the Cavendish Hotel; she was the best friend of Oscar Wilde and legendary "mistress" of Edward VII, and eventually became one of the rich and famous in England, France, and the United States. When I saw the episode where the "Plastique Vignettes" first appeared and I saw the physical positions the human manikins assumed I immediately drew a connection to Jacques-Dalcroze. They were almost exact replications of the famous Jacques-Dalcroze "attitudes en groupes" that are depicted in the appendix of the same text I sighted above, "Exercices de Plastique Animée." These photographs, taken by the artist Boissonnas of Geneva (depicted) who remains famous for his extraordinary photographs of ancient Greece, inhabit many Dalcroze publications and at one time decorated the walls of the Dalcroze Institute in Geneva.



Again, in this article Jacques-Dalcroze does not simply describe supercilious ideals and lofty goals but begins to illustrate the types of exercises that one would need to develop so that an art form such as he described could be developed and nurtured. In 17 classifications of "études", he describes what I call the "Eight Eurhythmic Subjects."¹ They include studies in:

1. Time, Space, Energy
2. Social Integration
3. Body Technique
4. Movement Independence
5. Concentration / Memory
6. Corporal Schema

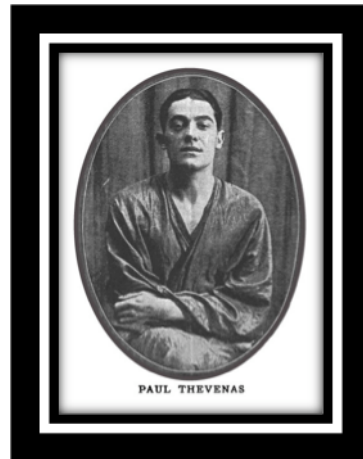
¹ Please visit http://bethms.com/DSI/DSI_https_pages/DSI_eurhythmicis.html for a complete description of the eurhythmic subjects

7. Breathing – use of the life force
8. Spatial Orientation

However, it is obvious that M. Jaques is describing exercises and etudes that were perhaps works in progress. After all, no one had done this before. Codifying exercises that would eventually develop an entirely new art form could not have been easy, and as all good teachers, he needed students and colleagues to help him learn. He began experimenting and reaching out of the box both proverbially and literally. He taught insistently, took copious notes, and drew up elaborate lesson plans. He gathered friends and colleagues around him to help navigate toward his goal, and advise him when and where needed.

Intelligent and gifted men and women who want to learn as they teach always seem to attract and gather intelligent and gifted colleagues. The gift in one always recognizes the gift in the other, and Jaques-Dalcroze was no exception. He had friends and colleagues who were all proven artists in their own right. They included: Adolph Appia, (1862-1928) considered the father of modern lighting technique and modern scenic design, and Paul Thévenaz, (1891-1921), a famous painter, dancer and self-proclaimed rhythmician. Other friends and colleagues included Fred Boissonnas (18518-1946) as mentioned earlier who took all of the stunning photos of the various exercises and techniques performed by students, and Suzanne Ferrière, an excellent and highly respected student and colleague of M. Jaques who eventually became Diplômée and professor at the Institute Jaques-Dalcroze in Geneva, Switzerland.

The two individuals immediately responsible for assisting M. Jaques in the methodology of *Plastique Animée* were Mlle. Ferrière and Paul Thévenaz. Mlle. Ferrière, herself a gifted Dalcrozian and educator, who understood M. Jaques the teacher, developed, organized, and classified his exercises while M. Thévenaz himself an experienced and talented dancer, painter and sculpture who understood M. Jaques the artist, could authentically realized those exercises on paper with pen and ink.



PAUL THÉVENAZ

the artist, could authentically realized those exercises on paper with pen and ink.



It is obvious from these now famous works of art by Paul (Paulet) Thévenaz that he had “experienced.” Look at the power, the force and the energy depicted so clearly in his drawing. With just a few strokes of a pen,

he was able to capture not only an accurate and precise depiction of the movement from one position to another but the beauty of the free spirit incarcerated.

A few years later he moved to the United States where at the age of 30 he died from peritonitis due to an appendicitis rupture, but not from suicide as it had been rumored at the time.



When examining the specific exercises contained in "*Exercices de Plastique Animée*" it becomes apparent that M. Jaques, for the first time in history had conceived a technique that would give students a "vocabulary of movement" that related directly to rhythm values and music expression. At first glance this "vocabulary" seems robotic in character because it divides the space surrounding the body and its parts into 8 or 9 "*degrés d'orientation*" or "*lignes de mouvements*" depending upon a given body part. I use the word "points." Shapes and forms are created by placing the limbs and their parts on the various

"points." In doing so each pose contains juxtaposed lines and angles stemming from one central point of reference as physical resistance with and against gravity is experienced. Students were taught to arrive at these various "points" through space in time with the music by means of a series of quick reaction exercises. From this comes "*les vingt gestes*" (the twenty poses) which are learned and memorized and used to create movement combinations for both stationary and locomotor movement.

Keep in mind that all of these exercises were created simply to get people to move who had little or no opportunity to do anything more than walk. As mentioned above it was all done with and "on the music," (a true revolution at the time) which was usually provided by the teacher's piano improvisation or by playing the pieces found in the two volumes of "*Esquisse Rhythmique*," which were specifically composed by Jaques-Dalcroze for these "*plastique*" exercises. (They are delightful piano pieces.)

Focus your attention on the two drawings by Paul Thévenaz on the previous page. Notice how each limb is set at an angle jetting away from the navel, and how each angle relates to another. The technique creates a counterpoint in space where one line opposes the other with weight and resistance. These drawings are designed to show one how to move one combination to another on whole notes with resistance.² They remind me of Yoga postures. As in level one of Kripalu Yoga, postures are leaned and studied, in conjunction with the breath. In level two the postures are held for longer and longer periods of time allowing the shape to form deep within the muscle memory. In level three the Yogi learns to move one posture to another in a "free flow," eventually

² *Exercices de Plastique Animée*, Pg 56. Jobin and Cie, Lausanne, 1916

abandoning the structure of each pose thereby creating a rhythmic flow of movement guided only by the imagination, the breath stream and yet grounded in the physical technique. Eventually, *Plastique Animée* does reach a level three where the student gains permission to find his/her own authenticity of motion and where the physical response to music and the musical response to movement becomes indistinguishable.

M. Jaques developed a method that connects the abstract concepts of music to the concrete realities of the human body in motion and in stillness. Speaking from my own experience as student, practitioner and educator of *Plastique Animée* I know and understand this place of indistinguishable lines uniting in mind, body, and soul. Once having been there one forms a unique bond with others who have also “experienced.” It is this common understanding that ignited a fire of interest and excitement all over Europe, England and the United States. Jaques-Dalcroze with his *Plastique Animée* even sparked what we now call the “modern dance” movement through his students Marie Rambert, Mary Wigman, Hanya Holm, and many others.³

However, before returning to the article in question, I want to remind the reader that *Plastique Animée* in no way should be confused with or mistaken for modern dance. The dancers, to their credit, took what they learned M. Jaques and developed it in another direction, a direction in their view that best served their art form. The “*les vingt gestes*” the “free flow” the resistance, etc, all live in their work today.

When I toured with the *Plastique Animée* troupe out of Ithaca College for those many years, I continually informed audiences about what I was taught by the genius of a woman, Mlle. Hussy who I mentioned earlier. It was actually her and through my own experience with dance that I learned how *Plastique Animée* differs from modern dance. I list some of the differences here.

1. *Plastique Animée* is first and foremost an educational process. It is a process that leads its practitioners to a keen understanding of a musical score and to an artistic image of that score realized through time and space.
2. *Plastique Animée* is an art form devoted to the individual’s personal movement and how that movement interacts with others. There is no attempt to create a specific style, technique or school of dance as for example that which was created by Martha Graham. Therefore, the athletic virtuosity may not match those of a dancer. Remember what he promulgated. Movement was personal and unique to the each individual. He designed exercises and techniques to allow the individual to become comfortable and at home in their own body. The act of exposing *genuine* movement married to live music was in itself an authentic, artistic expression worthy of public performance. The question is not how high one can jump but rather what sentiment is communicated in the jump and does the jump sing the music.

This axiom was well taught and strictly followed by Mlle Hussy. However, I found a quote Miss I. S. Wittenoon, a distinguished Australian Dalcrozian who

³ Please visit http://bethms.com/Articles/DSI_Articles/DSI_Art_Dancers_musicians.html for more information on the influence Jaques-Dalcroze had on the creation of modern dance.

wrote the following on the inside cover of a program for a *plastique* demonstration she gave in Australia on Saturday March 5, 1919.

“In plastic expression the music is studied in detail before being realized. The strict technique of the method is abandoned and freer movements employed. Plastic expressions are often very beautiful to the eye, but it should be remembered that the object in view is the musical education of the pupil, not the production of a spectacle. Beauty in movement is not the aim of the work but comes in the attempt to express a beautiful thought in movement. The faculty of plastic music expression exists naturally in but a few gifted individuals. The Dalcroze Method attempts to give to all its pupils the technique necessary for such expressions.”

3. *Plastique Animée* is an art form conceived with and through music. As stated by Miss Wittenoon, students intensely analyze each score harmonically, melodically, rhythmically and structurally before creating any movement. This is to ensure that the movement represents the music in all of its various parameters.
4. *Plastique Animée* is an art form based entirely on improvisation. Once the score has been thoroughly dissected for its theoretical, musical, and emotional properties, participants are asked to listen to the score and then to improvise movement that best speaks to their view of the music. This is done phrase by phrase, and section by section.
 - a. In most programs I would demonstrate how this skill is developed by improvising at the piano as the troupe would improvise movement to my music. Often they would each take a different element in the music so that one could see the rhythmic and melodic counterpoint, and phrase structure of the music in the movement. I would then reverse the role and have the group improvise movement. I would then create music that I believed best depicted their movement. I too would pick up on certain themes in the movement and play them against each other. It was always a great success.
5. *Plastique Animée* is an art form with no single choreographer. All the movement is created from ideas, impressions, and insights from all participants. No idea is left unexplored or discounted. The “director” is the facilitator of those ideas and guides the participants toward a final form that best depicts the music in its fullness through time and space. This is an educational process that cannot be rushed. The final product must arrive in its own time and only after everyone involved is convinced of its validity.
 - a. Often I would split the larger group into duets, trios, and solos so that we could create an entire program for each new touring season. This allowed more students to participate and to take on more responsibility for their group or partner. Solos were always encouraged because they were so useful as teaching tools. Solo work sparked the students to delve deeper into the score and to search more intensely within themselves to find the true artist within and thereby becoming more and more comfortable with their movement.
6. *Plastique Animée* cannot authentically be studied and practiced away from or apart from eurhythmics, solfège and improvisation, the three principle branches of a Jaques-Dalcroze education. *Plastique Animée* is a process through which one

applies all of the Jaques-Dalcroze principles, the solfege subjects, the eurhythmics studies, and the improvisation skills to the analytical study of music literature. The student becomes performer, and the analysis becomes interpretation. The entire Jaques-Dalcroze experience matures into an art form—an art form unique unto itself having as its basis the fusion of movement and music into a moment-to-moment drama.

M. Jaques' goal was made clear by his closing statement and remains the goal of each Jaques-Dalcroze educator. "Once reached to live on its own, in a life regulated by its own laws, *Plastique Animee* will not simply blend in with music any more, but will combine with it as does the word in lyric drama." The expression of the musical analysis of a piece of music is not in words, diagrams, or charts, but rather in movement through space in a "plastic expression." The plastic expression is the actual visualization of the musical score in space. It captures every pitch, rhythm, dynamic, and agogic nuance, phrase and articulation. The music dictates the movement completely. The performers are plasticians; musicians who draw the music with their bodies in space and time, and remain completely free to join with the music in a most intimate and evocative manner.