

Laban, Rudolf (1879–1958)

By Franco, Susanne

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Abstract

Rudolf Laban was one of the leaders of Ausdruckstanz (“expressionist dance”) in Germany. He worked as a dancer, choreographer, writer, educator, movement analyst, ballet master, director of cultural institutions, and industrial consultant. During the years of World War I, he worked intensively with other dancers and artists in Switzerland on Monte Verità in Ascona and in Zurich. After the war, he returned to Germany and soon founded a network of schools and affiliated dance companies. He promoted movement choirs as a form of mass dance, and developed a system of movement notation. After the National Socialists came to power in 1933, he continued his leadership role until 1937. The following year he immigrated to Great Britain, where he spent the rest of his life, abandoning his artistic career and focussing on his theoretical research and on the educational implications of his ideas. His work became the basis for British Modern Educational Dance. His most important legacy, however, lies in his conceptual thinking on dance, including his system of writing movement by means of signs and symbols originally called Schrifftanz (“dance writing”) and later Kinetography or Labanotation.

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Training and Early Career

Laban's father was an officer of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and governor of the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a child Laban traveled extensively throughout these and surrounding regions. Impressed especially by the traditional Balkan dances and by the whirling Dervishes in Turkey, he abandoned his brief military career in 1900 to become an artist. With his first wife, the painter Martha Fricke, he moved to Munich and Paris, where he studied painting and had architectural ambitions. After the death of Fricke, he settled again in Munich with his second wife, the singer Maja Lederer. There he worked as a painter and illustrator, occasionally created designs for theaters and cabarets, and encountered the ideas of expressionist painters and composers. In Munich he also founded his first dance company and school in 1910. In 1913 he established a summer course in dance and movement at the School of the Arts at Monte Verità near Ascona, Switzerland, in collaboration with Lederer and Suzanne Perrottet, a former pupil of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze. Mary Wigman, another former student of Dalcroze who later became a major choreographer of *Ausdruckstanz*, arrived to study with Laban that first summer and soon became his assistant.

During World War I Laban moved to Zurich, where he established a new school and met artists from the Dada movement. He and his associates participated in a few Dadaist performances, but they did not share the nihilistic attitude of the Dadaists. Rather, Laban's search for a spiritual dimension brought him close to the *Ordo Templi Orientis*, an esoteric sect. Like many artists of his time, he was inspired by occult knowledge and practices such as Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, and Anthroposophy. Traces of the occult are evident in some of his writings and are visible in his drawings, which reveal his interests in what esoteric thinkers considered the sacred geometry and spiritual philosophies of Plato and Pythagoras.

Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism

After the war ended, Laban started a new life in Stuttgart with Dussia Bereska, a Russian dancer, who became his personal and professional partner, and the co-founder of a school and new dance company, the *Tanzbühne Laban* (Dance Stage Laban). Appointed as guest ballet master at the Mannheim National Theatre in 1921, Laban choreographed the *Bacchanale* for Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (Paris version) that year. The following year he and Bereska started a second school and company in Hamburg, the *Kammerbühne* (Chamber Dance Stage). Over the next few

years, students trained by Laban opened their own schools—by 1927 there were at least twenty-five in Central Europe—demonstrating Laban’s success as a pedagogue and the popularity of his approach.

Although he had experimented with the form of the movement choir on Monte Verità, Laban established his first ongoing movement choir in Hamburg, a group of lay dancers who regularly gathered to explore the potential of movement through improvisation and ritual-like celebrations. Movement choirs became very popular, playing a role in gaining social acceptance for male dancing and fostering a sense of community. Laban organized movement choirs of different sizes, with some resembling mass pageants that featured choreography for thousands of participants, notably the *Pageant of Craft and Trade* (1929) staged in Vienna. In 1924 there were movement choirs in twelve major Central European cities, and ten years later more than thirty movement choirs in Germany alone.

Through the 1920s Laban choreographed many works of his own, and he also published extensively on dance theory. His significant publications were *Die Welt des Tänzers* (1920), a philosophical investigation on dance; *Choreographie* (1926), an analysis of movement patterns and qualities; and *Schrifttanz* (1928), the earliest documentation of his notation system. Laban’s thinking tended to be visual, and he often expressed his ideas in diagrams, sketches, and drawings. In the late 1920s he also invested energy in the nascent film industry by writing several screenplays, most of which were never produced. What pushed him toward film was his interest in expanding the audience for modern dance and assuring the form a position as a high art and respectable social practice.

His vision of modern dance was influenced by the spiritual and expressive approach to art promoted by the Blue Rider group, particularly by Wassily Kandinsky’s theories about painting and the necessity of an inner motivation, which Laban had encountered during his days in Munich. Composer Arnold Schönberg’s revolutionary perspective on harmony also nourished his ideas about movement. Laban was more an inspired and enthusiastic pathfinder than a rigorous scholar, and often he did not elaborate his ideas, but rather left that task to his students and disciples. The result is that he did not generate a technique as much as a basic vocabulary of expressive movement and a series of exercises based on correspondences between spatial directions and dynamic qualities, which Laban called “scales.” Improvisation and creativity were as crucial as movement theory. He wanted to make dancers aware of internal movement impulse and the possibilities of movement in space. Thus he concentrated his movement analysis on the concepts of weight, time, space, and flow. His choreographed works combined abstract forms and organic movements in novel ways, producing a kind of living geometry. Using principles of contrast and counterpoint, synchrony and asynchrony between individuals and the group, Laban created in many genres from dance-pantomime to dance-theater and dance-opera.

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In 1930 Laban was appointed director of movement and dance at the State Theatres in Berlin, a role that included the position of ballet master at the Berlin State Opera. Here his new dance works were considered revolutionary, for he focussed on the ensemble rather than on the star dancers and he deemphasized pointework. As a choreographer he gained a new success at Bayreuth with a new version of the *Bacchanale* for Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (1930), and in Berlin he staged familiar dances from the repertory such as *Polovetsian Dances* from Borodin's *Prince Igor* (1930) and the *Gypsy Dance* from Bizet's *Carmen* (1932).

After the National Socialists came to power in 1933, Laban took a leading role in reorganizing German dance. He became the head of the German Dance Theatre, the German Master Studio for Dance, and the German Dance Festival. His career in Germany culminated with the commission of *Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude* (*Of the Spring Wind and the New Joy*), one of the artistic events planned for the opening of the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936. His choreography for more than one thousand participants, disseminated via notated scores, was rehearsed by movement choirs in thirty German cities. But after Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister for Enlightenment and Propaganda, attended the dress rehearsal, he canceled the performance, considering the approach overly "intellectual" for the Nazi state. Despite this disappointment and his health problems, Laban aspired to maintain his positions at the German Dance Theatre and the German Master Studio for Dance, but newly appointed officials at Goebbels' Ministry curtailed his leadership. He eventually left the country for Paris in 1937.

Laban always claimed to be an apolitical artist who never belonged to the Nazi Party and who simply attempted to work in a difficult context where his art was misunderstood. Many of his disciples perpetuated this version of history, both in oral and written form. In recent years, however, historians have pursued in-depth archival research and given a different account of Laban's relationship with the Nazi state. These historians emphasize that Laban's involvement with the regime provided him with remarkable professional opportunities and allowed him to play a crucial role in the transformation of German dance and body culture into a powerful tool for the diffusion of Nazi ideology. The cancellation of *Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude*, they contend, resulted from interpersonal conflicts within the Nazi bureaucracy, not from ideological differences.

Emigration and Career in Great Britain

After a brief stay in Paris, Laban arrived in Great Britain in 1938. Welcomed at Dartington Hall by his former students Kurt Jooss and Sigurd Leeder, he established a long and fruitful collaboration with his disciple Lisa Ullmann and focussed on his theoretical research. Together Laban and Ullmann founded the Art of Movement Studio in Manchester (1946), which later

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moved to Addlestone (Surrey) (1953), and then to London (1975), where it was renamed the Laban Centre and, after its merger with the Trinity College of Music, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance (2005).

Ullmann edited Laban's books in English: *Modern Educational Dance* (1948, largely revised by her in 1963), *The Mastery of Movement on the Stage* (1950, largely revised by her twice in 1960 and 1980), *Principles of Dance and Movement Notation* (1954), and *Choreutics* (1966), published posthumously. Ullmann also translated into English Laban's autobiography *A Life For Dance* (1935, 1975).

In collaboration with the management consultant Frederic C. Lawrence, Laban developed a new approach to movement observation and motion study applied to industrial work. They published *Effort* (1947), a study of the time taken to perform tasks in the workplace and the energy used. During his years in the United Kingdom, Laban also deepened his knowledge of psychoanalytic theories and explored the potential therapeutic use of his approach to dance and movement.

Legacy

Laban's conceptual thinking about dance is his greatest legacy. He designated choreosophy the philosophical and pedagogical investigations into dance; choreology (later known as Laban Movement Analysis) the grammar and syntax of the language of movement dealing with the outer form of movement and its mental and emotional content; and choreography (also known as Kinetography or Labanotation) the notation of movement and dance. Although Labanotation has never been universally adopted in the dance world, it remains an important tool. More widely influential are the fundamental categories of Laban's thinking. Among contemporary choreographers who have found Laban's ideas a provocation is William Forsythe, an American-born choreographer who has spent most of his career in Germany.

Given the limitations of prose for explaining the experience of movement, it fell to Laban's disciples to disseminate his ideas. Irmgard Bartenieff studied with Laban and Bereska in the mid-1920s in Germany, while Anne Hutchinson Guest studied with Laban and Leeder at Dartington Hall in the 1930s. In 1940 Guest helped found the Dance Notation Bureau in New York City, an organization dedicated to preserving choreographic works through Labanotation. Bartenieff became an important teacher there, and in 1978 she founded the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies to continue her research and teaching in the somatic applications of Laban's ideas. Today there are hundreds of certified movement analysts and notation specialists who have trained at the Laban Centre in London, the Dance Notation Bureau, the Institute of Movement Studies, and related programs.

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List of Selected Works

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For the Concert Stage

- *Tannhäuser-Bacchanal* (Paris version, 1921)
- *Epische Tanzfolge in vier Reigen/Die Geblendeten* (Epic Dance Sequence in Four Movements/The Deluded, 1921)
- *Der Schwingende Tempel* (Swinging Temple, 1922)
- *Faust Erlösung* (Faust's Salvation, 1922)
- *Drachentötere* (Dragon Slayer, 1923)
- *Josephslegende* (The Legend of Joseph, 1923)
- *Prometheus* (1923)
- *Gaukelei* (Illusions, 1923)
- *Don Juan* (1925)
- *Narrenspiegel* (The Fool's Mirror, 1926)
- *Die grünen Clowns* (The Green Clowns, 1927)
- *Die Nacht* (Night, 1927)
- *Ritterballett* (Ballet of the Knights, 1927)
- *Tannhäuser-Bacchanal* (1930)
- *Polovetsian Dances* from Borodin's *Prince Igor* (1930)
- *Gypsy Dance* from Bizet's *Carmen* (1932)

For Movement Choirs

- *Lichtwende* (Dawning Light, 1923)
- *Agamemnons Tod* (Agamemnon's Death, 1924)
- *Dämmernden Rhythmen* (Dawning Rhythms, 1925)
- *Titan* (1927)
- *Alltag und Fest* (Everyday and Festival, 1929)
- *Festzug des Handwerkes und Gewerbe* (Pageant of Craft and Trade, 1929)
- *Vom Tauwind und der neuen Freude* (Of the Spring Wind and the New Joy, 1936)

Selected Writings

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