Dance Notation: Commotion and Order

Systems of dance notation translate human movements into signs transcribed onto flatland, permanently preserving the visual instant. Design strategies for recording dance movements encompass many of the usual (nearly universal, nearly invisible) display techniques: small multiples, close text-figure integration, parallel sequences, details and panorama, a polyphony of layering and separation, data compression into content-focused dimensions, and avoidance of redundancy.

Now and again, the paper encoding reflects the refinement of dance itself—a flowing and graceful line embellished by disciplined gesture, a dynamic symmetry inherent to both individual and group proceedings. Moreover, some notation systems engender a visual elegance all their own, independently of motions described.10

Our understanding of the aesthetics of information is enriched by examining dance narratives and their visual texture. We come to appreciate how the underlying designs bring about and enable the joy growing from the comprehension of complexity, from finding pattern and form amidst commotion. “How beautiful it was then,” writes Italo Calvino about a time of radiant clarity in cosmic prehistory, “through that void, to draw lines and parabolas, pick out the precise point, the intersection between space and time when the event would spring forth, undeniable in the prominence of its glow…”

Inevitably the texts begin taxonomically, laying out fundamental movements in a visual dictionary of dance elements. For most notation methods, the design of choice is the small multiple—since the analytical task at hand is unswervingly comparative. Variations, sequences, and combinations naturally follow.


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Redrawn from Giambatista Dufort, *Trattato del Ballo Nobile* (Napoli, 1728), pp. 44, 55, 66, 68, 75, 77, 81, and 86.
On each double-page spread here, identical small-multiple diagrams are repeated, facilitating comparisons among dance steps. Descartes did the same thing in his *Principia*, repeating one particular diagram 11 times. Such a layout makes it unnecessary to flip from page to page in order to coordinate text with graphic. Words and pictures belong together, genuinely together. Separating text and graphic, even on the same page, usually requires encoding to link the separate elements. Within each spread above, for example, attentive readers must repeatedly jump back and forth between text and graphic, which are connected up by 22 letters. Alphabetical labels bestow a sequence on the illustrations, but otherwise are just arbitrary codes, unrelated to the dance movements depicted.

Multiplied consecutive images, below, clearly trace out motion, in these original diagrams from an earnestly scientific system of movement notation. The proliferating cones and plates perhaps help to envision the range of three-space action, although the substance might be forgotten amid witticisms provoked by the eccentric drawings.
Free play of dance and castanet music is disrupted above by a grid-prison of heavy lines, which clutter the information flow. These active stripes are visually disproportionate to the tiny sum of content conveyed; grids can be implicit or nearly transparent, as a revision below indicates. Note the floorplans of two-space paths of each dancer, and also parallel sequences with profiles of motion running with music:

De-gridding the procession above enhances the depiction of continuous movement, avoiding the arrested and disembodied quality found in some compilations of dance notation. Here the representations become tiny stick-figures, nonetheless preserving fine details:

Shown are redrawn extracts from the score "Caschicha" for the ballerina Fanny Elsler, in Friedrich Albert Zorn, Grammar of the Art of Dancing: Theoretical and Practical, translated by A. J. Shea (London, 1887; Boston, 1920), p. 273; and, below, pp. 31, 34. Read vertically to see the simultaneous actions of four dancers; horizontally for sequence.
New meaning to the idea of integration of word-and-image is given by these quick-witted drawings from Rameau's 1725 *Dancing Master*. Such innovations, restricted by the exacting horizontality of traditional typographic grids, are now easily—sometimes too easily—accomplished in computerized typesetting and display programs. Rameau furnishes an uncommon demonstration of the *informational*, rather than exclusively ornamental, use of swirling words.

Symbolic abstraction is the prevailing doctrine in modern notational systems, with meticulous codes assembled for thousands of movements in huge dictionaries. Shown are variations on the handstand, as surely must be obvious.


Albrecht Knutt, *Dictionary of Kinetography Laban* (Labanotation) (Estover, Plymouth, United Kingdom, 1979), II, p. 70.
The microscopic and abstracted encodings of contemporary dance notation—so fussy and clumsy and contrary to the wholeness of the substance—provoked the choreographic eye of Lincoln Kirstein of the New York City Ballet:

A desire to avoid oblivion is the natural possession of any artist. It is intensified in the dancer, who is far more under the threat of time than others. The invention of systems to preserve dance-steps have, since the early eighteenth century, shared a startling similarity. All these books contain interesting preface remarks on the structure of dancing. The graphs presented vary in fullness from the mere bird's-eye scratch-track of Feuillet, to the more musical and inclusive stenochoreography of Saint-Léon and Stepanov, but all are logically conceived and invitingly rendered, each equipped with provocative diagrams calculated to fascinate the speculative processes of a chess champion. And from a practical point of view, for work in determining the essential nature of old dances with any objective authority, they are all equally worthless. The systems, each of which may hold some slight improvement over its predecessor, are so difficult to decipher, even to initial mastery of their alphabet, that when students approach the problem of putting the letters together, or finally fusing the phrases to music, they feel triumphant if they can decipher even a single short solo enchainement. An analysis of style is not attempted, and the problem of combining solo variations with a corps de ballet to provide a chart of an entire ballet movement reduces the complexity of the problem to the apoplectic.\footnote{Lincoln Kirstein, 
*Ballet Alphabet* (New York, 1939), pp. 49–52, entry on "Notation (Stenochoreography or Dance-Script)." Kirstein describes Kellom Tomlinson's 1735 *Art of Dancing* (which we have seen here and in Chapter 1) as "splendid... the finest representations of the Minuet to be found are rendered more complete by a series of careful portrait engravings of dancers moving on the floor-track of a choreographic short-hand."}

This profound and informed frustration reflects the essential dilemma of narrative designs—how to reduce the magnificent four-dimensional reality of time and three-space into little marks on paper flatlands. Perhaps one day high-resolution computer visualizations, which combine slightly abstracted representations along with a dynamic and animated flatland, will lighten the laborious complexity of encodings—and yet still capture some worthwhile part of the sublety of the human itinerary.