

Dalcroze Eurhythmics and the Quick Reaction Exercises

By Terry Boyarsky

Dalcroze Eurhythmics is multifaceted musical philosophy and method that educates through movement, refining the body as an instrument of rhythm and pitch.

“The best method of teaching is that which . . . offers the pupil a problem which neither his memory nor his instinct for imitation can help him to solve.”¹

Dalcroze Eurhythmics is multifaceted musical philosophy and method that educates through movement, refining the body as an instrument of rhythm and pitch. In the Dalcroze class, the music is improvised, so listening will be fresh, the mind stays alert, and the body is poised. The physical expression of note value, rhythm pattern, meter, pitch, nuance, phrase, accent, and emotion will “transform the whole organism into what might be called an inner ear.”² One aspect of Dalcroze is the Quick Reaction Exercise, which uses a cue to prompt students to perform a specific musical behavior. These exercises develop musical intelligence by improving response time, instantaneously connecting mind and body, and giving the student a direct feel for musical gesture.

Émile Jaques-Dalcroze’s Musical Approach

Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950) was a professor of harmony at the Geneva Conservatory who was absorbed in questions about how man can fulfill his individual potential and live a balanced life. Music, for him, was the best way to reconcile mind, body, spirit, and emotion: “For it is in music that tones, timbres, and rhythms, nuances, pauses, accents, tempi, and all the physical and dynamic phenomena of the world of sound, find themselves brought into conjunction, arranged, superimposed, measured, and shaped by the power of creative thought.”³

He noticed that while his students were able to complete written harmony and theory assignments, they

could not hear, appreciate, or perform them. Their deficiencies pointed to a common denominator: lack of rhythm, which meant lack of relationship between the ear, emotions, and body, through which all communication eventually comes. For the rest of his life (even after he was excused from the conservatory for having his students move around the classroom barefoot!) he experimented with how to teach musicality. He composed, created events and spectacles, and wrote extensively about his experiences.

Gradually, his methods were arranged into three interrelated parts: *eurhythmics*, “good rhythm,” which uses movement to study rhythm; *solfège*, the study of pitch relationships; and *improvisation*, the synthesis of good rhythm and tonal relationships. The work had an enormous impact on musicians, composers, dancers, choreographers, actors, and left a legacy of ideas and practical examples. Today, Dalcroze teachers are trained in movement, harmony, solfège, piano improvisation, and pedagogy.

Eurhythmics

Dalcroze aspired to “a system of musical education in which the body itself shall play the role of intermediary between sounds and thought, becoming in time the direct medium of our feelings—aural sensations being reinforced by all those called into being by the multiple agents of vibration and resonance lying dormant in our bodies; the breathing system punctuating the rhythms of words, muscular dynamics interpreting those dictated by musical emotions.”⁴ He realized that it wasn’t enough to train fingers, eyes and ears; the entire organism must participate. Presence, alertness, openness to change, flexibility, experience, ability to activate and calm one’s nervous system at will, an intimate knowledge

of and good relationship to one's own instrument (the body) have to be combined with music.

An essential idea in eurhythmics is that a musician must be able to listen and respond seamlessly and musically on his or her feet. Quick Reaction Exercises were developed to address the temporal and spacial aspects of behavior: anticipation, organization, coordination, and follow-through. They increase learning by activating, focusing, and creating a fluidity of attention and a plasticity in the body. There are unlimited possibilities for creating new, imaginative games that can enhance flexibility, receptivity, and sensitivity. Although there is an oral tradition of exercises that are commonly used, it is incumbent upon the Dalcroze teacher to create his or her own curriculum and tailor work to the specific student or group.

Musical Prompts

Dalcroze called this kind of training "musical prompts." These are "regarded as the paradigm of traditional rhythmic exercises."⁵ How do they work? There is a prearranged signal that instructs the student to change some action at a specific moment in time, a previously determined beat, or as soon as possible after realization. The signal can be auditory (pitch, harmony, or percussion), visual, or tactile, and the response is a motor reaction (movement or immobility) that keeps the pupil engaged, flexible, and awake. It demonstrates effectively which student has understood and processed the material.

A classic example of this kind of work uses a vocal signal. Dalcroze called it *les hop musicaux*. When I studied at the Dalcroze School of Music in New York City with Hilda Schuster, she explained that there was "hopp," which meant change and "heep" and "hupp," which could mean "change back" or "go on to the next series." However you set it up, the signals must be clear and predetermined. You can also say, "go" or "change." Often, with elementary school children, I use "boo" so my

voice can cut through the piano and the inevitable laughter.

Dalcroze discussed the necessity of being able to repress movement as well as accentuate it. A basic game for young children involves stopping and starting on cue. This sets in motion a primary correspondence between sound versus silence and movement versus stillness. It also isolates certain elements, so the student must manage his or her own distractibility, control his start and stop reflexes, and cope with extraneous tendencies and reactions.

Quick Reaction Exercises Using Aural Commands

I often use this preliminary exercise as a warm-up. Improvising music on the piano in different tempi and locomotor rhythms (see illustration 1). I ask the children to follow. If I say "boo," they must do that particular locomotor movement backwards. Any pupil who misses the signal will have a little surprise when he continues marching forward while everyone else is going backwards! The conditions themselves teach the student to be more conscious. I often combine this exercise with stop and start, so if I say "boo" when they are stopped they have to remember which direction they were going when the music resumes.

Exploring the element of pitch patterns, I describe the shy cuckoo hiding in the trees who sings a descending third ("like this"); we are going to search for him in the forest. The only way to find the cuckoo is to listen for his song. I play walking (running, skipping, tiptoe, giant step) music and say, "If you hear the cuckoo, point high up in the tree." The next step is to contrast high and low: sometimes the cuckoo hides under a bush. "If you hear his song sounding low, point under an imaginary bush." Students love the increasing challenge, and I can observe whether they are ready for further challenges. In another variation, the children sing along with the cuckoo's song, or echo it one beat later. This is a wonderful task, especially if the cuckoo's song keeps

appearing in another key! Quick Reaction Exercises are meant to provide enough pressure to enter the child into a little musical puzzle; they should not induce anxiety or competition.

The verbal command can be used for as many events and variations as you can identify and contrast: dynamic, harmonic, melodic, metric, timbre, and pitch. One example of moving a rhythm from one body part to another is to ask students to march (quarter notes) with their feet and clap eighth notes. On the signal, they switch (tip toe eighths, clap quarters). Similarly, the class can practice moving a rhythm from one "mode" to another by singing a familiar tune (words or solfège) and at the signal, stepping the rhythm of the song. Or, on the first cue sing it silently, on the second cue, resume singing (having sung internally in the silence).

Locomotor Rhythms







	Giant Step
	March
	Tip Toe
	Triolet
	Run
	Skip or Gallop

Illustration 1

The ideal is that students would be at a level to understand a musical signal. The prompt could be: “when you hear a Neapolitan chord stop everything and kneel.” Or, after we learn two different rhythms, I play one, class steps the other. If I change rhythms, the class has to change to the other one. The change must be accomplished as soon as you recognize it, but not in such a way as to upset your balance or composure. Often there will be a measure of overlap, which creates an interesting internal friction, that takes place in a fraction of a second, and certainly grows your synapses!

I use a grace note for “jump” and a trill for “turn” (twirl around once), so that all responses are executed smoothly in the context of listening and moving. Sometimes, I set up a call/response that can be randomly used to keep students processing and listening: I chant, “Girls? Are you ready?” and they (hopefully) answer, “Yes! yes! yes!” simultaneously nodding and clapping three times. Then, “Boys?” then “Kids? (see illustration 2). Children appreciate the call to vigilance; they prefer it to chaos, and rhythm is a fun, efficient way to get it.

Using Quick Reaction Exercises for Children With Disabilities

This winter I was artist-in-residence in a school for children with multiple disabilities, ages 6–22. Many of them were in wheelchairs, some

were blind, and many were emotionally disturbed. I realized there were ways these children could move but were not usually asked to, especially in response to music. One day, I suddenly “disappeared” while playing a familiar song on the recorder. I asked them to point, turn their heads, and look with their eyes in the direction of the music. Our room provided many hiding places and levels, and I continually moved about so that every repetition of the song came from a different direction. Their necks and arms got quite a workout and so did I. It was a simple game, yet they took so much delight in it!

Adding Visual Commands

The signals don’t have to be verbal, and the activity can even be set up so that that one or more students will give the cue. It could be a student who freezes in a specific posture. It could be a sign that someone holds up. Turning the lights off could signal an individual posture or a group statue. Different colored fabrics could cue different rhythms (and then you could alter with the sequence).

Sometimes I say, “If I play triplets, soar in curvy lines and if I play skipping music, skip in straight lines.” This could be accomplished instead by having a student draw straight or curvy lines on the blackboard with the piano improvisation following the visual prompts. This creates an ongoing interaction between class, leader, and musical underpinnings. My usual role

as teacher or director changes to facilitator and collaborator.

Working Without a Piano

Frequently, I do not have access to a piano. For the music teacher who is not comfortable improvising on the piano, there are many ways to create Quick Reaction Exercises in the Orff context. The first question is, what musical element do you want students to understand? You can begin with opposites (high/low, loud/soft, staccato/legato, major/minor, and so on). Choose which musical variables to explore in order to “enable pupils to demonstrate that they have internalized their grasp of the tempo that they have absorbed into their muscles and their inner ear the dynamics of a rhythm or the curve of a melodic phrase.”⁶

This spring I taught a group of fifth graders a Greek song and dance in 5/4. The bordun was tricky, so I wrote four different patterns on the board out of order. As I pointed to each pattern they played it in the air, memorizing the physical scheme. Students then took turns being conductor; they pointed to the written patterns in any order they chose, keeping the meter intact, while the others played it on barred instruments. When they became comfortable with each pattern, we decided which pattern went with which part of the song. After the Quick Reaction Exercise, their facility was greatly improved because they were playing by ear and by heart, from bodily memory.

Focus chant

Fast! with attitude & swing!

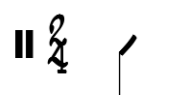
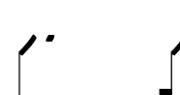




<p>Call:</p>  <p>Girls? Boys? Kids?</p>	 <p>are are are</p>	 <p>you you you</p>	 <p>rea - dy? rea - dy? rea - dy?</p>	<p>Response (nod, clap, chant):</p>  <p>Yes! Yes! Yes!</p>	 <p>Yes! Yes! Yes!</p>
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Illustration 2

To learn the melody on recorder, I divided the group in half: one half played the melody out loud and the other half just fingered it. At the signal, they switched (audible versus mute). I repeated the exercise with recorders versus singers; this time only one group was heard at a time, depending on whom I pointed to. You can imagine how attentive one must be knowing that your entrance could be on any given downbeat. A word about timing the signal: I set up in advance that the change only comes on the downbeat; if you get the signal before, "Finish out your measure!" I gave the signal on beat two to give students time to digest the information, prepare for the change, and organize their bodies to perform the task.

Here are some ways to use proverb rhythms. Learn a proverb, passing it around the circle in strict meter. On a signal, change from chanting to clapping; and on the next signal change back to chanting. Or, have the class perform the proverb as an ostinato. At the signal, say it inside, keeping strict rhythm. Next signal, say it out loud again.

Decide on four different "modes" of performance and divide the class into four groups: (1) clap, (2) chant,

(3) improvise on barred instruments, (4) step rhythm. At signal, move on to the next "mode." This can be done by setting up actual stations in the room, or it can be done in place as long as students remember the sequence of modes.

Related to the example of two contrasting rhythms above, find two proverbs with rhythms that complement each other. They can be the same meter—they can fill in the silences of the other rhythm. At the signal, change proverbs! Here are some contrasting proverbs, one crucic and the other anacrusic (see illustration 3):

Dalcroze wrote: "Sensibility is closely allied to sensation. To be a sensitive musician, it is necessary to appreciate the nuance not only of pitch, but of the dynamic energy and the varying rapidity of the movements. These nuances must be appreciated not only by the ear but also by the muscular sense."⁷ Eurhythmics Quick Reaction exercises interweave the ear, eye, mind and body, as movement and sound come to life. Students are transformed from playing music to being musicians. Create your own Quick Reaction games and help your students become better listeners, inventors and performers.

Paired Proverbs

The fool speaks, the wise man listens.

Talk sense to a fool and he calls you foolish.

Ac - tions speak loud - er than words.

A kind word is like a Springday.

Illustration 3

Endnotes

- ¹ Emile, Jaques-Dalcroze. *Rhythm, Music and Education*. (Dalcroze Society, 1973), 27.
- ² Marie-Laure, Bachmann. *Dalcroze Today: An Education Through and Into Music*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 17.
- ³ Marie-Laure, Bachmann. *Dalcroze Today: An Education Through and Into Music*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 12–13.
- ⁴ Emile Jaques-Dalcroze. *Rhythm, Music and Education*. (Dalcroze Society, 1973), 4.
- ⁵ Bachmann, 115.
- ⁶ Bachmann, 128.
- ⁷ Jaques-Dalcroze, 51.

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