

Interview with Virág Dezső about musicality of movement (18 October 2023)

CR: thank you for having me. I would, as I already explained, like to ask you how you developed the musicality of movement approach. But first, a bit about yourself, your background and how that led you towards teaching Musicality of Movement.

VD: About my background. If I look back, then I had always fascination for movement. My desire was to become a dancer. And I became a dancer. I also wanted to play music, more specifically, I wanted to play piano, but then I was chosen, by my school, back in Hungary, to play the violin. So, I did follow the eight years classes and the extra years of practise. But then I had to choose, and I have chosen dance, and then I put the violin down.

During my dancer's years, I was looking for always more than what dance could offer me with its aesthetics. And I found mime on the way, more specifically, modern mime, Dutch modern mime, following the curriculum of MAPA (the Moving Academy for Performing Arts) in the end of the 90s. I completely got inspired by it. And besides that, I was always fascinated by improvisation, so following courses of Julyan Hamilton, I got deeper and deeper in it and even started to use it as a performing form, not only as a research process.

Um, and then? Came a turning point in my life. When I left Hungary I and came to the Netherlands. And continued working with the dance improvisation projects, including musicians. And musicians on stage. Um, musicians more as a physical performer not only as a side standing accompanying musician, and it became very clear that they always need guidance. In their stage presence in their stage. But forming quality, the understanding of what a body can mean. And actually, when I was already teaching at the Conservatory in Amsterdam, became much more clear. To develop something specific for instrumentalists. Because I've been teaching physical acting based on mime. For singers and instrumentalists joined the classes, yes, and after a while the group became big. Too big, so it had to come to a separation. And then I had a year, a test year working on a separate group for musicians, for the instrumentalists. And the feedback was so positive that from the next academic year they put it in the electives and then the programme became the musicality of movement subject. Um, so actually. And. Yes, now I am already for continuing with it.

CR: So this is already a reply on how you developed the musicality of movement.

CR: so, just one step back if we can, because of course there was a moment, where you decided, uhm, you said musicians on stage need guidance, so what was the moment when you decided, hmm, 'I can give them some guidance, or did that just naturally come into the process of rehearsing or improvising? So, how did that go?

VD: It was not a switching point, but it was gradually growing. On a very natural way, because in the projects there were always moments for feedback, reflection, help, always stepping in to give suggestions, some guidance and the very clear, let's say, not even decision point, to make it official, was uhm, in the conservatory. Because I was already busy with it before, also giving classes in MAPA and uhm, also abroad, via MAPA, working with mixed groups but including always musicians and then I was also looking for the name that could fit the best and when the need was very clear in the conservatory in Amsterdam, then I decided to specifically focus on musicianship and instrumentalists and clear up the

program I had already. So, it suits the best their needs. And then also the name came let's say in a very natural way and it refers to the term used by Etienne Decroux in corporal mime, which fits very nicely and I just stuck to it.

CR: Would you now like to elaborate a bit on the difference between the needs of singers and instrumentalists? What made you separate those courses?

VD: Although I use the same basics, the same principles, the same approach, the end goal is not the same. With singers it is clearly towards acting, that's why it's called physical acting, and with musicians the performativity is not the same as acting. And even if we reach the point of clear performative qualities, it is more about uhm, ensemble work and opening up the senses and finding a way to come to the sensation of musicality through a very kinesthetic experience. And opening up intuitive work, intuitive allowance, but creating skills in order to be able to create trust and use them. And therefore, I mix the very clear given designed exercises with more improvisative or improvisation-based exercises with a frame.

CR: Yes, so, the musicality of movement, as you work with that, what are the main pillars that you use in your lessons?

VD: Yes, so, the musicality of movement approach is also the way I work with singers. For singers it's a two-hour lesson, I'm talking about the weekly regular lessons, and for instrumentalists the musicality of movement is a one-and-a-half-hour weekly lesson. The good thing is that the program allows to be flexible. For example, in Hungary I teach in blocks, so I do twenty-six hours in a workshop block, which is very intense, meaning that I work with them from the morning until five, six, so, the whole day and then it allows to have different exercises, uhm reaching the same questions and the same points, like in a weekly lesson. So, the structures can be different, so it's a matter of choice.

It is important that it starts always with discovering body awareness and it's always focussing on self, it starts with looking in and get acquainted with the own sensations in the body, opening up, getting to know about the articulation possibilities, muscle tonality, the relation between the muscle tonicity and the tonality it creates. So, the different characteristics it can communicate and it is important that we immediately work with the relation to breathing, so that is essential and then from the individual focussing discoveries, we open up to work with a partner, with one partner, with two partners, a group. It means it opens up also the concentration, the focussing and the sensation of the self, the body itself and the space. Relation to space.

CR: so, when you start to work with others, it's directly also about space.

VD: Yes. The space starts with the discovery of body awareness. Because in the exercises, immediately I connect the discovery of taken directions, which deals with the principles of 'from where to where the movement travels in space' and it can be the smallest movement. It's very important that the awareness of the starting point and the end point, like the smallest phrase, is there. Because the beginning already defines what is coming after. And the awareness of arrival, finishing and ending something is very important, in order to let go. So that's actually, from the very moment, a very important aspect to work on. Because of course building body awareness includes all the basics. Like in every movement based technique, which is the balance, the muscle sensation, the contraction-release, coordination, feeling symmetry, working with left-right, working with cross connection and etcetera...

Those are basics and you can find it in order techniques as well. And other methods because it is there also how to build up the posture. How to build up the posture and alignment immediately deals with direction also. And therefore there are specific aspects coming in, which is different from other techniques, and the main importance is, and that that makes it different, is the main difference from the very start, I immediately refer it to stage presence.

What can it communicate? Externally and always referring to that it also feeds back and the feeding back is important because the sensation has to be there. And learning about the sensation because that will be a very reliable, essential part is and then knowing that that experience, that essential sensation, can communicate something to the outer world.

So it's never an empty gymnastics exercise, but it immediately contains the...let's call it poetic meaning, or poetic side. And even the most abstract movement can trigger a certain association. In an audience, yes. And that's what needs to be accepted. Yes, accepted and also felt that it exists. Yes. And that's therefore breathing is very important. Yeah.

So then it comes the breathing, awareness of breathing and the freedom in breathing, which means that it relates to the needs of the body. And how the body acts at the moment and to allow the discovery to happen, and working with the principle of focus, focus lines, which is not only the eyes but several elements in the body.

And the working with neutrality as a base and from there working with the idea of ...uuh... transforming, transformation and or switch. But those are very important principles and to switch also the let go. Is connected and part of it.

Yes, and therefore it also, from the very beginning, deals with physical bodily development related to a mental development. So that makes it also complex in a way.

But I always try to find the way to keep it simple. And to have a simple access too. So, in that sense I am very practical, although the approach is, considering the body. As a holistic organism. And that's what we need to also consider. So I never call it a musicality of movement, we don't call the body as an instrument, like in dance.

CR: Yes, I yeah, I understand. Yes, it's it's that is what I find one of the most interesting aspects. And that's why I think it's so good is that it's what as you say that it's always about communication with an audience, yes, it is about performative skills. I mentioned to someone, and she said 'I did Alexander Technique. It was great until the moment I step on stage, then it is gone.' So that is what is so good about musicality of movement: that it actually always has meaning. I mean, even if you cannot explain what the meaning is directly...

VD: yes, so, and that's exactly why I was looking for a way to give a quick, reasonably quick access to a toolbox. Which can help not only theatrical, more performative performances, but even very traditional classical interpretation as a concert form. Yes, for musicians and, you could also ask, OK, what is the difference between then mime and musicality of movement?

And I would say musicality of movement contains a lot of different kinds of exercises from different origins and over the years I was selecting always the most suitable ones. And the most helpful for musicians. On a certain needs. So it's a mix. Also including different kind of mime exercises I've learnt over the years from different teachers and I also transformed that adapted them to specific needs I figured out myself working with musicians.

So it is tailor made, yes, and the main goal that it needs to be effective within a short period and it needs to give an insight so they can take it on and they can keep working with it and develop it and use it in practise on stage. As soon as it is practised.

CR: I suppose that in that sense there is no difference between the musicality of movement for instrumentalists and the physical acting for singers.

VD: No, that is the same; that is the same, only for singers there are additional exercises. And the additional exercises have much more focus on the quality of acting. And it means that the quality of acting comes in also including working with text or including singing. The dramatic meaning in the body. Um, emotions...

The different physical characters. Which are not primarily for musicians but for singers, it's very important. So it is integrating much more, it is a much broader programme, because of that.

CR: Well, I think we have a lot here already.

Just for me....do you have any books or articles that I need to read?

VD: That is not easy...but, I use the basic principles from the crew. So that helps a lot. You understand the different terms concerning the musicality in movement as he describes it in relation to space. The articulation techniques of the body. Jacques Lecoq. A little bit of Laban. And a little bit of the very bit of somatics. But I'm more practical than that. About improvisation actually and also as basics read about biomechanics or anatomy. Any body and movement related books can help us a bit because it's good to know about how the body functions. Yes, of course. And then from there it grows to a poetic medium.

CR: Yes, yeah, I was. I was reading a book about Dalcroze method. Yes, it's also, we also worked with improvisation. I found a book which is called Expressive Singing. Maybe you know this as well... some things I found quite interesting. And because I am also thinking about how to integrate the work of musicality of movement more in the singing lessons, there are things that are very interesting, but I also find it somewhat limited. It's also about me learning music and I think it takes a different path.

CR: What do you think about Dalcroze, did you read about it?

VD: Yes, and interestingly enough, I learned about Dasartes and Dalcroze in dance history, when I was studying dance. So I'm not that much into. Um. It's good to know about it. But what I'm looking for is always immediately reflecting on what I experience with the actual exchange with students and colleagues. And because of the the practical knowledge I collected over the years, I can design exercises, which can immediately trigger or support, and then also, in the follow up, working with students, working with singers. Comes only in the third year. Where I am clearly working on singing and the relation to action. And I say action because it is not only about movement. But activity being active, standing still is also an activity which comes already at the beginning.

But step by step, by opening up and finding the relation between more movement, moving and breathing, which becomes voice in a playful way through in improvisative exercises, comes to singing, more and more.

And two ways: either working on given repertoire, or, working on improvisative singing. And. Also goes on two ways the work. Because either we go on improvisation meaning also creating in the moment, which also requires already a dramatic understanding and dramaturgical understanding of a build up, off

a scene or follow up off scenes. And the other direction is working on set material like the director works, within a production. There, the requirement is to actually work on physical memory and still use the intuitive and impulsive quality, in order to find the relation between presence, the activity, the action, or movement, and the music itself; meaning the phrasing of the music, and therefore the phrasing the music, singing and phrasing the action itself, becomes the main focus.

CR: and in your lessons you do that quite late... Starting in year three...

VD: yes, it needs time to develop the physicality. The bodily and the physical awareness as a reliable toolbox? So then, when the singing technique is already further so they don't need to be afraid or put emphasis on concentration and focus, then it comes much more naturally, the combination of the two. Until then, the work on actually developing the sensation and the allowance of free breathing. And then also just playing with sound, with voice, and finding the relation to the playful movements with partners within a given frame, so it is developing, developing, but it has to come to a certain level.. where both are on a level that they don't destruct each other exactly each other, but they come to a supportive level. And I rather do it later because of also building up confidence and not to be confronted with, let's say, being destructive with singing.

CR: It's very interesting because I think, in my experience, when I do some of the exercises we do or I take some things of the mime, that I do, and sometimes when I feel that someone in the lesson just in the singing lesson, gets a bit stuck, I use an exercise, and, either let them do it before or let them do it and sing. And sometimes it really frees them up. And then it enhances their confidence because they experience: 'ah so I can do this!'. So, I think, a lot of these exercises can be like a part of the technique.

VD: Yeah, that's a very good point and that's a good point from your point of view, as a vocal teacher. Because what I experience from the from my point of view. That when it when I ask too difficult combination here then they lose the connection to their intuitive skilled body awareness or physical awareness because they want to focus on singing, as that is priority. Uh, that's good. So therefore, not to create this connection, then I bring in more simple vocal exercises in combination with physical acting on the movement.

CR: Yes, well, usually I also do it with simple exercises. But sometimes it can just help them. It can help them a lot. And then they will be able to them in more difficult exercises or even during the repertoire. This will, I really think that there is too much focus on this production here (in larynx, mouth etc). OK, up to a certain point it's needed, but I think we lose a lot of time just working on technique, so that's why I am looking for ways to use certain elements in my singing lessons. Collect the elements that I can use in my singing classes or in group lessons which then are more focused towards singing so that they are not then physical acting classes. But they can be more directed towards singing?

VD: Yeah, yeah, that's a very good idea. And I think the balance between having physically integrated vocal technique and having the musicality of movement class separately, is a very good combination. And also in addition to the last thoughts I shared. So, the other way, when the physical performative work gets in the way, let's say, when there is an exercise which is very much overwhelming and can be so freeing, that it takes away emotionally from being careful with vocal production, then it can be also harmful even. Yes, because. Realising. That someone went too far on the wrong way, then it's already too late. So therefore I also need to really be careful in the lessons, yes.

What is the combination of the group? What is the level? Who is already so far? Who is not yet? Uh, sometimes I need to give individual adjustments. To keep them always on their best here.

CR: So, I want to ask you, what can I add from your perspective of how you know me? What can I add?

VD: So I think what you can add is, to create a specific addition, as a vocal teacher. Which makes it more specific for a very clear target group. That group is professional singers, or let's say on the way to become professional singers. Because the combination of the knowledge, in vocal technique and how musicality of movement can be the supportive element in that. That is s very important. Of course I am not the vocal expert. So my point of view is always from the dramatic physical aspect on stage. Another supporting element, yeah, but then from your point of view you can also turn it around. And say, OK, my point of view is the vocal improvement. And also as a stage performer. I know then what elements and how can be supportive and where can it be. The strength and where can it be richer that's what you could work out, actually.

CR: That was actually my objective. Because I really know this from my own singing. Especially now that I get older, that is when I really use the elements of the mime training and musicality of movement, it helps me a lot. It gives me so much more. Is and and also confidence, you know, like. So so it's it's really. For me, that is when I look at myself. That's quite striking. Actually, so I think that that was also my idea, taking, the elements and using them with a slightly different objective, but I think the overall, of course the overall objectives of musicality of movement still stand.

And the last thing: They have difficulties finding a supervisor for me. OK and they they came with with Jed Wenz but he is about historically informed performance...do you know him?

VD: Yes I know him, because I know him from the Conservatory of Amsterdam. He was a teacher of Dorota. So he was the teacher of Dorota there. He also was teaching there the historic gestures. No longer. But he also visited the performance of Dorota and her ensemble in the V&D. Unfortunately, when he came to watch, Dorota was sick, so I had to jump in. OK, I took over her places in it in order to let the whole thing run through. Yeah. And then I played her places without playing traverso. Um, but then the interesting feedback he gave is that he can see the full embodiment in my presence and my movements. That is exactly what I am very eager to reach with students. That they come to embodiment. So, their performance becomes very authentic, very organic. Intuitive but skillful.

CR: So he so he knows you. He doesn't know that I'm also connected with you and MAPA. I will send him an e-mail this week, and let us see, if he if he wants to read my work. I don't know exactly what the supervisors work is. But. I think he he meant to supervise your thesis. No. Yes. Research report, research report. Yes, well. Let's see and. If not, if he thinks it's not his thing, we will look further and I will also ask you for ideas. And then I suppose that's also what they said. Then they will have to find someone outside Conservatory.

VD: Which is not easy. It's not an easy topic or field area, because I don't think that there are many experts. In it so everybody works from its own. Little segment, little background. There are not that many, but I don't, I don't know here anyone who is really very qualified.... It has to be physical, yes, it

has to be physical. Nothing related to any mental approach. No, psychology, please. No semantics, because that also goes on a different way. Mime is the closest.

I also want to add that in musicality of movement it doesn't deal with aesthetics, it doesn't deal with any moral issues, it's very, very practical and because of staying, very practical, I find it very helpful. That's also what I get in feedback from the students. They are very pleased with the result they experience themselves. So that's very important because when aesthetic stays in the way, or style, that's when I find it takes a wrong turn.

Tot hier So that's why in the improvisation. Ah. I am looking for. The. The. The way they can connect to themselves and discover their own vocabulary. And enrich it on their own way. Yeah, and and the combination with the given exercises, which creates more the awareness. Um. They come to more and more clarity. Without judgement, yes. Without comparison, and without trying to copy something and exactly. And then they learn. Also with the exercises of observation and reflection. They learn to look on the objective A but works but less and not about what I like or what you're. Not, yeah, exactly. So yes, that's also important part. In the whole build up in the exercises. But then we can talk about it later, yes. We will talk about that later, yes. This is very clear. Thank you.