

Movement and Balance - Allegro

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In previous articles Enrico Cecchetti's theory of port de bras was explored in relation to some of his adage and pirouette exercises. This article seeks to examine the value of these principles when applied to steps of elevation.

Cyril Beaumont and Stanislas Idzikowski quote Blasis saying 'When the arms accompany each movement of the body with exactitude, they may be compared to the frame that sets off a picture. But if the frame is so constructed as to not suit the painting, however well executed the latter may be, its whole effect is unquestionably destroyed'(1977, 28). It is logical therefore that in all Cecchetti's exercises, the amount of arm movement applied is directly related to the height of elevation required. For example, the arms remain en bas in most small sur place jumps but open to demi-seconde with the swish outwards of assemblés and jetés. The higher the jump the more the arms may, if correctly co-ordinated with each other and the plié, assist the 'take off' and landing of each step.

To understand the way in which the arms may help jumps students first need to appreciate the simple mechanics of a swinging movement. A 'swing' has weight on the downward action and suspension at the top of the movement. To use the arms to advantage in a jump they need to give in to gravity when lowering, so as to gather momentum when pushing away from the floor to carry the body into the air.

An interesting way for students to learn this basic principle is to ask them to fold their arms and jump forward as far as possible pushing off and landing on, both feet. Once this has been done a few times to establish the average distance travelled, the students may be allowed to use their arms to assist the movement. They will automatically lift the arms up as they bend and swing them down and forward as they push away from the floor. This propulsion will take them far further forward than it was possible to go without the aid of their arms. However as Richard Glasstone explains 'once the arms are brought into play, absolute exact timing and co-ordination become paramount' (1997, 843) It is the varying speeds with which the body is used in relation to gravity that provide the contrasting qualities in any sequence, providing a balance of energy and a contrast in dynamics.

A simple example of this is temps levé chassé pas de bourrée. The opening to 2nd position with the chassé can not be achieved if the arms are not first lifted swiftly to the 5th en avant, on the 'and' with the temps levé. To help young students pass the en avant position on time, a rise in 5th can be substituted for the temp levé. This way the student is not attempting to jump, or transfer weight whilst concentrating on rhythm and

co-ordination. The lowering of the arms to 5th en bas during the pas de bourrée usually happen quite naturally.

Indeed the way in which the arms are lowered after a movement can be misunderstood. In the effort to use the arms and legs in unison students may conscientiously lower the arms too quickly, causing a jerky effect. This fault is easily rectified when the 'landing' is thought of as a longer process than just the first contact of the feet with the floor. The arms may still be in descent as the plié of the landing is executed. In fact, their lowering should be delayed in order to use the 'swing' or weight of gravity into the next step. This may be observed when executing demi-contretemps assemblé élané in a series. All too often one sees a student lowering the arms very quickly after the assemblé thereby stopping the flow of movement which would otherwise help them into the next jump. To reach 5th en bas 'at the top' of the demi-contretemps the lowering of the arms from 2nd position of the preceding assemblé, need to be fractionally delayed so as to pick up momentum and impetuous into the demi-contretemps.

Assemblé, temps levé, assemblé, grand temps levé is another case in point. There are four steps to this sequence, the use of arms appearing quite straight forward. They open to demi-seconde on the assemblé, remain en bas on the temps levé, move to demi-seconde again on the assemblé coupé, then take 3rd port de bras on the grand temp levé. However, the subtle way in which these simple arm movements are timed are vital to the dynamics of the exercise.

Only when the dancer carefully co-ordinates the use of arms during the second and third jumps, can the highlight of the fourth be established. It is during the landing of the temps levé that the arms open slightly up to the side, delaying the downward action during the assemblé coupé so as to gather momentum through 5th en bas with the 'take off' for the grand temps levé. The word 'through' is underlined here in order to suggest movement, as opposed to lifting the arms from the static position of 5th en bas which would provide no impetus at all. Indeed the arms during the last step could be described as 'swinging' down through 5th en bas, up through 5th en avant, to suspend en haut at the top of the jump where the dancer 'hovers' for a moment to give the illusion of 'standing' in the air before descent.

When considering the sequences described above the value of the 'linking step' becomes apparent. The use of arms in these steps particularly, needs subtlety. Linking or transition steps and the arm movements that accompany them should be unobtrusive so as to draw attention to the highlights of a sequence. As Bruhn and Moore explain 'although the mechanics of transition steps should not be obvious to the audience, they are an important part of the dancer's education, and must be thoroughly mastered even though later they must often be deliberately subordinated' (2005, 27). In the assemblé, temps levé, assemblé grand temps levé exercise above the observer should only be aware of an easy bouncing quality of movement with a sudden 'explosion' of elevation at the end of the enchainement, an illusion that can only be accomplished with considered co-ordination and timing.

Another example of the importance of the linking step comes in Cecchetti's Tuesday enchainement pas de bourrée couru, dégagé, fouetté, jeté, pas de chat. The highlight here is the pas de chat, but without co-ordination of the arms on the jeté preceding it, the exercise can appear rather disjointed. During the initial dégagé and fouetté the arms remain in the pas de chat position with the body bent well forward over the dégagé. It is during the jeté, that the arms begin their descent so as to anticipate the subsequent step. Gravity brings them down through en bas during the landing of the jeté from which they 'swing' up to the other side into the pas de chat'.

Many students when attempting this exercise for the first time, substitute a step for the jeté, thinking either consciously or unconsciously, it will help them move more quickly. However it is the bounce of the jeté, with the downward 'fall' of the arms through 5th en bas, on the landing of it, that carry the arms and body into the air in the pas de chat.

Cecchetti's Saturday exercise temps levé, chassé croisé, temps levé in arabesque croisé, coupé dessous, ballonné, grand jeté en tournant, posé provides another example of the importance of co-ordination. This exercise uses a great deal of body movement and with a number of highlights requiring a particularly subtle moment of 'linking' in the middle of it. During the initial temps levé the arms lift en avant and during the chassé and temps levé in arabesque the down stage arm makes a tossing gesture upward towards the audience while the back one balances the line in arabesque.

The timing of the coupé ballonné which follows is very important. These steps change direction to face the front, are contained in quality and require an inclination of the head and body over the supporting leg. The arms lower en bas with the coupé and lift to demi-seconde and back en bas on the ballonné. This 'breathing action', if not executed in exact unison with the leg movement can become too late to move out again for the step into the grand jeté en tournant. If the arms and legs are not synchronized at this moment, in other words if the arms are not in demi-seconde ready for the grand jeté en tournant, the downward action to push from the floor can not occur. The arms will simply hinder, rather than help, the jump. Interestingly, Margaret Craske and Dera De Moroda when describing this exercise do not mention a use of arm in the ballonné although some oral traditions do.

It is variations of interpretations such as these that open up lively debate among Cecchetti teachers and ensures we explore the Maestro's principles of movement in depth before making them our own. Balance of energy, contrast of speed and the understanding of the use of gravity lead us to heed the words of Agrippa Vaganova when she says 'the achievement of full co-ordination of all movements of the human body in the dance exercise will enable the dancer later on to infuse ideas and moods into the movements, that is, to give them expressiveness which is called artistry.' (1996, 161) As Cecchetti teachers we need only look a little below the surface of all Maestro's exercises to find the means with which to inspire artistry in our students.

Note: ***Bibliography***

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