

Eurythmy

Origin

Eurythmy is a new art form created in 1912 by Rudolf Steiner, leader of the German branch of the Theosophical Society. Steiner was interested in developing the arts as a means of personal and spiritual development. Steiner wanted to bring a new impulse to the art of movement, an alternative to “modern dance” in Europe developing at that time, with its emphasis on personal self-expression. He wanted to connect dance with its original impulse as a sacred art form inspired by the Muses.

Eurythmy was at first a stage art used to enhance the performances of the “mystery plays” which Steiner had written. When the first Waldorf school was founded in 1919, Steiner felt strongly that eurythmy, in a modified version, should be part of the curriculum. He once said that eurythmy and gardening are two absolute essentials in a true Waldorf school.

Visible Speech

As an art of movement, eurythmy is perhaps unique in that it accompanies speech as well as music. Eurythmy seeks to make speech visible. Primarily with gestures of the arm and hands movements—though also with the feet and the entire body—the eurythmist manifests the individual sounds of speech.

The movements in ballet and other forms of dance are the inventions of human beings. According to Steiner, the eurythmic gestures for the vowel and consonant sounds are not arbitrary nor accidental but inherent in nature. They reflect the way the larynx moves in shaping the current of breath so that one or another sound is produced. There are remarkable stop-action photos which show the larynx doing exactly this. Eurythmy thus shows in three-dimensional movement the key expressive sounds of a verse or poem. This is done in an artistic fashion, so that the beat, the meter, the stresses, and the pauses are also made visible.

Visible Music

In modern dance the movements accompany the music and the dancer seeks to portray his own response to and particular interpretation of the piece. Eurythmy done to music—tone eurythmy—seeks to make the music manifest in a more objective way. It makes visible the several elements of the music according to certain fixed principles set forth by Steiner and von Sievers. Particular movements of the arms and hands show the pitch, the intervals between the notes, and major and minor modes, and even individual chords and notes. The meandering of the melody and its stresses are usually expressed in the form being moved. The feet can emphasize staccato notes or other aspects of rhythm. Individual eurythmists will present the same piece in different ways, but each will aim to manifest the intrinsic elements of the music rather than his or her own feelings about or reaction to it.

Eurythmy and the Child

Rhythm lies at the core of eurythmy and the study of eurythmy helps the child understand and experience in a positive way this basic component of life. Rhythm is not just an insistent musical beat, rhythm is a predictable harmonious recurring pattern that is a signature of life and health. Harmonious rhythm plays an important role in both the growth of the child and the development of good health. It is a key factor in Waldorf education. Rhythm is used to support learning and emotional balance, especially in the hands-on or “will” classes such as handwork, sculpture, form-drawing, and also eurythmy. These classes all involve physical movement and in them the child learns to work and move in a balanced and rhythmic way.

In eurythmy class, the children work with the rhythms present in great poetry and music. The children step according to the meter of a poem, perhaps the anapest of the trotting horse (short – short – long) or the sad trochee of the wounded warrior (long-short – short). When doing eurythmy to a musical piece they will take a strong step on the stressed note, even if it be only an eighth note, to accentuate it. Meanwhile, the movement of the arms may reflect the movement of the pitches of the melody. The form or pattern that one moves in Eurythmy reflects the rhythm of the line of verse or the beat of the musical piece.

Working with rhythm in eurythmy and in the other subject, helps the child fully and properly incarnate into his physical body. The ability to move gracefully and with a good sense of rhythm

indicates that there is a resonance between the soul-spiritual being of the child and the physical body. Doing eurythmy allows the child to experience with her entire body the building blocks of language and of music. The children learn the physical and etheric gestures for all the consonants and vowel, for the notes of the musical octave, and for other musical elements. The intense experience of speech and music through eurythmy also refines the child in body and soul. Playing a musical instrument has a similar effect but in Eurythmy, the child's body is the instrument, and thus the experience is much more powerful. Through eurythmy, the child can experience a poem of Keats or Robert Frost with her whole physical and soul spiritual being not only her intellectual understanding. She can internalize the music of Mozart, imprinting its harmony and beauty into her character and soul. Thus the student can move toward that goal, central to Waldorf Education, the realization of her humanity in its highest form.

Neurology might speak of eurythmy creating a rich network of synaptic connections and psychology might praise the engagement and development of the multiple intelligences. Eurythmy can also be described as allowing the child to deeply experience the greatest impulses of our civilization, though this experience is completed only if the child continues eurythmy through the Waldorf high school years.

Pedagogical or school Eurythmy is also used to develop specific mental abilities. In eurythmy class the children walk to counting "concentration exercises". In one such exercise the child may step four beats but take a backward step on one of those beats. In each series, the backward step is on a different beat, i.e. on beat 1 the first series, then beat 2 the next series, then 3 and then 4 and then back to 1. After learning the sequence, it can be sped up, then groups of children next to each other can do it in tandem and so on with variations. Mastering these exercises requires tremendous focus so as not to be distracted by others.

An important part of eurythmy in the schools is the visualization and the movement of geometric forms. This is a spiritual practice known from ancient times in many different cultures around the world. In Eurythmy, the children move in invisible, inwardly visualized circles, squares, triangles, and five-, six-, and seven-pointed stars. Moving these shapes not only helps the children in their study of geometry, but also serves with centering and mental concentration. When done together with copper rod exercises, these exercises develop the child physical and emotional posture or "uprightness."

Eurythmy as a Social Art

From kindergarten on, children in a Waldorf school learn through eurythmy to move together with others. Because most of the eurythmy work takes place in a circle, the child learns that she can only move right or left if she waits for her neighbor to move. She learns to move into the circle together with her neighbors and to take them with her as she moves outward again. As the eurythmy curriculum becomes more complex through the years, she learns to move around seven-pointed stars and other complicated patterns, always with “the other” in mind, progressively more in harmony with the movements of her fellow students. The students develop a sense of where they are in space and how they relate to others. And they learn to move as part of a group. Many Waldorf schools, despite their relatively small number of students, field surprisingly successful basketball teams. This success may be attributable to the students ability to move the harmoniously in a group, an ability that the girls and boys have developed in Eurythmy class.

Each of the arts helps the children develop in various ways. Eurythmy deepens the children’s experience of great poetry and music. It helps them acquire an inner and outer grace, an aesthetic sensibility, and a feeling for social harmony. Eurythmy’s work with rhythm and geometry can aid the children in their study of mathematics and in developing good focus and improved concentration. An eighth-grader may find this all hard to grasp, but perhaps they will when they are older.

References

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