

thoughts, definitions, ideas & questions:

PERCUSSIVE DANCES

I see our audiences excited in a way that I don't see at other kinds of dance concerts. It comes from the rhythm. It gets in people's blood¹.

Percussive dances are omnipresent in the most diverse cultures around the globe. Although form and aesthetics vary, they seem to exert a compelling fascination transcending cultural boundaries - as folkloristic or traditional forms cultivated and maintained in a certain society over time, but also in contemporary renderings that evolved from these roots and were transformed into stage performances.

Human beings - regardless of their background - seem to be attracted to percussive sounds, no matter whether played on instruments or the body itself, and the movement they inspire. For now, I won't go into depth about what exactly it is in our 'blood' - as the quote above puts it recurring to biological metaphors - that accounts for that force. We definitely connect with and are moved by rhythm in a very intuitive way. In the case of percussive dances, other elements apart from rhythm probably contribute to this effect. Their abstract qualities seem to communicate across time and cultures, weaving a universal thread between forms originating from different contexts.

Throughout the history of dancing there are two traditional elements always present: clapping of palms and tapping of feet².

Rhythmical stamping is a basic element of dance already present in its earliest forms. It is little surprising that throughout human history, this was refined and developed into more elaborate techniques. Even in traditions as complex, refined and therefore more intellectualized as Tap dance or Irish dance, percussive dances still maintain the force of their formally simpler roots. It is rhythm in its two shapes - music and movement - which I

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¹ Carr, Darrah. *Rhythm mash-ups: percussive dance hybrids send new sounds across the globe.* Dance Magazine, May 2010. www.dancemagazine.com.

² <http://travelsur.net>

claim to be responsible for this. Dancing *to* music already comes close, but in percussive dances, producing the rhythm and becoming part of the music by dancing integrates these two components.

some preliminary remarks

Since my first encounter with percussive dances performing *Schuhplatteln* as a teenager I have been fascinated by them. Coming back to this and other percussive practices years later professionally as a teacher and performer, my interest was revived and I started out to do some research in the field. The basis for this article is a thesis I wrote in 2012 at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna.

In this article I'd like to offer and investigate possible definitions and delimitations of the genre. A number of questions come to mind when comparing different percussive dances, trying to clarify their boundaries. To name a few examples explained in more detail below, we could distinguish them according to the techniques of sound production, accompaniment by musical instruments, or gender differences. I would like to share some of my ideas here and invite you to ponder yourself on the questions raised.

It is important to mention that the percussive dances discussed here are traditional forms belonging to specific cultural and geographical contexts, and not artistic creations by individuals or groups. The main aim is to raise awareness for the rhythmical and physical languages involved, trace common elements and structure the characteristics of percussive dances in general in order to provide material for further comparison, research or creation. To complement this, a second part of this article (in preparation) will give an overview of percussive dances worldwide as far as I could get in my research to date.



Gumboot Dance

the term 'percussive dances'

Although the term 'percussive dances' may seem self-explanatory to people from related disciplines, it is worth glancing in more detail at the possibilities of defining this genre. Taking a closer look, it becomes less obvious what is to be included or excluded here. The following paragraphs offer a few perspectives, comparing viewpoints found in diverse sources.

In traditional, analogue sources of reference, such as the Encyclopaedia of Dance, there is no entry on this topic. However, the index lists the keyword 'percussive dances', where we find references to Clogging, Flamenco, Step Dancing and Tap Dance. The term 'percussive dance' is used in alternation with 'folk dance' or 'traditions of step dancing'. This indicates that the concept is a rather traditional one here, considering the three forms as synonymous. Others, such as Allen³, keep it even more general, including "a wide range of different dance forms with a strong element of percussion" and listing the examples of Tap Dancing, Irish Step Dancing, Malambo, Zapateado and Kathak. However, there is no indication as to how the percussion is executed and why these dances all fall into the same category.

Rosenfeld⁴ goes into more detail and brings up interesting issues, defining as percussive dances those which include "the use of percussive foot sounds for musical expression as well as more focus on movement in the legs and feet than in the upper body", i.e. the production of rhythms with the feet by which the dancers become part of the music, and an element of improvisation are integral here. This list considers the two factors sound production and form of movement, but at the same time narrows it down to legs and feet.

Another idea to be thought about is introduced by Kartomi⁵ in her study on cultural expressions in certain regions of Indonesia/Sumatra: Instead of 'percussive dances' she prefers to speak of dances in which body percussion is used or plays a central role. Furthermore, doing justice to the subject of her study - dances which use highly differentiated body percussion techniques - she introduces a distinction based on sound production: a) genuine body percussion in which there are always two body parts involved, as for example the hand slapping a thigh, and b) quasi-body percussion using only one body part hitting a surface, as for example a foot stamping on the ground.

Considering these viewpoints, another thought seems worth mentioning here: It is not only the sounding rhythm but also the visual aspect which comes to bear in this genre. Watching percussive dance performances it becomes obvious that the movements are to a great part not only functional but also comply with certain musical-aesthetic criteria. Rhythm becomes visible and communicates both musical and non-musical content through structured movement. To put it differently, percussive dances speak both audible and visible, musical and physical languages.

³ Allen, Jackie. *Percussive What?* Shindy Arts, <http://www.shindy.dsl.pipex.com>

⁴ Rosenfeld, Malke. *Jump Patterns: Percussive Dance and the Path to Math*. Teaching Artist Journal 9(2), 2011. 78-89.

⁵ Kartomi, Margaret. *The art of body percussion and movement in Aceh and its links in countries around the northern rim of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean*. Conference on Music in the world of Islam. Assilah, 8-13 August, 2007.

why categorise... ?

Trying to categorise may be a mere act of putting things into boxes if the intention is to norm things, freeze categories and impose them on realities. But categories can also be a useful tool for guiding our understanding, providing a basis for reflection and questioning, and developing discernment for details, which is also my intention in the following paragraphs. A structured look at the genres may allow us to discover common underlying principles and connections, which in turn increases the number of possibilities of working with the form, both in artistic and educational contexts.

The categories formed here particularly refer to musical and social aspects. I consider them relevant because they connect to fundamental qualities in percussive dances: musical aspects by producing rhythm through dancing; and social aspects, as all forms rooted in traditions have social functions and are born out of a certain context which undoubtedly shapes them. Other points of view are of course possible here and would probably lead to different groupings in some cases.

a . sound production

One of the most obvious distinctions that can be made is according to the sound and its source, that is, the body parts involved in the production of the audible rhythm. It is easy to recognize a family of percussive dances in which footwork predominates (Tap Dance, Step Dance and others originating in the British Isles and North America). As a consequence, accessories in the form of special shoes or soles feature here. This entails that these dances are also characterized by their equipment. Other body sounds are generally not involved in this family of dances, on the contrary: in most cases, the upper part of the body is held still, foregrounding the lower part of the body.

more than the feet

Within this category of predominantly footwork-based dances, there are also examples which involve movement of the whole body or include other sounds, such as the Argentinean Malambo, Tibetan Step Dances, Indian Kathak or South African Gumboots. The latter is already a borderline case, as the hands are actually the part of the body mainly responsible for sound production, although the steps equally characterize this dance. Gumboots would thus represent a case of quasi-body percussion, referring to Kartomi's classification. Still, the shoes and thus the footwork are at the centre of attention.

Moving on gradually, we could form a category for dances which also use other sounds or genuine body percussion ('genuine' meaning two body parts involved in sound production).

Here, we may include the Schuhplattler from the Alpine region, the Italian Tarantella, the Legényes and other Hungarian Folk Dances, to name some examples from Europe, or Stepping from the USA, the Brazilian Catira and the Fa'ataupati from Samoa. The most popular technique is clapping the hands, followed by slapping the thighs; others are rather rare to find⁶.

accessories

When considering sound production, we could also distinguish between sounds produced exclusively on and by the body and sounds produced with the aid of equipment. In many cases, accessories are used to modify or amplify the sound, like a certain type of shoes (e.g. gumboots), metal plates on the soles, chains of bells around the ankles, or a certain type of clothing, such as the leather trousers in Schuhplatteln. Going even further and going beyond body percussion, we also find dances which use objects such as poles, ropes, sticks or swords, like the Dança do Facão (swords) or the Maculêlê (sticks), to name two examples from geographically opposite parts of Brazil, or the Argentinean Boleaderos⁷ (two ropes with balls attached).

what about the shoes?

One question here is whether to consider special footwear as extra equipment, regardless of being objects external to the body. If we place sound in the foreground they could be taken as synonymous with the feet in most cases because they are necessary for transforming visible into audible rhythm or amplifying it. Rare are the cases of percussive dances performed barefoot; Indian Kathak is one, but also here another sounding accessory gives the steps a distinctive timbre - the *ghungroos* (chains of bells around the ankles). Another similar case is the Brazilian Congado Mineiro which is performed using *gungas*, belts with tin can shakers attached to the dancers' ankles. We should recall that in these two cases, however, there is no body percussion in the strict sense involved: The music is purely instrumental while the dance movements are still linked to and produce a sounding rhythm.



Ghungroos in Kathak

⁶ Kartomi offers an exceptional, detailed classification of sounds based on percussive dances from Indonesia/Sumatra, where slapping the chest and snapping the fingers is also common, among other sounds.

⁷ An almost identical form can be found in the South of Brazil under the name of 'Boiadero'. It is unclear, however, where the dance actually originated.

Summing up, the feet seem to be the main point of reference for percussive dances almost without exception. Dances that live on percussion involving only other parts of the body are few, mainly found in the Asian/Pacific region.

b . relation accompaniment - dance

In some cases percussive dances feature accompanying musicians, colouring the rhythms with melody, harmony and an additional acoustic layer. Sometimes the dancers/ percussionists fulfill both roles, singing or playing other percussion instruments, as in Flamenco, which also features other musicians. A question to think about here is the relationship or hierarchy between the percussion produced by the dancer(s) and the accompaniment.

The cases where the rhythms are played purely on the body, without further musical accompaniment, are few, as in the Haka (New Zealand), the original form of the Fa'ataupati or the Sprigulu Sišana (Latvia). When a musician or a band accompanies the dancers, there are basically two forms of relation between them: in the first, the rhythmical phrases of the dance match the musical phrases, placing them as either subordinate or equal to the music; this could be illustrated quoting the Swiss Bödelen. In the second case, the musicians provide more of a background for the dancers, who may also improvise on top of that, giving prominence to the percussive dance.

To give a few examples for musical instruments accompanying percussive dances, we could name the accordion for the Schuhplattler; fiddle music for the Hornpipe or Cape Breton Step Dancing; the guitar for Gumboots, Catira, Peruvian Zapateado, Baile de la Chancleta (Cuba) and Flamenco - the latter two in combination with percussion on instruments; or a whole ensemble of various instruments as in Tibetan Step Dance, Kathak, or the Morris Dance.

c . costumes & equipment

Traditions usually connect to a number of areas of human civilization, cultivating aesthetic criteria that characterize the identity of a certain group. Therefore, looking at percussive dances as traditions, it is also worth considering clothes and props as part of their characteristics - not at least because in many cases the costumes bear additional adornments contributing to sound production. Shoes may be considered part of this category as mostly they are not only functional (sound) but also fit certain visual aesthetic criteria.

still the same without Lederhosen?

Should costumes and equipment be considered as necessary in order to define the dance? Recurring to the example of Schuhplatteln again, the leather trousers definitely fulfill a double function in amplifying the sound and protecting the thighs, apart from being a culturally relevant piece of clothing that is also worn on other occasions and is not exclusively used in



Trousers worn for Schuhplatteln

the dance context. The dance would certainly be identifiable if performed without this equipment, however. All in all, it is the body, its posture, movements and sounds, that communicate the form. But adopting a socio-cultural, anthropologic stance on dance everything the body is wrapped in and equipped with is necessary to complete the picture.

functional or decorative?

From a different perspective, i.e. isolating the musical-rhythmical part of the dances, it would be possible to distinguish between accessories and clothes which fulfill a function in sound production (as the bells around the ankles or knees in Kathak or Morris Dance, or the spurs in Brazilian Chula), and those which are mainly adornments functioning as cultural markers or complementing the dance movements (as the hats in the Catira or the tissues used in Morris Dancing). Placing rhythm and movement on the same level in the hierarchy or even giving prominence to the dance, however, would probably yield another viewpoint here.

d . rhythmical characteristics

A basic distinction between binary and ternary pulsations plus combinations of the two would be obvious here, following occidental music theory. It might seem needless to say but is still worth remembering that percussive dances are generally in line with the musical traditions of the respective country in terms of rhythms and other musical qualities.

In some cases the rhythmical characteristics of the dance go hand in hand with the accompanying music, giving prominence to the execution of the dance movement over the actual rhythms produced. This is the case with Kathak or Schuhplattler, which has both 3/4 and 4/4 patterns. In other cases the dance itself comes with a complex set of rhythmic-metrical patterns, as in Flamenco or various forms belonging to the family of Tap/Step Dances. An interesting case is the Sprigulu Sišana which instead of creating an actual piece

of music consists of a sequential build-up of different metres, starting from 1/4, building up to 7/4, and then counting back again.

e . improvisation

A logical consequence of traditions is that certain forms, patterns, movements and rhythms become established as the 'correct' form of execution. Within these boundaries there are some forms which also allow for or even require improvisation within a defined range of vocabulary. The type of body that is represented, the way of sound production and the rhythmical structure, however, always remain clearly defined even in improvisation.

Looking at a few examples may stimulate more thoughts on this topic. The Schuhplattler, for instance, is said to have developed its various patterns from improvisation; today still, individual groups tend to create their own 'corporate' patterns. Improvisation as a part of the dance, however, has been excluded from the standard procedure. In the Swiss Bödelen, on the other hand, improvisation answering to certain requirements has an important function, not only in competitions. Argentinean Malambo, to quote yet another example, also highly values the creativity of the dancer, including spontaneous improvisation of patterns which in certain cases the other dancers are challenged to copy. Gumbots also leaves large room for rhythmical creativity and invention of sequences - both in group choreographies and individual improvisation - within the range of movements and sounds established as its language. If we speak of improvisation in the context of percussive dances, I would therefore suggest employing the term bound improvisation, as aesthetical and musical qualities are clearly defined in most cases.



Footwear in Malambo

f . the gender question

One more factor worth mentioning that has to do with social rather than musical questions are the gender rules certain traditions of percussive dances have established and are perpetuating. In a survey of these dances worldwide it is striking in how few of them women participate or are the main protagonists. Some traditions explain this by recurring to the roots of the dance as a mating ritual (eg Schuhplatteln), attributed to male behavioural patterns, or connections with certain professions (eg Gumbots) which were also dominated by men.

There seem to have been few occasions in history for women to enter the scene, principally in Western cultures. Today, some of these boundaries are opening up and female groups are starting to appropriate themselves of these rhythmic languages. Traditionalists, however, often disapprove of such initiatives, as accounts of female dancers and my own experience testify. Dissociation from traditional contexts seems to provide a chance for more equality here. A few traditions, however, continue to maintain strict gender divisions, such as Kathak and certain forms of Flamenco.

final comment

I hope to have provoked a few thoughts that contribute to a more differentiated view on percussive dances with this article. Many thanks to Max Pollak for reviewing this article and pointing out potential for improvement.

I would be happy to receive feedback, comments and further ideas: anita.gritsch@gmail.com