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THE MIMO-DYNAMICS OF MUSIC, POETRY, AND SHORT STORY

Lecoq on Bartók

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[Notes on language: The name Lecoq is used as a noun to refer to the person and the school, as well as an adjective, as in Lecoq actors. The word dynamic is used as both adjective and noun (dynamics), as in the French, dynamique. Both usages have a meaning specific to the Lecoq pedagogy. The goal of Lecoq students is to create a dynamic theater. The goal of specific improvisational exercises is to achieve a certain dynamic. In both cases, the word refers to a combination of rhythm, force and space.]  

Bartók's (1936) 'Music for strings, percussion and celesta' is a visceral piece. (A student once had to leave my acting class because the music was making her sick to her stomach.) Lecoq chose the first movement of this piece, the 'Andante Tranquillo,' to teach his dynamic approach to music because of its tremendous rhythm, force and tension. The music lends itself to visualization. One can see the sound entering a room, climbing the walls, and suddenly falling in endless spirals through a hole in the floor. This chapter recalls Lecoq's lesson on Bartók as a way of understanding his dynamic approach to music, poetry, painting and short story.

Spring, 1991, Lecoq teaches two improvisational lessons on Bartók

Monday, May 6, 1991, year 1, semester 3, week 5, 1st Bartók lesson

Lecoq begins the lesson by asking students to take a place in the room, spread out, get comfortable (sit or lie down), close our eyes (if we wish) and listen. When the piece ends, he asks us to describe the music:
Adjectives and adverbs? What color is it? Where is it in the space? In what direction
does it move? How does it move? What path does it take? What is the dynamic? The
space? Shape? Element?

He asks these questions to provoke us to think in terms of movement, space, rhythm and
force. Lecoq uses the vocabulary we developed while working with the neutral mask, a vocab-
ulary of natural phenomena and man-made materials: clay, tree, river, lake, stream, ocean,
wind, fire, light, color, paper, cardboard, plastic, rubber. He is not seeking correct answers, but
stimulating a shared language. The answers come pouring out of students: Circular. Green.

Next, Lecoq directs us:

Get up on your feet and take a place in the room. As you hear the music, watch it.
Each person for himself. Don’t perform. Where does it enter the space? Where does
it travel?

Lecoq plays the ‘Andante Tranquillo’ for the second time. We follow the music with our
eyes. We track it as it moves through the room. Afterwards we discuss what we saw. Again,
students do not hesitate to describe in detail what the music looked like and how it moved
through the space. Twenty-four years later, I can still see the music in my mind as I saw it then:
One thin creeping vine enters through the crack around the door, then another and another.
The vines grow thicker and climb the walls, sprouting leaves, covering the ceiling. Then the
whole room begins to spin. A hole opens up in the middle of the floor, sucking everything
down. Spiraling down, down, down.

Lecoq splits the class into two groups, seven to ten people in each. His direction:

Conduct the music. Guide it; bring it into the space. Direct it; show it where to go.
Push and pull it.

Afterwards, we discuss what we did and what we saw others do. My visceral memory as
a student actor: I pull the music into the room, push it, smooth it up the walls, smear it all
around like paint, stir it down into a hole in the center of the room, let it fall, lift it up, hold
it back. I am all over the room, not worried about being right or wrong, confident. I know
exactly what I am doing. Afterwards, I am exhausted.

Finally, at the end of the first lesson, Lecoq asks us to:

Play with the music the way that dogs, or puppies, play with each other. They push
against each other, resist, give and take, pull, allow themselves to be pushed and
pulled. Play with the music in this way.

Lecoq comments that the first group was generous, but misunderstood the directions.
He wants us to achieve a dynamic of push and pull with the music as a force, rather than
pretending to be a person playing with an animal (tickling and touching), which is too
literal. Those who got it pushed and pulled and allowed themselves to be pushed and pulled
(more difficult). The dynamic of push and pull works better with the body than with the
arms and hands.
Lecoq begins by asking students to listen quietly, to hear the music again. Next, he gets the entire class up on our feet and plays the music a second time. Direction:

You are the music. Move as the music moves.

Then Lecoq plays the music for the third time. Direction:

Pick another material – for example, cardboard, or rubber – and move to the music as that material.

The purpose of this, he tells us, is to give another body, ‘donner un autre corps.’ In other words, we are to choose a material that is different from, not supple like, the human body. Again, the entire class works at once. Lecoq comments:

Good. It works better, because of the stiffness. You are better able to give the dynamics of the music. Because the music is full of undulations, if you undulate, the music gets lost. If you become a stiff material, the music has something to resist, to contrast, something to push and pull.

For the fourth listen, Lecoq asks for one volunteer to:

Do the music in acrobatics, stylized, again as a material that gives a different body.

My memory as the student volunteer: I play with the dynamics of the music as cardboard doing acrobatics. I pay more attention to the play than the stunts. I let myself go. It feels good to be fully present, committed and free. Afterward, I am exhausted again. The fifth time, Lecoq asks us to:

Work against the music, ‘contre’ the music. Whatever the music is doing, you do the opposite dynamic. Contrast it. Find the other side.

One student plays light, happy, carefree, while the music is twisting and mysterious. Finally, on the sixth listen, Lecoq directs us to:

Use the music to create drama. In banal, simple moments, the music is inside you, or outside you. For example, you are in your house in the country, you open the window and the music is outside, or the music is the internal life of the character. Let the music lead you. Go with the music.

For me, this is the most difficult challenge, to internalize the music. In French: Fait rien. In English: Do nothing. It is very difficult to do nothing. Ask me to do cartwheels and handstands as if I were cardboard, and I have no problem, but to internalize Bartók is very difficult.

The Bartók lesson embodies an essential pedagogical build: Listen, watch, engage, play. First we listen. Then we can see. Once we visualize, we can follow. Once we know the

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structure, we can push and pull it. Then we can allow ourselves to be pushed and pulled by it. Now we are playing with it. Or we can play against it. Finally, we can expand or diminish it until it is so small that it is internal.

The Bartók lesson is specifically designed to develop the actor’s ability to listen and respond, to make the actor more disponible. Lecoq uses the word disponible to mean available, open, present, listening, sensitive, pliable, flexible, and ready. Most actors recognize the importance of this skill to their craft, regardless of style, training or genre. The American movie actor Michael Keaton (2014) says that acting requires a state of being both fully present and completely free: ‘Acting’s such an interesting kind of way to make a living. It’s such an interesting art form, or trade, or craft, or whatever it is. Because when it’s being done well, I think – at least for me – you’re 100 percent present and, at the same time, you just totally let go.’ The Bartók lesson leads actors to this state of heightened presence and freedom.

An actor must achieve a heightened state of freedom and presence in language as well as movement. Lecoq’s approach to poetry encourages students to connect to their own culture, ethnicity and sense of truth through language. The fact that the school draws students out of their own countries to become strangers in Paris is part of the design of Lecoq’s pedagogy. Students come from all over the world to live in Paris, conduct daily business in the French language, and study at L’École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq. In 1990–92, the student body represents 32 countries. Language and culture of origin become especially consequential when students are asked to choose and recite their favorite poems.

Ironically, I discover my favorite American poet while working on this assignment in Paris. I buy a second-hand copy of The Black Poets, A New Anthology, edited by Dudley Randall (1971), at Shakespeare and Company, the famous bookstore on the left bank, and fall in love with the poetry of Sonia Sanchez. Had I discovered her in the US, I might not have held on so tightly. But something about being uprooted and separated from my homeland makes me question the essence of my cultural identity. I ask myself: What is truly and uniquely American? What do I have to offer this group of students who come from all over the world? What can I touch that they have never known?

When I look back toward home from my ‘chambre de bonne’ (maid’s room), the tiny seventh-story walk-up apartment on Rou de Douai, the lens zooms out and the lines of distinction blur between my compatriots and me. I find myself identifying with everything American. Lecoq associates Americans with broad open spaces, and although I have never been on a prairie or a ranch, I can easily appropriate the Midwestern cowboy swagger. Although I am a white American, I feel deeply connected to the poetry of Sonia Sanchez, a black American. Although I grew up on Long Island and in Westchester County, the suburbs of New York, and do not consider myself a native of New York City, I jump at the opportunity to demonstrate the language and attitude of that city.

**Thursday, January 10, 1991, year 1, semester 2, week 1. Improvisation class: the dynamics of words**

Lecoq discusses his lesson on ‘The Body of Words’ in his book The Moving Body (Lecoq, Carasso & Lallias, 2000: 49). This lesson is also featured in the film Les Deux Voyages de Jacques Lecoq (Lecoq, Carasso, Lallias & Roy, 2006). In this lesson, Lecoq demonstrates that language is influenced by culture and that each word has a unique dynamic – rhythm, force and space. Students create full-body gestures to go with words. In 1991, Lecoq taught this movement lesson in the morning on the same day that Norman taught the following improvisation lesson in the afternoon.
Norman Taylor begins his improvisation lesson by asking a representative of each language to get up in front of the class and improvise hammering a nail and accidentally hitting a finger. What do you say, when you hit your finger with the hammer? Thirteen students speak 15 different variations of languages, including British English, American English, Parisian French, Swiss French, Zulu, Greek, Polish, Turkish, Arabic, Norwegian, Dutch, Swiss German, German German, Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese. Students perform solo, and then one after another in quick succession. After watching the improvisations, Norman asks the remaining students to pair up with the performers and find a gesture or movement that expresses the dynamic of each word or phrase. We are instructed to listen to the sound of the words, rather than seek translations. Norman allows us to work in pairs for a few minutes and then calls the class into a large circle. Each pair performs their word and gesture in the center of the circle. Finally, Norman asks if anyone speaks Italian. Nobody does. He asks the other American in the class if he comes from New York. Not even close. At this point, it hits me. I suddenly understand the purpose of Norman’s probe. He wants to hear the loud, crude, earthy dynamic of a native New Yorker. As the only other American in the room, I am a bit annoyed at being overlooked. Does he see me as a diminutive female who could not possibly embody this dynamic?


Norman is stunned. The students’ mouths collectively drop open. Where did this come from? Who knew she had it in her? Norman quickly recovers from his surprise and eggs me on, asking me to repeat a certain sequence of phrases, while directing a team of five actors to get on their feet and search for the essence of my words in gesture. In the end, I feel a bit naked and vulnerable, but powerful and grounded as well. Through this improvisation, I uncover a piece of myself and forge a new connection to my heritage, my intrinsic nature, my essential being, that which makes me unique and connects me to the other strangers in Paris.

This improvisation class is designed for a threefold purpose: To expose us to the rich variety of dynamics in language, to challenge us to transpose words into movement and to steer us to discover something about ourselves. At Lecoq, students recognize their unique cultural heritage in contrast to the diversity of others. Students rediscover their roots and recognize a common poetic sense that transcends verbal translation. This lesson reflects the bell shape of Lecoq’s pedagogy, which begins by broadening our horizons and expanding our knowledge of the world around us, and ends by turning our focus inward and exposing our uniqueness. Students begin by discovering what they have in common through the neutral mask, and end by discovering what makes them unique.

Lecoq teaches actors to listen and see: Not only to analyze with the intellect, understand with the heart and sense with the body, but to reconnect these different ways of knowing. The Lecoq training works to undo cultural conditioning that separates body, mind and soul. (The word ‘soul,’ as used in the context of this chapter, refers to the recognition of a central, intrinsic, unique and essential wholeness at the core of our beings. Aristotle’s definition of the soul also serves the context of Lecoq’s physical theater training: ‘The first animating principle
of the organized body’ (Cohen, 2008: 1) – in other words, the primary motivator, the engine, the reason for the action, the impulse that comes before the movement.)

A brief tangent into the science of the body-brain organism offers another way of understanding how the Lecoq training works to reverse cultural conditioning and to integrate the body, mind and soul of the actor. Improvisation and movement exercises forge neurological connections between body and brain. Students develop the ability to respond with the whole organism and to take information in through somatosensory perception, including musculoskeletal proprioception. Lecoq sharpens the actor’s sensory awareness – our sensitivity to sounds, sights, tastes, smells and feelings. Most importantly, perhaps, the training develops the actor’s proprioception, the ability to know where the body is in space, in relationship to the floor, the ceiling, the walls and other objects and bodies in the space. Proprioceptors are neurons embedded in the muscles and joints that, when stimulated by gravity and bearing weight, provide feedback to the brain about the location of the body in space. Perhaps the word soul, as used in the context of this chapter on Lecoq pedagogy, refers to the integration of body, mind and heart; the coming together of all that we know physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually; the establishment of a connection to one another and to the natural and material worlds around us; the recognition of a central, intrinsic, unique and essential wholeness at the core of our beings.

The integration of the body, mind and soul begins with the neutral mask and continues through the work with music, words and poetry. Emotion, thought, sensory perception and musculoskeletal proprioception reconnect, realign and reintegrate into a full organismal way of responding. Lecoq teaches students to listen with the body.

The ability to listen with the body becomes particularly important when devising new work through improvisation, as practiced by students at the school in the weekly auto-cours. ‘Auto-cours’ translates to self-lesson, or teaching oneself. Auto-cours refers to the one-and-a-half hours students spend each day at the school working in groups to create performances based on weekly themes given by the teachers. These auto-cours are performed for an audience of teachers and students every Friday. In the fourth week of the second trimester, 1991, Lecoq gave the following theme for auto-cours: The world of a short story.

This assignment followed several weeks of improvisational and movement work exploring words and poems.

Monday, January 28 through Friday, February 1, 1991, year 1, semester 3, week 4. Auto-cours: the world of a short story

In recounting this auto-cours, I hope to demonstrate the way in which Lecoq provoked students to explore the art of literature as a source of inspiration for the creation of theater. The assignment was to create the atmosphere or world of the story, rather than to tell or act out the story.

Five of us choose ‘Bitterness for Three Sleepwalkers’ by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1984), only four pages long and as dense as a dream. We begin by reading the story silently and aloud several times, and marking passages that evoke powerful images. Next, we get up on our feet and try to achieve the dynamic or essence of each phrase through movement. For example, we play with the following sentence: ‘We found it out suddenly, as if a glass had been broken inside, when she began to give off anguished shouts’ (Marquez, 1984: 34).

At this moment in the training, the lines between words and gestures, poetry and movement begin to blur. Writers use the visible world to build metaphors out of words that allow readers to touch the intangible. Actors use the tangible world to build metaphors out of
movements that allow audiences to see the invisible. Lecoq trains actors to imitate observable phenomena through work with the neutral mask, then sets up situations that require them to access this newfound gestural language to embody the invisible in music, poetry and literature. For example, one can observe and imitate glass breaking. It has a definite rhythm, force and direction in space. The violence of the movement evokes fear, anxiety, alarm and surprise. Marquez uses the image of shattering glass to sharpen the reader's understanding of the characters' anguish. When actors imitate this movement on stage, the characters' emotions become four-dimensional, visible in time and space.

Our ensemble of five stands close together, then moves suddenly apart in a violent shattering dynamic. Each of us stops abruptly, as if surprised by a sound, and looks quickly in one direction, then another. We work with 23 separate phrases in this way, sometimes all five together, sometimes in groups of two or three, searching for the dynamic of each passage. Early in the rehearsal process, we map out the space of the story on the floor. We cluster the improvisations into themes, passions, images and movements with the following titles: Courtyard-house, wetness-sensuality-insects, dragging, cricket pushing on wall, fall, earth eating, pacing-time-waiting, shattering glass, crying, profile. Finally, we order and overlap the improvisations, mapping them in the space and carving out moments by directing points of focus.

At times, we use one or two members of the group to serve as an outside eye, to look at a particular movement or sequence. However, more often than not, this is unnecessary because our actor bodies have been trained through the neutral mask work to sense the overall balance and rhythm of the stage. Teachers at Lecoq talk about developing the ability to sense movement through imaginary cilia growing out of the skin on the actor's back, as if we were protozoans swimming in a pool of liquid, perceiving the ripples made by other organisms. Lecoq actors can also be compared to jazz musicians, sensing the collective rhythm and timing as an ensemble sans conductor. Composer and musician Herbie Hancock talks about performing in Chicago with the Mwandishi band:

> It was just a moment where we were all so unified that the energy of the bass player and the drummer and the saxophonist – I felt like they were all, like, in me. 'Many in body, one in mind': That's a phrase we use in Buddhism. And it was incredible.
> (Hancock, 2014)

Students of Lecoq in auto-cours learn to think with the collective body as part of an ensemble.

On Friday afternoon, we perform for our teachers and peers. As we begin, I feel an acute awareness of myself as part of a finely tuned machine, like one gear in a Swiss-made watch, sensing my function on the stage in relationship to the whole. Feedback from teachers:

> Very good! Good individual work and good ensemble work. From the moment you began, the way you took your individual places on the stage collectively, the air was charged with anticipation.

The Lecoq pedagogy has three objectives when working with music, poetry and literature. The first is to teach the skill of acting. The second is to broaden and deepen the actor's cultural experience, knowledge and repertoire. The third is to reconnect the actor to his artistic soul. Lecoq makes a rare personal statement in his book, *The Moving Body*: 'For me, poetry is a major source of nourishment' (Lecoq, Carasso & Lallias, 2000: 51). He recognizes the power of poetry and music to fuel the creative spirit, to inspire the artist to make something new on stage. I think Lecoq would agree with Joyce: 'Beauty, the splendor of truth, is a gracious presence when the imagination contemplates intensely the truth of its own being or the visible
world, and the spirit which proceeds out of truth and beauty is the holy spirit of joy’ (Joyce, 1902). Lecoq calls this spirit of truth and beauty the ‘essence of life’ (Lecoq, Carasso & Lallias, 2000: 46) or the ‘universal poetic sense.’ Lecoq teaches students to mine the depths of words, colors, sounds and light to touch this spirit.

In Lecoq’s dynamic approach to music, poetry and short story, words become movement. Movement imitates sound. A short story is not told or read, but emerges via gesture and movement, which cut beneath the surface of the words, revealing the world of the story. Lecoq uses the art of poetry, music and short story not as a way to teach text, but as a way to uncover a work of art and represent its truth on stage.

References