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The Voice of the Body

A conversation with Barbara Haselbach and Christa Coogan

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The term 'voice' is broad in scope and thus offers many possibilities for this 2025 IOSFS Convention. The voice is commonly equated with singing and speaking. Yet, the ability to form an opinion is indicative of a voice; in a group context, the articulation of a single voice assumes importance; and 'having a voice' signifies the potential to exercise power in specific ways.

Through our many voices, we communicate with others, we connect to one another and create relationships, meanings, and ideas. In Orff-Schulwerk the interrelatedness of music and dance with the visual arts, allows for communication, connection, and creativity, all realized through the body.

This interrelatedness, as it was introduced and practiced at the *Günther-Schule*, was no longer possible in its original form after the destruction of the school. The relaunch and the introduction of this approach to children at the Bavarian Radio (where, as an aural medium, the realization of movement was naturally impossible), and the resulting publications of the five volumes, did not allow for the complete integration of these art forms. Even today, movement at times plays a marginal role worldwide in many Orff-Schulwerk lessons.

The following questions begin a discussion between Barbara Haselbach (BH) and Christa Coogan (CC).

- *How does the body communicate?*
- *What connections and relatedness between music and movement/dance can be established?*
- *What role does the body's voice have in the historical context of Orff-Schulwerk and as we understand today?*

BH: Many participants at our convention and generally in the world of Orff-Schulwerk probably understand voice mainly as a tool for singing and speaking. However, the Latin word *vox* (voice) encompasses more. And it is precisely because of the character of the Schulwerk that we must understand the meaning of the voice in a more comprehensive way. The voice encompasses the whole body in ways that we not only can hear, but also can see, and indeed, feel.

CC: What do you mean by 'to feel' the voice?

BH: You can talk to someone calmly and kindly, or you can argue and shout at them, which create different levels of tension in the psyche, the voice and in the whole body. Similarly, you can move gently or make energetic gestures. In other words, our body tension, our posture, and the spatial and temporal execution differ.

CC: Therefore, you contend that people employ their bodies expressively and as a means of communication.

BH: Think how a small child tries to communicate with its parents: he cries or laughs, she moves her arms, and little face shows clearly whether she wants to be lifted out of bed to be comforted or to discover the world around her. The child uses acoustic, physical, and facial signals from his body to communicate, to speak with the languages of the body. Such body languages are developed and refined during childhood and youth.
Growing up in a particular place, we learn the culturally appropriate patterns of communication. But we also find our individual way of singing, speaking, locomoting, gesturing, and expressing our emotions through our faces.
We can include in the term *language of the body* the following ways in which we express ourselves in and through the body: speaking, singing, facial expressions, conducting, sign language, and dancing.

CC: We had wonderful examples of singing and speaking during the convention. Now, for our readers, we share linked examples that demonstrate some of these above-mentioned voices of the body, especially in connection with music.

1. **Facial Expressions:** *Leonard Bernstein/Haydn, 1787/ Symphony No. 88 – excerpt.*
   LINK:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56qZblncQrs&list=RD56qZblncQrs&start_radio=1

The expressions from Bernstein are minimal yet so communicative. How are they to be read? Perhaps he is at times appreciative of the playing; perhaps other times he is caught up in the music, or encouraging the players in their music-making.

2. **Speaking and Sign Language**: *Wedding Vows:* American sign language (ASL) & Black American sign language (BASL)
   LINK: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2KAsi3U-V4

Here, one might notice that the BASL signer is more active in his use of facial expressions and the space around him than the ASL signer, whose gestures are held closer to his body and his facial expressions are more subdued.

3. **Sign Language as performance:** *Silent Night*: *(Christmas carol)*, *M: Franz Xaver Gruber, T: Joseph Mohr, 1818; Concept and Direction: Hildegard Starlinger:* German sign language – excerpt.
   LINK: http://www.hildegard-starlinger.at/regie/w7e53010921000024af9ad1593dba9ed

In this case, we can observe that the textual and musical content is emphasized via the particularly expressive, unified dance-like sign language gestures.

4. **Whole body movements in conducting**: *Teresa Riveiro Böhm/J. Strauss, 1874/Die Fledermaus, Overture – excerpt*
   LINK: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDQQSv9q_Fo

5. **Whole body movements in conducting**: *Teresa Riveiro Böhm/Stravinsky, 1910/The Firebird – excerpt*

LINK: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2bTexoHOtA

These excerpts show varying qualities of movement corresponding to the musical qualities of these two pieces. Riveiro-Böhm's body language as a conductor is characterized through a dance-like interpretation of the music.

6. Mostly folkdance styles: whole body movements

LINK: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/vYtwnHvcpcs

Here, we can watch distinct rhythms, varied music styles and instrumentations and emphasis on different body parts.

BH: But it is not only musicians and dancers who are interested in the voice and language of the body. Visual artists, painters, graphic artists, sculptors, and photographers are also fascinated by it and create moving works of art on this theme.

(Photograph: ©Christa Coogan, 2025)

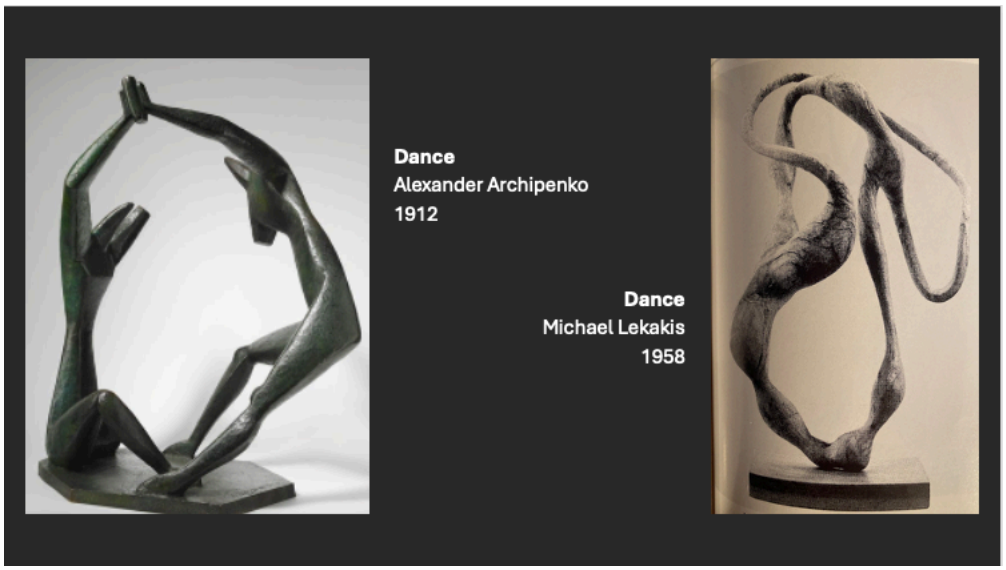
The Florentine Pietà (1547-1555) is one of Michelangelo's last and most personal works. The sculpture is recognized for the emotional intensity of the figures.

The Scream, painted by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch in 1893, expresses intense panic or perhaps fear.

Figural visual or sculptural works can provide strong inspiration for musical or dance improvisation and compositions. Their posture, facial expressions, and charisma 'speak to us' through their body language.

In examples of abstract sculptures it might be more the spatial dynamic that inspires us. For example, the juxtaposition of two abstract, contrasting sculptures on the theme of dance—Alexander Archipenko's *Dance* (1912) and Michael Lekakis' *Dance* (1958)—present a wonderful challenge for the improvisation or choreographic creation of a duet and its musical interpretation.[20]

[20] Photographs © Haselbach, B. (1991) *Tanz und Bildende Kunst*. Klett, p.110/11.



CC: Barbara, can you talk about the terms 'movement' and 'dance'? Is there a difference?

BH: Movement is the umbrella term for everything that happens when a living being changes with the whole body or with parts of it from one position or place to another with their own energy. But we also say: A car moves at high speed on the highway, clouds move calmly and slowly across the sky, an ant moves hastily across the path, and the hands of a clock move.

To define and describe what **dance** is we looked up the definition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/art/dance.

> Dance is the movement of the body in a rhythmic way, usually to music and within a given space, for the purpose of expressing an idea or emotion, releasing energy, or simply taking delight in the movement itself.
>
> Dance is an art form or activity that utilizes the body and the range of movement of which the body is capable.
>
> Unlike the movements performed in everyday living, dance movements are not directly related to work, travel, or survival. Dance may, of course, be made up of movements associated with these activities, as in the work dances common to many cultures, and it may even accompany such activities. But even in the most practical dances, movements that make up the dance are not reducible to those of straightforward labour; rather, they involve some extra qualities such as self-expression, aesthetic pleasure, and entertainment.

CC: *What is the correspondence between movement/dance and music?*

BH: They both are a medium of human expression and can touch us in an emotional way. If we analyze it logically: they have various parameters in common:

- **Time:** tempo and tempo changes such as accelerando and ritardando, time signatures, time changes, duration (long and short)
- **Dynamics:** contrasts such as forte/piano, or energetic/soft; transitions such as crescendo, decrescendo, also accents
- **Space**: in music these are pitches or intervals, in dance they are spatial pathways, spatial directions, forms in space.

The understanding of this phenomenon of correspondence and how it has changed over time depends on the culture, the historical period, and educational and artistic aims.

- As a music pedagogue, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, for instance, endeavored to teach his students how to directly translate musical phenomena into physical expression/movement.
- In many folk traditions, the music and movement are close in their rhythmic structure.
- In European dance, Renaissance dances mostly followed the musical form (or vice versa) and in the Baroque era, dancers were able at times to veer from the musical form, improvising phrases and smaller sections before joining the musical trajectory.
- In contemporary western art, dance and music rarely are parallel, often independent of each other.

CC: What role does the body's voice have in the historical context of Orff-Schulwerk? Can you say something about the beginnings at the Günther-Schule?

BH: Detailed information about the *Günther-Schule* can be found both in the article by Esther Gray in Volume III of the *Texts on Theory and Practice of Orff Schulwerk (Movement and Dance in Orff Schulwerk)* and on the IOSFS website/Resonances: https://www.iosfs.org/forum-resonances.

Let me share one example that relates to the conducting exercises offered at the *Günther-Schule*. In the conducting lessons, taught by Carl Orff, the students learned how to develop a great sensitivity to reading the bodily gestures and expressions of the conductor and to react to them. When conducting the orchestra themselves, each student attempted to transmit the character of the music as they felt it themselves and wanted it to sound. Thus, they developed an intense awareness of the expressive potential of their conducting gestures. All dances performed by the Günther Dance Group during their Europe-wide tours were accompanied by the school's orchestra. A unique feature of this performing group was their ability to seamlessly transition between dancing and instrumental playing.

If we look closely at the photo of Orff giving a conducting lesson, we can perceive two things. First, the internalization with which he seems to physically experience the music he wants to impart to the students, and second, the way he conveys this content to them. A

very similar intensity of attentiveness and devotion can be seen in the photos of the conducting students.[21]

CC: What I notice in the photograph of the student conductor is the complete awareness and energy in her body, the conductor leans into the group, and even though I don't hear the music, I can feel her readiness for the music.

CC: While we are thinking about conducting, I want to share a quote from Carl Orff (Orff, 1964, 74):

> The significance of the conducting exercise is first to feel music physically for oneself, and to feel its relation to dance and all movement language. Secondly, the binding connection, similar to that in word and gesture, that which in precentor *(the choir leader)* or dance leader comes to life and expresses itself as leadership...Not just fingers, hand or arm, but the whole body as totality has to be involved in the process of conducting and also in the technique of playing the instruments.[22]

Feeling music physically helps you to understand music. And so, Barbara, we come back to your beginning thoughts about feeling and how children communicate. Their feelings are evident in every movement they make and every word they speak or sing.

Data protection laws prevent us from sharing photographs with our readers. However, we teachers may view photographs of our students or observe children in our classes. For instance, we can notice:

- The concentration, openness while listening to the teacher!
- The joy on a child's face while skipping!
- The physical qualities of a scary monster that are even felt in the fingertips, the twisted torso and the facial expression!
- The bodily alertness of children as they play a clapping game!
- The determination found in the stillness of a pose!
- A child moving through the space – effortless, light, open, and free.

CC: Let's fast forward to the Orff Institute – opened about 16 years after the end of the Günther-Schule. Can you share some of your experiences and observations there?

BH: I taught for 57 years at the Institute, so it is difficult to select! But I will start with the first years when Gunild Keetman was still teaching once a week.

[21] Members of the Orff-Schulwerk Forum Salzburg may access the member pages of the Günther-Schule Resonances Event. In the video made by the Resonances Committee, you can see images of Carl Orff as well as students conducting. https://www.iosfs.org/copy-of-resonances-september-2024

[22]

Her **classes** usually started with a short motif, for instance with a rhythm, which was then transferred into a step pattern, accompanied with sound gestures or small percussion instruments. This was then enlarged, developing into a dance form in space with a contrasting B part, or turning into a Rondo. Parts were accompanied with singing or recorders.

In terms of **artistic presentations and performances** in the earlier years, the pieces played were almost always from the Orff-Schulwerk *Volumes.* This changed quite a bit in the following years. Students were creative with their own compositions in these productions – sometimes but not always based on models of the Schulwerk music pieces.

New teachers often introduced innovative ideas. Collaboration between music ensemble teachers and dance teachers was also intensive. Hermann Regner, a composer and choir director and the director of the Institute for many years, and I taught groups together for many years. And I taught historical dances from the Renaissance and Baroque eras. Here, my collaboration was with Hilde Tenta, who provided live accompaniment, teaching the music of this time.

CC: *How did the idea of movement/dance develop during these years at the Institute?*

BH: In the early years of the Orff Institute, Dorothee Günther came several times to Salzburg and worked with us to develop a movement and dance curriculum. As the institute grew larger, we needed more teachers. Two or three graduates coming from gymnastic or dance schools were hired as teachers. We couldn't repeat the *Günther-Schule* – in fact, we didn't know so much about it at that time. Orff's quote, however, from the opening of the new building of the Orff Institute in 1963, gave us young teachers permission and inspiration to continue with this integration of music and dance in the expression of *our* time. Remaining alive also means to change with time and through time. Therein lies the hope and the excitement' (Orff, 1978, 249). And, during this time, there was a notable expansion of the expressive potential and stylistic repertoire of the voice of the body, particularly among college students and adults. Concurrently, the dance curriculum at the Orff Institute changed as well, encompassing a range of subjects, including improvisation, dance technique, choreography, movement accompaniment, social and historical dances, folk dances, anatomy, dance history, didactics, and teaching practice. Nevertheless, the most significant element was not a highly developed dance technique; rather, it remained focused on the creative aspect.

The Orff Institute does not only educate teachers who will work in primary schools. Teaching practice groups representing a wide range of age groups are involved, including parents with toddlers, kindergarten children, primary school children, groups in after-school music and art schools and projects involving both children and teenagers. Additionally, there are groups for adults, seniors, and people with special needs. All participants in these different target groups have their own language of the body, requiring student teachers to adjust how they communicate with their bodies, including their gestures, whole-body movements and facial expressions, as well as their choice of words.

CC: It is interesting to note here that the language of education is changing and evolving. As well as experiencing the connections and interplay between music and dance, we recognise that movement and dance are forms of creative expression in Orff-Schulwerk, activating the 'voice of the body'. This activation fosters self-awareness and agency, strengthens self-image, and develops strong, empathetic social skills as well as sensitising the musical voice. These attributes support the perception and appreciation of the creative input of others.

BH: Yes, and the teaching philosophy at the Orff Institute - embodied music-making, integration with other art forms, non-hierarchical structures, tasks mostly solved independently or in groups, respect for individual development, discussions and reflections, and a direct connection between practical work and accompanying theory - supports these characteristics and attributes exactly.

CC: At this point, I would like to quote you, Barbara, in what appears to me to be close to understanding the voice of the body in its relationship to music in Orff-Schulwerk as Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman understood it.

> …what is unusual about Orff's concept is not that it is a rediscovery of a forgotten unity…but the idea of allowing the common ground of rhythmically based forms of expression to become practical and personal experiences through creative processes that are achievable by all. Instead of analysing the corresponding relationships between music and dance and in the end binding these together again, Orff opens the way to an independent experience of integrated action.[23]

BH: Our reflection on the use of the body's voice in Orff-Schulwerk remains ongoing. The manner in which we develop and realize this vision is contingent upon our personal and collective efforts. Therefore, we invite all our readers to consider the following questions:

- *What is your own connection to movement and dance in Orff-Schulwerk?*
- *How can you develop the voice of your own body?*
- *How do you help to develop the voice of the body with your own students?*

[23] Haselbach, B. (1984) 196,198.

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