For a woman.

The 7th Couplet
Western classical music developed the way it did in part because it found a way to translate what was happening on to paper and literally “see” it in the mind’s ear. Dance has never really found such a system, or at least not one as successful or durable. How do you “see” four dimensions at once? How do you catch the shifting and subtle changes of dynamic in the body? Writing dance is the exception rather than the rule, and the impossibility of pinning it down has become a quality of the artform, a defining freedom. Dance can go on re-inventing itself, always concerned with the authenticity of the moment, always free of its own history. Yet dance-makers have at times needed some way of recording their work, an overview, a way of reading and writing movement in time and space. The results are a private but often beautiful code.

Each act of choreography is an attempt to create a new language with the body, and each choreographer has a unique voice and an individual way of communicating that voice. Dance-makers will use whatever is at hand that enables the translation of sensation, ideas or feeling into movement, and that helps communicate and record the work. Notation divides into two kinds: the various attempts at a complete system to write down work that already exists, or the score as a notebook, a tool to find something new. Western theatre dance is a relatively young artform with its origins in the spectacles of the seventeenth-century French court. So we begin with the body as a site of wealth and status, an image still persisting in the classical ballet that grew out of it. However, the twentieth century saw dance place itself at the centre of rapid change that was Modernism, and out of this came an explosion of new forms. Whereas ballet took 300 years to develop, this new dance encouraged the individual and evolved rapidly. Dance-makers such as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham began to invent their own techniques, usually modelled on how they moved and with far more complexity of twist and fall.

In the 1960s the dancer-choreographer hierarchy itself started to be questioned, and improvisation asserted itself as an important tool again. Today a dancer can draw from many different movement philosophies, and be expected to share the making of the work with the choreographer. All of this poses a problem to the complete notation systems, which are slow to use, but it has led to some wonderful uses of graphic scores and notes by contemporary dance-makers.

The first commonly used methods for scoring dance are the elaborate curling “track drawings” of the eighteenth century. These documents shorthand the basics of each dance, dealing mainly with the feet and where to go in the space, and assuming that the style of the period is understood by the dancer. Like other dance graphics, they carry something of the quality and spirit of the thing itself, a kind of aristocratic grace.

It is difficult to write the detail of the body in dance once you get into the torso rapidly spiralling, with arms and legs moving out of sync. Complete notations work

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1. An eighteenth-century dance seen from above with music notation running across the top. The author of this dance, Molton Tomlinson, wasn’t blind to the decorative appeal of the drawings, since he also sold them as “paper furniture for a Room or Closet...if put in Frames with Glasses.”
best for systems that are already codified, such as court dance or classical ballet, where
you can draw the sweep of an arm, and the detail is understood. Benesh Notation is a
complete system that has worked well for ballet. Developed by Rudolph and Joan
Benesh in the 1950s, it employs a five-line stave, with the bottom line for the feet and
the top for the head. Movement is drawn as curves across the lines: it deals best with
the geometry of ballet. Classical ballet companies across the world employ an army of
people to write and re-interpret this system but despite being taught at ballet schools
it has never really become the universal tool envisaged by its designers.

Another successful movement notation of the twentieth century came out of the
work of a Hungarian movement researcher called Rudolf Laban. He saw the body
as occupying what he called a “kinosphere”, determined by how far we can reach
our limbs out in a three-dimensional circle from our centre, like Leonardo da Vinci’s
spreadeagled man. He analysed movement as a combination of four things: time,
weight, space and flow. His theories of dance were part of the inter-war German
interest in the body and nature. The notation system based on his ideas was
developed in the 1920s and 1930s by his pupil Albrecht Knust. It looks like what it is:
a painstaking scientific breakdown of the movement.

After being banned (at the last minute) by Goebbels from showing his choreography
at the 1936 Olympic Games, Laban fled to England. There, he put his ideas to good use
for the war effort, by giving classes to factory workers in “Laban-Lawrence Industrial
Rhythm”, an early time-and-motion study that sought to improve efficiency at work.
His analysis of the body in motion remains important, though, and is one of the
tools used by American choreographer William Forsythe (with his company Ballet
Frankfurt) in his deconstruction of ballet.

The process of dance-making today is organic and intimate, one on one: it does
not lend itself easily to being overformalised. There is a blurred line between maker
and performer, each bouncing things off the other in an endless feedback loop. The
choreographer throws ideas to the dancers, trying to find the thing that best enables
each unique physicality, which is then shaped and edited immediately. The job of the
performers is to stay two steps ahead, responding fast to each image, task or word
and trying to embody them as their own, often making the material themselves. The
choreographer is also searching for the bigger picture, and dance is only one part of
this. As the process grows and work in the theatre begins, then sound, design, light,
and often text and film add more layers and textures.

In the middle of all this complexity it can be difficult to step back and reflect. Many
dance-makers today use some kind of notebook to give them back some private
space in the chaos of the studio. Often these notes are a private reference point for the
choreographer, but occasionally they become a hieroglyphic that the dancer must
translate directly. If a visual image is used like this to find movement, it is usually only
a clue, a way to push the imagination of the performer out of habitual ways in the
manner of some graphic notation for music (see Eye no. 26 vol. 7). Any piece of
choreography, any score, can work only if it enables the dancers to rediscover their
own internal dance and let them take flight. Without that there is no life.

Merce Cunningham, one of the giants of the American modern dance movement,
has always used scores to make his dances. Without these charts and drawings the

2. The "circuit-board" look of
Labanotation changes little from
dance to dance, but hides a wealth
of detail about the time, weight,
space and flow of movement. This
is a transcription of an eighteenth-
century dance similar to the one on
the previous page, though it couldn’t
look more different. Labanotation
was developed in the 1920s and 30s.

3. A page from the notebook of
choreographer Rosemary Butcher,
showing preparatory line and
space drawings for her 1999 piece
Scan. Rough notes like these help
visualise texture and keep track
of the process.

4 (opposite). A handwritten page of
Benesh notation showing part of a
dance for seven men from Kenneth
Macmillan’s 1974 ballet Manon.
The body is seen from behind with
the head on the top line and the
feet on the bottom. Sweeping
curves graphically illustrate the
flow of the movement.
complexity of spatial and rhythmic detail in his pieces would be impossible for him to orchestrate. Cunningham's scores inform the whole idea and landscape of each piece. It is probably his work with the composer John Cage that influenced this unique and musical approach to dance-making, starting with the rhythmic structures they shared in the 1940s. These structures divided time mathematically into pre-decided "parcels", which each could fill in his own way. This experience of working in parallel but without being tied to each other was followed by their discovery in the 1950s of chance methods of composition. Cunningham would have a chart for each aspect of the dance, with dice to be thrown for every possible choice of time, space and movement. The process was laborious, but the pieces that emerged from it led to a new way of seeing performance itself. Multiple events could unfold on stage at the same time and the overlap of different elements was constantly shifting and open to change.

In the past ten years, finding it harder physically to work out the phrases from his charts, Cunningham has turned to computer technology. The Lifeforms software was developed with his help from an animation program. It gives you a digital body and a library of shapes, a timeline for each body in the piece, and a stage that can be looked at from any angle. The current obsession with all things digital means that these pieces are marketed as "cyberdance", but they are a logical continuation of a way of working Cunningham has followed for years. That this is another tool, another way of enabling the event itself, is what makes it radical. In his short autobiographical text, Four Events That Have Led to Large Discoveries (1994), Cunningham lists rhythmic structure, the discovery and application of chance procedures, film camera techniques and the use of software as the moments of important change in his work.
In the past ten years William Forsythe and Ballett Frankfurt have changed the image of ballet. Forsythe’s work has challenged the hierarchies of the form and deconstructed the classical body, making fierce and hyper-articulate dances. He has often used arbitrary timelines to decide when things will happen, written out as a score and then cut from digital clocks on stage. The timeline is often a way to pervert what he calls “anatomical” time, the time of the body falling. It forces the dancer, for instance, either to complete a lot of movement in a short time, or to fill up a long interval with very little movement. Alongside these timelines are often other graphics, cut-ups and space plans, things that the dancer is forced at some level to translate, to understand.

*Hypothetical Stream*, a piece commissioned in 1997 by the French choreographer Daniel Larrieu, was faxed through to the studio as a series of scribbled marks over photocopies of preparatory drawings for Tiepolo paintings. The piece has been remade by four different groups of dancers, each group engineering a radically new dance, but each dance sharing some kind of spirit with its predecessors. Forsythe has also made a CD-ROM called *Improvisation Technologies*, where the line of the movement is superimposed on to the screen in white lines and the hidden architecture of the dance is made visible. More a facilitator for ideas than a score, the program was sent to the Royal Ballet to use in preparation for Forsythe’s 1994 piece *First.*

Scribbled notes will always be a part of the dance maker’s tools, but the biggest revolution has just begun, with the advent of cheap digital recording and editing on video. Once the images are transferred to computer, the choreographer can cut and paste instantly, sculpting the shape of the event in time and sampling from any number of process tapes. Improvisations can be relearnt and a record can be kept not only of finished work but of the piece as it changes, grows or decays in performance. This is a tool for the dancer also, since one of the best ways to learn movement is to see it. When we see a movement, the neurons in that part of the body fire even if we do not actually move, and the brain immediately scans for similar patterns that have already been encoded. Video allows the dancer to look again and again as the information sinks in. The body can move on, knowing the earlier movements are stored safely on tape, and free the physical imagination to find new things.

The ideas that underpin choreography can be a rich source, complex and diverse, but watching dance is no mystery; what you see or feel is what is happening. The joy is that we are all silently skilled in reading body language.

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10 and 11. Two windows from *Improvisation Technologies*, a CD-ROM by American choreographer William Forsythe. The user navigates their way around a series of different methods of generating movement. Technology has allowed the makers to be drawn in lines of motion, articulating the hidden architecture of the dance. These windows show two parts of a section called “dropping curves”, which show the simultaneous circling and falling of the body in space.

12. In 1997 the French choreographer Daniel Larrieu invited William Forsythe to make a new piece for his company. Forsythe was too busy, so his solution was to make a dance communicated entirely by fax, and translated into movement by the dancers themselves. *Hypothetical Stream* is derived from a series of Tiepolo preparatory drawings over which a hieroglyphic of lines and numbers has been scribbled. Dancers love to work with this kind of freedom.

13. This is a score sent by Daniel Larrieu to Jonathan Burrows (the author of this article) who used it to make two dances, *Rewriting and Singing*, in 1999. The basic computer font *Wingdings* is used as a map, with instructions and choices as to how to proceed from A to B.

14 (opposite). Version two of the score for *Honds*, a film made by Jonathan Burrows, Mattéo Pargeon and Adam Roberts in 1994. The idea was for a hand dance that a musician would sight-read live on camera, retaining the hesitation and doubt caused by not knowing what might come next.

15-19. Five stills from the completed film of *Honds*.