

Extrait du Rhuthmos

<http://rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article2351>

Rhythm as Form of Working Process (part 2)

- Recherches

- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains
- Économie et Marxisme - Nouvel article

Date de mise en ligne : Thursday 21 February 2019

Rhuthmos

Table of contents

- [The Rhythmization of Work Songs \(Bücher - 1899\)](#)
- [The Rhythmization of Dance \(Bücher - 1899\)](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

The Rhythmization of Work Songs (Bücher - 1899)

Due to the considerable improvement brought by Bücher to his book, I will, from this section on, use its 1899 version (in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France's version because some pages are missing in the version provided by archive.org). The chapter 3 was devoted to "work songs." According to Bücher, there was originally no rhythm "neither in music nor in language." Rhythm resulted only and directly from "the movement of the body"; it was fully corporeal, that is based on human physiological and psychological substratum. That was, he argued, the reason why each particular activity needed a particular song and also why in some primitive peoples, each individual owned his own rhythms, his own songs, and his own dances.

The rhythmic element is inherent, originally, neither in music nor in language; it comes from outside and derives from the movement of the body, which the song is intended to accompany, and without which it does not occur at all. Therefore every work, every play, every dance has its own song, which is sung on no other occasion, and since the proportions of the body-movement are different in different individuals, then in some primitive peoples everyone owns his own song, over whose possession he jealously watches. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 44, my trans.)

True to its evolutionist method, Bücher then imagined the simplest and supposedly most original forms of song. First, when the work did not produce by itself any "Takttschal - rhythmic sound" (p. 41), simple cries were used, he claimed, to rhythmize work like "the *hopp* and *hopla* in load lifting, the *hohoi* of the sailors when hoisting the anchor, the counting: *one, two, three!*" (p. 41). Soon, instruments were introduced to "substitute the human voice" like the rowers following "*dem Schlage des Tamtam* - the beat of the tam-tam" in Malay countries, or "*dem Takt der Flöte* - the timing of the flute" in Ancient Greece (p. 41). The most common and most effective musical instrument for this purpose was "undoubtedly the drum that is found in primitive peoples everywhere and in the richest variety of forms" especially in Africa (p. 31). Lastly, full rhythmic songs were composed and commonly sung during work in primitive but also in civilized peoples. Rhythm thus became a universal feature of mankind.

These observations extend over such a large number of peoples and cultural levels that we may say that they apply to the whole of humanity [...]. Of many peoples, such as the Negroes and the Malays, it can be said that every bodily activity is accompanied by song, and even in civilized societies [*Kulturnationen*] we still find many remnants of this habit. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 43, my trans.)

Rhythm as Form of Working Process (part 2)

In his review of *Arbeit und Rhythmus* published in 1901, the French linguist Antoine Meillet (1866-1936) strongly objected to the fundamental assumption which backed this evolutionist reconstruction. As far we go back into the past in the oldest "Indo-European languages," he noticed, we find word accents. Since "the word naturally tends to present a certain rhythm," it is clear enough that "poetic and musical rhythm is already in germ in the language," i.e. that if the body is certainly involved in the process, rhythm does certainly not *directly* derived from it. Language and body, body and language should not be opposed.

The author exaggerates the absence of rhythm in language; it is quite true that in no language sentences are subject to rhythm: rhythm appears only in *literature*, poetry or scholarly prose, but the same is not true of the essential unit of language, of the *word*: the word is very often subject to determined conditions of rhythm, and, for example, in the old Indo-European languages, which had a quantitative rhythm (and not an intensity rhythm like the modern languages of Europe), certain successions were avoided. Mr F. de Saussure noted that the Greek avoided, at an earlier date, the forms composed of a succession of three consecutive briefs, and it has since been recognized that Vedic Sanskrit presents the same peculiarity; near two shorts, these languages need a long syllable serving as a rhythmic peak. In languages that have an accent of intensity, the long words have one or more secondary accents. The word, which is the fixed and constant element of language, therefore has a rhythm, just like work. Sentences of ordinary language, destined to satisfy a transitory need, have no rhythm, but poetic and musical rhythm is already in germ in the language, by the mere fact that the word naturally tends to present a certain rhythm. (A. Meillet, juillet 1901, *Revue d'histoire et de critique musicale*, n° 7, p. 294, my trans.)

Meillet's arguments are still extremely valuable to us since they point to the weakest part of Bücher's conception of rhythm. As most of his contemporaries except in very few exceptions like Meumann Bücher based his views exclusively on music and life science, and lacked sufficient knowledge about linguistics and poetics. In Germany, the Romantic contribution to rhythmology (see vol. 2, chap. 4), which had culminated with Goethe (died in 1832) and Humboldt (died in 1835), had been completely marginalized at the end of the 19th century. This obliteration is one of the factors that explain the domination of the Platonic metric paradigm to the expense of the alternative views that had yet developed among artists in the second half of the 19th century (see vol. 2, chap. 8).

Despite his evolutionist prejudice and his ignorance of the latest developments in linguistics and poetics, Bücher was very careful in collecting the maximum number of musicological and ethnographic data. This must be emphasized if we are to understand his extraordinary success among musicians, artists, and even some poets, at the beginning of the 20th century. Most of the content of the second chapter concerned work songs collected in various societies around the globe or in Western ancient history, and the body movements they were associated with. This is the part of the book that underwent the largest changes in the second edition, being expanded from 43 to 257 pages.

It is not necessary here to go into detail. Most of the time, Bücher contrasted the poorness of the melodies and the steadfastness of the rhythms. In the Baedeker's guidebook for Egypt, he found this description.

These songs [at work or in daily life] are definitely lacking melody: they all are sung through the nose, according to a certain rhythm, [...] in such a way that after six to eight tones the singer arbitrarily changes it [the melody], just depending on his mood. The character of the resulting melody is very monotone and without euphony for a European ear. (Baedeker, Egypt, probably 1885, quoted in *Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 46, my trans.)

He also insisted on the primacy of the body movement over the song rhythm. It was wrong to think, as Guillaume Villoteau (1759-1839), that the Egyptian water workers "performed, while drawing water, 'according to the beat [*nach dem Takte*] of their songs.' Rather, as the notes show, the time of the songs [*in ihrem Zeitmass*] is adapted to the movements of the workers" (p. 36). Similarly, an Ancient Greek mill song from Lesbos did not respect the metric rules "probably because it followed the movement of the millstone" (p. 38). This point was so important to him that he added in the 1899 edition a paragraph in which he extended his idea not only to music but also to speech.

These examples, and the many others alike, clearly show that in these primitive peoples singing requires a metric regulator [*eines metrischen Regulators*]. Such [regulator], however, is obviously not to be found in the sounds emanating from the drum, the pukuta, or the hand clapping, the feet stomping, but in the rhythmic movement of the body which produces those sounds. The rhythm of movement is thus the cause of the rhythmic course of the speech sounds, and we may provisionally assume that the latter is not possible without the former. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 55, my trans.)

He then listed and classified the songs related with the various kinds of work involving bodily rhythms, be they performed alone or in a group: grinding wheat; preparing, spinning, and weaving wool or flax; lace-making; braiding; blacksmithing; field farming; winegrowing; winemaking; hunting (1896, p. 37-54). The next two sections were devoted to differentiate, just as in his previous book, the "alternate" (1896, p. 54-60) from the "synchronized work rhythms" (1896, p. 60-73). Noticeably, he kept the same classification in the 1899 expanded edition in which it was exposed at length in new chapter 4, considerably enlarged (1899, p. 60-194).

In 1899, Bücher introduced, at this point, a lot of new materials in a new chapter numbered 5 entitled "*Die Anwendung des Arbeitsgesanges zum Zusammenhalten grösserer Menschenmassen* - The Use of the Work Song to Hold Together Larger Human Crowds." This new chapter aimed at accounting for songs used in occasions of gatherings larger than a mere team of workers on a field or in a forge. Bücher first listed and differentiated in his introduction marching-, war-, hunting-, caravan-, procession-, hiking- and neighborly help songs, then provided ethnographical material gathered from Africa, China and East-Asia, Georgia, South Slav countries, Russia, Estonia and Latvia, and German speaking countries. In all those cases, rhythm was used to coordinate the actions of a large crowd.

Wherever a very large number of people gather together to do the same thing, the need for an orderly and regular [*geordneten, gleichmässigen*] procedure becomes obvious, even if every individual is capable of achieving the goal which he has set for himself. The song proves to be an ordering power as well as a means of encouragement and refreshment. This is why, in an almost instinctive expression, it breaks forth, and the mass complies willingly to its rule. Everyone strives to move according to its beat [*nach seinem Takte*], and the unordered crowd thus becomes by itself a unitary body. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 195, my trans.)

The Rhythmization of Dance (Bücher - 1899)

In chapter 6, which was also entirely new, Bücher addressed "*Gesang mit andern Arten der Körperbewegung* - Song with Other Types of Body Movement," such as dancing, cradle rocking, magic spell, exorcism, blessing, and healing

performing.

The section on dancing was particularly rich and attracted immediately the attention of pedagogues and "life reformers" as the Swiss Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) and dancers as Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) who used it as a scientific basis to sustain their own artistic and ethical research on rhythm. Since the latter belong to a world different from the one considered in this book which limits itself to human science, I will address their important contributions in another volume. However, it is easy to imagine the enthusiasm of these artists when they read the following lines concerning much wider and more expressive uses of the body than those practiced in the 19th century in body exercises and in ballroom as well as in ballet dances.

The dance of primitive peoples is not like ours merely a movement of the feet. There are dances performed while standing and sitting, the last especially in the South Sea islands. The Javanese dancers use almost only their hands and fingers. Many oriental dances are based on knee and hip movements. The upper part of the body, the head, actually all parts of the body capable of a peculiar movement, are used. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 254, my trans.)

Instead of the common emphasis on melody and harmony, Bücher also insisted on the centrality of rhythm in primitive dances. According to him, they all were representing common "processes and actions" in rhythmic forms. Although the case was not as clear as he claimed, this comment remarkably anticipated the imminent research on rhythm by dancers as Laban or musicians such as Stravinsky (1882-1971).

We must therefore say that the dance of these peoples is rhythmic bodily movement *par excellence*. Its goal is a rhythmic representation [*rhythmische Darstellung*] of processes and actions which in and of themselves are not rhythmic, or a rhythmic figuration [*rhythmische Figuration*] of activities in which [by contrast] the rhythm is not usually lacking in daily life. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 254, my trans.)

In recognizing the fully artistic nature of primitive dances, Bücher was also perfectly in tune with the primitivist aesthetic that was developing in those years. Modern man was not the only one to be capable of art. Moreover, he could certainly find new expressive resources in primitive cultures; art was a common medium that connected the civilized man to his primitive forbear.

Thus the rhythmically moving human body becomes in dancing an artistic means of expression, and the tendency in human nature to rhythmically configure movements finds its highest perfection in dancing, in which it succeeds in achieving aesthetic effects. If poetry has been designated as the sculpture of the inner life, then the dance of primitive peoples may be deemed to be a sculpture of the external life, after the latter has passed through man's spiritual center. It is true that, in addition to mimetic elements, dance can and must express feelings. But with primitive peoples, it is always the whole body movement, arranged according to certain proportions and aiming at the pleasure of the spectators, which constitutes, in an inseparable association with song and music, the essence of the dance. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 254, my trans.)

Rhythm as Form of Working Process (part 2)

Finally, in emphasizing the inseparability of music, poetry, and dance in primitive cultures, including in certain European folk traditions, Bücher provided ethnographical and anthropological evidence in favor of the widespread Wagnerian artistic motto of *Gesamtkunstwerk* - total work of art.

Dancing, singing and playing are inseparable to Spanish people. You do not dance without singing a song and playing an instrument. You do not hear a song or an instrument without giving the body the fleeting movement of the rhythm. Thus, because dancing, singing, and playing are practiced at the same time, there is a limit to these amusements: the dance does not become wild jumping, the song mere shouting, the accompanying music remains simple (raw, if you want), [and this has been unchanged] for centuries, for millennia. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 279, my trans.)

The conclusion of Bücher's survey in chapter 6 was that dance, music, and poetry had grown together in primitive cultures, and that rhythm was their common source. The problem was therefore to identify the source of the rhythm itself.

Our investigation has shown us body movement, music and poetry in close mutual connection. How did they originally join together? Were these three elements originally independent from each other, first existing by themselves, as in our cultural world, and then connecting only incidentally? Or did they emerge together and were they separated from each other only later on through a slow differentiation process? And if this is the case, which one of the three elements formed the nucleus with which the others two joined? In order to answer these questions, we can start from the fact that it is generally acknowledged that, originally, poetry and music are never separate. On a regular basis, poetry is also singing; lyrics and tune arise together, none of them can exist without the other. But we already know that for primitive peoples the essence of this double structure, the song, is its rhythm. Where does the latter come from? (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 299, my trans.)

[Next chapter](#)