

DANCE, SENSES, URBAN CONTEXTS

Dance and the Senses · Dancing and Dance Cultures in Urban Contexts



**29th Symposium of the ICTM
Study Group on Ethnochoreology
July 9–16, 2016
Retzhof Castle, Styria, Austria**

Editor

Kendra Stepputat

Copy-editors

Liz Mellish

Andriy Nahachewsky

Kurt Schatz

Doris Schweinzer

**ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology
Institute of Ethnomusicology, University of Music and Performing Arts Graz
Graz, Austria
2017**

Symposium 2016

July 9–16

International Council for Traditional Music

Study Group on Ethnochoreology

The 29th Symposium was organized by the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology, and hosted by the Institute of Ethnomusicology, University of Music and Performing Arts Graz in cooperation with the Styrian Government, Sections 'Wissenschaft und Forschung' and 'Volkskultur'



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Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-8440-5337-7

ISSN 0945-0912

Shaker Verlag GmbH · Kaiserstraße 100 · D-52134 Herzogenrath

Telefon: 0049 24 07 / 95 96 0 · Telefax: 0049 24 07 / 95 96 9

Internet: www.shaker.de · eMail: info@shaker.de

Atsuki INOUE

THE SEPARATION OF DANCE AND MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN:
AN INQUIRY INTO THE STANDARDIZATION OF BALLROOM DANCE

In this article based on my fieldwork, I illustrate the relationship between dance and music which resulted from the standardization of ballroom dancing in Japan. In his recent study [2008], ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino noticed that most scholars separate dance too much from music. He suggested it is important to look again at the reality that dance and music exist together. Some scholars already have, similarly, pointed out the 'separation' of the music from dance. I contribute to this recent discussion of dance and music by showing that this 'separation' is not only present among researchers and their conceptual models, but also in the real world of dancers.

Keywords: dance and music; ballroom dance; standardization; separation; Japan

It is quite easy to imagine that, when we hear some good music, we feel like swinging our bodies, rocking, swaying and bobbing our heads and moving our hands a little. Such a feeling seems primordial, coming without any effort. Based on this, we might say that dance and music are fundamentally mixed together.

When looking around, however, we can find many examples of dance and music that seem to exist independently. For example, there are many classic music concerts where only musicians play. On the other hand, there are many dance events where only dancers show their performance. It looks like dance and music exist as mutually independent activities. But it is very difficult to imagine music without tiny movements as seeds of dance, or to imagine dance without any music.

The scholarly interest in both dance and music has grown against the backdrop of the recent reexamination of the dance/music dichotomy that once served as a fundamental framework of dance studies and music studies. That framework presumes the contrast between dance, which later narrowed its focus to "movement", and music, which focused on "sound". However, that framework has recently been reconsidered in respect to a simple fact in the world, namely, dance and music exist simultaneously [Mohd Anis Md Nor, Stepputat 2016; Eriksson, Nilsson 2010; Turino 2008].

In this article, I will illustrate the process of separation of dance and music. More specifically, I ask not how dance and music interrelate harmoniously but how they may be thought of as separated. I believe this direction of investigation may contribute to recent discussion. The material I examine is Japanese ballroom dance and music, and I focus mainly on dance and music genres that have been standardized, played in social gatherings and performed on stage from the beginning of 20th century.

Based on my fieldwork among elderly Japanese people, I will present my ethnographic observations on the separation of dance and music. I find that they dance with "artificial" music, indeed not so much with the music itself but with the counting of numbers. Secondly, I document the separation of dancers and musicians. On this background, I introduce some

participants working against these trends, struggling to dance not to numbers but to the music itself.

I have been a member of the Japanese ballroom dance industry since 1999, before I began to research it consciously. I participated for four years as a student belonging to Hokkaido University's competitive ballroom dancing club, then since 2006, as a competitive dancer and an instructor. Since 2010 I have been engaged in active research. The data for this project is primarily based on my fieldwork in Japanese ballroom dance venues, including schools and music pubs in Sapporo, Hokkaido.

Since my career as ballroom dance teacher and competitive dancer started in 2006, I have been curious about the combination of ballroom dance and Japan. Why do Japanese people engage in such a strongly ordered ballroom dance? Why do I feel something strange when Japanese people participate in ballroom dance? In order to answer these questions, in my PhD research, I focused on three major trends in the Japanese ballroom industry (1) Commoditized and fixed sociability, (2) Separation of dance and music, (3) Hidden sexuality. In this article, I would like to focus on the second trend.

Standardization of ballroom dance in Japan

Generally speaking, in Japan, we call dance styles based on a group of two people, mostly men and women, *Shako* dance. *Shako*, a Japanese word, communicates an attitude of sociability, including friendliness and politeness. Literally meaning "specific dance style practiced for sociability", *Shako* has been a very popular name for most Japanese when describing couple dances from the West. It is frequently thought in Japan, that because of the close physical contact, couple dances are likely to lead to sensual relationship between the man and woman.

Today, in Japan, the majority of participants are elderly people who were part of a craze for ballroom dance in their younger years, from about the 1940s to the 1970s. The rest are usually younger people engaging only in competition or performance in public. It is thought today that there are two aspects of ballroom dancing: one is social ballroom dancing and the other is presentational [Nagai 1991]. We call both of these styles of dancing *Shako* dance.

Japanese pioneer James Hyojiro Kato (1890–1954), once explained why ballroom dance had not become popular in Japan. He might be the first Japanese person to describe the state of Japanese ballroom dance abroad in English, contributing a short story, "Ballroom Dancing in Japan", to *dancing times* in September 1930 [James 1930]. He quoted a celebrated proverb from ancient China, "Boy and girl of seven years and over should never sit together", and indicated that it was difficult to spread the practice of ballroom dance to all Japanese men and women, since most elderly people adhered to this proverb [James 1930:559]. It was widely believed that it was not good for men and women to be close to each other in public spaces.

A Japanese folklorist on dance, Yukichi Kodera (1895–1945) indicated that the practice of couple dancing was not suitable for Japanese culture. Comparing *Bon* dance, a Japanese traditional social dance, he argued that there was no idea of dancing in pairs in Japan. He said:

I always think of dancing in pairs as strange. When they join in *Bon* dance, making circles around the center tower and dancing individually in them, there is a pleasing sense of happiness for Japanese men and women. But no man and woman dance in a couple like European people, for example George and Mary, in public. [Kodera 1928:51–53]

Mainly because of the social norm regarding sexual immorality, both Kato and Kodera thought it would be difficult to spread ballroom dance in Japan. From the 1930s on, dancing in pairs has been regulated by law and social norm.

Under such circumstances, many dance teachers and fans worried about the unpopularity of ballroom dance, and they studied English technique books very hard and tried to present ballroom dance as sophisticated. Under their energetic direction, ballroom dance gradually spread to a broader range of people. In the period after the Second World War, ballroom dance gained in popularity in Japan, especially among young people, mainly for social gatherings. Because of great efforts to popularize it by members of this generation, ballroom dance has become widely practiced as a healthy sport and as a graceful performing art in contemporary Japan (see figure).

Regarding the standardization of ballroom dance, the establishment of the Ballroom Branch of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) was a landmark event. ISTD, founded in 1904, and its Ballroom Branch formed in 1924, is one of world's oldest ballroom dance organizations in the UK. Subsequently, English style ballroom dancing has spread around the world, including Japan in East Asia. The standardization of ballroom dancing has contributed to make learning and teaching dance easy. The musical beat, for example, has become communicated as a series of regular numbers.

During this process, social ballroom dancing, which originally included improvised body movements, has gradually been set apart from performance-oriented ballroom dancing. The latter is influenced by predetermined rules for competition or exhibition.

Some dance scholars have indicated that the standardization of dance is the key to make it a salable product in the world market [McMains 2006, Myers 1984]. During the process of the standardization, ballroom dance has come to include (1) precisely predetermined steps and groups of steps, (2) the transformation of the musical beat into regular numbers and (3) an elegant and proper behavioral code.

Ballroom dance is performed by a pair of individuals with different bodies. They cannot dance to their own personal plans alone, and thus have to pay close attention to each other. The codification of ballroom dancing "emancipated" the dancers from problems that occurred when they couldn't predict their partners' next move, or when they tried to communicate the next step with their partners. Even among nonprofessionals, the majority of ballroom dancers must learn from their teachers about the correct ways of dancing. Also, the music played while dancing has been turned into an instrument in the background, for counting steps. It is now difficult for ordinary people, particularly elderly ones, just to enjoy dancing without receiving formal lessons. Ballroom dancing seems to have become not so much the dynamic bodily dialogue between two bodies as the reproduction of predetermined patterns of body movement without uncertainties.

The separation of dance and music

During my research, I made some very interesting observations. One of them is "dancing to numbers". When they begin ballroom dancing, almost all Japanese participants studiously repeat the numbers, "1,2,3 1,2,3". Whatever music they listen to, they always say "1,2,3 1,2,3" in the same metronomic way, like marching.

In retrospect, when I started ballroom dance, I did the same thing. Teachers often requested that their beginner students say numbers like that. But now, I don't do this when I dance. When I dance, even though counting numbers, I want to dance like singing. Counting numbers is only a temporary aid for learning dance and students gradually don't need counting as they advance. However, almost all Japanese elderly people seem to count the metronomic numbers in ballroom dancing forever.

This ethnographic fact has led me to one question: "what are they dancing to?" Dance anthropologists have long examined questions such as "what is dance?" and "What are people doing when they are dancing?" These are important questions, especially if we see dance as a kind of conversation. In my view, they seem to dance to artificial music, metronomic numbers, not to the music itself. Provisionally I call this situation "the separation of dance and music".

With regards to the relationship between dance and music, the question about how musicians relate to dancers is important. In Japan, the opportunities for dancers and musicians to share musical events have rapidly decreased. Even though some live music dance events are organized, dancers and musicians don't seem to get along with each other. For ballroom dance, it's not too much to say that they are separated.

I encountered the situation many times, where dancers and musicians complained about each other: "Your playing is too quick for dancing!, your playing is not constant enough for dancing, too lame for dancing, too outdated for dancing..." and more. On the other hand, "Why do we need to play with a constant beat?" or, "Your movement is disturbing when we play music. Please sit down and listen more quietly."

How can I understand this situation? I call this situation "the separation of dance and music" too. In the academic world, the concept of "separation" of the music from dance has been pointed out before. For example, in his 1994 article, ethnomusicologist Anthony Seeger said that the study of dance and music have become separated due to the difference in speed of inventing recording devices for each [Seeger 1994:690].

Let me mention another scholar. In his recent study, ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino argues that most scholars have distinguished dance from music too much. He suggests that it is important to take a look again at the reality that dance and music exist together, introducing the concept of "participatory performance", instead of dance alone and music alone [Turino 2008:28]. Thomas Turino, as an ethnomusicologist, now tries to re-integrate music and dance from the side of music studies. I, as a dance anthropologist, try to do the same from the side of dance studies.

As I have explained above, however, this "separation" is not only seen in conceptual arenas but also in real world. Dancers and musicians tend to show less interest in each other in the Japanese ballroom dance scene.

Dancers often mention that it is very difficult to dance to live music because of its uncertainties. Specifically, many dance teachers instruct their students to conceptualize the music as a series of metronomic numbers. Teachers also teach their students to recognize what category of ballroom music they are listening to: *waltz*, *tango*, *rumba*, etc.

The music used here has a fixed tempo. In the process of the ballroom dance standardization, its music has been fixed in constant tempos [Silvester 1933]. Students in

dance schools today learn to conceptualize the music as a series of countable numbers instead of learning to react to the irregularities of live music.

Live music by musicians may be irregular in its tempo and volume. Most students however, don't learn how to react to this irregular music, which sometimes progresses quickly, sometimes slowly, sometimes may be loud or quiet and sometimes melodious or rhythmic. In Japanese ballroom dance, the music has been fixed and dancers are accustomed to it never changing. In fact, in present dance competitions and exhibitions, it is rare to hear live music. That's why dancers may experience difficulties when they dance to live music. Some dancers said that they prefer CDs to live music because dancing to live musicians is unstable and less attractive. The more they are trained in a dance school, including teachers, the more they tend to think so.

Given that a playback device produces the sound, dancers never think about the sound sources. Except perhaps, when the devices break down. In other words, the dancers don't need to listen carefully to the played back music. When the sounds are produced by living musicians, the dancers need to think, for example, that "the tempo has suddenly become quick. Members may be on a roll." When playback devices are used, they don't need to be attentive to such things.

Musicians also say that dancers don't like live music. One said to me "live music is never nice for dancers. Professional teachers, in particular, don't like live music." [Matsuo 2015] Another said "Even though we play for them, they don't dance to our music." [Tajiri 2012] Furthermore, they may not need the presence of dancers at their music events. Some tend to see dancers as a nuisance.

It is true that the musicians want to make their music irregular sometimes to make it more expressive and more beautiful. But they are requested to perform regularly for dancers to count easily. Live musicians certainly can perform regularly. But unlike machines, humans cannot produce perfectly constant sounds. It might be enjoyable to react to such uncertainties. On the other hand, although dancing is one of the most passionate reactions to live music, most musicians don't see dancing to their live performances as a desirable audience response. Dancers and musicians thus have come to separate each other.

Category-centered dancing and music-centered dancing

So far, I've explained a rather negative aspect of the standardization of ballroom dance in Japan. I propose to name such a situation, where dancers and musicians are more likely to be concerned about standardized music, "category-centered" dancing, because both dancers and musicians think about a specific dance category when they join dance/music events. The dancers and musicians are less interested in each other, instead they have more interest in knowledge about ballroom dance.

In contrast, I call dancing "music-centered" when the dancers have less interest in whether a piece of music is a waltz or not, but when they focus on other aspects of the music. Now I'd like to introduce ballroom dance lovers who try dancing to the music itself.

In my previous studies, I observed that most Japanese participants appear to see ballroom dancing as a strict lesson, similar to a Japanese tea ceremony, *Sa-do*, rather than an enjoyable social gathering. Even among nonprofessionals, the majority of participants feel that they

must learn from their teachers about the 'correct' ways of dancing. I once called such dance "over-disciplined ballroom dance".

A man aged in his middle 70s once said to me in a reserved way, "I've found dancing not as interesting as before. It is absolutely monotonous. I want to dance more freely" [Kazama 2015]. This comment struck me because I had believed that those who are dancing are almost all enjoying it on one level or another. For him, the present way of dancing seemed rather "disciplined". He and a few of his friends now try to dance to the music itself. Avoiding metronomic counting as they dance, they manage to enjoy music throughout their bodies. For them, "dancing to music itself" doesn't mean dancing to numbers, neither does it mean dancing to the name of a dance, such as *waltz*, *tango*, or *quickstep*. Sharing only one principle, being a couple, they try to listen carefully to the music and to each other's bodies. Of course, they understand the importance of rhythm. But for them, rhythm is just one element. Dancing to the music itself here includes melody, volume, the feelings of the musicians and singers, temporary changes in quality of voice and sound, the story of songs, and more. They also try to dance to *Karaoke* music that is not standardized for ballroom dancing.¹

Authorized teachers would never allow such experiments because most teachers think that music standardized for ballroom dancing is the only music appropriate for ballroom dance: Dancing to non-standard music is thought to be incorrect and should be avoided in Japanese ballroom dance.

In this *Karaoke* situation, dancing, music playing and singing are less clearly divided. My point is that dancing is realized here as part of a conversation. By reacting to the music itself rather than dancing to transformed numbers, these people seem to achieve an actual conversation with music.

One of the members, another 70 year old man, said "there is no music in the world we cannot dance to. I dance to the music itself. Therefore if musicians and singers play and sing well, I dance well. Conversely, if they perform their music and song poorly, I dance poorly." [Matsumoto 2015].

Conclusions

As the standardized dance has become more popularized, it has become more ossified. It is because a clear border between correct and incorrect way to dance appears among participants. It is also because standardized dance has come to be regarded as correct. In my view, this trend can often be seen in ballroom dance.

Firstly, in this process, some aspects of ballroom dance have been made explicit and orderly, such as careful content of steps and the conceptualization of music as a series of numbers. Most Japanese participants have enthusiastically received this artificial and shallow way of interpreting the music. It can be called a separation of dance and music from the dancers' perspective.

Secondly, while dancers have come to prefer fixed tempos to less regular, live music, musicians have also come to prefer not to play for dancers, but for silent, still audiences. This

¹ Note the woman singing a *Karaoke* song in the photograph. *Karaoke*, a Japanese word, means singing to recorded music, and is very popular in Japan.

is true even though, for such musicians to survive, they need to be high quality players. This phenomenon can be called the separation of dance and music from both dancers' and musicians' perspectives.

Responding to music metronomically has been described as good for dancing in the Japanese ballroom industry, with the exception of full-fledged professional dancers. Dancing to the music itself, which I call music-centered dancing, is a reaction to the current situation of the relations between dance and music.

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Link to original symposium presentation

Inoue, Atsuki (speaker).

2016. What has come from the standardization of dance? An inquiry into the relation between dance and music in ballroom dance in Japan (paper presentation); 12 July. Retzhof, Austria: 29th Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology. <<http://phaidra.kug.ac.at/o:38675>>. (2017 May 3.)