

13th February, 1969

Mrs. Victor Carëll,  
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Dear Beth Dean,

Thank you for your most interesting letter. It was good to hear from you again. I should greatly value any opportunity to combine field activities with you some time and hope we can talk seriously about this soon.

During recording sessions, watching the microphone and tape-recording controls etc., I am not able to observe, continuously, the dancing which accompanies the singing. This does not prevent me however, from being acutely aware of the need for obtaining continuous film of the same event and of the tragic lack of study material of this kind. Many dances have been filmed in the past but to my knowledge very few are completely preserved and with synchronised sound.

In view of this I was especially glad to accept Stefan Haag's invitation to accompany the Trust's little expeditionary force to Arnhem Land last year and to record the dance songs during filming. As you know this was only a pilot project, or experiment. Our aim was merely to obtain continuous films and recordings to enable Benesh movement notations to be made from them. The Budget though reasonably adequate, did not allow for fully synchronised equipment.

At Delissaville and Mandorah (now tourist-ridden) the movements of the Wogadj men who "danced" Jimmy Muluk's Wongga dances (Buffalo, Crab, Crow etc.) were mainly miming or story-telling movements. As far as I was able to judge there was nothing which could be compared with some earlier Wogadj dancing I had observed at Bagot in 1962 and which may have included the movements you mentioned in your letter. It seemed to me that these men, who now perform daily for tourists in the dry season, were not really exerting themselves as dancers, nor could they be blamed for this. But this is another story.

At Bamyili (formerly Beswick) we found Jolly Laiwonga and his group rehearsing for "Open Day" at Bagot, again for tourists. We filmed about 8 to 10 Bungaling Bungaling dances belonging to Laiwonga who, incidentally, sang and danced often simultaneously. These Majali corroborees were, in my opinion, of better quality than the items filmed at Delissaville.

Elphine would have preferred better equipment I know, but in spite of the technical limitations, her Benesh notations seemed to me to be remarkably successful. Last October I saw the Australian Ballet School (Melbourne) students dance to two items from my original song recordings. They had not seen the films beforehand but were able to read and learn the movements from Elphine's notation. In these circumstances no one in their senses would have expected them to perform the movements exactly like Aborigines. Nevertheless, I was very impressed with the possibilities of the Benesh notation as demonstrated by Elphine's work.

After Elphine and Babette left Arnhem Land, I went on to the Kimberleys where I spent three months recording songs and collecting song words. As far as I could see some of the dancing styles in the Kimberleys are quite unlike many Arnhem Land styles. My feelings here are that the sooner comparative dance studies can be commenced, the better.

As in music, some kind of notation is necessary for comparative studies at any level. More attention seems to be given to Labanotation in the studies of ethnic dance which have been published to date. And in your book you have said that many critics consider Benesh notation more suitable for classic ballet than for other forms. Benesh notation seems to me to facilitate the correlation of music and dance sequences by its ready application to the five-lined stave, and in a far less cumbersome and more easily readable way than Labanotation. Do you know of any comparative studies which have been made of these two methods of notation? I should be very grateful to have your thoughts on these matters and I hope we will be able to keep in touch about the possibilities of combined field work.

Yours sincerely,

(Mrs.) Alice M. Moyle,  
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