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Ethnochoreology in the Time of Social / Physical Distancing: Performing, Transmitting and Researching Dance in Conditions of Physical Separation

Since it was impossible to hold the thirty-first regular symposium at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre in the city of Klaipeda, the large number of dance researchers from all over the world gathered within the Study Group for Ethnochoreology of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM), assembled in virtual space on July 20 and 21 with special energy because direct communication and physical contact were impossible. The organiser of this historical meeting, which marked the beginning of a new era in ethnochoreological and anthropological research on dance, and which rallied 94 dance researchers from 34 countries from all over the world from Hawaii to Australia, was a Serbian institution, the Department of Ethnomusicology at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. The aim of the program co-chairs, Selena

Rakočević (Serbia) and Anne von Bibra Wharton (USA), was for the virtual symposium to fully resonate with the current pandemic events in the world. This was the reason why they decided to dedicate it to considering the various aspects of performing, transmitting and researching dance in the global conditions of social distancing and physical separation caused by the virus Covid 19. Therefore, the thematic focus of the meeting was succinctly expressed in the title "Ethnochoreology in a time of social and physical distancing". Due to the fact that the organiser is an institution of higher education, namely, the University of Arts in Belgrade, the majority taking part were scholars and other participants from Serbia (a total of 11 applicants). The presence of participants from our country greatly contributed to the global promotion of Serbian ethnochoreology and Serbian traditional dance and music heritage. Although the so-called Zoom application has recently become favored in online gatherings dedicated to music and dance, this meeting was held on the "Microsoft teams" platform, which provided all the members of the "team" with the long-term availability of presentations and materials exhibited at the meeting, as well as the open opportunity to take part in the discussions through the "raise your hand" option.

Despite the large number of participants who actively took part in the debates after the presentations (which are always plenary within this scholarly group), the number of presenters was not large. There were only eight. The reason for this probably lies in the fact that researchers, and it seems especially danc-

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ers, have still not become fully accustomed to presenting the results of their research through the use of virtual platforms, and that in technical terms everyone has to learn and adapt to new circumstances. The modification of scientific work, not only in the field of research on dance and music, but also in the humanities in general, is a necessity of contemporary research and academic work.

During the presentations and very lively discussions, many different issues of ethnochoreological research were raised. They can be grouped into two problem hubs defined in the opening presentation by Egil Bakka (Emeritus of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology).

The first group of questions that were raised refers to the consideration of the ontological and epistemological bases of ethnochoreology and dance anthropology, since the nature of dance and the sources of knowledge about it have undoubtedly changed in the conditions of screened transmission. As some of presenters demonstrated, their immediate experiences of teaching traditional group dances from different parts of the world through online communication with students and performers have shown that the sensory and perceptual potentials of dances have been modified in all of the sensory aspects of their perception (visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic). Along with that, dance workshops held by dance teachers isolated in their homes during lockdown, have taught us that dances themselves are transformed in relation to the surrounding environment of their performance within the in-door

habitat of the dance teachers' living rooms. In the dynamic presentations of case studies, ethnochoreologists have shown that group dances, such as the *Serbian kolo* (Selena Rakočević, Faculty of Music, Belgrade), the Greek *horos* (Maria Koutsouba, School of Physical Education and Sports Science, Athens), the chain dances of Estonia (Sille Kapper, Tallinn University, Estonia) and the Faroe Islands (Tóta Árnadóttir, University of the Faroe Islands), in the conditions of screened transmission not only lose their perceptual and sensory potentials based on tactile mutual contact and direct intra-group communication, but change their 'nature' by becoming solo dances of mutually distant performers. Due to the perceptual unreliability of online dance transmission, the usage of Labanotation appears as a useful additional teaching method which improves the cognitive processes of acquiring knowledge of a particular dance (Maria Koutsouba, Selena Rakočević). The ontological modifications of dance genres are even more pronounced in cases of the performance of pair dances. The mutual embracing of dance partners as the basic condition for their realisation in the circumstances of the global pandemic becomes not only impossible but also 'forbidden' (Sonja Graf, University of Limerick, Ireland). Besides all these issues are questions regarding aspects of the modification of choreographic work and the stage interpretation of dance heritage (Könczei Csilla, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania): how to create a choreographic work without the direct communication and the physical presence of the performer?

In summarising her thoughts on dance and its research in virtual space, Judy van Zile (Emeritus of the University of Hawaii) pointed out in one of the discussions that the conditions of the screened transmission of dance and its research in virtual space re-actualised the basic questions of ethnochoreology and dance anthropology: 1. What is dance; 2. What is the field; and, 3. What are the determinants that define the 'dance' event? Without giving definitive answers, but in line with the current situation and the ubiquitous global rhetoric of empathy and altruism, Georgina Gore (Emeritus of the Blaise Pascal University, Clermont, France) expressed the firm view that online research is a moral imperative in all the humanities in the 21st century.

Another thematic group of issues that were raised relates to the position of researchers in local university circles, but also in the global network of academic knowledge exchange. In conditions when the Internet is becoming the only space of mutual communication and research work, there appears, more than ever, an open space for the neo-colonial repositioning of power, benefits and availability of technological means (Sevi Bayraktar, University of Music and Dance, Cologne, Germany).

Despite isolation, the fear of uncertainty and the awareness of their own position within the local and global aca-

demic network, most researchers agreed that the emerging circumstances can provide unexpected opportunities for reintegration, solidarity, the creation of new communities of dancers and dance researchers, and, on the other hand, to generate conditions for a new inclusiveness and transparency of all data about dance as an immanent human need for bodily expression. This issue was particularly emphasised by Urmimala Sarkar (the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India), who, in trying to underline the potentials of the global sharing of technological achievements, raised the questions: Is this then a new kind of accumulation by dispossession? Or can this be turned into a call for the empathetic engorging of coming together as a virtual community?

The majority of participants, despite the isolation, separation, and the general and latent feeling of anxiety, agreed that crisis situations can really generate the will for new beginnings. How they will reflect on traditional dances and their research will be shown to all of us in the very near future. As Daniela Ivanova-Nyberg (the Bulgarian Cultural and Heritage Center, Seattle) poetically expressed while summarising the event, dance scholars have to develop 'strategies to keep one's head above water. And to actually swim'.