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Collaboration: Tap Scored and Notes on the *Three Monk Tunes* for Tap Dancer

Anita Feldman and Larry Polansky

TAP SCORED (Anita Feldman)

I am a percussionist and choreographer. My instruments are my tap shoes and my body. About seven years ago, I decided that my childhood passion, tap dancing, was the perfect medium for integrating my varied skills—an extensive modern dance and tap background, a mathematical bent, and several years of percussion training. As I began studying tap again, I saw that it was stuck in tradition. It was performed in solo competitions or in unison chorus lines, in $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ time to pre-existing jazz music. Unfortunately, it was usually entrenched in a dramatic story or, more often, comedy. What excited me was that I could imagine tap dancing standing alone as an intricate, subtle, serious art form.

In 1980 I choreographed my first orchestrated tap dance, *Off-a-Cliff*, an a cappella work for three tap dancers, James Cunneen, Deborah Robertson and myself. In this work, while the dancers always relate to one another, they never tap dance or move their bodies in unison. I used choreographic methods from my modern dance training to create the piece: improvising movement, generating variations by dancing and then setting the movement. I also began to integrate methods of musical composition. First, I notated the rhythms, then made mathematical variations on paper and finally went into the dance studio to choreograph the rhythms. The idea of composing the sound of an entire tap dance, along with the instrumentation, interested me because the process would result in an equality between the two sound elements. I looked for a music composer to collaborate with on this idea.

Larry Polansky, a lecturer at Mills Center for Contem-

Fig. 1. Anita Feldman and Gary Schall performing *Three Monk Tunes* (score by Larry Polansky; choreography by Anita Feldman). (Photo: L.V. Feldman)



porary Music in Oakland, California, was responsive to the idea. He was, moreover, a perfect choice for such a collaboration. His previous work dealt with the transformation of traditional source material such as jazz music and Hebrew prayer tunes into new forms. He also wrote music that was virtuosic in unusual ways, which interested me. During our initial sessions in New York City I began by showing Larry the tonal and rhythmic possibilities of tap dancing while he notated the rhythms. He then returned to the West Coast. Over the next year I received sections of scores, from which emerged an extraordinarily challenging, 30-minute duet for percussionist and tap dancer entitled *Three Monk Tunes*.

I spent from 1983 to 1986 choreographing, refining and performing *Three Monk Tunes*. Each of the work's three sections is uniquely challenging.

"Bemsha Swing", the first section, is a 10-minute journey through a gradually changing phrase of 17 counts. Performing this section from memory is always a challenge, since each phrase is a very subtle variation on the one preceding it. Therefore, I cannot rely on a dancer's muscle memory. I started to work on the section by choreographing the opening and the ending phrases. I translated the opening phrase into a somewhat nonchalant, subtle series of foot movements that walked in a straight line. I thought it would be most interesting, and most clear, to create a contrast between the ending phrase and the opening phrase. To do so I choreographed the ending phrase as a spiraling, full-bodied, dynamic and nonlinear series of movements. After that it was a matter of gradually interspersing parts of the second phrase into the first, getting to know each of the 60 phrases kinesthetically and memorizing them. The phrases were a delight to me because they were unpredictable and different from anything I had ever before seen or heard.

The major concern of "Round Midnight", the next sec-

ABSTRACT

The authors document their first collaboration involving tap dance and new music, describing their goals in collaborating, the process of composing, and the resulting work, *Three Monk Tunes*. In "Tap Scored" Feldman discusses her process of choreography and her work with refining the movement of musicians. In "Notes on the *Three Monk Tunes* for Tap Dancer" Polansky analyzes the score, which includes the taps as one of the instruments. He discusses the effects of Feldman's performance of the work, and future projects with tap dance.

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tion, is the obscure but exact rhythmic relationship between dancer and musician. To the audience it is a quiet, introspective and simple-sounding piece. Since there were many silences between individual phrases, Larry wanted the tap sounds to be almost inaudible. I decided to give myself the added challenge of choreographing off-balance phrases that ended in gently precarious shapes. I wanted the section to have a weighted sense of concentration, and I decided that being sensitive to my balance while also being accurate and quiet would achieve concentration by necessity.

The last section, "I Mean You", with its use of rapid footwork, is the most traditional—the familiar tap magic. This was the only section in which Larry left some tap parts for me to compose. Larry had once told me how Thelonius Monk adapted traditional jazz tunes in ways that were amusing to educated jazz enthusiasts. I decided to do the same thing with the uncomposed tap parts. Using typical tap steps, such as a 'time step', 'buffalo', or 'over-the-top', I performed them backwards, changed the downbeats, double-timed them or altered their usual rhythm in some other way to create unusual combinations based on the traditional steps. These light combinations were interspersed with the driving rhythms composed by Larry.



Fig. 2. Anita Feldman and Gary Schall performing *Tapping Music* (score by Steve Reich; choreography by Anita Feldman). (Photo: L.V. Feldman)

Rehearsing and Performing with Percussionists

I have performed *Three Monk Tunes* with two excellent percussionists, William Winant in Berkeley, California, and Gary Schall in New York City. These performances provided me with valuable insight about differences in the ways that dancers and musicians rehearse and perform.

Before rehearsing *Three Monk Tunes* with a percussionist for the first time, I had spent two months intensely developing and practicing each phrase. I was quite impressed when Winant, with only one day of practice, was able to run through nearly the entire piece. His ability to sight-read, a foreign concept to a dancer, resulted, in our rehearsals, in a pacing that was quite different from what I had expected.

A typical first rehearsal for a choreographed piece consists solely of learning component phrases. When I rehearsed the new tap work with either Winant or Schall, we ran the entire work more times during one session than I believed was within my ability. Immediately after finishing 30 minutes of vigorous dancing, Winant would say impatiently, "O.K. Let's do it again". I now value the practice of running pieces long before all the difficult passages are clarified. The percussionists taught me to gain an understanding

of a phrase by experiencing it repetitively as part of the whole.

Another major contrast between musicians and dancers lies in the fact that during performances musicians use scores, whereas dancers usually do not. The reliance of musicians on scores limits the possibility of visual interest and relating visually to others in their performances.

When we first started performing *Three Monk Tunes*, I felt very alone on stage. As a dancer, I relate to other performers mainly through my vision and my kinesthetic awareness of spatial relationship. In *Three Monk Tunes* I often found myself dancing a few inches away from the percussionist and staring directly at him. He, on the other hand, was looking at the score and relating to me through his sense of hearing; yet it appeared he had no idea that I could tap dance right on his foot.

Some musicians I've interviewed feel that conscious attention to their own movement while playing will somehow lessen the quality of the playing. This, of course, is in complete contrast with a dancer's point of view.

Due to the willingness of the percussionists to memorize the score and accept my direction, the visual aspects of the work have developed greatly. I suggested to them when and how they should relate visually to me or the audience. I've also worked with them on being more aware of their body movement in relationship to the quality of the sound they are making. So, for instance, we worked on expressing the violence of louder sounds through greater effort, or on reflecting silences by suspending their motion, and on how to do this in a way that looks natural. The greatest visual and theatrical progress was made during a month-long tour of Japan, where Schall and I gave 16 performances of *Three Monk Tunes* (Fig. 1). The Japanese pay so much attention to visual details in all of their art forms, including their new music concerts, that it inspired us to greater visual refinement.

In turn Schall and Winant worked with me on developing my ear for rhythmic accuracy. This was extremely helpful as it addressed a problem that is common to many dancers: unconsciously lagging slightly behind the beat. The percussionists' and composers' ability to hear subtle inaccuracies helped greatly in developing my own sensitivity in this regard.

Tap Dancer as Choreographer

Being a choreographer as well as a percussionist provides me with certain creative freedoms. When tapping out a score I have more decisions to make than a musician playing the score.

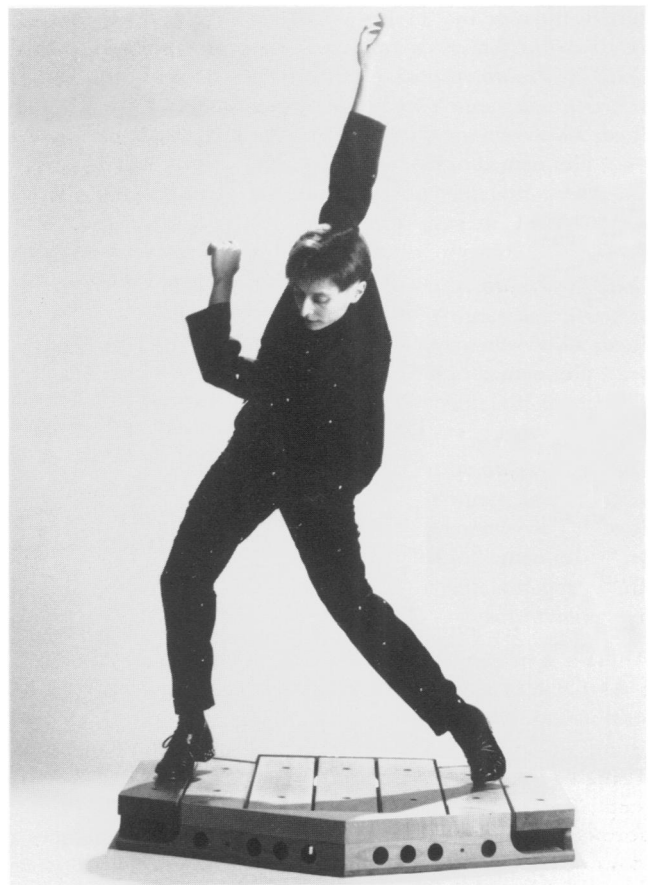
In 1984, Steve Reich generously allowed me to realize his score *Clapping Music* as a tap dance duet for myself and T. J. Rizzo. The score dictates that one percussionist clap the same six-count phrase for the entire piece. The other percussionist begins by clapping the identical rhythm but moves the '1' over by an eighth note every 12 repetitions. This process continues until the two musicians are playing in unison once again. I will use this work, which I have called *Tapping Music*, to further explain my choreographic process (Fig. 2).

In learning a new piece, a percussionist usually finds the most efficient way to play each rhythm. My process is totally different. There are innumerable ways I can play/dance any rhythmic phrase. Rather than find the most efficient way, I try to find a visually interesting way to complement or contrast the sound. I am most interested in discovering new coordination patterns for my body parts. This is one reason I need more rehearsal time than a musician. What the rest of my body is doing is often as intricate, and usually as important, as what my feet are doing. Sometimes that body movement grows naturally out of my foot movements, while at other times it is quite independent of these movements.

My decisions about body movement relate to the overall quality and structure of the work. In *Tapping Music*, for instance, the entire structure of the score is realized not only by the sound of the feet but also by the complex gestural arm patterns.

In choreographing a new work, I analyze a score in terms of its structural aspects, such as repetitions, types of variations, major contrasts, how the work proceeds and, more recently, imagery. It is my decision whether to match the dance with the score or to choose choreographic structures of my own. The simple progression of *Tapping Music* left me room to layer a variety of movement structures on it. Because there was so much repetition, I decided to choreograph many contrasting ways to tap the same six-count rhythm. For instance, I choreographed a turning movement for one phrase, an elevating movement for another phrase, a twisting movement for yet

Fig. 3. One section of "Tap Dance Instrument" (TDI), a multitimbral, multipitched floor/ sculpture. Designed by Anita Feldman and Daniel Schmidt, it combines electronics and MIDI processing with tap dancing.



another and so on. As the piece proceeded I kept inserting more and more of these variations. The work built in visual complexity but not in aural complexity. I also experimented with two ways of shifting the phrase by an eighth note. At the beginning of the piece I shifted the rhythm and the movement. With the inserted movements I shifted the sound, as the score dictated, but always used the same movement so that the order of the movement did not change but the silences and the accents within the movement did. This shifting resulted in a different visual relationship between dancers, even though the aural relationship remained constant.

Sometimes a subtle emotional idea arises from these dances as a result of this purely formal method of choreography. As I described earlier, *Tapping Music* begins with score and choreography in unison. As one part shifts, the rhythm moves further away from the original, until at a certain point halfway through the piece it begins to circle back, returning finally to where it began. This formula influences the spatial relationship of the two dancers. At times the dancers are so close to each other that their bodies intertwine. As the phrases become less synchronized, the dancers move further and further apart, until they find themselves on op-

posite sides of the stage facing away from each other.

In choreographing *Tapping Music* and *Three Monk Tunes*, I derived corresponding or contrasting ideas for the movement, the spacing and the overall structure of each dance from the respective score's structure. My goal is to create a subtle blend of sound and movement, both derived from the same source, not necessarily sharing all the same structures but together creating a modern expression of tap dance.

Postscript

Since the making of *Three Monk Tunes*, I have continued striving to expand the range of tap dance. While collaborating with composer Lois V. Vierk on three works, we developed a new method of co-creation in which together we form the basic ideas, the phrases and the overall structure from the beginning of the creative process, rather than my working with a pre-composed score. In my second collaboration with Vierk, titled *Hexa*, which premiered at the American Dance Festival in 1988, we worked extensively with live processing of amplified taps through a digital delay audio system for the first time.

In addition, percussionist Gary Schall and I have continued to extend the importance of the movement of the

percussionist. In our latest work, *Landings Take-Off*, which premiered at the Colorado Dance Festival in June 1990, we composed much of his music, as well as my own, using the spatial relationship between the movement of his drumming and the movement of my feet as our primary consideration.

My most recent development is "The Tap Dance Instrument" (TDI) (patented), a multitimbral and multipitched floor sculpture designed by myself and instrument maker Daniel Schmidt (Fig. 3). Because the resulting sounds are varied and because the instrument can be so well amplified, the TDI will open up new realms for the use of electronics and MIDI processing with tap dancing.

NOTES ON THE *THREE MONK TUNES* FOR TAP DANCER (Larry Polansky)

I first met Anita Feldman in December 1980 while in New York City. She told me that she was interested in collaborating with me in—of all things—pieces for tap dancers. Her interest in my work confused me somewhat because my experimentation was mainly concerned with form, intonation and the integration of traditional American styles. But the prospect of a collaboration also excited me, because I saw an opportunity to try out some of my more formal ideas in a wonderfully corporeal context.

I was at that time rapidly coming to the conclusion that the Western tradition compared to other musical cultures of the world was quite backward in terms of its understanding and serious exploration of rhythm (with some notable, if recent, exceptions). Working with a tap dancer seemed like an interesting way for me to begin my own rhythmic experimentations. Anita suggested I drop by her studio, where we could talk about a possible collaboration and where she could also give me a demonstration of tap steps, techniques and terminology.

Following that afternoon's education

a few things stuck in my mind. First, I was amazed at the level of rhythmic density and accuracy Anita could achieve with her feet. I asked her to show me some non-duple grupetti and she was able to perform fives and sevens rather easily, much as a rudimental drummer can measure strokes to a roll. The names of the various steps also intrigued me. The poetic implications of terms like a 'buffalo' caught my attention even though now I probably couldn't reconstruct any of their meanings.

Another thing that intrigued me, though I didn't mention this to Anita for fear of discouraging her, was the remarkable paucity of available timbres, something that appealed to my own aesthetic sense. Most of my percussion pieces had only made use of instruments like muffled tenor and snare drums, tom-toms and bass drums, and I had always been interested, when using percussion, in avoiding many of the more 'interesting' timbres. Although Anita frequently stressed her interest in expanding the timbral language of tap (using sand and different surfaces to increase the palate), I didn't have the heart to tell her that my own sonic inclinations at that point would most likely lead me to seek the most straightforward timbre imaginable—tap shoes on a wood floor—so as to allow the formal and rhythmic experiments to be perceived in what I thought was a 'purer' context.

Finally, I saw and heard in Anita's performance/demonstration something that I had only perceived in the finest musicians—a wonderful integration of sound and movement. The movement's main goal was the production of sound; but in doing so, the movement engendered its own unique performance life. One of the compositional difficulties I had previously had with Western classical music was its reliance on an essentially nineteenth-century set of distinctions between performer and audience and, more importantly, between performer and sound. I saw and heard in Anita's sounds/motions a possibility for that situation to evolve.

Writing *Three Monk Tunes*

After returning home to California, I began the work almost immediately. I had recently begun investigating (along with my colleague, David Rosenboom) a formalization of the perceptual and compositional notions of morphological primitives—how motivic ideas are transformed, what makes one morphology or shape 'close' to another and so on. I have written about this at length and have usually called it the study of morphological metrics—the study of distance functions between shapes [1]. David and I were (and still are) working on computer and theoretical applications of these ideas and have implemented many of them in our computer compositional and performance language "HMSL" (Hierarchical Music Specification Language), which has also been described at some length elsewhere [2]. These ideas were nascent at the time Anita and I began to work together, and they assumed prime importance in *Three Monk Tunes*.

At the same time, almost all of my work up to that point had in some way used traditional American sources for its inspiration. My reasons for using these found sources included a desire to erase distinctions between art/folk/jazz/traditional/... musics, and a simple love and deep respect for the musics on which I had cut my musical teeth. It seemed natural, especially since tap is one of our truly indigenous art forms, to try to develop this idea in terms of the dance work.

Some fundamental, almost technical problems needed to be resolved. The first was how to notate the tap. My notational style, with the exception of several pieces that are almost completely visual scores, had always been quite traditional. I decided to write the tap part in an extremely straightforward way, as if it were simply two drums (high and low for heel and toe taps). In the first movement, I also used clapping, finger snapping and vocal grunts, but all of these sounds, including the tap, were condensed onto one staff. I made no notational distinction be-

Fig. 4. Measure 2 from "Bemsha Swing", the first movement of *Three Monk Tunes* by Larry Polansky.

Fig. 5. Measures 21 (top), 42 (middle) and 58 (bottom) from “Bemsha Swing”, the first movement of *Three Monk Tunes*.

tween right and left feet but tried to keep those kinds of physical implications in mind in the composition of the rhythms.

These notational decisions related in a quite essential fashion to the problem I perceived in defining the nature of the collaboration. Respecting Anita’s role as a choreographer, it was my intention to convey movement information only when it directly related to the sound. For example, in the second movement, which is extremely quiet and nonmetrical, I asked her to move very little, perhaps even stand in one place. Eventually she changed this considerably—much to my liking—but I think that my original conception of the movement allowed her to find a more developed choreographic form that was still consistent, even resonant, with the sonic and structural ideas on the page.

About *Three Monk Tunes*

The piece on which we collaborated is called *Three Monk Tunes* for tap dancer and percussionist. Each of the three movements is a setting of a song by Thelonius Monk: “Bemsha Swing”,

“Round Midnight” and “I Mean You”. The choice of Monk’s music was motivated in part by the fact that he, along with Eric Dolphy, was one of the most important influences in my early musical development, and in part by the wonderful, if possibly apocryphal, image of Monk rising from the piano and dancing around on stage when the music moved him.

Three compositional ideas unite all the movements. First, each explores the systematic morphogenesis or transformation of a given melodic/rhythmic motive. In this case, the motives are the almost primitive, highly repetitive melodies that Monk himself used in the case of “Bemsha Swing” and “I Mean You”, and the more complex melodic movement of “Round Midnight”. Second, it was my intention to avoid squaring off the rhythm whenever possible, in a deliberate homage to Monk. This motivation resulted in the 17-beat phrase which is the basis of the first movement, the complex grupetti of the second, and the abrupt shifts of the 17 short sections of the third. Finally, I wanted to explore the concept of unison, and each movement interprets the

notion of two performers playing the same thing in a different way.

The first movement, 12 minutes of nonstop movement for the dancer and percussionist, is played on tuned woodblocks and marimba. It was originally scored for bass clarinet and dancer with the clarinetist playing key-clicks for the nonpitched sounds, but for reasons of rhythmic clarity it was rescored for one percussionist. The dancer and percussionist begin in unison with a 17-beat phrase that is a complex development of the first line of “Bemsha Swing” (Fig. 4). As the piece progresses, both parts are subjected to a formal process of simplification, beat by beat, with the percussion part gradually adding in pitches. Figure 5 shows three separate measures of the piece, each placed successively further along in the movement. The transformation process is too complicated to describe here. What is important to point out is that although the same transformation is applied to both parts, it does not happen on the same beats (because the process is started out of phase). The result is a complex and changing pattern, slightly different in each measure.

Vibes, el. piano,
guitar, etc.

Tap

The image displays a handwritten musical score for the piece "Round Midnight". It consists of seven systems of music, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a tap line (bass clef). The notation is highly detailed, featuring numerous slurs, accents, and dynamic markings such as "soft" and "ppp". The tap line includes numerical values in parentheses, representing tempo deviations from a quarter-note pulse. A legend at the bottom right explains that these small numbers in parentheses indicate hundredths of a beat deviation from a quarter-note pulse (where 60 = 1 beat). The score includes measures numbered 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, and 19. The overall style is that of a working manuscript, with clear rhythmic relationships between the vocal and tap parts.

Fig. 6. "Round Midnight", page 2 of the second movement of *Three Monk Tunes*.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Anita's performance was her ability to memorize this movement, which consisted of some 60 complex 17-beat measures, no two exactly the same.

The second movement uses a similar transformation process on each line of

the tune "Round Midnight". Here the main result is to create various restructurings of the tempo, manifested in a difficult-to-perform succession of gruppetto relationships. Figure 6 provides an excerpt from this movement. The notational method used for these

rhythmic relationships retains the spatial integrity of the underlying quarter-note tempo and then lines up the resulting rhythms exactly above that. The performers are also given numerical indications, in hundredths of the quarter-note pulse, as to where the given beats

