

**Abstract for European League Institute of the Art's  
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**Crossing the Pond: Cultural Influences in  
Collaborative Music and Dance Improvisation**

by

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**Premise.** This is a brief oral presentation with a workshop. This collaborative project investigated dance and music and how we think about making/creating art as a viable cross-cultural activity. Chicago choreographer Diane Wawrejko commissioned composer Stephen Johnson, who blended traditional Swiss alphorn music with American jazz, to create an original composition. She then set an experimental improvisation on a Swiss ballet company in July 2009. Through the music and dance structures selected, the flux between cultures, albeit Western, emerged. During the conference session, those attending will engage in improvisational dance and music, and then reflect on their own thoughts while engaged in these creative activities from their own perspectives of culture, age, physical limitations, etc. In what ways did non-American bodies respond to culturally stylistic movement, and how did Eurocentric dancers choose to embody certain dance improvisations? How can improvisation cause us to re-think how we make/create art, and to what extent are our understandings and cultural development shared?

**Methods.** The dance improvisational structures used were based upon the work of American modern dancer Daniel Nagrin whose choreographic methods improvisationally employ the body, mind, rhythmic pulse, and motivation to create metaphors which are taken into the moving body. A decentring occurs when interaction with other improvising dancers cause a shift from self to others as all participants become co-creators in the process. Within this fluid immediacy, improvisation's various factors contribute to its unstable qualities shaped by the dancer's body which act as a catalyst for successful transmission of cross-cultural creativity and change; not only by its technical prowess and agility, but also by such constructs as age, mindset, heritage, and culture.

These constructs also become significant when the musical composition is a hybridity of two culturally distinct musical genres presenting both familiar and unfamiliar musical elements to the listener/dancer. Three notable distinctions problematise the contrast and juxtaposition of American jazz with the Swiss alphorn music, "*Der Meiringer*". The alphorn, similar to a bugle with no valves, is limited by its single overtone series and acoustically is incapable of performing chromatic notes, which distinguish American jazz (ie, "blue" notes and other non-chord tones). Secondly, the musical phrasing in jazz usually is regular or the phrases are of the same length, but the musical phrases in "*Der Meiringer*" are irregular in length. Third, the simple monophonic texture found in the alphorn music contrasted with the rich harmonies often associated with jazz.

## SUMMARY.

This paper takes a look at dance and music praxis and performance that can transform how we think about making/creating art as a viable cross-cultural activity. Chicago choreographer Diane Wawrejko set an experimental improvisation on Swiss ballet company students in July 2009 and commissioned composer Stephen Johnson who combined elements of Swiss alphorn folk music and traditional American jazz. Through the music and dance structures selected, the flux between cultures, albeit Western, emerged. Improvisation's various factors contributed to its unstable qualities shaped by the dancer's body which act as a catalyst for successful transmission of cross-cultural creativity and change.

## PROMPTS.

1. In what ways did the use of dance improvisation change how we think about creating cross-cultural art and bridging other cultures? What worked in Switzerland?
2. What were some of the major obstacles in embodying cross-cultural music and dance concepts?
3. How can music composition reconcile cross-cultural musical differences, such as phrasing, texture, and rhythm, which enhance each culture's process of creating?

**BIOs.**

**Diane Wawrejko, PhD, MFA** choreographer, educator, and scholar, has served in the dance and humanities faculty at Columbia College Chicago. She was selected as the sole exchange artist from the city of Chicago to Lucerne, CH for July 2009. A Senior Fulbright Scholar in dance Fall 2006 in Sofia, Bulgaria, she received a PhD in dance studies from the University of Surrey, UK and an MFA in dance choreography from Arizona State University.

**Stephen Johnson, PhD**, conductor and composer, is currently an associate professor in the Department of Music at Clarion University in Clarion, Pennsylvania. Accomplishments include creating and co-directing half-time shows for the World Football League in Europe, a summer of study at Tanglewood, and a recipient of the Presser Foundation Award. He has served as both Associate Dean and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Clarion University. He received a Ph.D from the University of Maryland and a Masters of Music from Arizona State University.