

Finding my rhythm

Sara Marshall-Rose shares her joy of discovering body percussion as a D/deaf community dance practitioner and the journeys it has taken her on, back to her own earliest dance roots and forward in her participatory practice

I was born with congenital deafness.

I live with sensorineural hearing loss. This means that the nerves in my ears are damaged and do not pick up sound clearly.

As a dancer this presents many challenges.

I don't hear high or low sounds, so listening for music cues is tough. Visual or touch cues work best. When waiting for music cues, there is an overwhelming sense of panic and when dancing with hearing contemporaries, I am often left behind as they respond to what appear to me to be invisible cues. Consequently, I prefer to choreograph without music and indulge in embodied experience to create movement material.

My background in dance, however, is steeped in traditional English and American styles, with a few others thrown in! I grew up in a family of musicians, singers and dancers. As a deaf child, I found it difficult to learn many of the necessary skills demonstrated by my family, but I was not going to allow that to stop me trying! My earliest memories are of ceilidhs and barn dances, with strong percussion driving the movement. What I discovered really worked for me was the sound of drums; when drums were in the mix I could dance.

Initially, I thought it was because drums were loud that I could respond to them. I now know it's the resonance that goes through my body that gives me something to work with. Drums keep me in time with other dancers and allow me to be part of that community.

As an adult, I have discovered traditions of stepping. English clog was my first venture into making sounds with my feet, but then I discovered Appalachian Flatfooting – now my passion and speciality. The pulse appealed to me and the movement

involved was more 'whole body' than English clogging, that is very upright and focussed on leg and foot movements. Flatfooting takes the whole body on a visceral pulsating journey and as I researched its history, I learnt of the strong African and Native American (indigenous, the now favoured term for USA Native Americans) influence in the dance, which led me to discovering the phenomenon of body percussion.

Body percussion is purely and simply using the body as a drum – patting, tapping, slapping and stepping

to create rhythmic sounds. Everyone one of us experiences it. When we are excited, we clap our hands, jump up and down and shout. When we become angry, we thump and stomp about. Our very being is rhythmic and the human body is capable of creating so many sounds. Have you ever noticed how the audience applause often becomes synchronised as each person responds to the rhythm around them? I urge you to listen and enjoy the ripples of percussion next time you find yourselves at a performance.

Body percussion is so exciting to watch or be a part of! It enhances movement, builds additional rhythm into any dance piece and has no limits. Originally a vernacular form of communication that evolved as a way of expressing oneself, body percussion is probably one of the earliest forms of communication. As a D/deaf person, I readily engage in visual rhythms offered by others which create sound. I enjoy the resonance as the air moves with the sound created and indulge in the feel of the rhythms as I pat them out on my own body.

A couple of years ago, I was lucky enough to spend time with Keith Terry and Evie Ladin – leading body percussionists from California. Promoters of Body Music and the International Body Music Festival (1), they travel the world discovering, learning and sharing many different styles of body percussion, with a passion and skill that's infectious. They really inspired me to explore body percussion further and gave me confidence to embed it into my own contemporary dance and movement practice, develop my body percussion skills and explore ways of bringing it into my community practice. I have found it to be connective and uplifting as well as challenging to the body-mind connections.





Above and left: Sara Marshall-Rose, Sidmouth Folk Festival Children's Workshop 2019. Photos: Phil Rose

Advantages to body percussion are that it:

- bridges gaps with non-verbal participants and, used non-verbally, it is particularly effective with groups experiencing confidence issues. I can begin by clapping or snapping my fingers in a simple rhythm, participants join me when they are ready, the building rhythm weaves between us creating its own pulse, eventually drawing everyone in. A fantastic ice breaker!
- is completely inclusive and engaging. Any age or ability can access it in some way. It encompasses not only clapping, snapping, stepping and moving, but also vocal sounds and songs. Bringing these together creates a beautiful musicality from the body like no other, the sense of accomplishment and community when this is achieved in a group is empowering and uplifting. Some examples of it working in my practice:

- Children's workshops at the Sidmouth Folk Festival 2019 exploring voice and song. This involved rhythm patterns, starting with the feet and building up to using voice, encompassing moving, singing and body percussion. We choreographed small pieces in pairs, where participants played with rhythm patterns learnt to create their own movement shapes to accompany a learned song. They noticed what they were doing was similar to the playground clapping games learnt at school and therefore felt able to incorporate some movement they already knew. It was fun and the children were really engaged throughout
- My group who have experienced head injury enjoy using percussion to sound out the syllables of their names. Sometimes these are used, other times a movement is used without a sound and when repeated in a pattern this creates a dance. I also

encourage the exploration of the body and awakening its senses by patting it all over, discovering what feels and sounds good; noticing the hollows and the different densities of sound, but also the many different ways that our bodies make it. This has been particularly effective for seated dance practice

- For a learning disabled group, it was a really effective way of engaging on a non-verbal level. Each week they could sound out their movements and were able to remember then build on them week to week, creating layers of movement and sound both within their own bodies and as part of the shared experience.
- Gainsborough Old Time music festival in February 2019. I enjoy 'playing' with sound too! I facilitated a workshop where a sound was thrown into the air, we all waited until someone caught it and passed it around. It was fun, really played with the rhythms in room and created a laughter and silliness that was beautiful to be engaged in and really brought people together
- In general, I always work in the round. This allows the visuals and sound to be available to everyone. It also brings a sense of togetherness that seems to be enjoyed by all.

As a D/deaf dancer, percussive dance opened up new pathways for me, where I could embody the feeling that accompanied the sound, rhythms and pulses travelling through my body. My personal experience of it found me waking up dormant senses and engaged me in dance in a way I have never experienced previously.

Now I have taken that into my practice, whichever groups I work with, there is always a sense of fun when we begin exploring the body percussion. Underlying the fun, though, there is also a more serious aspect to using body percussion that creates an increased awareness of body and self and simultaneously builds a sense of community and togetherness that supports the ability to explore and develop dance activity further.

Info

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References

1. www.internationalbodymusicfestival.com