

Body Music

by Keith Terry



Photo: Grana Sisters

Musical copyist: Thomas Lawrence McKinley

Body Music is that music/dance created by the sounds the body can produce via clapping, slapping, stepping, and vocalizing. Body Music was probably the first music. Before people began slapping rocks and hollowing logs for drums, they were probably stomping, clapping, farting, and grunting to express their musical ideas. There are many Body Musics still thriving today. In the United States, hambone was popular at the turn of the century and is still in practice. Some South Pacific island people create music by clapping and slapping the chest and thighs, and in Morocco, there is a version that involves beating the chest while singing. Certain Sumatran line dances use slapped chests and legs for percussive accompaniment, and in Ethiopia armpit music is produced by groups of players who cup their hands under their arms and force the arm in a downward motion, creating tones with air rushing around and between the fingers of the cupped hand. These are only a few examples of a varied and vital Body Music scene.

"Body Music" is the term I use to describe my work, a name suggested to me in 1979 by friend and colleague, Paul Arslanian. Similarly, I think of Body Music as an umbrella term to describe a form that has existed for centuries. This form is composed of many styles. My own Body Music is not a traditional style, but is certainly influenced and inspired by those that have preceded it. I started working on Body Music in 1979 by displacing my drum patterns onto my body, combining my interest in trap set drumming and rhythm dancing. It also fulfills my desire to do something that is music/dance and yet is totally portable,

acoustic, and self-contained.

I am particularly attracted to those cultures that make no distinction between music and dance and simply would not think of performing one without the other. In Body Music as well there is no such distinction. Since the body movements used to produce the rhythms have visual impact, the player is also a dancer. Unlike most dancers who have a relationship to music (performing either with it, without it, or in spite of it) the Body Musician is the music. Audibly and visually the limbs create a dance of sound, enabling us to see music and to hear dance in ways that are simple yet complex, elemental yet sophisticated.

COMPOSITIONAL FORMS

There are four rhythmic techniques I often draw upon when developing Body Music material: polyrhythms, phasing, cross pulses, and polymeters.

Polyrhythms

Polyrhythms are simply multiple rhythms, two or more rhythms going on simultaneously, hopefully in a musical fashion. Take, for example, a few parts from "Artsia", a piece from the Ewe people in West Africa, shown to me by Ghanaian master drummer, C.K. Ladzekpo. Note how the simple rhythms, when played together, become an elaborate weave of interlocking parts. Polyrhythmic music reminds me of the alignment of wheels and gears inside a clock.

release. Next come the thighs (RT) (LT), which you strike on the front or side. There is no need to reach lower than the natural extension of your arms. This is followed by the hips (RH) (LH). Be certain to make a distinction between the thighs and hips; they create different sounds and the visual contrast is important when considering the movement. The sounds from the feet (RF) (LF) are produced by low, flat-footed, grounded steps with a minimum of extraneous movement. As you move down the body, hear how the pitch descends from your clap, to the chest, the thighs, hips, and down to the feet. The sounds correspond with the trap set, starting with the cymbal and descending tonally to the snare drum, then the side tom, the floor tom, and the bass drum. These are the basic strokes. There are many options and embellishments involving finger snaps, brushes and slides in the feet, playing the mouth, cupping the hands, and so on, but these are the fundamental strokes we will deal with in the following exercises.

Try this series of sounds using all the basic strokes in an ostinato 9 pattern:

Example 6

Now, take the pattern of example 6, leave out the chest strokes, and add a rest at the end of the phrase. Rhythmically it resembles the tap dance time step, "Thank you for the buggy ride." Try it first in a straight 8th-note feel, as in a rock or Latin groove; then with a swing feel, as in a jazz ride with an underlying triplet. A time step is equivalent to a ride in jazz drumming.

Example 7

Now, this time with a friend, or by recording the second part yourself and playing along with the playback, let's phase it as in the example below:

Example 8

By adding a clap in the beginning of the second rhythm, you are displacing the part into a different relationship with the first rhythm, e.g., phasing. Try adding more claps at the beginning to be phased in a different place. Remember to add the extra claps only when you first begin the phrase, not each time it repeats.

Now let's try this time step with another simple rhythm to create polyrhythms:

And another part:

And another:

Example 9

Next, let's try polymeters. If you repeat a 5 pattern in your hands with a 3 in your feet, the result sounds like this:

Example 10

Or try 5s with underlying 4s.

Example 11 shows two systems of rhythmic notation. The first system has two staves: the top staff has notes with labels RC, LC, RT, and LT; the bottom staff has notes with labels RF and LF. The second system also has two staves with similar labels. A 'CONTINUOUS' label is placed to the left of the first system.

Example 11

Try examples 10 and 11 together with a friend or tape recorder. The combined feet parts will be a cross pulse — 4 over 3.

Example 12 shows two lines of rhythmic notation. The top line is labeled '4' and the bottom line is labeled '3'. Both lines consist of a sequence of notes with foot labels.

Example 12

Now try the two parts while phasing the 5s. The permutations are endless. Experiment with your own variations.

BODY MUSIC IN PERFORMANCE

In 1979, I created my first Body Music piece, "Tune for K.B." It was a fifteen minute piece in three sections combining Body Music, tap dance, and choreographed movement while playing portable instruments. The piece was performed for five years in the repertoire of the Jazz Tap Ensemble by Paul Arslanian, Fred Strickler, and myself. The first section was primarily in 12/8. Here is one of the opening patterns:

Example 13 shows a sequence of rhythmic notation with foot labels: RT, LT, RH, LH, RC, LC, LF, RF.

Example 13

During my work with the Jazz Tap Ensemble from 1979 to the beginning of 1984, I also composed "Encore" for six performers, combining Body Music and the "shim sham," a

traditional tap dance. These are three of the parts of a polyrhythmic section of that piece:

Example 14 shows three systems of rhythmic notation. The first system has labels R/LT, R/LT, RT, LT, RH, LF, RF. The second system has labels R/LT, R/LT, RT, LT, RH, LF, RF. The third system has labels R/LT, R/LT, RT, LT, RH, LF, RF.

Example 14

"Out There" was a later work that combined Body Music and tap dance. The following is a break from that piece:

Example 15 shows a sequence of rhythmic notation with foot labels: RF, LF, RT, LT, RH, LH.

Example 15

Tap dance and tap dancers frequently give me rhythmical inspiration for Body Music parts. Over the years dancers such as Honi Coles, Cookie Cook, and Eddie Brown have shown me techniques and steps that have been directly incorporated into what I do. The following Body Music time step was strongly influenced by a tap time step that I heard Camden Richman play:

Example 16 shows a sequence of rhythmic notation with foot labels: RF, LF, RT, LT, RH, LH. A '(R Smar)' label is placed above the notes.

Example 16

In addition to tap dance, a number of musical, dance and theatrical forms have influenced my work — from jazz to circus, to Japanese *kyogen*, South Indian *solkattu*, and Balinese *gamelan*. Also, my experiences of collaborating and performing with a mix of artists representing a wide range of styles and disciplines

continues to expand the limits of my Body Music. Working with artists such as singer Bobby McFerrin, physical comedian Geoff Hoyle, choreographer Kimi Okada, *kathak* dancer Purnima Jha, dancer/actress Blondell Cummings, and Balinese dancer I Wayan Dibia frequently leaves me with a changed perception as to how I see Body Music's potential.

In addition to Body Music's accessibility in a variety of performance contexts, I have found it to be extremely valuable in teaching rhythmic skills to other performers and non-performers, both adults and children. I have worked with modern, ballet, and jazz dance companies, university music, dance and theater departments, the learning impaired, and high school and elementary school students. In all of these contexts Body Music has proven to be a fun and effective way to develop rhythmic skills, coordination, ensemble awareness, and concentration.

There are many aspects of the work that I have not addressed in this brief article, such as movement and spatial considerations, the left/right brain shifts that occur, playing Body Music with other "external" musics, solo versus group work, and the potential for voice in Body Music. Body Music's applicability to a wide range of settings frequently amazes me — it is accessible yet totally unique, crossing cultures and disciplines in its origins, spanning generations in its appeal, and blending artistic sensibilities in its scope.

© 1984 Keith Terry
revised 1989

KEITH TERRY is a percussionist/rhythm dancer/educator whose artistic vision blurs the line between music and dance. In addition to his solo performance, He has collaborated with a wide range of artists such as Charles "Honi" Coles, Turtle Island String Quartet, Jovino Santos Neto, The Jazz Tap Ensemble, Gamelan Sekar Jaya, San Jose Taiko, and Bobby McFerrin. He is The artistic director of: the Crosspulse Percussion Ensemble; Slammin All-Body Band; and Professor Terry's Circus Band Extraordinaire. His large-scale works include the Body Tjak Projects, an on-going series of multi-disciplinary performances involving artists from Indonesia and the Americas, which began in 1980, co-directed with I Wayan Dibia. From 1998 to 2005 Keith was on the faculty at UCLA's Department of World Arts and Cultures, where he designed and taught courses on the relationship of music and dance; deep listening; synchronicity, time and timing; and intercultural communication in the arts. In 2006 he conceived and directed the first international body music performance project in Salzburg with artists from Turkey, Finland, Spain, Austria and the US, produced by the Orff Institute. Keith tours extensively in the Americas, Asia and Europe, where his Body Music workshops, residencies and choreographic commissions are popular among professional performers and educators.

For more information please contact:

Keith Terry
c/o Crosspulse
PO Box 3388
Oakland, California USA 94609
t: 510-601-9797
f: 510-601-9197
w: www.crosspulse.com
m: www.myspace.com/keithterrybodymusic