Tap Musicians: Exploring the Use of Tap Dance as an Instrument Through the Lens of Notation

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Known to very few, there is a written notation for tap dance: Kahnotation. Our research explores the integration of Kahnotation with musical notation. Tap dance is considered to be a performing art rather than a musical instrument. Our goal for this research is to develop a musical notation, derived from Kahnotation, that uses the bass clef and treble clef to incorporate tap as an instrument into a musical score. Multiple versions of tap notation exist; however, one universal form has yet to be codified within the performing arts industry. Synthesizing previous tap notations (that focus on movement patterns) and recalibrating these methods to be used for the codified musical notation. This research bridges the gap between what it means to be a dancer versus a musician. This notation requires that both dancers and musicians are able to understand and execute the written score solely based upon the new notation. Tap dancers are the foundation of this research which correlates to our main objective: rebranding the traditional verbiage of a dancer to a musician.
Kahnotation

• Created by Stanley D. Kahn in 1930-1950
• A form of tap dance movement notation.
• The notation consists of 82 symbols. Approximately 30 are primary symbols and the remainder are compound derivatives.
• This notation uses more obscure symbols, like Bartenieff movement notation.
• We wanted to create a tap notation that is derived from musical notation, and can be incorporated into a musical score.
• We did not end up incorporating any symbols from Kahnotation into our notation, but it was the first big inspiration for our sonic tap notation.
When creating our sonic tap notation, we tried to think of all of the possible tap steps and dissected the sounds that they made to create a very basic notation. We then tried to incorporate music theory and keep the same note notation for beats per sound, so that a musician is able to read and follow our notation. Our focus was to stray away movement notation and gear our efforts towards a more sonic approach to tapping.
We asked all of the participants on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the hardest and 10 being the easiest: How easy was it to learn phrase 1 of the sonic tap notation?

The average answer was 4.25
We asked all of the participants on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the hardest and 10 being the easiest:
How easy was it to learn phrase 2 of the sonic tap notation?

The average answer was 5.5
Phrase 2
We asked all of the participants on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the hardest and 10 being the easiest:

How easy was it to learn phrase 3 of the sonic tap notation?

The average answer was 2.625
Phrase 3
We asked all of the participants on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the hardest and 10 being the easiest:

How easy was it to learn phrase 4 of the sonic tap notation?

The average answer was 5.25
Survey Feedback

Do you believe that sonic tap notation would be useful for the dance/music industry in the future?

- Yes: 62.5%
- Maybe: 37.5%
Survey Feedback

If you answered yes to the previous question. Please give a short/brief descriptions why?

• "This whole idea is super cool and I feel like in the dance/music industry many individuals could benefit from this. Musicians can benefit from this because in the future they could create music with tap dancers and have that be a song people listen to, or dancers can benefit from having a new genre of music to dance too, and even tap dancers can find this useful because there are a bunch if different things they could do with this notation."
Survey Feedback

Any comments, concerns, or ideas for improvements to the sonic tap notation?

• It’s very difficult to decipher what every single note is.
• The key was difficult for me to follow but I can see how the theory could be helpful in dance.
• It might help to be a little more specific about what you mean by each step. It was also hard to understand the transfer of weight, and if you should put weight on a toe, for example, or if it’s just a tap/touch. But there was also a learning curve, which is partially why phrase 1 was harder to understand, because it was the first time. I was able to read it quicker for each phrase
• I definitely think that this is such a cool concept! I think I took pretty much every note very literally, which I think in turn made me deviate from some of the originally intended steps. However it was a lot of fun (and only mildly frustrating) to try and figure it all out! I would love try and use this method at some point while teaching!
Future Direction

• Looking into adapting the notation from notes of survey participants
• Approaching the notation from the view of a musician, rather than dancer and seeing what adjustments should be made.
• Analyzing our score to look for any forgotten sounds or steps
• Adding a metronome so that all the participant's tempos are the same
Thank You!

Q & A