

Plastique Animée: yesterday, today and tomorrow...?

by Karin Greenhead

Introduction

Plastique Animée—or realisation as it is sometimes known today—generally refers to the realisation of a musical composition in movement although as early as 1912 Dalcroze himself speaks of an expressive art of movement in silence or as a dialogue to music. In the diverse practices that have evolved worldwide since this 1921 article was published there are schools that devote themselves to choreography while others do not practise it at all, imagining perhaps that Plastique is an element of the Dalcroze work that is no longer relevant.

Those who have attended FIER congresses will have seen many such choreographies in many different styles that are the result of group collaboration or work by an individual teacher or student.

The story of Plastique Animée is central to the history of the method itself and explains one of the reasons why the spread of this most comprehensive and richest of all teaching methods has been difficult to sustain. Periodically it rises again, as it is now rising, like a phoenix from the ashes of the latest war, artistic or educational reform.

It is interesting to compare the 1921 article with two others: “*Eurhythmics and Moving Plastic*” (1919) and “*How to revive Dancing*” (1912).

In the earliest of these articles Dalcroze (who reveals that he considers the art of dance to be derived from music rather than an art in its own right) deplors the state of classical ballet, as he sees it, grown decadent through the cultivation of virtuosity at the expense of expression and through the lack of unity between body movement and musical rhythm.

In fact he was far from the first to make such judgements. There has from the beginning always been a tension between technical virtuosity and the expressive and social aspects of ballet—perhaps because people enjoy virtuosity: they enjoy the challenge and exhilaration of pushing the body to its limits and watching others do so too. From the early 18th century various critics, dancers and choreographers tried to rescue ballet from its origins as a courtly diversion. One of the first, Noverre, published an influential book in 1760, introducing drama and the expression of human emotion and teaching that musician, choreographer and designer should work together.

In Dalcroze’s own time Fokine^(see Endnotes) wrote as early as 1904 to his superiors that more attention should be paid to the integration of story, music, scenic design and choreography. He said that “*danc-*

ers can and should be expressive from head to foot” and that “*all the arts should have complete equality*”.

Nevertheless Dalcroze thought that even the Russian dancers did not respond appropriately to music. He also criticises Isadora Duncan (who he otherwise admired) for not being able to walk in time and her students for copying the poses on Greek vases without relation to music, rather than moving as an expression of their own personal feeling.

Why was dalcroze so opposed to ballet? The desire to define and reform

Dalcroze saw himself as a pedagogue and social reformer as much as an artist. His jovial and optimistic personality and Apollonian view of life, strongly influenced by the philosophy of Rousseau² and other French writers of the 18th century, had no room for disorder and conflict. The liberation and co-ordination of the natural rhythms of mind and body by means of music through movement would lead students to freedom through the recovery of natural responses suppressed by mechanization, rationalism and restrictive clothes and attitudes. This reawakening and expression of “*primary emotion*” through unblocking the creative urges has no dark or chaotic side, only joy and order. However, the art of the early 20th century became very much concerned with the expression of the dark and conflicted in human nature. Dalcroze constantly tried to discover or define Laws³ or rules governing musical expression (after Lussy⁴), structures, the use of space, balance and movement.

By “*dancer*” Dalcroze meant anyone who interprets music bodily, such as conductors and opera singers. He wanted to “*restore (dance) to its ancient glories*” through the “*rhythmic regulation of gesture*” and ridiculed not only exaggerated or false emotion but athleticism itself. Even at this early stage he says that movement without sounds will be possible when mu-

sic has been “*ingrained in the body*” and the human organism impregnated with the many rhythms of the emotions of the soul and only requires to react naturally to express them in movement. “*Orchesis*”, he says, “*is the product of impression transformed into expression*”. This expression may take the form of a dialogue in which the dancer like a concerto soloist engages in dialogue with the other instruments: sometimes one pauses, sometimes the other. This shows that he was not thinking simply of “*mickey-mousing*” as was often stated later.

Dalcroze prioritised the moral and social development of children, learning through experience and individual freedom. He saw technical virtuosity as empty if it did not appear to express the authentic and finer states of soul of the performer. Although he had worked in the theatre in his youth, participated in Festspiele and loved spectacle and performances of all kinds, he enjoyed them, as Ansermet was to point out, as social events that everyone could engage in⁵.

By 1919, conceding that ballet concentrates on harmony and grace, Dalcroze states that a conventional dancer adapts music to his restricted technique and automatism while the eurhythmist lives the music. By this time Dalcroze had received a lot of criticism. The Russian choreographer and teacher Fyodor Lopukhov⁶ suggested that Dalcroze’s teaching was for “*the visualisation of beat, metre and details of rhythmical pattern*”. This was rather unfair as the work did encourage a response to other musical parameters as stated in this article which goes into more detail concerning the relationships between music and movement. This includes a feeling for space and its laws, shades of time, inward sense of decorative line and form, balance, nuance and dynamism. Here Dalcroze produces a list of elements common to music and moving plastic⁷:

By 1919 too he had suffered the loss of Hellerau and many of his brightest students. Perottet, Wigman, Holm, Chladek and others felt, as Wigman said in 1914, the movement at Hellerau was chiefly of the extremities of the body and not

expressive enough⁸. Perottet sought “dissonance” to express her character which was not possible under Dalcroze’s “*harmonious structure*”. Although the articles mention movement initiated from the centre, following dynamic changes and articulation in the music and the embodiment of authentic thought and feeling, the fact remains that many felt that the work was not sufficiently visceral to cover the full range of human expression which required plumbing the depths of human passion and not only aspiration and the heights of human emotion. Some of these left Dalcroze to pursue greater authenticity in the study of movement in and for itself, following Laban, who taught movement without music, or creating their own schools. Many became important figures who effected profound changes in European and American dance. Ausdruckstanz developed by Chladek and Wigman found its way to America via Hanya Holm whose work became part of the strong Dalcroze influence found in the whole of Modern American Dance.

By this time Dalcroze feels optimistically that “only a short time is needed to reform musical, dramatic and choreographic interpretations”. Despite stating again that “forms of movement will be created without resort to sound” he is becoming insistent. “There is only one way of restoring the complete scale of its means of expression to the body, and that is to submit it to an intensive musical culture”

The 1921 article is as remarkable for what it does not say as for what it does. There is little comment on music, the realisation of musical repertoire or dance and more about movement, space and control. Here there is less confidence and enthusiasm: musical phenomena play a small part and the list of indispensable necessities is dry and often seems to quote Duncan’s notebook -

“they will learn first the values of straight lines, then angles and finally curves...they will possess an unconsciousness in the execution as to be merely the expression of the unfolding of the Human Will in Bodily movement...they will be learning the notes as one might call them of the scale of movement” – or an even older influence, the actor Delsarte (1811-1871) who connected the inner emotional experience of the actor with a systematised set of gestures based on his observations of human interaction⁹.

Here speech as well as music can help re-educate the body but music is more powerful because it “expresses human truths through sound, dynamic force and duration in all gradations”.

Already in 1912 Dalcroze had suggested that musical accompaniment “may not be necessary” to *Plastique Vivante*. In 1919 he wrote that it would “not take long to reform musical, dramatic and choreographic interpretations”. By 1921, although he is open to any means of enriching the technical means of body expression, silent *plastique* is far away—it requires such wonderful technique as lies beyond the span of a single human life: *plastique* will need to be allied to words and music for some time to come. He also sees less of a role for it as a specialism as “there is a tendency to link all the arts for the purpose of humanising thought”.

The savage criticism of the influential ballet critic André Levinson which resulted in the eventual banning of Rouché’s Eurhythmics classes at the Paris Opéra in 1925 added to the wave of negative views of the Dalcroze work in the dance world and was the probable cause of Dalcroze’s retreat from

Plastique exemplified in a letter of 1932 to Gertrude Ingham¹⁰ (then Head of the Dalcroze School in London):

“I have decided in general to give only pedagogical demonstrations, finding that this is the best way to protect the method against all equivocation while affirming that it represents a preparation for art and not an art itself. I have confirmed moreover that many people prefer to see exercises of rhythmic and not plastic realisations.” He received a reply from Natalie Tingey informing him that “plastic movement still has a place in London”. A further letter to the school begins: “Too often people confound our method with a system of dance. That stems from our use of body movement to reinforce our physical sensations and transform them into feelings. For that we have our own technique which consists of a deep knowledge of the diverse conditions of possible movement of the organism. We know how to move in all degrees of slowness and speed, of impulse, of continuity and of elasticity. We learn to orient ourselves in the space around us, which we think of as a collaborator, as an accomplice of movement. We know also all degrees of muscular energy and the way to grade dynamics” and goes on to say that the movement technique connected with his teaching “is certainly not that of ballet and modern dance”; he wishes to dispel the “error of those who believe that we have choreographic pretensions. Our method does not form virtuosos”.

This dry and conservative description had little effect on the English teachers who had included demonstrations of *Plastique Animée* since the very beginning of training. The London School, eventually founded officially in 1913, sent students to Hellerau. Ethel Driver with her students had produced plastic movement studies on Bach and Debussy and the ballets from Holst’s “*the Perfect Fool*” and in 1933 Ann Driver was invited by Ninette de Valois¹¹ to teach Dalcroze Eurhythmics as applied to choreography on a training course for the new Association of Operatic Dancing. During the 1930s Dalcroze principles, touching so many areas connected with music, movement and education, began to be absorbed into the general education system in England and elsewhere so that, as Tingey observed, people benefited from his ideas without realising where they came from. This is still the case today.

After the first world war: developments in contemporary dance

Those who left Hellerau and Europe itself took their ideas and experience with them. In America, Ruth St Denis developed a form of choreography she called “*Music visualization*” clearly based on Dal-

croze’s ideas and included Eurhythmics in the curriculum of her Denishawn School—the cradle of American Dance where Doris Humphrey studied and worked. Famous for her “*music visualizations*” Humphrey eventually moved away from a literal interpretation of music in search of dance as an art in its own right. In 1938 she created *Water Study* a choral ballet with no music in which the movement is initiated by the dancers’ breathing echoing, probably unknowingly, Dalcroze’s mention of breath and gesture in the article of 1921. The *Plastique* element of the Dalcroze work could not be suppressed.

The family tree of Dalcroze influence in American dance was reinforced by John Colman who worked with most of the great choreographers at one time or another. It descends through Graham, Weidman, Limon (who “orchestrated” the body), Cunningham, Taylor (from Graham’s company) and Tharp, Nikolais (student of Hanya Holm), Ailey and George Balanchine. Many of these great choreographers had a very strong background in music in addition to absorbing Dalcroze’s ideas. Balanchine studied harmony and counterpoint for three years and earned his living as a pianist from cabaret and silent films in his youth. Dalcroze in the States has also produced Meredith Monk who works across all the disciplines using time, space, voice, movement and music. The Central European trees of influence take us through Wigman, Chladek, Perottet, Laban, Jooss and others to Pina Bausch in our time and through Rambert, Massine and Ashton and countless others. Of internationally successful choreographers today Mark Morris’ choreography is marked by music visualisation and an eclectic mixture of styles including everyday movement and folk dance; Jiri Kylian also uses a combination of choreography based on the musical score including movement as a counterpoint to or dialogue with music (Dalcroze’s 1921 article refers to this possibility) and dance with no music accompanied only by the body percussion and sounds generated through movement as seen in *Return to the Stamping Ground*. The young but internationally celebrated British choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, noted for the musicality of his work, had Eurhythmics classes twice a week in which he improvised and composed movement to music from the age of 11 – 14 at the Royal Ballet School.

All that Dalcroze rejected: the training of “*virtuosos*”, the inclusion of mime or imitation of the natural world and dance technique, has been included, incorporated and remixed with his ideas during the twentieth century to form new schools and styles of dance training and produce generations of virtuosos! A fertile ground indeed!

Contemporary research in neurosci-

ence and related fields shows a natural connection between musical listening and bodily response and also between actual, observed and imagined movement and stimulation of the motor cortex. Eleanor Stubley (McGill University) has written on how dancers come to know music directly through the body and the bodily basis of linguistic concepts such as balance, repetition and continuity. This leads her to a conception of musical form as something both felt and heard. This may explain why the practice of creating realizations of music in movement can be so rewarding not only to dancers but to conservatory music students.

Plastique animee today: a personal account

I have taught Plastique Animée as realization, dialogue, with body percussion, bruitages and in silence to trainee and professional dancers and musicians for many years at the Royal Ballet School then Central School of Ballet and Northern Ballet theatre. At the same time I was teaching Dalcroze to dancers I was teaching it in conservatories. Plastique is a requirement in the UK Dalroze Certificate exam and at its best is a wonderful discipline that allows the student to discover and plumb the depths of music as an interpreter of a score, to be a primary creator when working without music and to discover him/herself and one another at the same time.

Like some of Dalcroze's students, I too was irritated by the emphasis on "joie", skipping and a lot of exercises. To me it was about discovery and revelation, including the dark and conflictual: the whole of life in and through art. As a student I discovered plastique as a way of learning music and engraving it in the memory through taking part in plastique performances of movements from Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. Over 30 years later I still know this score from memory. As a teacher I moved quickly from teaching children to training teachers and would-be performing artists. Here the exploration, study and creation of artworks and not only preparatory exercises and improvisation became essential. I often use body-percussion to sharpen up rhythmicity and "bruitages" to form a bridge between silent movement and its interpretation in music as part of a training both for plastique and playing for movement and so it has always interested me that Dalcroze himself as Edith Naef¹² said "described" the movement rather than did it himself. When you move yourself you discover a lot of things hard to describe in words. Movement is its own language, its own communication.

As my conservatory students were

almost all string players they tended to choose string quartets for plastique realisation. In teaching them I discovered how to help them show more aspects of the music than the obvious rhythm patterns, accents and form on which I had been advised to concentrate by many of my own teachers. Were four people really sufficient to convey the opening of the slow movement of Bartok's String Quartet no IV with its chords and solo part, or to handle very rapid music? How about the relationship between the parts, the texture and density? Nijinsky had been criticised for running every semi-quaver. From my musical training and performance in orchestra, opera, as soloist and as accompanist I knew that the written notes are signs indicating to a performer an impression a composer wants to effect. Sometimes the busy semi-quavers mean murmur or a sense of speed or power. The notes are not the music and the music is not always "about" semi-quavers. So would it be better to show this as a swirly movement or just as a visual crescendo by adding more people instead of running about? I gave the string quartets to my dance students to see how they would approach them. If we think of Plastique today as answering the question "How does the music move?" as opposed to "what does it look like on paper?" we are far nearer a useful result with music realisation. We could ask what the composer means by what he writes, we could attempt to embody this ourselves and show it to others. So Plastique as realisation is a kind of living analysis in real time—a deep way to study music for both dancers and musicians which both groups found completely valid. From the dance point of view learning to hear into the musical text and express it meant they got more out of the music and could choose if they wanted to counterpoint it or not. It gave both groups a chance to ponder on musical repertoire and absorb its messages and meanings and create meanings for themselves. For the musicians' group choreographies it lead to insights concerning interpretation, a real need to co-operate with others to arrive at solutions: combined lessons in aural training, score reading, harmony, interpretation, performance and projection. When eventually we started performing "the best from exams" to the College public and friends, more than one dancer who attended said she was amazed. None of them had any really trained movement technique and yet they were completely convincing, watchable and moving¹³.

Central School of Ballet students also put on their realisations publicly. As there was no budget there was always a problem with costuming. Some were very good, some less successful. The Director of the School, Christopher Gable, was always very keen to see them and

said that had he had a standing company he would have set up an ongoing project for dancers in the company and himself to study this work and produce work of their own.

The FIER congresses have often included various kinds of choreographies. Some of them are wonderful artworks, original, compelling and authentic in expression and some are less successful. The range goes from the very simple to the involvement of computer technology and complex staging. Dalcroze considered that the best pieces to use were ones with unequal beats, metrical changes and accents but even his supporter Ansermet said he felt Dalcroze had emphasised metrical rhythm at the expense of phrase and cadence¹⁴. Was this because he had been put off by his experiences in Paris as far as interpretation went – or because of his Apollonian and rational approach to art or a mixture of the two? The London School never gave up Plastique despite Dalcroze's advice, knowing that it "worked" in some way for them.

In my experience plastique as realisation is not only entirely valid as a way of studying music and music and movement relationships but a kind of summary of the method itself. It is there that students practise and apply their aural skills, their harmonic knowledge, their understanding of structure, style and meaning. It is there that they study the score, learn to co-operate and work with one another, to express and project the music in and through movement to an audience. It can be preceded and complemented by exercises in silence, so that the sense of movement in its own right can be explored and studied. Plastique as realisation can be studied using a wide range of repertoire, as a way of studying music and musical performance: plastique as dialogue with the music or other kinds of relationship can follow. Successful study in Plastique does not result from seeking "laws" but through deep listening with all the senses, knowing how to ask questions and find answers, finding an authentic response. This reflection in, on and after action requires the experience of using space and weight and orientation so that the study of phrase is not only about sustained line but also about direction and cadence. Does the phrase travel or not? Does it come towards us or move away, or change direction or energy? What is the emotional or dramatic relationship between foreground and background of the music? How can we make the audience see that? Bringing this work to performance really is a transformative experience for students and audience alike. □

Endnotes

1. Fokine (1880–1942) choreographer of the Ballets Russes till 1912. Dalcroze was very familiar with the work of Fokine, Nijinsky, Nijinska and Massine. Marie Rambert went from Dalcroze to work with the Ballets Russes on *Rite of Spring*.
2. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) also of Geneva. Philosopher, writer and composer Rousseau believed in the goodness of the natural man. He also thought that children's emotions should be educated before their intellects.
3. Does this search for underpinning laws reflect Platonism or a search for scientific explanation and justification for his work? Or possibly

both?

4. Mathis Lussy (1828-1910) *Musical Expression* 1892, Novello; *Traite de l'expression musicale* (1893-1894), Heugel. Lussy was the first to try to base a theory of expressive performance on a theory of rhythm and was a great influence on Dalcroze
5. Berchtold, A. 2000, *Emile Jaques-Dalroze et son temps*. Lausanne, Editions L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, Suisse
6. Fyodor Lopukhov (1886-1973), influential Russian choreographer who disparaged Dalcroze's work although he had much in common with him. Lopukhov's choreography of *Firebird* and also the adagio of his *Dance Symphony* included body counterpoint legs in 2 time with the arms in 3
7. Pitch—position and direction of gestures in space; Intensity of sound—muscular dynamics; Timbre—Diversity in corporal forms (the sexes); Duration—Duration; Time—Time; Rhythm—Rhythm; Rests—Pauses; Melody—continuous succession of isolated movements; Counterpoint—opposition of movements; Harmonic succession—succession of associated movements (or of gestures in groups); Phrasing—Phrasing; Construction (form)—Distribution of movements in space and time; Orchestration—Opposition and combination of divers corporal forms (the sexes).
8. Partsch-Bergson, I. 1994. *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States*, Routledge.
9. Delsarte's (1870—1871) *Science of Applied Aesthetics—voice breath and movement dynamics for emotional expression*. His use of relaxation, poise and control of the breath—inspired Duncan, St Denis, Laban as well as Dalcroze and was very widely taught by 1890s.
10. EJD letter to Gertrude Ingham 23 May 1932, London File, CIDJD quoted in her Doctoral Thesis "Dalcroze Eurhythms in England: History of an innovation in Music and Movement education" by Selma Odom University of Surrey, 1991
11. Ninette de Valois, (1898-2001), born Edris Stannus in County Wicklow, Ireland, dancer in the Ballets Russes, noted choreographer and founder of The Royal Ballet Company. Ashton was her chief choreographer. She brought in new talent and continued to be a strong influence, appearing in public until her death at 102.
12. E. Naef interviewed in the film "The Liberation of the Body". At a FIER congress in 1999 she gave a public class including a demonstration of how to walk showing the Duncan walk with lifted thigh and relaxed lower leg.
13. The DVD "The Movement of Music" is one such concert of exam pieces. Distributed by Meerkat Films
14. Ansermet, E. 1965. *Les Structures du rythme* in *Deuxième Congrès International du Rythme et de la Rythmique*

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Résumé

Bien que Jaques-Dalcroze ait imaginé qu'un jour existerait un art du mouvement dans le silence, indépendant de la musique ou d'un texte, la *Plastique Animée* est toujours pensée comme une réalisation musicale en mouvement. Ayant noté une variété d'approches de la *Plastique* dans différentes écoles, certaines l'ignorant complètement, d'autres concédant beaucoup de temps aux chorégraphies, l'auteur compare l'article de 1921 à 2 autres articles plus précoces « *La rythmique et la plastique animée* » (1919) et « *Comment faire revivre la danse* » (1912). Dans ce dernier, Dalcroze critique dans le ballet classique « *La virtuosité au dépens de l'expression* », une critique émise fréquemment. Tout en admirant les Ballets Russes et Isidora Duncan, Dalcroze sentait qu'ils ne répondaient pas d'une manière appropriée à la musique. Il était en cela très influencé par Lussy et d'autres personnes, qui souhaitaient que des règles codifiées soient établies pour définir l'expression. Dalcroze était aussi un réformateur de la société, un pédagogue au même titre qu'un artiste, et il croyait en la libération et la coordination des rythmes du corps et de l'esprit, qui conduiraient les étudiants vers leur liberté personnelle et artistique. Pour lui, la libération des « *instincts* » n'avait pas de mauvais côtés. Cependant les gens au début du 20^e siècle étaient très concernés pas le côté sombre et caché de la nature humaine, et plusieurs de ses meilleurs étudiants sentant que son mouvement était trop périphérique, trop concerné par la métrique, et pas suffisamment par l'expressivité, ont quitté Jaques-Dalcroze pour Laban, ou ont développé leur propre recherche ailleurs, y compris en Amérique. Ces anciens étudiants de Hellerau devinrent des personnalités importantes dans l'expressionnisme allemand, ainsi que dans d'autres formes de danse européenne, et dans la danse moderne en Amérique.

Dalcroze et ses disciples furent sévèrement critiqués à Paris. Dans l'article, on constate un déclin progressif de l'enthousiasme et de la confiance, et le développement d'un conservatisme croissant, de telle sorte que l'article de 1921 parle très peu de musique ou de réalisations du répertoire en mouvement, mais insiste sur les questions d'espace et de contrôle. On est fort loin de la « *plastique en silence* »

Une lettre écrite en 1932 à Gertrude Ingham (Ecole de Londres) recommande de ne donner que des démonstrations pédagogiques. La

méthode n'est qu'une préparation à l'art, mais n'est pas un art. La réponse fut cinglante : « *la plastique a toujours une place à Londres* ». Contrairement à Paris, Londres a incorporé la rythmique dans la formation des danseurs avec beaucoup de succès. Les idées de Dalcroze, grâce à leurs implantations profondes dans la danse moderne américaine, peuvent être retracées grâce à St Denis et Humphrey (dont la chorégraphie « *Étude d'eau* » basée sur la respiration a eu tant d'influence), et se trouvent également chez des chorégraphes contemporains, comme Mark Morris, Meredith Monk, et en Europe, Kylian, Bausch, Wheeldon.

On constate dans le domaine de la recherche en neuroscience, qu'il existe un lien naturel entre l'écoute musicale et la réponse du corps. Il s'agit là d'une approche dalcrozienne.

Enfin dans la section finale de l'article, l'auteur mentionne sa propre expérience d'enseignement de la *plastique animée* avec des danseurs et des musiciens. L'auteur parle de la *Plastique* comme étant une discipline pour étudier l'expression musicale et l'interprétation, en devenant un créateur, en se découvrant et découvrant les autres, et en donnant du sens à la création. Elle parle de l'utilisation des percussions corporelles et des bruits pour jouer pour le mouvement et de son utilité comme passerelle vers la *plastique silencieuse*. En allant plus profondément vers la réalisation du répertoire, elle soulève différentes questions comme par exemple comment montrer la densité, la texture, les relations entre les voix ; que mettre en évidence, que mettre en arrière-plan dans le cas d'une musique très rapide. La *plastique* en tant que réalisation répond à la question « *Comment est-ce que la musique bouge ?* »

Dalcroze considérait que les musiques présentant des accents, des changements de métrique étaient propices aux réalisations. Même ses supporters ont souvent trouvé qu'il mettait en avant le rythme métrique, au détriment de la phrase et de la cadence.

La *plastique* résume la méthode Jaques-Dalcroze car c'est là que les étudiants pratiquent et appliquent tout ce qu'ils ont appris en rythmique, solfège et improvisation, tout en étudiant les styles, les moyens et développent une écoute profonde, ainsi qu'une réflexion avant, pendant et après l'action. Ainsi elle propose une expérience qui enrichit.