PROJECT PEDAGOGY IN COMMERCIAL DANCE EDUCATION

SOUNDPAINTING WITH BODY

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Abstract

This study analyses the application of project-based learning in a group of second-year commercial dance students (n = 16) at the Hungarian Dance University's the dancer and coach training programme. The study sheds light on how the project aligned with curricular and extra-curricular objectives and requirements, as well as how it contributed to the students' individual and group development. The final product was a performance entitled *Soundpainting*, which featured musical and visual improvisations and drew upon notations from *Treatise*, a collection by the English experimental composer Cornelius Cardew.

Keywords: project pedagogy, commercial dance education, dance and rehearsal management, soundpainting, improvisation

1. INTRODUCTION

The term project is commonly understood as a series of activities, each of varying duration and broken down into smaller sub-processes aimed at achieving a specific goal (Orgoványi-Gajdos & Virág, 2024). In contemporary usage, the concept of a project has a wide range of meanings and interpretations. Orgoványi-Gajdos and Virág (2024), based on the definition by Bárdossy et al. (2002), view project-based learning and teaching as an open curriculum structure that focuses on learner agency, decision-making, and real-life learning processes. The approach builds on learners' interest and active participation, tightly integrating pedagogical objectives with curricular requirements to ensure the acquisition of practical knowledge. The project method is able to provide opportunities for discovery learning, through which both community and individual development can take place (Verók & Vincze, 2011).

Throughout the course of a project, the learning community, both students and teachers, produce a tangible outcome that reflects human creative processes. In a dance-related project, the teacher's learning management activities include the formulation of the need, the objective, the planning, the decision, the organisation, the implementation, the rehearsal (e.g., in the case of an exam situation, a presentation, a performance, or a lecture) of a project as well as its evaluation, either in the form of student self-reflection, teacher evaluation (e.g., in an exam situation), or audience reception in the case of public performances.

According to Orgoványi-Gajdos and Virág (2024), differentiation is one of the fundamental features of project-based teaching. When applying this approach, teachers take into account the individual abilities and developmental pace of each student, thus allowing for the adoption of teaching methods adapted to the specific needs of the students. The project method provides differentiated learning opportunities that support students' independent work, creative thinking, and collaborative skills, with teachers acting as facilitators guiding and supporting the learning process.

In my own teaching practice, I primarily work with heterogeneous groups in project-based activities, where everyone participates in group work according to their own strengths and abilities. Cooperative work in homogeneous groups is more rare, as it requires that students have the same level of skills and motivation to achieve the same goal. Regardless of group composition, it can be said that project work enables students to choose subtasks and starting points that correspond to their current conditions, based on their previous experiences, prior knowledge, level of motivation, and ambition, all without significant didactic effort being required (Hortobágyi, 2002). Project learning is fundamentally a constructional process facilitated by different forms of group work (Radnóti, 2008), which in this context involves the interpretation and discourse on a given topic (i.e., the expression of notation through movement in improvisational live music with the participation of a painter).

According to Hortobágyi (2002), one of the most important features of the project method is that it focuses not only on the *transfer* of knowledge, but also on the *acquisition* of practical, real-life knowledge, with participants developing their skills through engaging with different activities and situations. In particular, the method emphasises social learning and cooperation, allowing learners to acquire different behavioural models through interaction, including responsibility, cooperation, cultural debate, conflict management, or reconciliation of interests. In this approach, the role of the teacher in the organisation of teaching extends beyond its traditional boundaries to include the functions of a participant, observer, mediator, partner, adviser, or facilitator in the students' learning process.

Teachers using a project-based approach may find it necessary to define roles in advance, especially if students are not able to organise group work independently. Beyond facilitating the work process, the teacher is also tasked with planning assessment that integrates traditional summative methods with verbal formative feedback that contributes to the quality of the product and to the students' skill. Qualitative evaluation should focus on the following aspects: the achievement of the original objective, the reasons behind issues that may have occurred, justifications for changes made to the original plan, and explanations for any sub-objectives that were exceeded (Kővári & Bogáthiné Erdődi, 2010). Based on the information above, the components of the qualitative evaluation system can be grouped based on the quality of the product, development of competencies, level of collaboration, ability to manage conflict, creativity, student engagement, independence, performance of dance styles and content, and the enhancement of metacognitive (i.e., problem-solving thinking and research) knowledge.

As a practising teacher, I strive to engage students in as many real-life learning activities as possible with the aim of cultivating agency as well as decision-making and experimentation skills, which have the potential to spur innovation.

During the design of this project, several concerns were considered:
- the ways in which students can flourish within a notation-based guided improvisation system
- the extent to which students, while improvising with musicians, can engage in collaborative reflection and coexist with one another through music
- the extent to which they can collaborate on stage with painter Viktoria Balogh-Kovács;
- the degree to which dance techniques learnt during the performance are reflected in their improvisational activities.

2. BA-LEVEL COMMERCIAL DANCE EDUCATION AND PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

2.1 Teaching the basics of choreography in the dancer and coach training specialisation

The teaching of basic choreography in the commercial dance specialisation is achieved by gradually introducing students to the basic choreographic skills, starting with a combination of simpler movement forms and steps, and building on these to create more complex choreographies. The pedagogical focus is on developing a sense of rhythm, spatial orientation, and musical sensitivity, while creativity and self-expression are also emphasized (Kárpáti et al., 2020).

In the three-year BA programme, students learn a variety of dance styles, such as modern-contemporary, hip-hop, jazz, show-dance, Caribbean, and swing-based dance. They then take a final exam in these subjects at the end of the fifth semester. In addition, the curriculum includes classical ballet, improvisation, and various additional techniques to help students broaden their dance knowledge and technical skills (Hungarian Dance University, 2024).

The project-based approach to teaching commercial dance is constantly present in the lessons. An example of this is the *rehearsal and choreography* course, which combines theory and practice. Here, students create a product or composition over the course of the semester based on a list of themes or musical ideas given to them by the teacher.

The specific themes and the music are chosen by the students themselves, who decide on the dramaturgical arc of their composition. This arc is made up of two main elements: the development of the plot and the emotional arc, which portrays how the characters react to the events of the story, changes in themselves, or external influences. When processing music, listeners often visualise it, interpreting the score either rhythmically or melodically. In this way, they demonstrate how the music affects them, and which can be formulated as an independent objective.

Sub-objectives of the project include implementing the chosen theme through different forms of movement, portraying changes in the plot, and distributing tasks effectively. If the aim is to develop the theme, the creation of musical montages is also a critical part of the work. In addition, the use of props, tools, and scenery, as well as the design and procurement of costumes, also constitute important tasks. If the performance will be presented on stage, the students must also design the lighting setup.

At the end of the third year, the final stage exam is also a project-based exercise requiring the collaboration of several teachers. Students and practitioners teaching different styles and techniques work together to create a stage production. The sub-objectives are defined by the teachers, each contributing to the joint work according to their own subject. Once the script has been collaboratively written, everyone participates in the production, and the students work with their teachers to complete the tasks, which are then combined into a whole during rehearsals. They also collectively brainstorm about the theme and the music, although experience has shown that the choice of music is often more important than the choice of theme. Joint work tends to be smoother if the music is chosen by the teachers involved in the project. Developing the theme and deciding on the music during the brainstorming session often leads to quicker results than when the choice of music is negotiated. An example of this was the one-act play *Pictures at an Exhibition*, a transcription of music by Mussorgsky for two pianos and drums with live music, which was written by the class of 2022. The production, however, was not based on familiar images, but presented a life story that spanned different eras, from birth to death. Such projects provide a valuable opportunity for experimentation and discovery.

3. A SOUNDPAINTING PROJECT

In the spring semester of the 2023/24 academic year, all second-year students (n = 16) of the Dancer and Coach BA in commercial dance (n = 16), comprising 5 male and 11 female dancers, participated in a complex, interdisciplinary project. Given the project's focus on improvisation, the varying skill levels of the students were not a primary concern in this case. Notably, overall, the cohort was open to new experiences and enthusiastic about improvisation. The students met with me for two hours a week, in line with the thematic focus of the semester. When I proposed the project, they were unanimous in their support and agreed to commit the required extra hours to prepare the performance. The preparation phase took a total of two months, and a number of sessions were held, amounting to 20 hours in total.

3.1 Structure of the *Soundpainting with Body* project

The project work transformed the role of the teacher into something fundamentally different from traditional frontal teaching. In addition, the product needed to be delivered by a set deadline, with the performance taking place at Bethlen Theatre.

The initial steps began with topic selection, which in itself defined the aim of the project. *Soundpainting with Body* was based on improvisation techniques that the students had been learning for two years. Since improvisation has become an essential skill in today's dance profession, the students engaged with it both in the process of completing the project and in the final product. As the class leader, I felt it was important for the students to showcase their improvisation skills in a real, on-stage environment in front of an audience, and this vision inspired the project. The basic idea came from soundpainting, a practice stemming from Samu Gryllus' community music theatre, with Miksa Samuel Garami participating as a jazz trumpet player. My conversations with Gryllus and encountering the musical experience of

Garami were major contributions to the project. The term soundpainting naturally implies painting with sound, which I expanded on in this project by adding the term 'with body', emphasising the collaboration between musicians and dancers. This collaboration was based on musical notation symbols, while I coordinated the process as a conductor. This involved observing the performance process, whether it was the dancers, musicians, or the painter's creative process, and deciding then and there whether the notation symbols would change or not.

Once the theme had been proposed, there was no need to form separate groups, as the students suggested finding a way to keep everyone on stage throughout the performance. During the brainstorming session, we agreed that it would be permissible to step out of the scene temporarily and then return. They believed that this would not disrupt the audience's experience, even if they occasionally stood to the side of the stage.

Continuously monitoring the workflow and recording the results helped me to track the varying sub-goals of the different ad hoc groups' and provide assistance if necessary.

- The students defined the main organisational steps:
- First, we discussed the details of the joint cooperation with the Bethlen Theatre and submitted the necessary written materials for the performance.
- We then collected information and analysed Samu Gryllus' soundpainting programme.
- The musicians, who provided live sound effects and improvised on a variety of instruments, introduced themselves. One of them, Miksa Sámuel Garami, who had participated in Samu Gryllus' programme, gave a lesson to the students on how to put improvisation into practice. All of the participating musicians improvised, and their collaboration was guided by the conductor's cues and use of notation.
- The students then reflected together on how the notational signs could be transformed into dance practices in such a way that they can stablish a minimal set of rules that would not hinder them but leave them with room for improvisation. The development of the rule system was also based on joint brainstorming without teacher intervention and without major confrontation. In a fairly short period of time, the rules for the notation sheets were established and varied from sheet to sheet.
- We shared the selected notation sheets with the musicians, who developed the ideas further.
- The next step was a rehearsal with the musicians and dancers, where, as the conductor, I signalled transitions on the notation sheet or indicated when to switch sheets. The duration of each part was not predetermined but was decided in real time by observing the process. During the rehearsal, both the musicians and dancers considered the result a success. A recording was made and distributed to everyone involved to watch and listen to.

- The painter, who had been dancing for ten years, introduced herself, and the students proposed the idea of painting on themselves, on each other, or on the canvas. The artist had no objections but asked only that the paint be applied to specific areas. We were relieved when she announced that she would handle the procurement of paint supplies, as we lacked expertise in that area.
- We then had to obtain the appropriate canvas and discussed technical details with the stage technician, in particular with regard to setting up of the canvas and using UV paint. I participated in these discussions with the students, but only as an observer.
- The final task was to discuss the costumes. When asked about what they should wear, I suggested they should choose to wear something they felt comfortable in, that could be painted on, and that would allow their movements to be visible. The visual artist preferred bright colours, so the students chose pastel or light-coloured clothing to ensure that the paint would be visible on them.
- The project implementation, specifically the day of the performance, proceeded as follows:
- The stage setup began at 10:00 a.m. This involved placing the canvas, setting up and arranging the sound equipment for the musicians, and arranging them so that they could see the dancers without obstructing the stage. This process took several hours, with the students assisting under the guidance of the stage technician.
- Next, they familiarised themselves with the paints: testing how well they spread, how easy they were to remove from skin and the dance floor, how visible they would be on their clothes, and how well they could be washed out.
- After a warm-up, we held a closed-door dress rehearsal without the paint, running through the performance in its entirety. It proved to be a completely different experience from the previous instrumental rehearsals.
- The dress rehearsal was followed by a break.
- The audience was then let in, and for the next 25 minutes they were able to watch the realisation and execution of the project.

3.2 The project presentation

Before the performance began, I briefly introduced the audience to the concept of soundpainting, including its musical significance, the system of notation symbols, and my role as the conductor.

The spectators became part of a multidisciplinary, collaborative production, (*Figures 1–4*). The visual artist, dancers, and musicians reacted spontaneously to the art, experiencing its emotional and intellectual meaning and painting it on the canvas. The structure was provided by the notation symbols, yet at the same time they left room for freedom, capturing the unrepeatability of art in the moment. The performance required the participants to concentrate and listen to one another in order to transform the movement and other visual elements on stage into a unified performance.

Figure 1–4. Images of the *Soundpainting* performance (Balogh-Kovács, 2024)[1]

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[1] The pictures were provided by Viktória Balogh-Kovács, founder of BaKoVi Art Gallery. The performance would not have been possible without the assistance of my colleague Virág Sóthy, the management and professional technicians of the Bethlen Theatre, and the help of the Deputy Mayor of Erzsébetváros, Balázs Szűcs, who ensured we had all the financial resources needed for the performance. Unfortunately, in the last picture, due to the lighting conditions the UV-painted elements are not visible.

Like all projects, this one also had an evaluation phase, which was reflected primarily through the public's reactions. After a short silence at the end of the performance, there was a huge round of applause. The audience was reluctant to leave, with many asking why the performance was so short. When we explained that the programme was 25 minutes long, they replied that it seemed much shorter, as they were so engrossed in it that they lost track of time. They had many questions. and it was challenging to move the conversation to the theatre lobby. I encouraged the dancers, musicians, and the painter to also answer questions from the audience, which they did. Meanwhile, I began the cleanup process with the technical staff.

At the end of the performance, following the audience's reactions, Adrienn Mádi-Horváth, the improvisation teacher for the class, and Zsófia Safranka-Peti, the teacher of contemporary dance technique, also evaluated the performance. They highlighted that the performance was very challenging from a dance point of view, and would even present a serious challenge to professional dancers; nonetheless, the students managed the task brilliantly.

In the following class, the students spontaneously shared their experiences and feelings with on another without being prompted. Afterwards, I also evaluated the students' work, emphasising how seamlessly they were able to think and make collaborative decisions smoothly at each stage, without any friction or obstacles. I also commended them for the immersive nature of the performance, through which I was able to live, feel, and think alongside them on the stage.

4. CONCLUSION

The project was both an expression of community and an opportunity for individuals to express themselves. Through improvisation, students acquired skills such as adaptability, decision-making, self-expression, confidence, communication, and creativity. During the overall artistic production, free/improvisational materials were coalesced into a cohesive composition by the participants. The artistic disciplines were linked without hierarchical relationships, each maintaining its own creative process, allowing the resulting composition to emerge as multidisciplinary in nature and to develop into a product.

This student-teacher collaboration aimed to explore how project-oriented teaching and learning can create meaningful experiences in commercial dance education, shifting from a traditional teacher's perspective as a reflective participant. Throughout the process, I journaled my observations to answer the questions I had originally asked:

- The possibility of improvisation within the structured project framework: although there was a given structure, some participants were so engrossed in the previous themes that they were slow to react to changes indicated by the conductor.
- Collaboration with musicians: the collaboration with the musicians went very well. The musicians frequently sought feedback to ensure that the music they played inspired the dancers. Interestingly, no such questions were asked by the dancers, even though they were also improvising. The discussion revealed that the musicians felt that they were there to serve the dancers,

while some of the dancers saw themselves as the main actors. Ideally, this project should have achieved a collaborative dynamic, something which became apparent during the performance, with both dancers and musicians treating each other as absolute equals. The dancers responded remarkably to the musicians' unexpected improvisational changes, instrumental switches, and moments of silence, while the musicians also reacted with constant attention to the dancers' body dynamics, enhancing their overall emphasis.

• Creativity and use of paint on stage: The dancers used paint boldly on stage and, in their interactions with the painter, treated her as a full partner both in movement and in the creative process.

I have also reflected on the process from a pedagogical perspective. I hypothesised that if a dance technique has been mastered at a body-conscious level, it could naturally appear in the movement vocabulary during improvisation. The students, who had been learning improvisational techniques for two years, approached the task with confidence. On the stage, I encountered partnering work, contact and floor techniques, Forsythe-based improvisation, various dynamic movement patterns, rotation techniques, isolations, popping-based movements, and falls. The project also significantly developed the students' situational thinking and active participation in the decision-making process, gaining an understanding of the principles of democracy in action. As a teacher, the implementation of the project required an open-minded on my part, which was key to the results we achieved. The process itself was an immersive experience for the students, as expressed in their self-reflections given after the presentation and was equally engaging for me as a teacher. During the process, I too had to re-evaluate my reactions and sometimes change my behaviour. The opportunity to interact and work together to make the project a reality provoked a surprisingly positive reaction from the students. They valued the process and were courageous in expressing their opinions about my role throughout the process, which served to achieve our collaborative goal. The students' trust and commitment to the quality of the work was another important experience for me. It became clear that communication and trust played crucial roles in joint collaboration, facilitating knowledge building between the participants, both during the presentation and throughout its preparation.

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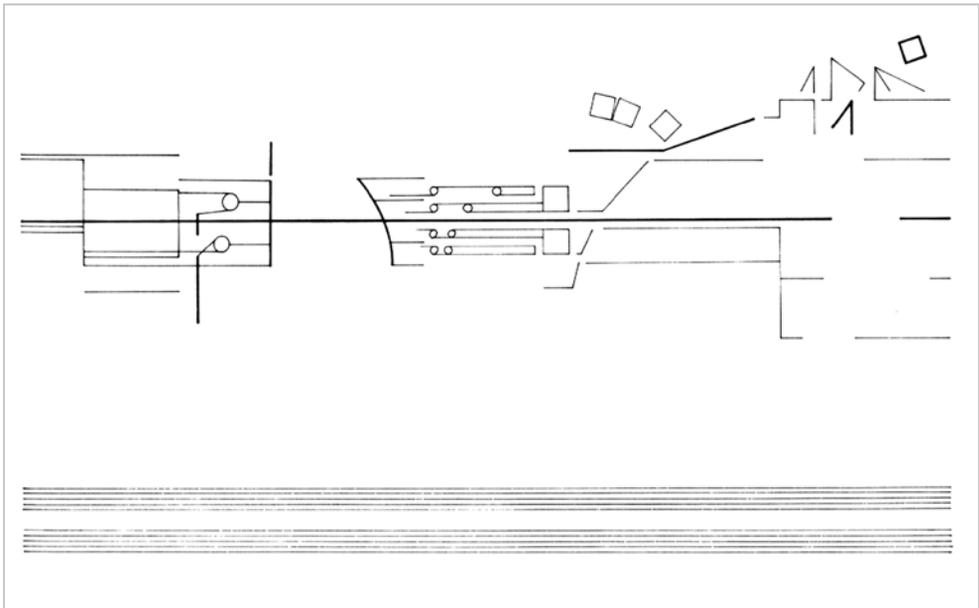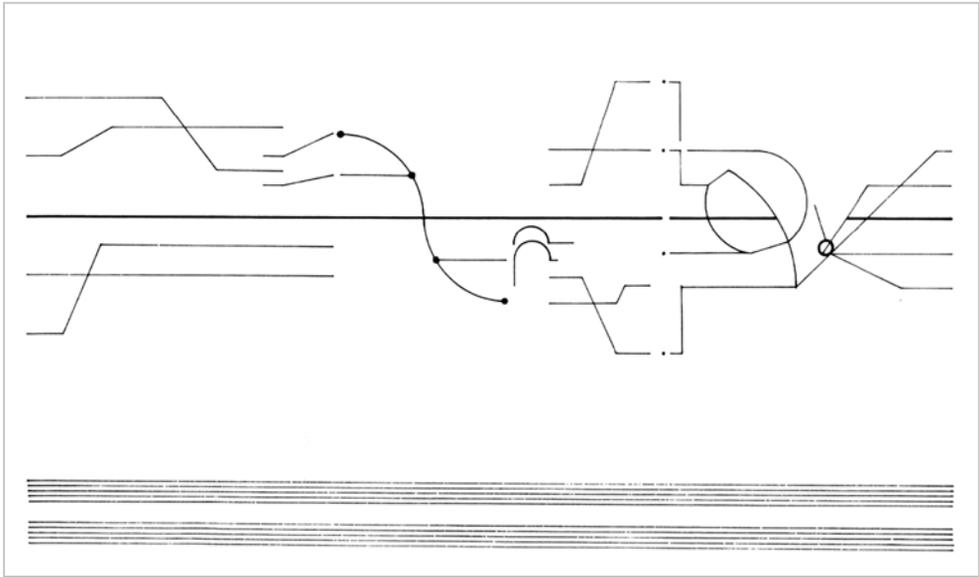
Appendix

Notation sheets during the performance
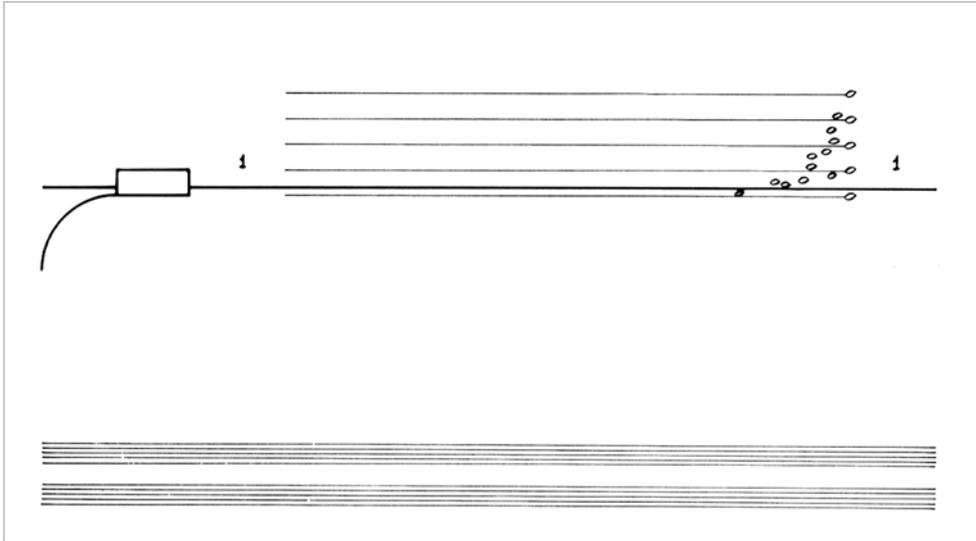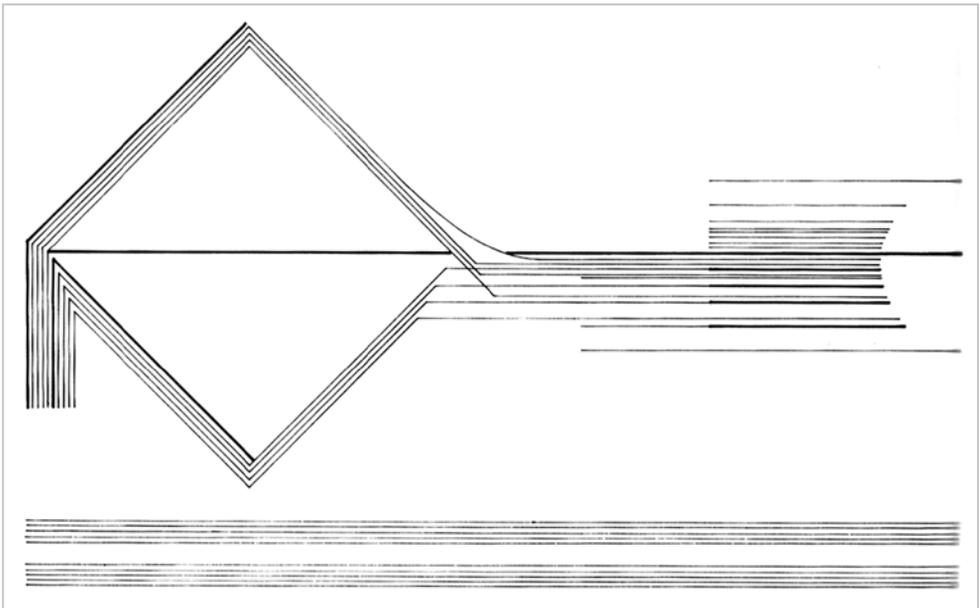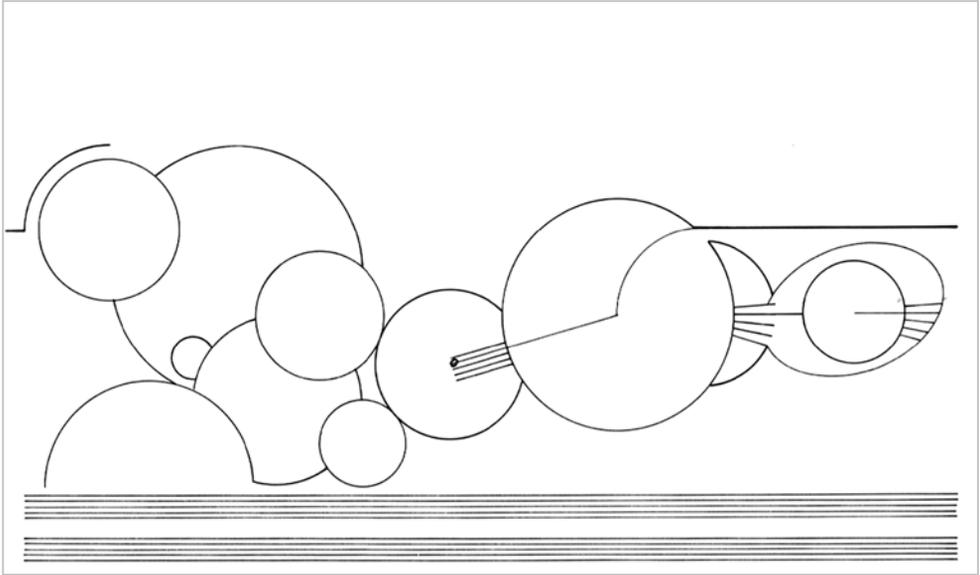
Figure 5–10. Notations Treatise (Cardew, 1967, p. 3,5,18,76–77)