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EUROPEAN SEMINAR FOR KINETOGRAPHY

Paper No.7.

Some Thoughts on the Graphic Structure of the Laban System of Notation

by Donata M.Carbone,1989.

One of the assets of the Laban System of notation is its rational approach to movement.It rests upon a thorough analysis of the universal laws of kinetics,upon the study of the movement possibilities of the human body.The logic of movement is mirrored in the graphic structure of the system.This is followed up consistently,and is contained in the following elements of the script:

1) The symmetrical lay-out of the staff mirrors the symmetrical build of the human body;

2) Specific columns are assigned to movements of the various body parts;they appear in the staff in hierarchic order,from the central line of the body outwards;

3) A double axis of reading is followed up: the vertical one (from the bottom upwards) for the succession of movements,the horizontal one for simultaneity of action;

4) The direction symbols by their shape,shading,and length, record simultaneously the three spatial dimensions of movement (direction and level) as well as its temporal dimension (duration).

All these elements give the system a high degree of visuality.It should be noted that the term "visual" must not be confused with "pictorial".Visuality is based here on the usage of a limited,but flexible set of symbols,which follow some intrinsic,logical criteria.They convey messages,which can be easily decodified by the reader.Pictoriality,on the contrary, involves a stylised representation of reality,and has a much more limited range of applications.

A similarity can be found between kinetographic symbols and the letters of a phonetic alphabet: both are combined according to grammatical rules,to form movement sequences and words respectively.In fact,Kinetography is a script capable of recording the movement idiom.As such,it is subject to a process of evolution,due to the changing kinetic horizons with which notators are confronted.This evolution is a positive phenomenon as it witnesses the vitality of the system.On the other hand,it gives rise to a crucial question: how far should innovations go? No general recipe can be given,each case must be thoroughly considered and discussed,keeping in mind,however,that the comprehensiveness of the system can only be safe-guarded if both,its structural laws and the logicality of their graphic expression,are respected.

In this paper a few examples of graphic layout will be considered which,to a higher or lesser extent,deviate from the graphic structure of the system.Some of the elements which will be examined were part of the system from the very beginning,others were introduced little by little,either as modification of pre-existing rules,or as quite new items.

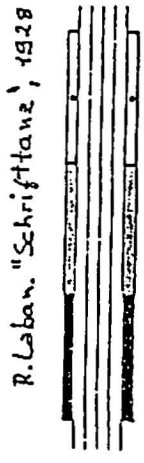
As mentioned above,the staff is conceived in a way so as to mirror the symmetrical build of the human body. Movements of the right parts of the body are written right of the central line and vice versa.Moreover,each part of the body is assigned a specific column,the order of the columns following basically the structure of the human body in its "normal",vertical stance.

There are a few exceptions to this basic rule: some of them are due to objective reasons (unpaired body parts,such as the head),and were introduced in the system at the very beginning.Others appeared later,as new movement situations were met,and the originally established means proved inadequate to solve a number of notation problems.

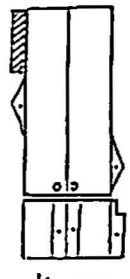
This is the case with movements of the trunk and its parts.Originally,the analysis of movements in the upper region of the body,which were performed jointly with arm movements,followed the symmetric lay-out of the staff (see A).However,there was soon the need to follow a much more detailed analysis of torso movement,as a result of the attention given to such movements in the new dance techniques,and of the increasing demand to notate such instances.

Therefore,the original way of writing was confined to "upper part of the body" movements (which should not be identified with movements of the chest).See definition Knust Dictionary part XI.412-413,pp.134-137.(See B).

Meanwhile specific symbols for the sections of the trunk and for augmented body parts were codified: they are mostly non-symmetrical symbols,for unpaired parts of the body.They are written in the 3rd columns of the staff (either right or left of the central line) (see Ex.1),and are followed by direction symbols.



A

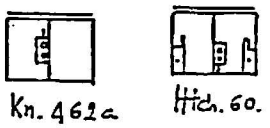


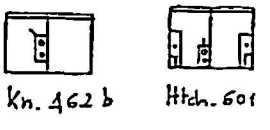
B

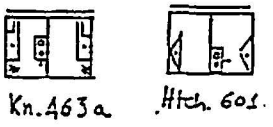
The same is true when these symbols appear in the support columns.In this case,symbols for the front and back surfaces of the torso are written in either column,while the principle of symmetry is followed up for the right,left or intermediate surfaces (see C and D),although exceptions are allowed (see E).

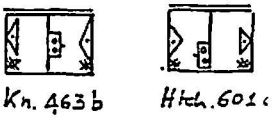
The principle of symmetry and visuality was also the basis of the former rule for the placement of circular path signs on the staff.Circular path signs,which are derived from turn signs,were originally written to right or left of the staff respectively,according to the kind of circular path (clockwise or anti-clockwise) to be described.(See Ex. 2).

In the current usage,however,both clockwise and anti-clockwise circular path signs are written at the right of the staff,i.e. in the same column where all other path signs are written.This proved to be more practical for the reader,as it allows all information pertaining to the path described by the performer to be grouped in the same section of the staff.







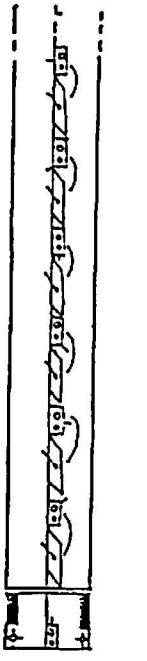


C D

The exact definition of specific areas/columns for each category of information adds indeed to the consistency of notation and fosters a quicker decodification of symbols.An incongruous use of columns,instead,results in the mixing up of different kinds of information and,as a consequence,in a blurred message.

Infractions of the basic principle of specific columns,however,are quite frequent.

In some cases this is due to lack of space.In fact,space problems can be solved by means of an expanded staff.However,if no subsidiary columns are used,at least consistency in the usage of the standard ones should be attempted (see Ex.3.where foot movements are systematically written in the 3rd columns.In Ex.4,however,measures 1 and 2,the shoulder movement is first written in a body column,and then moved to a subsidiary one,beyond the arm gesture column).



E

In some cases,symbols are put intentionally in other columns than their own,in order to make them more visible or to stress their importance in the movement sequence (see Ex.5 and F).The changes of the consistent usage of columns, however,might have quite opposite results and prove confusing to the reader,who automatically looks for symbols in the columns of the staff where they are usually written.

Similarly,if the principle of specific columns (for movements of specific body parts,as well as for specific categories of information) is to be respected,orthographies

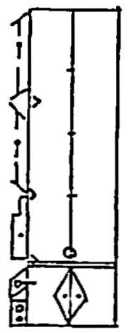
F

such as those appearing in G and H are not acceptable.Path signs are indeed collateral symbols,specifying or modifying the information supplied by direction signs in the support or gesture columns.Namely,they specify the kind of pathway travelled along by the performer during the transference of weight,or the pathway of his gestures,and they are written in a specific column at the right of the staff,or within a vertical bow next to the direction symbols they refer to.The usage shown in the two examples,therefore,transgresses the principle of specific columns.Furthermore,it clashes with the logic of symbols,since path signs become the substitutes for turn signs in the support, and gesture columns. Simply the wrong signs were applied.

Sz.III,35a

G

As to the basic principle of the double axis of reading to express respectively simultaneity and succession of movements,a major inconsistency was introduced by the usage of a vertical bow to indicate the simultaneity of actions (usually a gesture accompanied by a twist) described by two symbols written in vertical succession (see Ex.6).This exception was allowed in those cases when two movements occurring simultaneously were to be written in the same column (see Knust 757,p.298).As a result of a wider usage of subsidiary columns,it is now preferred for symbols for simultaneous movements are placed side by side on the staff (see Ex.7,meas.28).

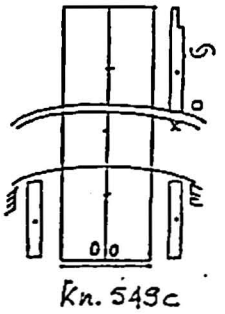


Hkl.459h

H

Similarly,the idea of duration does not seem to be clearly expressed in the current way of notating prolonged sliding contacts (see J) and gliding addressing (see J'),by means of relation signs,followed by a retention-in-the-body sign.

In all other kinds of relationships,a retention-in-the-body sign following a relationship sign indicates that the relationship continues,even though the positions of the parts have changed (see Knust 543,pp.216-217 and 582,p.232): namely,the retention-in-the-body sign maintains the configuration of the grasp (or of the touch).

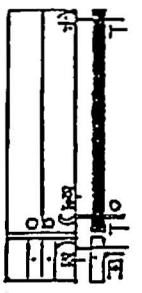


Kn.543c

J

In prolonged sliding contacts and gliding addressing,however,the constant movement of one or both parts involved is an intrinsic feature of that particular form of relationship.(In the absence of movement,a prolonged sliding contact would become a simple touch,and a gliding addressing,a simple addressing).

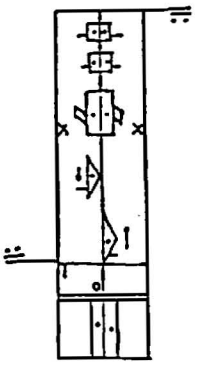
Since the configuration itself of these relationships implies a continued movement,the use of a retention-in-the-body sign (which usually indicates the absence of action,the fixing of an angle between two body parts,the rigidity of a joint,etc.) does not seem adequate to express the duration of the relationship,either at a conceptual,or at a visual level.



Kn.610

J'

A deviation from the 4th principle (directional symbols providing four kinds of information) is represented by "parasite symbols" (see K, Sz. I,17a,p.37).Although they might often prove useful and time saving,they actually transgress the rule according to which the length of the symbol is equated to the duration of movement. Additionally, gestural indications appear here in the support column.



Sz. I, 17a

K

Finally,two more instances will be mentioned regarding symbols which are not in line with the logic of the graphic structure of the system,although they cannot be directly related to the four basic principles.

The first one regards the symbols containing letters of the alphabet,such as the symbol for the head (C).for water (A),earth (T),and a few others of the same family.They are not consistent with the semiological principles governing the system,since they "suggest" a word rather than providing an abstract representation of a body part or of an object.Given their limited number,however,and since they are mostly symbols for objects,they constitute an exception which does not affect the logical structure of the system itself.Furthermore,although they are derived from words of European languages (Latin was used to make it more universal) which may not be immediately understood by people belonging to non-European cultures,they are not a sufficient reason for condemning the whole system as being ethnocentric.They represent just a negligible portion of a whole set of symbols which,in spite of their visuality,are in fact not entirely self-evident.They necessarily require a process of comprehending on the part of all those who approach the system,regardless of their cultural sphere.

The second one regards the open rectangle used as an area symbol in floor pattern drawings.This symbol differs from the original one which was a closed rectangle,with the upper side indicating the front.

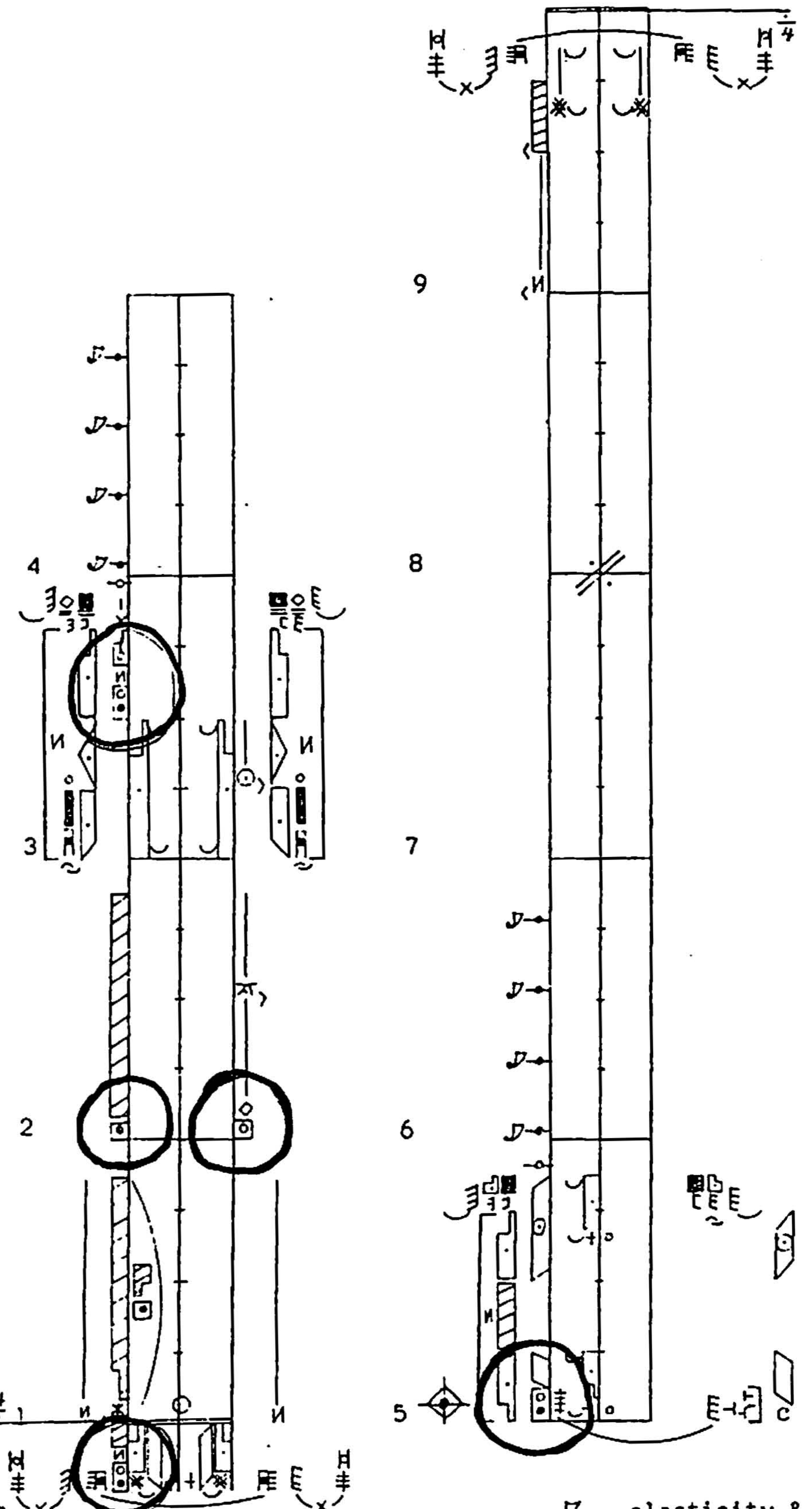
Indeed,the upper,open side of the rectangle in the current usage represents the stage opening, i.e. it mirrors the standard performing area of the European theatre,based on a linear division between the performers and the audience,hence on frontal presentation and viewing.No such division exists in most peasant cultures,nor in non-European theatrical forms.In European theatre too,other stage forms and new relationships between the performers and the public are being experimented,implying the existence of a number of possibilities.Therefore,while the open stage area sign is suitable for notating movement sequences in a European theatre situation,its usage in instances which do not contain a frontal viewing,forces the movement analysis into arbitrary schemes.

Ruth Currier's Barre DNB Cyl. / OSU / USA 1972-1977

LONG TORSO STRETCH

2° cycle
7.3.86

Keep torso straight as long as possible then curve.



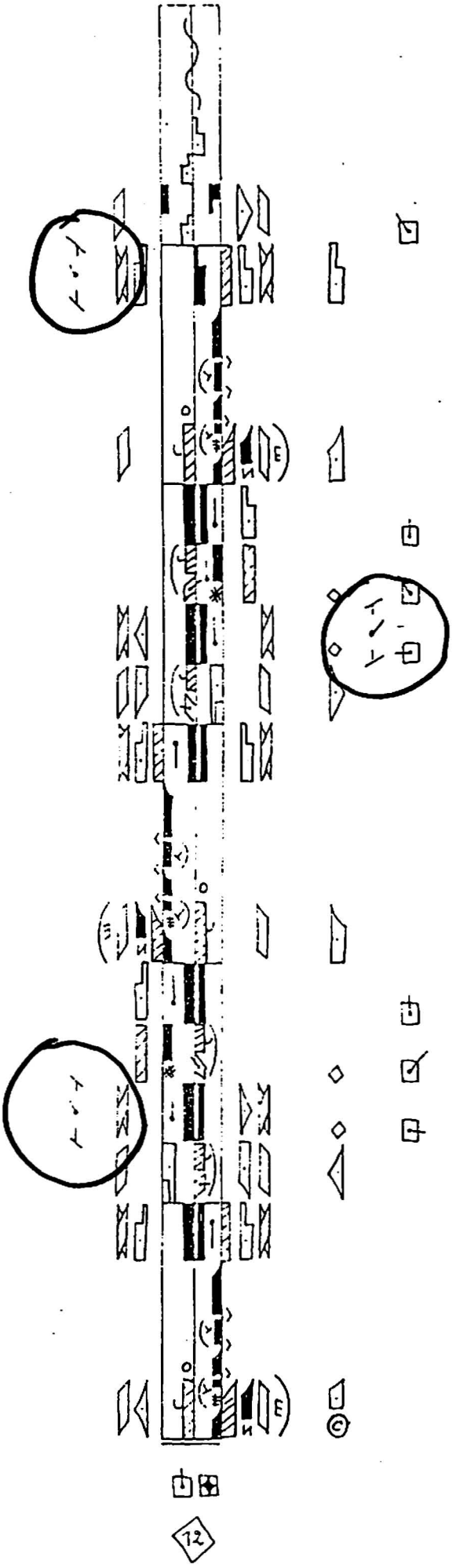
$\frac{4}{4}$ [ ] = ♩ = 66

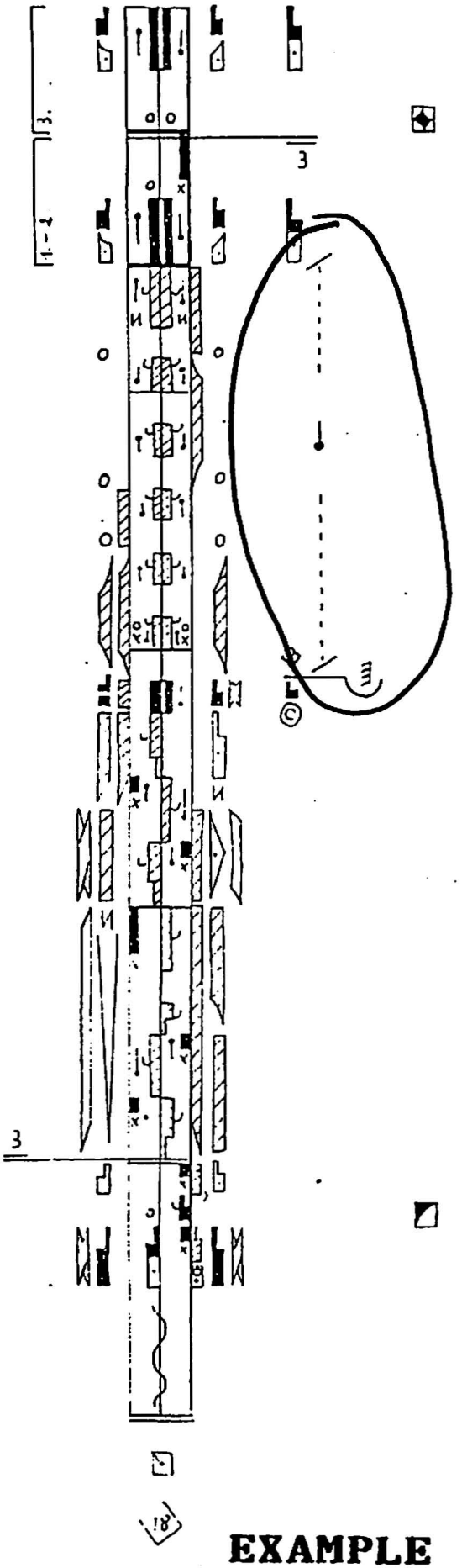
= elasticity & rebound

= front for everything is the untwisted front

EXAMPLE 1

1 Frauenvariation 2
ins de trois
Cin J. Baier



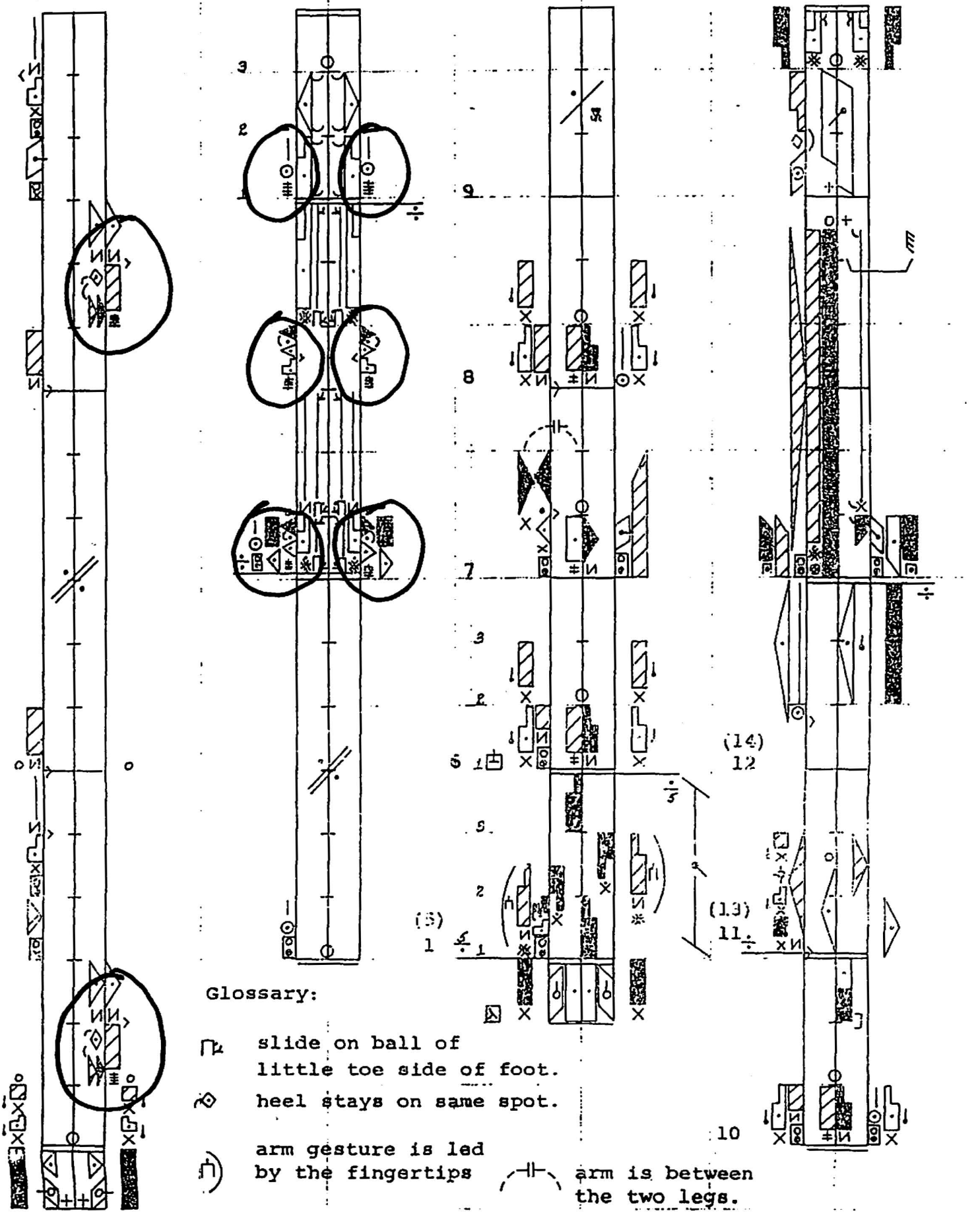


EXAMPLE 2

2 - eyes
2.5.86

Intermediate Reading Studies
D.N.E. New York - 1912
19

FLOOR STUDIES



Glossary:

slide on ball of little toe side of foot.

heel stays on same spot.

arm gesture is led by the fingertips

arm is between the two legs.

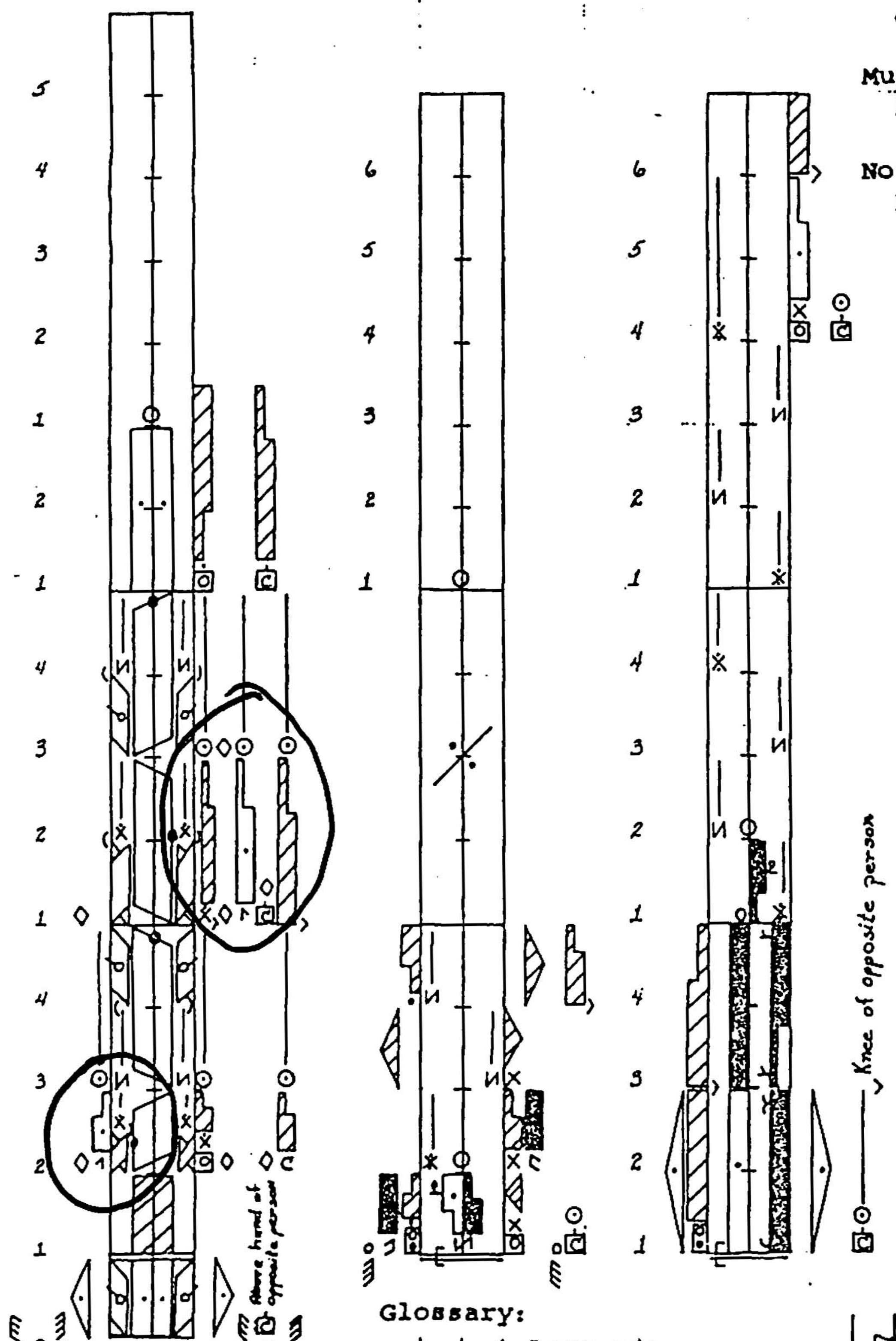
EXAMPLE 3

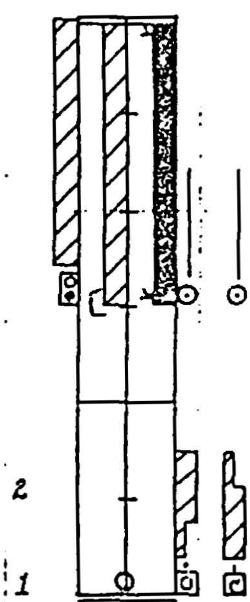
Excerpt from Opening of THERE IS A TIME
(Simplified Version)

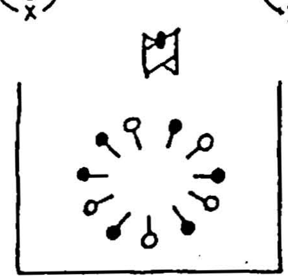
Choreography:
José Limón

Music:
Norman Della Joio

Notation:
Lucy Venable







Glossary:

= Legs are turned out 45

= Legs are parallel

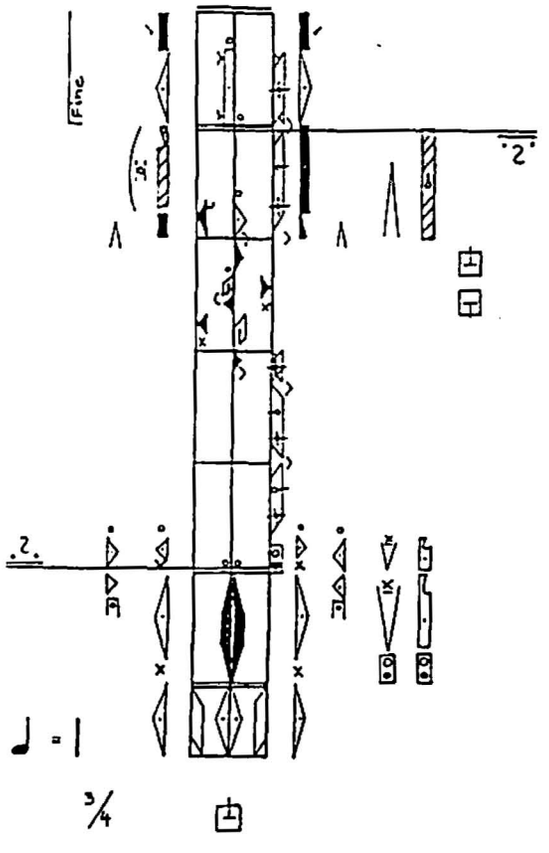
= Turn right until the focal point (center of circle) is on your left

= Turn left until focal point is in front of you

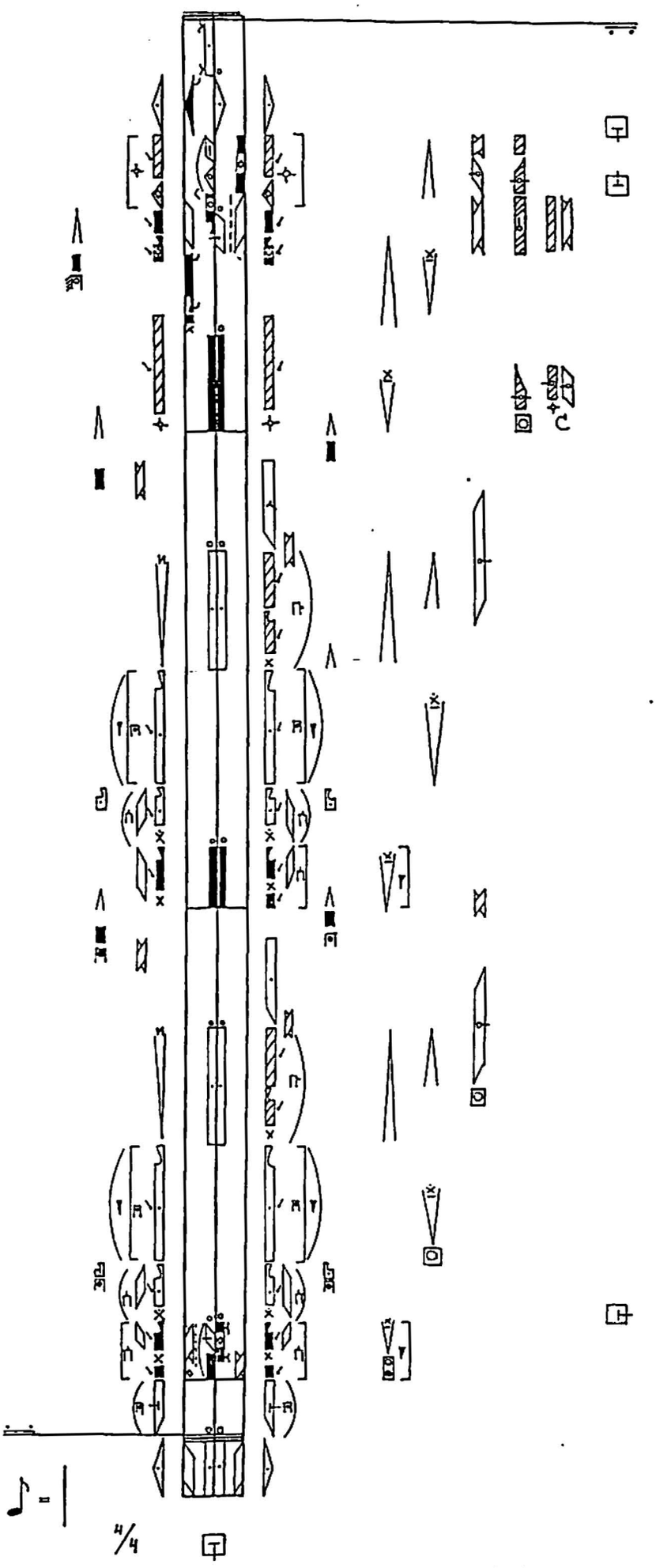
= Half-way to back high

= Half-way to forward high

EXAMPLE 4

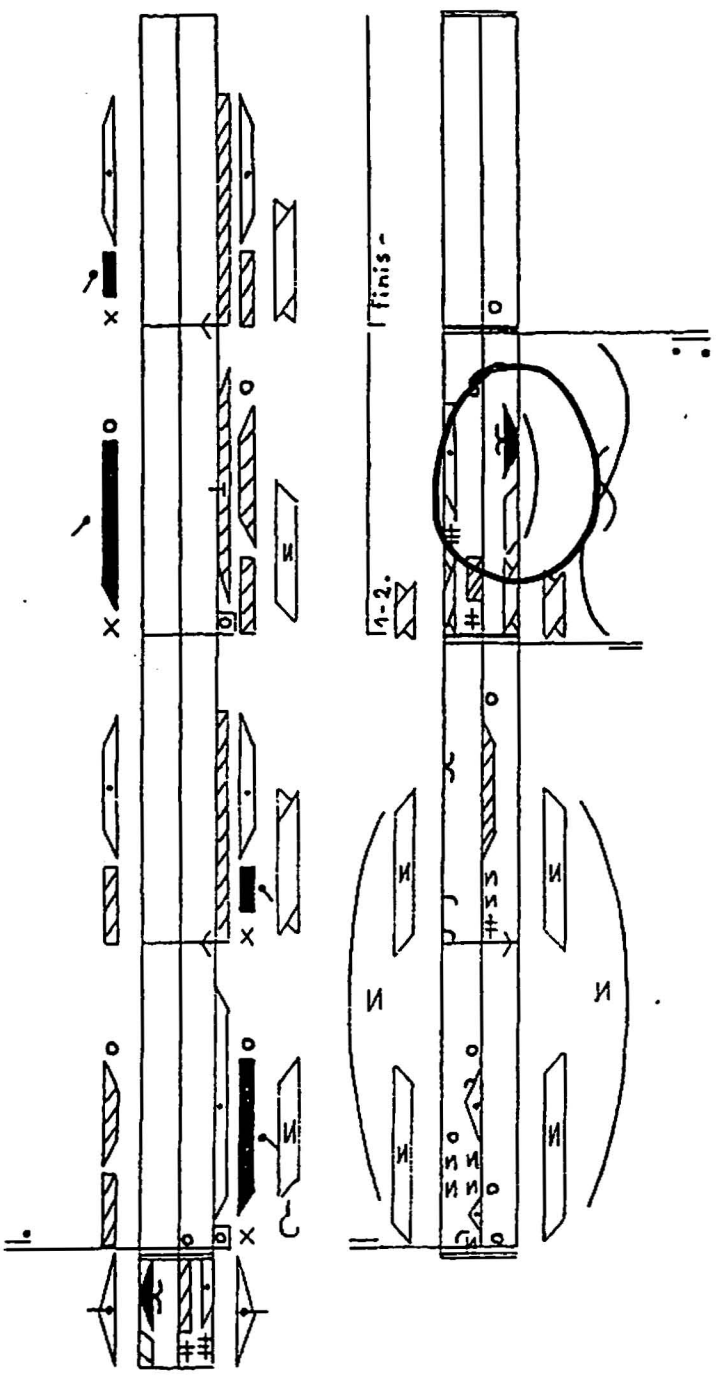


Nr. 7b



Nr. 5c

EXAMPLE 5



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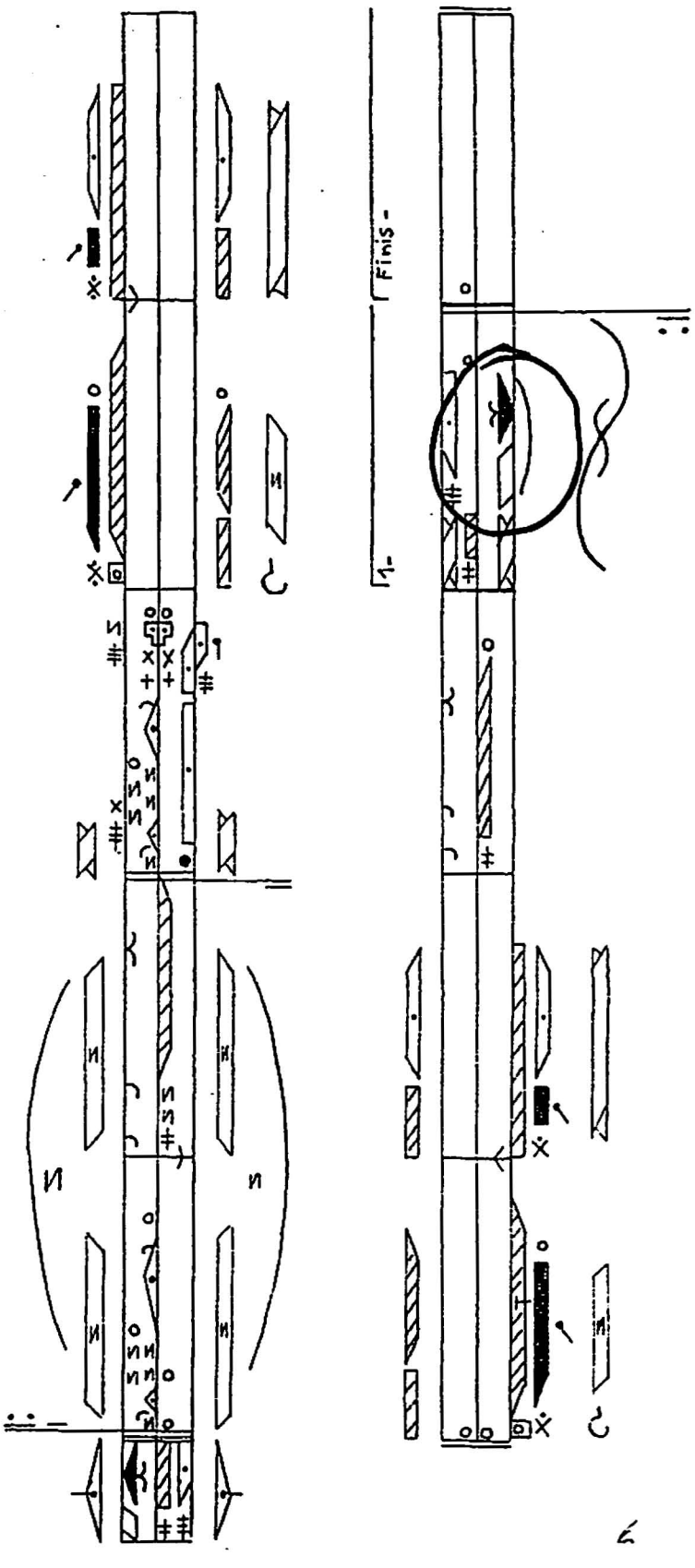


-18-

EXAMPLE 6

FALL AND REBOUND SITTING - SLOW VERSION

Allow knees to relax during fall and rebound with legs forward.

Position of arms will vary according to individual flexibility.

Hands must touch floor in front of feet.

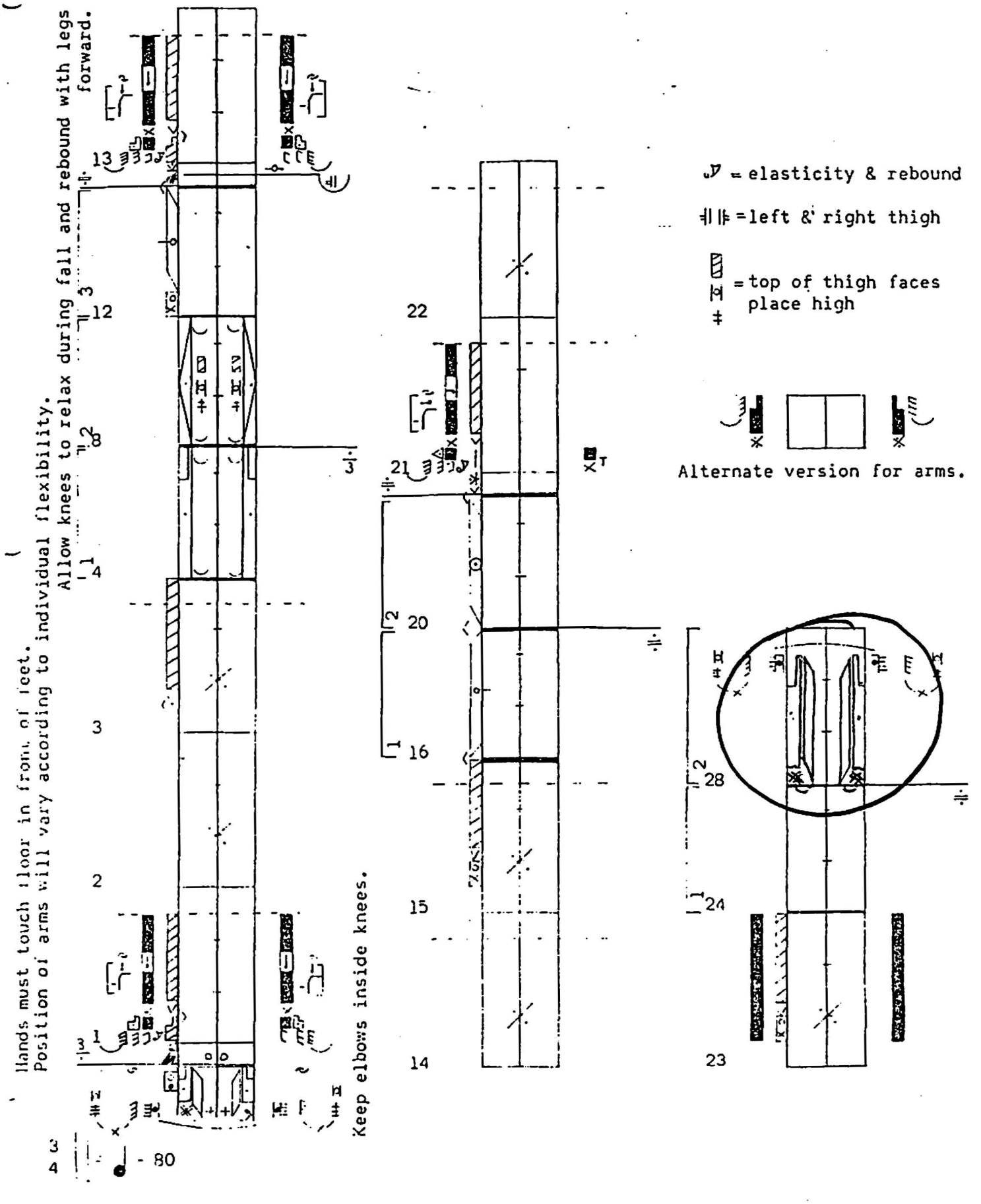
Keep elbows inside knees.

= elasticity & rebound

= left & right thigh

= top of thigh faces place high

Alternate version for arms.



EXAMPLE 7