**Bodenwieser, Gertrud (1890-1959)**

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## Summary

Gertrud Bodenwieser made major contributions on two continents to the development of what she called New Dance, what others have called modern dance or *Ausdruckstanz*. Since the 1940s she has enjoyed the status of a dance pioneer in Australia. More recently, her legacy has been recognized in her native Austria, allowing her a place amongst Vienna’s interwar modernist avant-garde. In both countries Bodenwieser is remembered as an inspired experimenter who stirred a prodigious loyalty among her students. Her early experimentation solidified into a formal technique, which she imparted through her teaching in Vienna in the 1920s and 1930s and in Sydney in the 1940s and 1950s. Her pedagogic principles supported her choreographic practice, as did her belief in the interconnectedness of all the art forms. In her works of pure abstraction or her dance dramas, music was a constant inspiration and improvisation a key process in the realisation of her kinetic and thematic ideas.

## Training and Early Career in Europe

Born into upper-middle class circumstances in Vienna, Bodenwieser and her sister were educated by German and French governesses. The young Gertrud’s early dance training began with Carl Godlewski in an eclectic mix of physical performance genres—ballet, acrobatics, clowning. She later expanded her dance education through exposure to the practitioners of German *Ausdruckstanz.* Her debut performance, delayed by the First World War, finally took place in 1919 at the *Neue Vereinigung für Malerei, Graphik und Plastik* (New Union for Painting, Graphics, and Plastic Art), an exhibition in Vienna’s Konzerthaus supported by the Hagenbund—a collection of the city’s most progressive visual artists. The critic Alfons Török was impressed. He observed Bodenwieser’s ‘unconditional refusal of all tradition’. She had ‘dispensed with the existing dancer’s impediment: step-based structure, illustrative mime, historical and ethnographic aids and links in movement and costume’ and revealed an ‘honest search for new, purely personal expressive values’ (qtd in G. Oberzaucher-Schüller 21).

Bodenwieser married Friedrich Rosenthal, a theatre director, in 1920, and she contributed choreography to several of his productions. Side by side, the couple combined their personal artistic goals with their pedagogic roles within Vienna’s interwar arts scene. Bodenwieser became a teacher at the Austrian State Academy of Dramatic Art in 1922 and formed her first ensemble *Tanzgruppe Bodenwieser* (Dance Group Bodenwieser) the next year. She became Professor of Dance and Choreography at the Academy in 1928. During these years her company toured across Europe, and her choreography was recognized with awards in Florence (*Riunione Internationale della Danza*, 1931) and Paris (*Grand Concours International de Chorégraphie,* 1932). When the Nazis invaded Austria in 1938, the Jewish couple fled. Subsequently, Bodenwieser joined her dancers on tour in Bogota, Colombia. Rosenthal, still in France, was captured and taken to Auschwitz, where he died in 1942. At first unaware of her husband’s fate, Bodenwieser made her way to New Zealand and then joined her dancers again in Sydney in 1939.

## Contributions to Modernism and Later Career in Australia

Bodenwieser was an exponent of Viennese A*usdrucktanz*, a German form with a Viennese twist that, according to one scholar, ‘combined the lyricism, musicality, and naturalness of free dance’, a form introduced to Europe by Isadora Duncan and others at the turn of the twentieth century, with ‘the abstraction, geometry, and defamiliarization of German expressionist dance – all without rendering the human body so “ungraceful” or “ugly” as to alienate the audience’ (George 194). Such adjustments were well received in the Anglophone world, as critics in both Britain and Australia breathed a sigh of relief when dancers such as Bodenwieser framed their abstract, expressive choreographies with more musical and feminine qualities than did earlier exponents of *Ausdruckstanz*, notably Mary Wigman.

Bodenwieser was inspired not only by German Expressionism but also by modernist movements in painting and architecture. She was an eclectic creator. She collaborated with theatre directors such as Max Reinhardt while in Vienna, created movement pieces for operas in Australia, and utilised various forms of expression in her works: screaming in *Die Masken Luzifers* (*Masks of Lucifer*, 1936) or reciting text from Krishnamurti in *O World* (1945). Bodenwieser offered purely expressive studies on the beauteous aspects of nature in works such as *Sonnenuntergang* (*Sunset*, 1936), but also drew on dramatic texts for such works like *The Life of Insects* (1949) based on Josef and Karel Čapek’s 1921 play Ze života hmyzu(*The Insect Play*).

Her all-female dance troupes, a feature of her company structure until very late in her career, coloured the development and reception of Bodenwieser’s work. Her dance technique encouraged a very particular body type: women with capable, muscular cores, defined upper arms and strong, serviceable thighs. Photographs and film of her dancers show accomplished, confident movers and an apparent preference for choreographic motifs that feature a lifted sternum and elongated extensions. One of her dancers, Coralie Hinkley, remembers Bodenwieser’s dominant kinetic motifs: ‘the wave, the figure eight and loop. These forms were metamorphosed into living, breathing elaborations […] initiating variations in the configurations of the arc, circle, spiral, tilt, bend and curve’ (Hinkley 164). Another Bodenwieser dancer, Eileen Kramer wrote: ‘I first heard the word “organic” in Madame’s class. […] The breathing created the quality that distinguished her work and made it recognizable’ (Kramer 58).

file: bodenwieser\_blue\_danube.jpg

Figure Bodenwieser Dancers, *Blue Danube Waltz*, National Library of Australia

Source: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms9263-2-5x>

This technique created dancers capable of both the expansive curvilinear and percussive mechanistic actions necessary for such diverse works as *Blue Danube* *Waltz* (1940) and *Dämon Maschine* (*Demon Machine,* 1924).The former was full of joyful abandon, with swirlingchiffon skirts. Such Viennese waltzes were a staple within Bodenwieser’s repertoire from the beginning, which she offered, sometimes reluctantly, but with pragmatic resignation to presenters and audiences at home in Vienna, Sydney, and on tour. In contrast *Dämon Maschine*, now considered a classic, was part of a four-part series *The Forces of Life* and was remounted with new casts throughout Bodenwieser’s career. *Dämon Maschine* was a modernist exposé on the power, potential and enslaving capacities of mechanisation. But as Karl Toepfer rightly observes: ‘What probably made [*Dämon Maschine*] so popular was its erotic decorativeness….Bodies formed different patterns of synchronicity and counterpoint with each other to create a pulsing, mutating machine-organism of ecstatic intensity, amplifying both the desirability and the demonic power of female bodies’ (Toepfer 267). Such well-proportioned, beautiful women with flowing hair tossed with demonic (or ecstatic) abandon, or entwined in erotic, kinetic sculptures in works such as *Wiegenlied der Mutter Erde* (*Cradlesong of Mother Earth*, 1934) or *The Wheel of Life* (1944) were attractive to performers, artists, presenters, audiences, and students who became part of Bodenwieser’s following in both Vienna and Sydney.

File: demon\_machine.jpg

Figure Bodenwieser dancers, *Demon Machine*, National Library of Australia

Source: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms9263-2-1x>

## Legacy

Bodenwieser’s great legacy was her development and promotion of new dance forms in multiple countries. She created an enduring school in Sydney, which reopened in 1969 and functioned as the Bodenwieser Dance Centre until 1997. Many performers and choreographers benefitted from her artistic influence: Hilde Holger, Evelyn Ippen, Bettina Vernon-Warren, Hilary Napier Dunlop, Emmy Steiniger Taussig, Joanna (Hanny) Kolm Exiner, Anita Adell, Margaret Chappel, Coralie Hinkley, Eileen Kramer, Ruth Galene, Vija Vetra, Keith Bane, and Shona Dunlop MacTavish. All these artists and teachers have in turn influenced other generations of dance practitioners, whether they continued to work in a similar vein as their mentor or rejected the work of their former inspiration in the great modernist process of innovation through rejection and renewal.

## Selected Works

*Dämon Maschine* (Demon Machine, 1924)

*Wer will Frau Wahrheit Herbergen?* (Who Will Accept Mistress Truth? Alternate title: The Pilgrimage of Truth, 1930)

*Wiegenlied der Mutter Erde* (Cradlesong of Mother Earth, 1934)

*Die Masken Luzifers* (Masks of Lucifer, 1936)

*Sonnnenuntergang* (Sunset, 1936)

*Cain and Able* (1940)

*Blue Danube Waltz* (1940)

*The Wheel of Life* (1944)

*O World* (1945)

*The Life of Insects* (1949)

*Errand into the Maze* (1954)

## Film Documentation

The National Film and Sound Archives in Australia holds an extensive collection on Bodenwieser’s work, accessible via the internet. Among the titles are the following:

389502  
**Title:** THE AUDIENCE JOINS IN THE SHOW  
**Alternative Title:** AFRICAN MIRROR NO. 551  
**Production Date:** 1950  
**Produced as:** Newsreel

**Summary:**  Gertrud Bodenwieser and her dancers on tour in South Africa in 1950 perform with African dancers in a native compound.  
**Place:** Location   Johannesburg  
**Country of Origin:** Australia  
**Language:** English

**Title No:** 643070  
**Title:** BLUE DANUBE  
**Production Date:** 1994 **-** 1994  
**Produced as:** Live performance (includes concert); Music  
**Categories:** Ballet; Classical music  
**Media:** Film

**Summary:**  Popular Viennese ballet set to the music of Johan Strauss, choreographed for Australian audiences by Gertrud Bodenwieser. The recording is of a 1994 reconstruction, by former student Elaine Vallence, of the original ballet, performed by Barbara Cuckson's students from the Rozelle School of Visual Arts.  
**Duration:** 00:57:30  
**Country of Origin:** Australia  
**Language:** English

**Title No:** 27740  
**Title:** [BODENWIESER BALLET]  
**Production Date:** c. 1957  
**Produced as:** Documentary  
**Categories:** Indigenous as subject; Indigenous themes or stories  
**Media:** Film   
**Summary:**  This film comprises three dances choreographed by Gertrud Bodenwieser - Central Australian Suite, a trilogy set in the outback; Aboriginal Spear Dance; and Blue Mountains Concert Waltz. Central Australian Suite is danced by Coralie Hinkley and Keith Bain and consists of three separate dances called 'Solitude', 'The Wild Chase' and 'A Child Has Been Born'. 'Aboriginal Spear Dance' is danced by Keith Bain. Blue Mountains Waltz is danced by Anita Ardell and Joan Barrie. General note: This film has been attributed to Eric Cuckson and was probably filmed at St Mary's in the theatre in the factory of Eric Cuckson.  
**Country of Origin:** Australia

**Title No:** 642986  
**Title:** CINDERELLA OF OLD VIENNA  
**Production Date:** 1958 **-** 1958  
**Produced as:** Live performance (includes concert); Music  
**Categories:** Ballet; Classical music  
**Media:** Film   
**Summary:**  Ballet choreographed by Gertrud Bodenwieser, set to the music of Johan Strauss and performed by her dance students.Title introduction reads: 'Gertrude Bodenwieser adapted the Cinderella story for a charming ballet in the setting of the gay Vienna of the days of Johan Strauss' -- General notes: Rondo Studios Production -- Pianist: Bela Bolesko  
**Country of Origin:** Australia  
**Language:** English

**Further Reading**

(Bodenwieser)

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(Card)

(Card, Art Dance, Burlesque and Body Culture: Negotiating Interwar Modernities)

(Card, Tethering the Flow: Dialogues Between Dance, Physical Culture and Antiquity in Interwar Australia)

(Card, Imported and Homegrown: Dancing Modernists in Oceania)

(Grayburn)

(MacTavish)

(Toepfer)

(Oberzaucher-Schuller)

(George)

(Hinkley)

(Kramer)

**Suggested Paratexts**

Bodenwieser dancers, *Demon Machine*, National Library of Australia

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms9263-2-1x>

Bodenwieser dancers, *Blue Danube Waltz*, National Library of Australia

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms9263-2-5x>