

# INTEGRATING DANCE NOTATION INTO THE DANCE CURRICULUM

by

**Tina Curran**

Can dance notation be more effective as an instrument of learning rather than as an independent course of study?

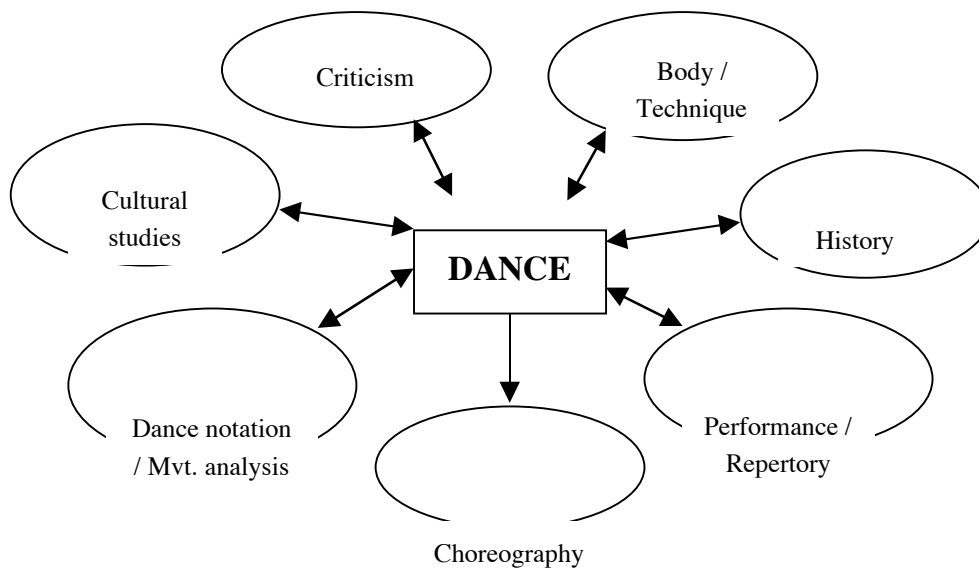
In a recent article on education reform, a high school principal accounted for the treatment of technology in his school. He stated that the revised curriculum no longer offered separate classes in technology, but explained that, instead, every class directly employed technology in the teaching and learning of the course content to reach educational goals. In this situation, the technology being referred to was the use of computers and the Internet. If we ponder the term technology in a broader definition provided by the *Random House College Dictionary* as "an application of knowledge for practical ends," dance notation can also be considered as a technology to be applied as a practical means to an end.

Dance notation has traditionally been taught as a discreet discipline in the larger curriculum of dance education and practice. It is indeed a study worthy of specialization, however this separated focus has not met with exponential growth in recent years with the elimination of dance notation from various educational programs. Though this specialized focus for study should not be eliminated, perhaps the teaching and use of dance notation can be expanded where dance notation is used as an integrated technology, as an active element of learning, creating and reflecting in multiple aspects of the dance curriculum.

The following diagram illustrates how the dance itself is central to the diverse areas of study that inform and enrich a dancer's skill development and artistry. The study of dance begins with the experience and with the movement. A deeper knowledge and appreciation of dance is effected by encounters in various surrounding aspects. Imagine dance notation introduced and used as a technology in multiple contexts to serve the central focus of Dance.

Consider notation employed in composition class as a way to identify universal building blocks of movement leading to a conscious physical, verbal and analytical vocabulary for creating, observing, talking and writing about dance. Imagine this knowledge being transferred into the dance history and criticism class to compare and contrast dance repertoire of various styles, cultures and historical periods. Imagine this new technical awareness and knowledge impacting student observation and understanding in the

technique class as they hone their observation and performance of movement nuances. Picture students learning repertory from dances documented in notation, along with other vital sources, as a result of their cultivated literacy skills.



Using this idea as the central key component of dance and utilizing dance notation as an active technology for experiencing, learning, reflecting on, creating, and performing, this frames the content of the ideas presented. In this presentation the central dance element is an etude dance masterwork created for the American Dance Legacy Institute Repertory Etudes Collection. The etude, a work-in-progress at the time of this presentation, is a jewel-like distillation based on Jose Limón's master choreography arranged by Carla Maxwell, Artistic Director of the Limon Dance Company in New York City.

The American Dance Legacy Institute provides an invaluable resource, through the Repertory Etudes Collection, for serious dance students, educators, and professionals to learn, study and perform dances of choreographic masters. Dance etudes are documented in various media providing resources to enhance the teaching of dance repertory, performance, dance history, composition, analysis and movement literacy. Each etude package includes video of the dance, historical background, footage of the choreographer providing insight and meaning to the dance, the music and a Labanotation score.

In this presentation, the Limón etude served as the central material to demonstrate the progression of a teaching framework actively employing dance notation as a technology. This progression is cross-curricular, combining aspects of dance history,

composition, movement analysis, and repertory leading to performance. The outcomes to this approach might include:

- a stronger feeling of ownership by the performer of the dance,
- a richer experiential and intellectual understanding of the movement aspects and meaning of the etude,
- a deeper understanding of and appreciation for Limon's / Maxwell's choreographic process,
- an ability to understand and utilize dance notation in various contexts
- a more sensitive or dynamic performance due to the multi-faceted approach serving multiple learning styles.

This is a framework that can be added to and altered in various ways to serve the needs of teacher and student. This series of events is offered as a beginning point for experimentation and development as each component can be delivered as a portion of, an entire or multiple classes or rehearsals.

The first introductory components of this progression begin with the sharing of historical and contextual background about the choreographer and their choreographic works, in this case, Jose Limón. Next, the work itself is presented on video for a visual introduction to and observation of the choreography itself (in the conference presentation, the video performance of the Limón etude in rehearsal was performed by Limon Company member Amber Merkens.) A following group discussion identifies key choreographic elements such as general movement components, vocabulary, stylistic aspects, mood, use of space, etc. These identified movement components or basic vocabulary might be incorporated as elements of a warm-up to prepare students to move and to create in the next steps of the framework progression.

After the whole work is viewed, choose a phrase of the etude to focus on and watch the video excerpt as needed to collectively identify prominent movement ideas being seen. Use motif notation to write down the basic phrase of movement ideas observed as a starting point. The action elements of the Language of Dance® Movement Alphabet is a helpful resource to create a motif phrase and is included in these materials as a resource (Figure 1). The dancers then use this written dance to explore and create their own movement phrases inspired by the etude. Group sharing, observation and discussion add to the creative process as various interpretations are presented.

The progression next leads to distribution of notated material of the same movement phrase with additional choreographic information from the etude added as represented by additional notations to the motif score. Three notated examples are included to illustrate the first movement phrase of the Limon etude. The first (Figure 2) is very

basic, representing broad movement ideas. The second version (Figure 3) includes some specific information and the third version (Figure 4) adds effort qualities and could provide additional qualitative aspects. As dancers interpret and share each of these versions, they continue to fine-tune their creative choices and build an inner relationship with the etude itself. The following component bridges the creative process to the learning of the actual etude. The next notated version of the etude movement phrase would still be a motif score, but one with more detailed information as to easily lead the student to reading the Labanotation score as a final step to learning the entire dance. This bridge continues to nurture the creative and artistic decision-making of the student while leading them to dance literacy and the learning of choreography for practice and performance. Of course, coaching would be woven throughout this entire process to provide essential insight into the work. (The Labanotation score for the Limón etude was not yet available at the time of this presentation, so examples of the last two score versions described are not included here.)

In the spirit of addressing the needs of the whole learner, which include the integrated sensory, cognitive, emotional and kinesthetic capacities, dance notation *can* be an impactful technology for reaching educational objectives. We believe in the purpose and benefits of notation, and it is up to us to instill this value and our enthusiasm in our students and colleagues. Experiment with this teaching framework or with ideas of your own to infuse notation into the fabric of dance.

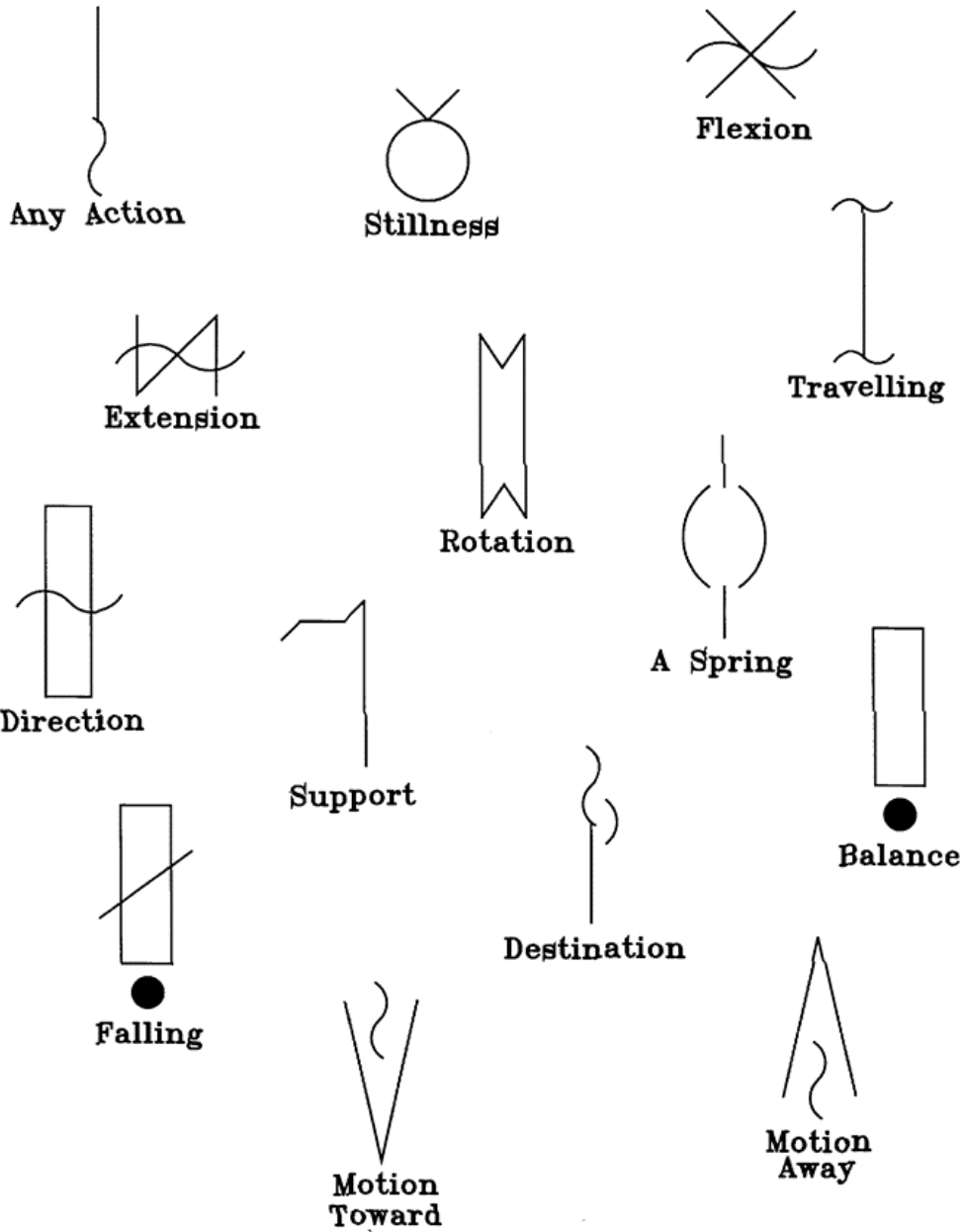
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If you would like more information related to this presentation:

- Contact Tina Curran at [tinalodc@aol.com](mailto:tinalodc@aol.com)
- Visit the Language of Dance website at [www.lodc.org](http://www.lodc.org)
- Visit the American Dance Legacy Institute website at: [www.adli.org](http://www.adli.org)
- Visit The Limón Dance Company website at: [www.limon.org](http://www.limon.org)

# THE MOVEMENT ALPHABET

The prime actions and concepts of which movement is comprised are as follows:



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Figure 1

ICKL - American Dance Legacy  
Institute, Etude Project

Limon Etude - Motif Version 1

choreography by Carla Maxwell  
after Jose Limon

motif by Tina Curran

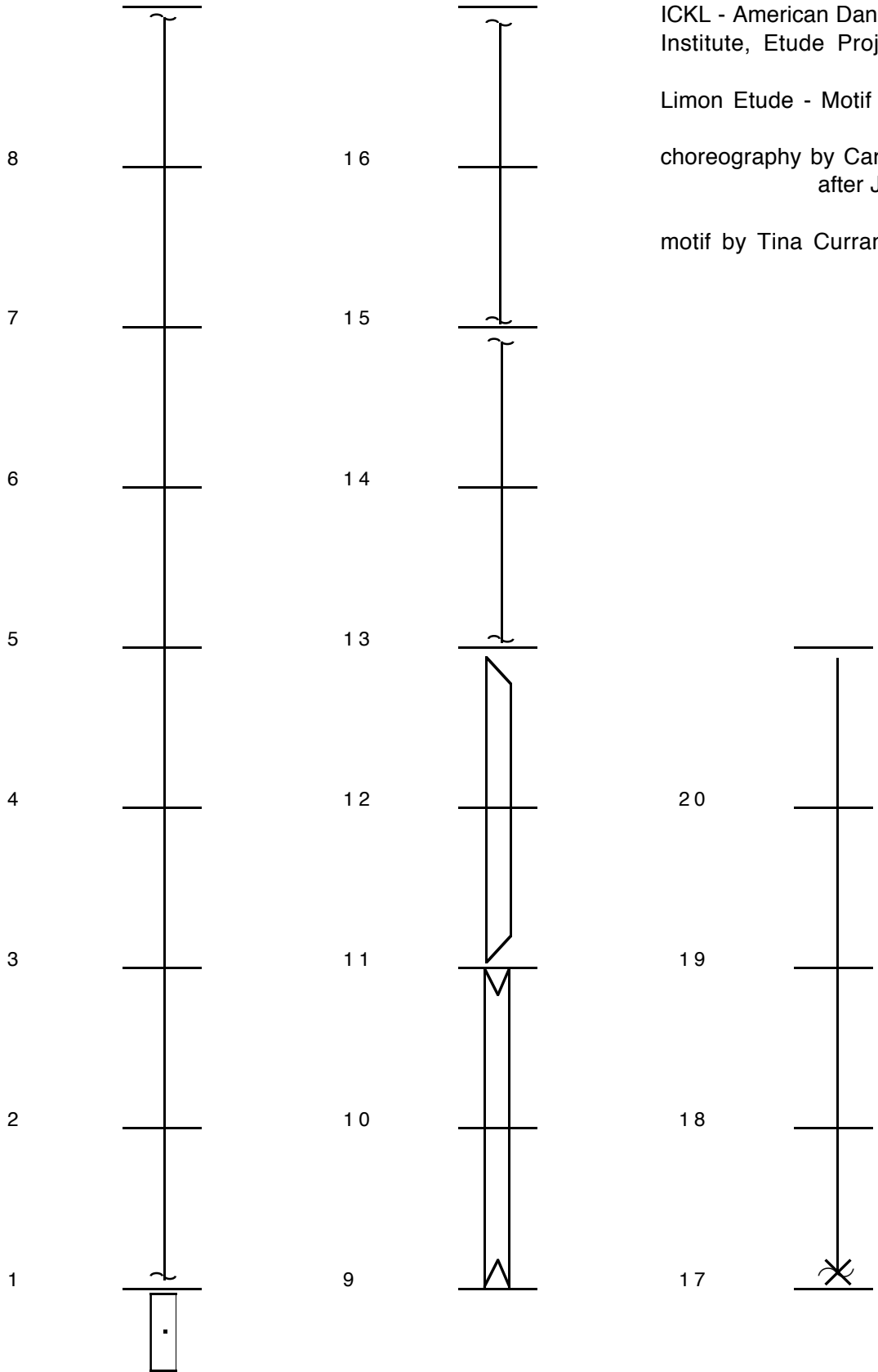


Figure 2

ICKL - American Dance Legacy  
Institute: Etude Project

Limon Etude - Motif Version 2

choreography by Carla Maxwell  
after Jose Limon

motif by Tina Curran

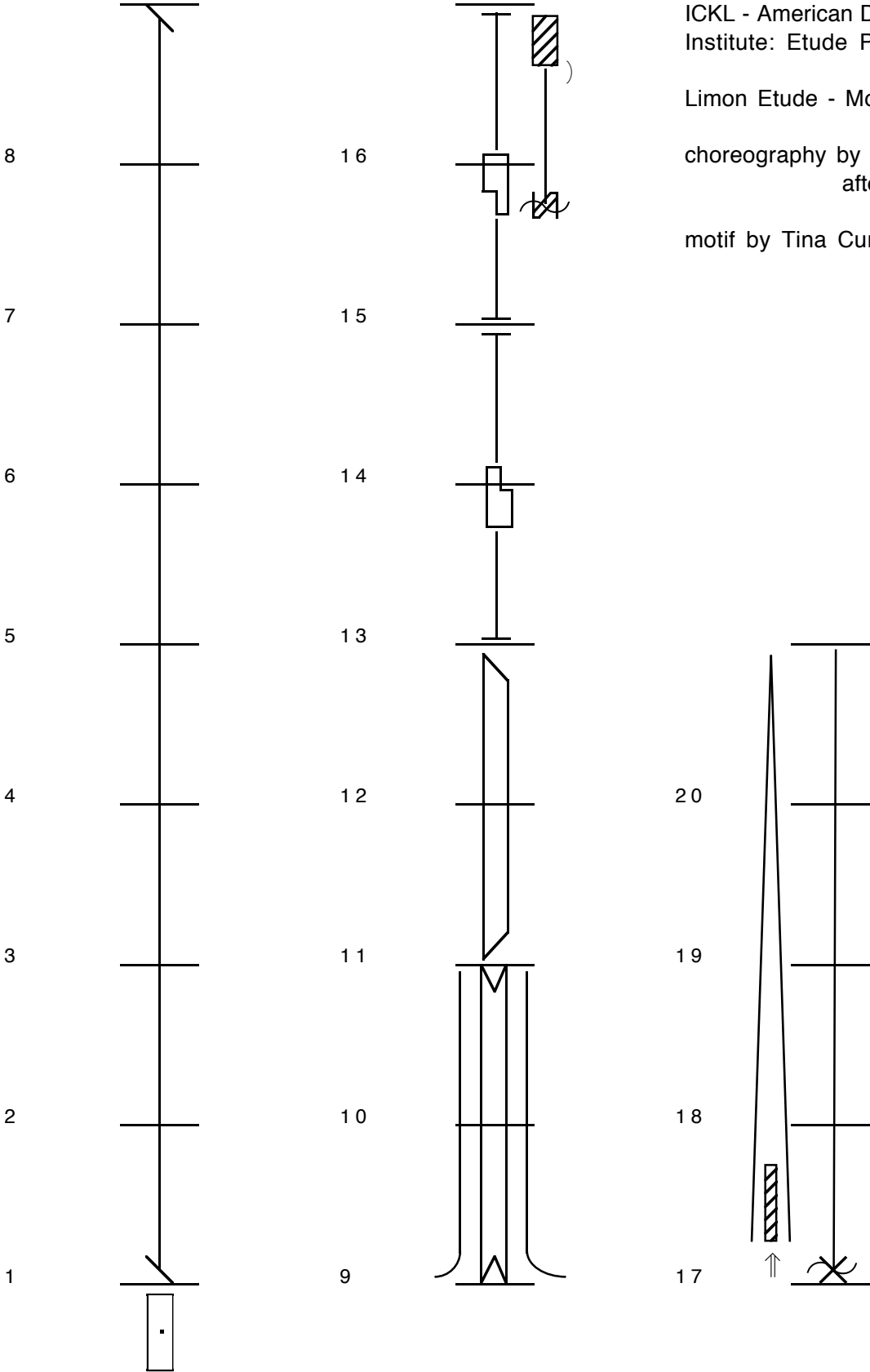


Figure 3

ICKL - American Dance Legacy  
Institute: Etude Project

Limon Etude - Motif Version 3

choreography by Carla Maxwell  
after Jose Limon  
motif by Tina Curran

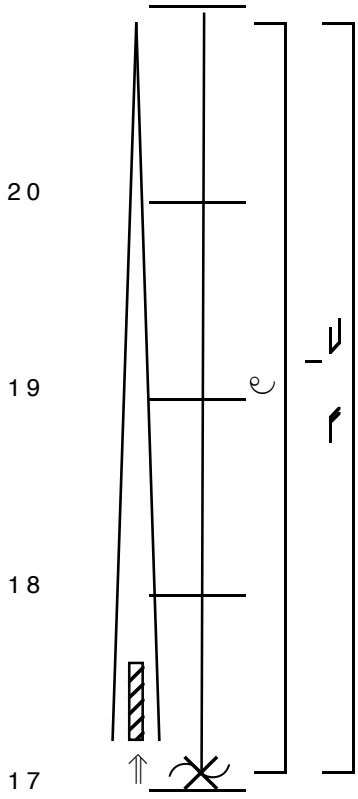
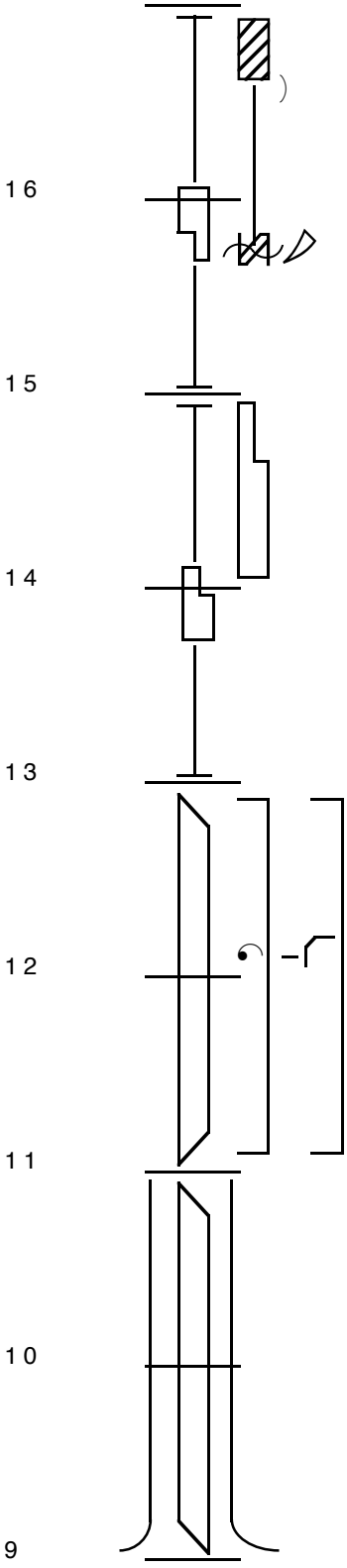
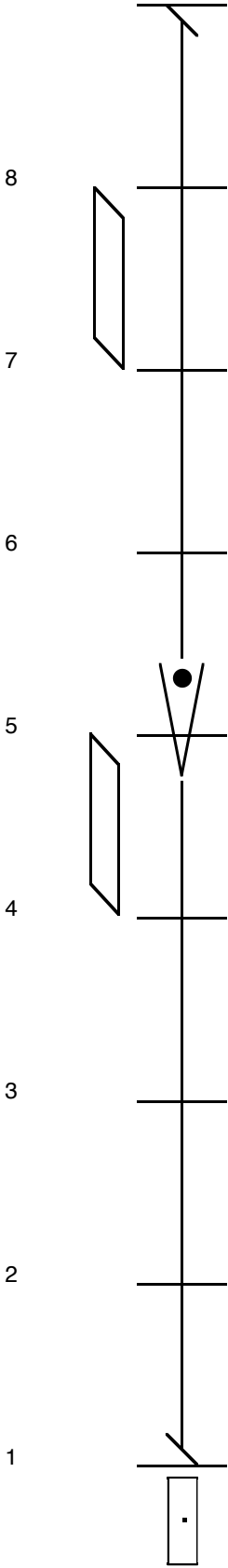


Figure 4