The Influence of Delsarte’s Work in the United States: Late 19th Century and Beyond

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In this paper I introduce the Americans who were important in the early history of Delsartean study and practice in the United States and discuss their work in spreading and adapting Delsarte’s theories and practice in the fields of acting, oratory, women’s physical culture, expression, and dance—in the development of what I term “American Delsartism.” I focus on the contributions of Steele Mackaye (1842–94), Genevieve Stebbins (1857–1933 or later), and Henrietta Hovey (1849–1918); and also refer to Lewis B. Monroe (1825–79), and William R. Alger (1822–1905). Most of this comes from my book, The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism (1999).

The context for the introduction of Delsartism in the United States was the field of elocution (voice and speech training for public speaking), which had been developing on a national scale from the 1820’s. By the late nineteenth century, there were schools, performance venues, publications, and a national network of professional associations devoted to this field. Increasingly, from the mid-century on, some elocution instructors emphasized gesture and bodily motion, and the term “expression” came into vogue for work that included physical culture, pantomime, acting, and interpersonal communication, as well as training for public speaking. While expression was taught by various methods in the United States, what became the best known and ultimately the broadest in application was the American Delsarte system. It comprised theory from Delsarte, practical exercises and formulas for expression from Mackaye (what could be termed the “Delsarte-Mackaye System”), physical training exercises from a variety of sources, and popular performance genres such as statue posing, pantomime, and dance or dance-like forms that incorporated or reflected Delsartean theory. By the late 19th century, American Delsartism had spread across the United States and involved thousands of students—mostly women and female children.

There were three phases or focuses in American Delsartism as it developed. The first began in the early 1870’s and was closely associated with the professional training of speakers and actors. The second, coming to the fore in the 1880’s, emphasized physical culture for the general public. That became popular particularly among middle and upper class women. In the third aspect, which also began in the 1880’s and was the broadest of all, Delsartean aesthetic theory was applied to all aspects of life. Often a single teacher would be offering work in two or three of the training aspects, although some specialized in only one.

The first phase began with the only known American student of Delsarte, the well-known actor, dramatist, director, and theater inventor, James Morrison Steele Mackaye. Mackaye began his work with Delsarte in Paris in October 1869. He had not come as an unsophisticated beginner, but had been developing his own approaches to expression, pantomime,
gymnastics, and aesthetics since the early 1860’s. Delsarte soon discovered that Mackaye had important pedagogical knowledge and methods that could complement and enhance his own work, so he invited the new pupil to teach with him. Mackaye was still a student of Delsarte, but also to some extent a colleague.

Some 20 years later, Mackaye asked his wife, Mary Medberry Mackaye, to develop an article on the Delsarte-Mackaye work for publication. In his undated communication with her about what she should write, he stated that he had been able to master Delsarte’s series of gestures much more quickly than other students because of his “diligent study [...] according to a system which I invented myself.” He continued:

[After analyzing the motions, I discovered by close study the physical obstacles existing in my own organization to the realization of these motions in my own action. Before Delsarte and I parted, I had laid the foundation of my whole system and philosophy of psychologic gymnastics of which Harmonic Gymnastics is a branch (Undated letter to M.M. Mackaye, Delsarte Archive, Louisiana State University, Box 14, Folder 156. The resulting article, “Steele Mackaye and François Delsarte” by Mrs. Steele Mackaye, appeared in Werner’s Voice Magazine 14 (July 1892): 189).

Whether the “Harmonic Gymnastics” had been developed by Mackaye or by Delsarte himself would be a topic of discussion and sometimes argument from the early 1870’s to the end of the century.

The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War forced Mackaye to leave France in July 1870. When he returned to the United States, he was contacted by two noted Bostonians who had heard of Delsarte’s work from a report in the Atlantic Monthly (May 1871). It was written by an American journalist, Francis A. Durivage, who had attended a Delsarte-Mackaye class in Paris. The two men who contacted Mackaye were Lewis B. Monroe, founder and director of the Boston University School of Oratory, who then studied with Mackaye and invited him to lecture at the School, and Reverend William R. Alger, a Unitarian clergyman who began his studies with Mackaye and then continued with Delsarte’s son Gustave in Paris. The three friends worked to bring Delsarte to the United States to begin a school there, but his death in the summer of 1871 interrupted those plans.

Mackaye directed a series of schools where the system and his development of it were integral parts of the program. Monroe included the Delsarte system in the curriculum of the Boston University School of Oratory and taught it himself as well as inviting Mackaye for lectures. Alger also taught, wrote, and lectured on Delsarte. These first three American Delsarteans taught many others who would teach in their turn and spread knowledge of the system. However, of the three, Mackaye was the only one who probably made a substantive contribution to the development and expansion of the Delsarte complex as it became known and practiced in the United States – the “harmonic (or aesthetic) gymnastics” and the vocabulary he termed “gamuts of expression.” A demonstration of the latter during one of his lectures in Boston (21 March 1871) was highly praised by a critic who described how Mackaye’s changes of emotion were:

running through satisfaction, pleasure, tenderness and love to adoration, and [...] through dislike, disgust, envy and hate to fury [...] [then] transitions from repose to jollity, silliness and prostration, to utter drunkenness; [...] passing through all the grades of mental disturbance to insanity, and down all the stairs of mental weakness to idiocy (Boston Transcript and Boston Advertiser 22 March, 1871, quoted in Percy Mackaye 1:151–52).
The “harmonic gymnastics” and “gamuts of expression” became fundamental elements in American Delsartism; and it is likely that it was Mackaye who created and developed them, but that is a question that remains unanswered. Mackaye wrote some articles, but no major treatise on the Delsartism that he taught. However, notes for his lectures and classes are available in the archives.

As Delsarte himself, Mackaye was never rigid in his theory and practice. He was continually researching and expanding his knowledge and approach. He built on what he had learned from Delsarte, but also incorporated his own thinking and innovations into his teaching. He established some of the first schools for actors in the United States and his theory and methodology influenced a generation of teachers and practitioners in theater, oratory, and physical culture.

The representative figure of the second phase of American Delsartism, in which physical culture for the general public was emphasized, was Genevieve Stebbins, who eventually became one of the most prominent popularizers of American Delsartism through her teaching, writing, and performances. It was she who initially developed the system furthest in the direction of dance, and she herself performed dances, pantomimes, and statue-posing for popular “ladies matinees.” Stebbins, like many of the “modern dance” pioneers who would come later, was an indefatigable reader, researcher, and writer – as well as an admired performing artist and teacher – and her publications gave her visibility and stature in the field of physical culture and expression.

Stebbins’ interest in performance and expression began to develop early in her life, as evidenced by her performances as a child in pantomimes, songs, dances, and statue-posing. Then in 1875, at the age of 18, she went to New York to pursue an acting career, with her professional debut probably two years later. She began to work with Mackaye or his assistant in 1876 or 1877. At his suggestion, she left performing for two years to study intensively with him, appeared in one of his productions in 1879, and then resumed her regular acting career. She did so well with the Delsarte-Mackaye work that Mackaye had her demonstrate for his lectures and sometimes even teach in his place. While their relationship was initially characterized by cordiality and mutual respect, it eventually deteriorated, as they became competitors in the world of American Delsartism.

From the mid-1880s until the early 1890s, Stebbins and Mary S. Thompson, a colleague from the Boston University School of Oratory, taught in New York City and gave a “Delsarte Matinee” each year at a major theater there. In 1893, Stebbins and her husband, Norman Astley, opened the New York School of Expression, which, in 1894, merged with F. Townsend Southwick’s School of Oratory. It continued operation until Stebbins retired in 1907. During this time, Stebbins was active as lecturer, teacher, and performer in various cities of the United States. She continued performing until at least 1903.

Stebbins’ elaboration of the Delsarte system derived from a number of sources. It was founded initially on the theoretical and practical material she had learned from Mackaye. Then in 1881 she traveled to Europe to do research for a book on the Delsarte system and there she met and talked with the Abbé Delaumosne and also acquired some unpublished manuscripts of Delsarte himself. Her first publication, The Delsarte System of Expression appeared in six editions from 1885 to 1902. The last one contained several new sections and was reprinted by Dance Horizons in 1977. In considering her publications from the first edition of The Delsarte System of Expression through The Genevieve Stebbins System of Physical Training of 1913, it is clear that while the Delsarte work remained a core element for her, as time went on, she had incorporated theory and practice from many other sources as
well. These included the work of other specialists in acting, gymnastic and therapeutic exercise, and anthropology. In addition, in her writings, one finds references to literature, art, music, religion, philosophy, etc. – and to Swedish medical gymnastics and yoga breathing techniques.

The third phase of American Delsartism was the broadest of all. Its basic ideal was to treat all of life as art, and to enhance it according to the principles of Delsartean aesthetics. This phase is best represented by Henrietta Hovey. Born Henrietta Knapp, over the course of three marriages her last name became Crane, then Russell, and finally Hovey (as I will refer to her here). Hovey taught mostly in society circles until later in her life when she settled in the Los Angeles area, came into contact with Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis, and taught at the Denishawn School.

Hovey was the first American to begin the widespread popularization of the Delsarte system outside the fields of acting and oratory. By her early twenties Hovey had been lecturing on dress reform, and sometime in the 1870’s, to improve her speech for public presentation, she entered the Boston University School of Oratory. She learned about the Delsarte system in classes with its director, Lewis B. Monroe, and from lectures given by Mackaye. In the late 1870’s (probably 1878), she traveled to Paris where she studied with Delsarte’s son Gustave prior to his death in 1879. She returned to the United States and began a teaching career that would continue off and on for almost 40 years. She was recognized by some contemporaries as a serious Delsarte authority – and dismissed by others as a fraud. Most of her press coverage (which appeared on society pages) depicted her as a beautiful, exotic creature catering to upper class, fashionable ladies. They had the leisure and money to seek classes in physical culture and expression from this icon of American Delsartism; and of course, such engagements provided both income and prestige for Hovey. It is difficult to reach any conclusion about Hovey’s teaching and serious commitment to the Delsarte work until we get to Ted Shawn’s contact with her. Shawn (1891–1972) with his partner Ruth St. Denis (1879–1968) was one of the leading pioneers of what developed in the 20th-century as “modern dance.” Hovey obviously impressed Shawn deeply, and he learned much from her and respected her totally. While she, as well as Delsarte and Mackaye, had projected writing a multivolume work on the Delsarte system, she only published *Yawning* (1891), a slight volume that was to be the first part of the series (and that elicited mocking comments in the press). There is a long typed draft of other proposed volumes in the Ted Shawn Archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, which would appear to presage a substantial opus, but one that was unfortunately never realized. The fact, however, that this exists gives an idea of the breadth and depth of Hovey’s understanding of the Delsartean principles.

By the late 19th century, one could find the adjective “Delsartean” applied to teachers, schools, performances, and publications – and even to corsets that were less restrictive and harmful than the ones fashionable women had been wearing. As Delsartism spread across the United States, it came to involve hundreds of teachers and thousands of students – mostly women and female children – and in the early part of the 20th century the American version of Delsartism even traveled back to Europe to effect physical education and new dance practices in Germany and other countries. And, as discussed above, in addition to furthering the cause of women’s physical culture and expression, some proponents also promoted the aesthetic principles to argue for artistry in everyday life – in clothing, house decor, social interaction, and anything else that might be thus “improved.” It was precisely this side of the popularization of American Delsartism that some critics, such as Shawn, saw as a distortion.
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of the master’s intentions – “[...] a reversal and falsification of the science which Delsarte taught” (1974: 11). And yet, his most revered Delsartean, Henrietta Hovey, had been one of the leaders in the popularization of American Delsartism in all these aspects.

While some of the American Delsarteans, such as Genevieve Stebbins, performed and taught dances or dance-like forms as part of their Delsartean work during the late 19th century, the influence of Delsartism on 20th-century dance developments really began with the work of Shawn, St. Denis, and their company, Denishawn. Shawn’s and St. Denis’s knowledge and experience of the Delsarte system had gone through various phases before their contact with Hovey. In 1915, however, Shawn embarked on a more tangible and immediate experience of Delsartism than he had known previously, and, of course, he shared this with St. Denis and the members of their company and school. He took private lessons with Hovey in the summers of 1915, 1916, and 1917 and also invited her to give lectures on Delsartism at Denishawn. She became the most important source of Delsartean knowledge for Shawn and probably inspired his own intensive research into the broad spectrum of Delsartean literature that resulted in his book *Every Little Movement* (1974). I believe that the Delsartism that Shawn came to know over the years served as a powerful, continuous and crucial guidance for his development as an artist, teacher, theorist, writer, and leader of dance in the United States and significantly influenced his students and followers.

Although François Delsarte never showed the least interest in dance himself, his concepts and their theoretical and practical manifestations have been seminal in the development of the 20th-century Western concert genre, “modern dance.” And since the publication of Shawn’s *Every Little Movement*, the contribution of the Delsartean theory and practice to the history of 20th-century dance has been acknowledged by many dance historians and scholars – some briefly, and others with more extensive discussion and analysis. Shawn’s book provides a carefully researched and well-written study of the Delsarte system and its relationship to dance and a discussion of the most important literature published up to the 1960’s. It is one of the most reliable and significant sources on the subject that exists in English.

The core principles of Delsartism, as established by Delsarte, were passed along by those who had studied with the master himself, and then by their students, and by their students’ students – passed along through both personal instruction and writings on the system, some published in Europe, but many more in the United States. With a history developing through several generations of proponents and among the various fields of acting, oratory, singing, physical culture and expression, and dance, it is not surprising that different emphases and adaptations appeared under the Delsarte umbrella and a spectrum of interpretations, uses and teaching methods. Of course, such adaptations and the proliferation of Delsartism throughout the United States led to claims of authenticity versus fakery. While it is understandable that Delsarte disciples and practitioners of the past felt compelled to defend whatever aspects of the complex each saw as being the “true” Delsarte and malign what they considered false, I think it is more useful to consider the various aspects of the historical development of the Delsarte theory and practice with an open mind and appreciate the multiple ways that it has functioned and served various needs.

Within the last couple of decades, interest in the Delsarte work has developed in Europe as well as in the United States. There have been publications, conferences, and exhibitions in France and Italy; sponsorship by the Centre National de la Danse in Paris of a translation into French of Shawn’s *Every Little Movement*; and an issue of the *Mime Journal* devoted to Delsartean research. The latest evidence of the continuing importance of Delsarte’s work and that of his followers has been the 2011 events in Stuttgart, Paris, and Padua to commemorate
the 200 year anniversary of Delsarte’s birth and to further research into and practice of the various aspects of Delsartism.

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