



Barbara Mettler circa 1931

# Thoughts on Mettler's *Manifesto for Modern Dance*

By Griff Goehring

I recently rediscovered Barbara Mettler's *Manifesto for Modern Dance*. It was originally published in *Dance Observer* in 1953 and was included in her collection *Ten Articles on Dance*.

How like Barbara, I thought, to use the word "manifesto" when we were in the middle of the Cold War, the Red Scare was in full swing, and Joseph McCarthy was looking behind every door for godless communists with their Karl Marx papers—specially in places where artists were found. She liked to feel "subversive" and rebellious. She liked to stir things up.

Certainly Barbara's ideas developed over the next several decades, but the *Manifesto* holds up as a concise explanation of her guiding artistic principles. By the time I met her in 1973, she no longer used the term "modern dance"

in relation to her own work, for example. Within the next two years she "retired" the *Ten Articles*, believing they were dated. That also was characteristic of Barbara: don't keep doing things the same old way. If you're going to write books and articles about your dance in the 1970s, don't use the same words you wrote in the 1940s and 50s.

Yet the basic framework of her theory is there in clear language. "Creative dance is something to do, not to watch.... Dance satisfies the kinesthetic sense. Everyone can dance.... Movement is the material of dance and the body is the instrument...."

How wise of Barbara to write down principles—not rules, not commandments—but principles that can be used as guidance and still allow an individual artist to discover and evolve new directions in free movement expression.

In my experiences with Barbara, she was adamant that, as her student or as a dancer in her employ, it was essential to understand her work and represent it accurately. Yet once I left her studio, it would be necessary to find my own way, to discover ways to use these principles appropriately with my own students and in my own dance. I was not to go out into the world to do Barbara Mettler's work because only she could do that. I should go out to make up something new that was mine to give to others in ways that would evolve naturally if I allowed myself to be free.

Every time I teach I face the challenge: keep the clarity and the basic truths that I learned from Barbara but bring freshness, openness, and creativity to this moment and this group in front of me. I try to avoid falling into patterns or teaching by rote. My choices as a teacher may differ sharply

from the choices of another who studied and danced beside me under Barbara's firm direction. The decisions I make with one group of dancers may appear to be in conflict with those I make when teaching another group. To teach free movement expression, I must be free.

Now we are all out of the studio. Our community of dancers has taken it upon itself to "promote and develop creative dance founded on the free approach to the art of body movement developed by dance pioneer Barbara Mettler."

The *Manifesto* doesn't give us specific instructions on how to do that. It doesn't give us a road map. It doesn't even set boundaries. It does give us a compass, and points us toward new territory. It encourages us to go out into the world and stir things up. It allows us to be free.



Photo provided by Susan Dayall, Hampshire College Archives

## MANIFESTO FOR MODERN DANCE

By Barbara Mettler (1953)

I. DANCE is the *art of body movement*. Its *form* is determined by its *material*, movement. Its *technique* is determined by its *instrument*, the human body. Its *content* is determined by the *movement idea*.

Dance is *aesthetic movement experience*. Aesthetic experience means awareness of the expressive form of the experience over and above its utilitarian function. Any movement may be experienced aesthetically. Its dance-value is relative to the person having the experience.

Dance is a *motor* art, directed toward satisfying the kinaesthetic sense. Its visual and auditory elements are outgrowths of the motor.

Dance is a *creative* activity. It is primarily something *to do* and only secondarily something to see.

Dance is *expression of personality*. Since no two people are alike, no two can be expected to dance in exactly the same way.

Dance is *pure movement expression* rather than interpretation of drama or music.

Dance is the awareness of the *abstract* elements of movement: pulse, pace, direction, etc.

Dance is *expressive* movement, not gymnastic drill or acrobatic display.

Dance is an *inner experience* made perceptible in outer form. It may be shared with an audience, but its motivation is not audience entertainment.

Dance is the *central* art because it is equally concerned with force, time, and space, whereas other arts emphasize one or the other of these areas.

Dance is the *primary* art because all art begins with a movement impulse.

Dance may be *pure* or *applied* (to recreation, education, therapy, interpretation of music or drama, audience entertainment, etc.).

II. Modern dance is *pure* dance, *basic* dance, *free* dance. Modern dance is modern only if it has

1. a democratic philosophy
2. a scientific basis
3. organic form

A democratic philosophy means:

Creative dance expression is for everyone: everyone can dance. Materials and methods must be found for making creative dance expression available to all kinds of people: old and young, healthy and handicapped.

A scientific basis means:

1. Respect for the laws of movement (physics)
2. Respect for the laws of the human body (physiology)
3. Respect for the laws of human behavior (psychology)

Organic form means:

The form of a dance grows organically out of itself like a living thing, according to its inherent function, which is the expression of a movement idea.

III. A democratic philosophy can be put into practice by emphasizing:

1. Free creative expression: freedom from arbitrary patterns, freedom for every individual to find his own unique forms of expression according to his age, sex, body structure, temperament and life experience.
2. Creative group expression: opportunity for every individual to find his creative relationship to the group.

Freedom of expression can be achieved by emphasizing:

1. Objectivity toward movement as the material of dance and toward the body as an instrument of expression. This extends dance beyond the limits of the private and personal.
2. A direct approach to movement expression rather than a round-about way through music or drama.
3. Relaxation, the natural counterpart of tension, without which no creative movement is possible.
4. Improvisation, which liberates movement imagination.
5. A systematic exploration of all areas of dance experience:

Form

- Force elements
- Time elements
- Space elements

Technique

- Fundamentals of Body Movement

Content

- Sensory
- Emotional
- Intellectual