While the Israeli painter, Chaim Nahor, was talking to a woman in silver eye-shadow and red boots who was gushing “simply marvelous” at a showing of his work, he begged my reaction to the paintings already on display. I was in a hurry and not in the mood for anything “simply marvelous.” I had planned to take a quick look, meet Chaim, and leave. But in a breath-catching instant, I knew I could not leave until I had seen every painting. When the last guest had left, Chaim turned to me. “I think you like them?” he asked as he pulled out a portfolio that he had not shared with the other guests. I nodded, and soaked up three stunning watercolors that he chose to share with me. Little by little we worked through the entire portfolio.

“Chaim, it’s—I don’t know how to describe this to you—it sounds crazy, but I have the sensation in my body that I have when I am dancing—when I am improvising my own movement to music.”

“But of course,” Chaim answered to what had seemed to me an ineffective way of expressing myself. “You see it—you feel it! That’s the way I paint, and to you it comes through.” His wise, wonderful face lighted the room the same way his paintings did. “In any art there must be movement or it becomes static—dead,” he continued. “I paint to music, you see. Bach, Mozart, Schubert—perhaps most of all Bach. As I listen, my body feels the movement in the music just as you feel it when you dance. Only I dance on the canvas, not? I take brush and color and light, and my painting becomes a dance, and my dance becomes the painting. But of course... You see it, you feel it. The instant you walk into the room I know.”

Is it so unusual to respond to art this way? Why did I feel embarrassed at expressing my response to his painting in terms of movement? I had no choice, for no impressive intellectual commeat came to mind.
I could only fumble out my inner response, and be gratified that he instantly understood. Not only did he understand; he was fascinated and delighted. He had received recognition in several countries for his imaginative work. Yet my comment touched a spot in his soul that fogged up his intense eyes. Until he responded, however, I felt tongue-tied and inadequate, reprimanded by my judges.

I had quite the opposite experience a few weeks later when I attended a photographic showing. I felt perfectly at ease commenting on the perceptive eye of the photographer, his remarkable sense of composition, the imaginative quality in many of the pictures. Yet I left the show unmoved, although the subject matter he had chosen was intended to be moving, and had been dealt with in a way that showed brilliant technical knowledge.

“What do you mean,” asked a friend once, “when you say something moved you deeply?” Good question. Hard to answer. The phrase is used too easily, and becomes fuzzy with imprecision, vague meaning.

When I left the exhibit I felt troubled, thinking perhaps it was I who lacked something rather than the pictures. I went back another day when my mood was different and tried hard to be moved. I was impressed, but I was not moved. Then I remembered the experience with Chaim Nahir, and I knew that for me the term moved was not imprecise, and was not a convenient substitute for more erudite terms. There was something lacking in this photographer’s vision. The light was superb, the textures fascinating, the depth of focus carefully wrought out, and the subject matter full of emotional overtones. The pictures were “correct,” yet sterile. Quite literally, nothing moved. Nothing nudged inside of me.

“They were not pictures to make you feel joyful,” my husband said when I tried to describe my reaction. That was not the point. Being moved is not necessarily joyous. It may have nothing to do with feeling joy, although many times I do. It has to do with a strong reaction in my entire body that involves muscles and tissue and cells and emotions. It has to do with feeling intensely and totally alive and—yes—charged. The emotions that accompany the feeling may be sad or joyful or angry or tender. But the feeling of movement is there: the sense of literally being moved around at some deep level of awareness.

We speak also of being moved or not moved by music, dance, or theater. We can fall asleep at a flawless concert. Or we can go to another, feeling just as tired to begin with, and come away with an indescribable charge in our bodies and our spirits. Interestingly enough, the second concert may not have been as flawless, but the performer conveyed a quality of energy and involvement that inspired and refreshed us.

The difference is hard to pin down, and we often blame ourselves for our fatigue or flagging attention. Yet the chemistry of our bodies changes when certain people perform, and we know we could not be bored if we tried.

Chaim danced his movement onto the canvas and I felt the response in my body. The photographer thought his way to his pictures and I left unmoved.

Does this mean we should abandon the thinking process and slop paint around on a canvas indiscriminately, or just let our emotions carry us through performing a piece without worrying about more precise details? Heavens no! But too often we rely so much on thought process that we think our bodies out of existence. Our art—or our appreciation—suffers.

I had lunch one day with Larry Graham, a performing and recording artist who had recently won several international awards and who taught at a nearby university. I had been a guest lecturer in the piano pedagogy class he was teaching, and he was skeptical about my ideas for using movement as an integral part of teaching piano. To illustrate my ideas, I described a session with Kate, a student who was playing a Mozart fantasy. The piece opens with a slow tension that I could easily demonstrate with my body, but which eludes verbal description. As the opening chords unravel, the music gives the sense of tentatively exploring a fascinating, unknown grotto.

Kate loved the piece passionately, but the passion didn’t show because her head pretended it could direct fingers in such matters as passion. Those slow opening notes on the piano should sound as though they are being played on cellos or double basses or violas, where a well-roasted bow can prolong and intensify a tone, and where the body of a cello and the body of a player are almost as one body producing—almost breathing—the tone. That’s a lot to ask of a precocious seventh-grader tackling music beyond her years, and a lot to ask of hammers hitting strings.

I could have inundated Kate, as I sometimes have, with a lengthy verbal description of the qualities of that opening. I could have been quite precise about the amount of weighting she needed in each finger to achieve the crescendo. I chose instead to invite her away from the piano to discover something about Mozart that heads and fingers can’t
teach us. We stood facing each other, the palms of my hands against hers with just enough pressure to create substances for her to work with.

"Now show me with movement how that opening phrase feels to you."

Timidly, Kate started exploring. As she heard the music more clearly in her head, she let her arms flow with an intensity that matched that of the music. My own body yielded and resisted in a subtle flow of energy between us. When I felt that her sense of the music had become body-knowledge, I asked her to play the opening once again. The long notes that had seemed passive and limp now had a resonance and energy that brought the music to life.

Larry, my friendly critic, thought the anecdote interesting enough, but still maintained that the movement experience was probably superfluous. He began describing how he feels about that opening phrase and why it works musically for him, vividly demonstrating with his hands and arms how he reacts to the dramatic tension in the music. As he spoke—with words and movement—I realized that our table had become a center of attraction in the restaurant and remarked, "Larry, look at yourself."

His arms suddenly dropped to his sides, he looked around a little embarrassed, laughed, and replied, "Case dismissed! I guess I've just proved your point."

Indeed he had, for he could never have been as eloquent with words alone. Of course, he had proved his point at the same time for he is a musician who intuitively feels movement in the music he plays. But there are many musicians who are so distant from their physical bodies that they need the drama of actual movement to reconnect them. Even when musicians have this wonderful intuitive sense, movement can clarify their musical responses and strengthen their interpretation. Larry was willing to experiment with this at a later point. When he did, the combination of his wonderful musicianship and technique—enhanced by additional musical freedom gained through experiment—was sheer delight. He found that moving a phrase with his body could be an interesting shortcut to sensing how to shape that phrase musically at the piano.

In my own playing, I find that although thinking verbally about a phrase gives me important information, I can always discover still more through movement. If we are tied to the verbal concept and never verify it with the wisdom of our bodies, we may fool ourselves into thinking the music sounds right because the words sound right. But words and music are not the same.

How about the listener? When we listen, does it change our perceptions if we are tuned in to movement? Sometimes we blame the performer wrongly, for at times we go to a concert and become inert lamps of flesh, challenging a performer to move us out of our sophisticated lethargy. I sometimes enhance my enjoyment by giving free rein to the intuitive side of my nature, allowing imagery to develop, characters to emerge, and invisible dancers within to respond to the choreography of the music. My muscles come to life in response, yet to an onlooker's eye I am sitting as sedately as Mr. Hacklebriar in the front row (or almost). When I listen this way I know I've hit a real loser if the music only dulls me into a state of indifference. If I play recorded music at home I need not worry about a Mr. Hacklebriar, and can turn the dancer loose whenever I wish.

All very well, you say, for someone who loves to move and dance. But is the urge to move and to dance that unusual? Or is it a natural capacity that we often ignore? Doesn't that urge to move come with our first breath of life? How about earlier, when we first stirred within our mother's womb?

As a mother, I have lovely memories of that stage when an abstract pregnancy turned into a tiny tentative quiver within my belly. I couldn't be sure at first—perhaps it was a gas bubble. Within days the tentative quality changed and I knew something marvelous was taking place. Nothing abstract any more. There was something alive in there, each day gaining power to capture my attention. Each child I bore moved differently, and I never lost my sense of awe—even though at times I wished this new little life inside me would choose a different rib to kick.

Research has shown that the fetus responds to voices, sounds, music. The newborn baby carries this response into a new world. The movements of the baby are not just random movements, but are often choreographed by surrounding sounds. By the time the baby is a toddler, no researcher is needed to convince us that the child is responding to music.

As small children, most of us listened to music with our entire bodies, charming parents and aunts and uncles with our free and joyous movement. But charming our relatives can be dangerous. Their encouragement can sow the seeds of self-consciousness. When a natural response turns into a performance, the charm fades and we may be scolded for showing off. Alas, spontaneity and scoldings can become cousins in our minds.
At a proper age we may have been sent to "dancing class," but in all too many cases the class had as little to do with that original response to music as a rap on the knuckles at a piano lesson has to do with liking to play the piano.

That innate response is still there within us, waiting to be rediscovered. People often find themselves crying as they begin moving to music again after years of disconnection. The crying can mean many things, but frequently it means that they have been touched in some forgotten corner of their being. The crying sometimes means sadness for something they have lost and the joy/pain of rediscovery. Sometimes it signifies a healthy release of emotions tucked into the too-right bag of adulthood. People often realize how alienated they feel from their bodies, and feel nostalgia for earlier freedoms.

If sadness is experienced, it is usually a fleeting feeling, yet it is important to notice because it tells us something about what we deny ourselves. What may come next is a body-tingling charge which signals that a part of us that was dulled into polite passivity before is alive and awake. In workshops I always enjoy the reaction of people who rediscover the dancing child within as their bodies come to life. Their faces change, their personalities lighten up, their eyes become more expressive.

Try an experiment, just for yourself, behind closed doors where you won't be embarrassed. Get a recording of the Samuel Barber Adagio for Strings, the Albinoni Adagio for Strings and Organ, or some other record of your own choosing that moves along with a powerful sweep. Turn on the record player and lie comfortably on the floor with plenty of space around you. Imagine the music flowing into your body.

Experience the essence of the music . . . let it flow up through your veins until your whole body is suffused . . . feel the sensuous quality of the music . . . let it turn you inside out . . . weep with it . . . laugh . . . let it do an inner dance of power, of ecstasy within you . . . let it flow into your arms, your fingers, your thighs, your knees, your toes. Resist the music if you must . . . then go with it . . . flow with it . . . let it reach some inner layer until you can no longer resist the urge to move. Let the music do what it will . . . let it pull you up off the floor, . . . move with it . . . play with it. Feel the air about you come alive with sound waves . . . let your body jangle with the music and mingle with the vibrations in the air. Let yourself be alive to the fingertips . . . beyond the fingertips. Feel streams of energy yield like elastic as you explore the space around and above and below you.

Feel the climax of the music . . . intensely . . . intensify . . . let it take you where it will, and leave you where it may. As the music ends, sense the life and energy in the silence. Listen for your own silence as a frame around the experience.

Or try another experiment. Take a folk dance record: an English country dance, an old-fashioned polka, an Israeli hora, or the dance music from "Zorba the Greek." At first just listen. Feel the compelling rhythm. Then begin moving, but with some restrictions: at first let only your fingers dance to the music, your feet glided to the floor, your body immobile. Let your fingers gradually connect to wrists, to arms, and next to shoulders. Now a torso can move from the waist, feet still glided in place. When your legs and feet can stand the restraint no longer, turn them loose, but don't think about what they are doing. Don't worry about correct steps. Your body knows how to move. Trust it. Send the judgmental part of yourself off on vacation so it won't interfere, and make up your own steps. Try it with a friend, or in a group. It doesn't matter whether you ordinarily have two left feet or not. Just pretend when you improvise that everything is right, and somehow it is. Interact with each other. Hook elbows and spin around . . . snap your fingers . . . step-hop-bounce-slip . . . allow your body to respond before your mind catches up and balks. Out of breath? Your body will automatically slow your pace until you get your second wind. Surprise yourself with your gaitions? Many people do, once they drop that top layer of stiffness. Feel more alive suddenly? A common reaction.

Some people panic at the thought of such a free, unstructured response to rhythm. They have been told—often enough to believe it—"You have absolutely no sense of rhythm." I don't believe it. They probably need a word of encouragement and a nudge to connect with the sense of rhythm that everyone possesses just by virtue of being alive. It would be difficult for a human being to live an arrhythmic life, for rhythm is inherent in too many bodily processes—the beat of the heart, breathing, peristalsis. Even though we may not be consciously aware of these rhythms, they form a backdrop or undercurrent for our consciousness, waking and sleeping. If I put on a recording with a strong beat and ask you to tap out an arrhythmic response, you would find it much more difficult than to respond rhythmically.

There are great differences in rhythmic abilities, however. When I have students with a ragged sense of rhythm, I ask them to show me how they crawl. It's pretty undignified, but you might try it. See if you
crawling with right hand and right knee together, or whether you have a cross-crawl pattern of right hand with left knee and vice versa. People with a strong sense of rhythm usually have a strong cross-crawl pattern. People with fuzzy rhythm, on the other hand, are apt to crawl by shifting weight from the right hand and right knee to the left hand and left knee.

If you do not naturally use the cross-crawl pattern, have courage. You can change the "no sense of rhythm" curse if you can suffer the indignity of crawling around on all fours for a few minutes each day until you develop a strong cross-crawl pattern. Concentrate on moving the left hand with the right knee, and then the right hand with the left knee. (Those automatic cross-crawlers have no idea what you're suffering!) Be patient, for it may take more time than you realize. When it feels comfortable going forward, use the same pattern to crawl backwards, and then sideways.

If you can do the cross-crawl already but lack precision, practice until your right hand and left knee strike the floor together at precisely the same instant. You'll be pleased at how much this will sharpen your sense of rhythm. If you have trouble with the cross-crawl, and consequently with rhythm, you might be curious to find out whether you were one of those physically precocious children who walked before you spent much time crawling. According to some specialists in developmental pediatrics, skipping the crawling stage can cause a gap in physiological and neural development. These gaps are also related to the sense of rhythm.

In the meantime, forget about the accuracy of your rhythm and connect your body with music in any way that feels comfortable. See how you come to life. Not only do we feel more alive when responding physically to music, we actually are. Our breathing is stimulated, as is our cardiovascular system and many other complex physiological processes. We are mainly interested, however, in how our bodies actually feel, how locked up emotions can begin to release, and how we can experience the creative and imaginative parts of ourselves. It is not the same as simply engaging in exercise, valuable as that may be. We release a free, spontaneous, uninhibited being who has been hugging the wall, afraid to dance but desperately wanting to try.

Let's take things further and explore different styles of music through our newly-discovered ability to move. If you are a Baroque music fan (or even if you're not), play a recording of a Bach Suite and feel the difference in the way your body moves to a sarabande compared to a courante, a gigue, a minuet. Switch to the Classical era and compare Mozart to Haydn. Find out if you can feel in your body the difference between Mozart's elegance and Haydn's impulsiveness. Your body will pick up more differences than your ear. Then compare that feeling with your response to Chopin, Brahms, or another Romantic composer, and you may discover what no history book could teach you about different periods. Go on to Debussy or Ravel and discover how differently your body flows with impressionistic music. Resist the impulse to think your movement out logically.

I often encourage such exploration in a group, using movement dialogues between partners or random interactions between group members. When people allow the movement to come from inside out, without pre-planning, they usually feel a dramatic difference as they change musical eras or styles. In a group they learn not only from the wisdom of their own bodies, but from seeing and feeling the dynamics of group interaction. Using movement to explore style in this way lends fresh understanding to intellectual knowledge, and music history takes on a new dimension.

If we progress into the twentieth century and move to Bartok's Allegro Barbaro, the phrase "primitive rhythm" becomes more than an intellectual concept. Try moving to Circles by the contemporary Italian composer Luciano Berio. You will find it more difficult to dismiss this as strange contemporary music, as your body finds the flow and structure and excitement that an intellectual ear can miss.

Move to some of the pieces from Makrokosmos, by George Crumb, a contemporary U.S. composer, and you will never be quite the same. You may find yourself giving birth to a planet, living through some of man's tormenting and exalting emotions, and spitting off into a spiral galaxy.

Turn another corner musically and dance to classical Indian music, much as a recording by Ravi Shankar. The hypnotic drone of the tamboura in the background of the sitar and the complex rhythms of the tabla will coax your feet.

I disliked rock music until I danced to it. Now one of my favorite recordings to use with groups is the classic Inna Gadda Da Vida, recorded by the Iron Butterfly. A friend disliked classical music until he discovered Bach through movement. Test out an acquaintance who wears she hates jazz with one of the Claude Bolling suites or with Bill Evans. Our bodies are much less opinionated than our heads.

The application to performing is obvious. A former student returned
for a visit after moving away. She came for a quick shot of inspiration—to get in touch with a part of herself she felt she had left behind. Her new teacher was exciting, demanding, challenging, and I felt the girl had developed well technically. Yet when I complimented her on the Haydn style she was developing, she shrugged her shoulders and said “It’s just programmed in. I don’t feel it.” She wanted permission and encouragement from me to dance her way to a sense of Haydn. Her comment about not really feeling the style of Haydn made a deep impression on me. I realized again how ineffective it can be to ask a student “Let it dance,” or “The music needs to move more freely,” without actually dancing or moving freely. It’s like trying to describe the taste of a ripe pineapple in words.

The term “programmed in” has bothered me ever since. I had used movement in my teaching almost apologetically for a long time, for it seemed somewhat unconventional to ask someone to leave a piano bench during a lesson. Yet this student missed it. Shortly after this visit, I was asked to give a workshop at Redlands University in California, where I had the opportunity to get acquainted with Alexandra Pierce, a well-known teacher, composer, and writer. My work with movement seemed more legitimate after I experienced the genius of this inspiring woman who incorporate movement into every aspect of her work in teaching piano and music theory. Our minds danced together as we shared similar alternatives to “programming in” a formula for a particular piece. I used movement with more assurance after that.

I find the transfer from movement into performance fascinating. Something a little four-square begins to soften at the edges and melt away. Our intellect is supported and enhanced by our imagination. We are less apt to manipulate the drama in a tempestuous Beethoven sonata if we have felt it ahead of time in our body. The dances in a Bach suite can truly dance. We can feel, rather than think, the wildness of a Prokofiev sonata. If we have physically experienced the giving and receiving quality of tempo rubato, our tempo changes will happen as naturally as though we were walking in a garden, quickening our steps to reach the brilliant blue of the doldrums, slowing our pace to savor the spicy fragrance of the roses.

A university piano student came for a coaching session, ready to show me how beautifully she could play a slow movement from a Mozart sonata. She had thought the piece out carefully, analyzed it harmonically, planned lovingly for nuances, cherishing the opportunities for rubato. But her planning was too meticulous and had cowed the spirit out of the piece. I asked her to follow the music around the room, reaching for each burst of an invisible pulse.

“Keep feeling those small explosions of energy as you play,” I suggested as she came back to the bench, “and don’t try consciously for any of the rubato you have been putting in.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Can’t I put in my wonderful ritard at the end?” she asked, like a child begging for goodies.

“Keep the pulse, and instead of thinking about it, just feel the quality of the ritard in your own center—your dance space inside.” Her well-planned ritard had slowed too early and too much.

Her playing changed so easily that it seemed ridiculous. She was like a science-fiction character who only needed to let her thoughts rest lightly on an action and it was accomplished.

“It’s spooky,” she said when she finished. “I heard it—I heard a rubato. It was really subtle—and I heard a ritard at the end. It really happened, didn’t it? But I didn’t consciously change the speed.”

The listener hears it too, and finds it more exciting without knowing why. The music moves the listener. But first the music must move the mover—must move the performer.

If you are lucky enough to have a dancing friend available, the music can also move the dancer while you play. I mean “dancer” only in the sense of someone who enjoys responding to music. I may think I have discovered all I can about Chopin, Scarlatti, or Brahms in a particular piece. Yet the instant someone starts dancing to the music I am playing, I feel it change beneath my fingers. The phrases find a more beautiful shape. I discover fresh nuances. I give myself more time for unselfconscious drama or tenderness. It is as though someone else’s movement makes the drama, tenderness, or passion legitimate and more authentic. The dancer responds to my sense of the music, I respond to that person’s sense of my sense of the music, and as we toss the energy back and forth, the music intensifies and finds a new freshness, a new magic.

“Nice theory,” you say, “But I can’t imagine myself trying it, not at my age.” (Seventeen, did you say? Thirty-two? Forty-six?)

At the age of ninety, my still-energetic mother accompanied my husband and me to an international folk dancing class. As she sat watching the teaching for a few dances, I realized that her feet were vibrating with information.

“No, no,” she protested, when I invited her to try the dance. “You know I’ve never danced before in my whole life.” I knew.

Her eyes belied the “No, no” response, and we pulled her into the
circle. Soon she was doing a two-step forward, a two-step back, in and out of the circle, as though she had danced all her life.

"I guess I've always had itchy feet," she explained through the aura of her excitement, and went whirling off with a partner who assumed she knew the next dance.

"Itchy feet" indeed! And a body meant for dancing, only it took a long time to make the discovery.

I suspect we all have "itchy feet" that need to dance and jump and spin us into new worlds. We need not wait until we are ninety!