

Praise Dance Choreography

Background Introduction by Lauren Speeth
Guidelines and Choreography by Rena Marie Guidry

Introduction

This paper is intended as a guide for music directors interested in creating a choreographed praise dance. In addition to presenting a short background on the genre, the authors include a complete choreography for the song Resurrection, using either a group or with an individual dancer, and details on where to find a video of the praise dance, online.

Background

Praise/worship/biblical/Davidic dancing is not only a means of worship, it can enhance the worship experience of others, as they contemplate space, time, rhythm, interconnection, and the fleetingness of the moment. Modern praise dance has deep biblical traditions. Thousands of years ago, in ancient Judaism and then early Christianity, it was part of worshipful prayer¹. There are many biblical references to dancing in praise of the Lord². Then, during the time of Reformation, it was suppressed along with other bodily expression, as unseemly. We have experienced a resurgence in the past century, with liturgical dance serving many purposes, including witnessing to faith, inspiring congregants, challenging our thinking, or acting as a form of prayer.

Praise dance can be found in styles as wide-ranging as the dancers themselves, including: spontaneous, choreographed, modern, ballet, lyrical, African, clog, Davidic, and hip hop. Dancers can be few or many. Their attire can be simple or ornate. They can have props – streamers, banners, tambourines, flutes, and such – or have none. This genre is continually growing and changing with the inspiration of the dancers and the music directors who are embracing it.

Preparation and General Guidelines for Music Directors

All choreography sessions will flow more easily when preceded by prayer. The very first step, after preparing oneself spiritually, is to have all the dancers become familiar with the chosen music. Familiarity is important, as praise dance works best when it matches or complements the feelings, sentiments, and intensity of the music. If the dancers are able to internalize the meaning that the music is trying to convey, the congregation or audience should be able to see the song in the dancers' faces and feel it in the flow of the dance itself. Dancers will likely follow the feel of the music. As it crescendos, movements will become more sweeping. As the music grows softer, the movements may likewise feel small. In this way, the musician and the praise dancer tell the same story, with the same inflection, and a harmony arises.

Keep in mind the experience level of the dancers, when choosing the complexity of the dance. If the praise dancers have formal dance training, more ballet and modern dance choreography can be

¹In *Introducing Dance in Christian Worship* authors Ronald Gagne, Thomas Kane and Robert VerEcke trace liturgical dance from early Judaism.

²For example, Judges 21:19-23; Exodus 15:20; 1 Sam. 10: 5b-7.

included. If not, the music director can rely on aspects of sign language and/or sweeping but simple arm movements. Or, a lead dancer with greater experience can take the center stage, and be a focus of attention, much as a lead singer might be. Including free form, improvised sections of the song is only advised for experienced dancers, and those who have a gift to minister this way. Newer dancers and children have better success when most or all of the movements are choreographed for them.

One final word about the praise dance performance: a performance begins the moment a performer is visible in any way, to the audience. What happens before the music starts, as the dancers orient themselves on stage, is important. It sets the tone for what will follow. Dancers who walk in as a group, or stand up from the choir as a group, and take their places with a sense that the moment is important will convey a very different message than will dancers who shuffle into place without much thought. The careful music director will want to help the dancers understand this truth, and to rehearse the pre-dance moments – entering and exiting the stage – as well as the dance itself.

Choreography for Resurrection

Lyrics by Lauren Speeth ~ Music by Tammy Hall

The following choreography is offered as a starting point for you. It is not required that you follow it, exactly. Keeping your own dancers in mind, feel free to get creative with spacing, or to have dancers change positions, or to incorporate spins, gentle runs, and leaps where the spirit moves you to do so.

Intro Music:

Dancers can begin one of two ways: Standing in place, or making an entrance. If starting in position, use this time to do fluid, slow, and graceful arm movements. An alternative would be to add spins, and if enough space have dancers change places and create pretty movement patterns. If dancers entered during the intro music; they can simply walk gracefully, or move their arms as they move into place.

Verse

In this first verse, the dancer(s) are setting up the story. Here's where we started. In the case of Resurrection, the picture is painted of someone who was down, feeling low, conscious of having hurt both self and others.

Lyric	Choreography and Notes
I've been so down I couldn't look up,	Spin, then lower body to the ground in a crouched position on the floor; slowly look up, and allow one arm to follow the dancers gaze.
lower than low,	Lower body even more keeping head down, both hands on the floor, and elbows pressing out to the side.
Lord take away this bitter cup.	Step out with one leg, and raise both hands as if holding a cup, while looking up (match tempo of the song).
I could not see the damage in my wake,	Stand and sweep one hand across body at eye level, then down to the side. Take two steps ("the damage") to the side as arms sweep across body in frustration, then bow down (to the side) as both arms push back.
the footprints of my selfish climb,	Step back and pivot, then slowly kick (press) foot out from body as both hands press in front. Reach up with alternating hands, as if climbing a rope.
my friendships at stake	Step forward and thrust both hands forward in an arc toward the floor, as head follows.

Chorus

The first chorus is often sung at the same level as the verse, and the movements should match the song. In the case of a quiet song, we generally keep the movements relatively small and graceful. In this case, the chorus of Resurrection conveys the most important concept from the song, and must be emphasized.

Lyric	Choreography and Notes
Well, it's never too late for resurrection -Come on and resurrect me	Beginning on "Well" scoot backwards into a light and airy three step turn, rotating 1 1/2 times, finishing in a lunge with back toward audience with arms outstretched (front and back) on "late". Slowly open body back to the congregation as arm opens up (shifting weight). Take two slow steps, crossing first, then opening up. As you step, slowly press both hands up. Once again step out faces the congregation, as arms press slowly, come down and out to the side. -Step out bring hands into chest one at a time; with palms turn toward self, lift hands up. As arms press up, shift weight and feet to prep for turn again.
It's never too late for resurrection,	Repeat light and airy three step turn, rotating 1 1/2 times, finishing in a lunge with back toward audience with arms outstretched (front and back) on "late". Slowly open body back to the congregation as arm opens up (shifting weight). Slowly press both hands up. Once again step out facing the congregation. As arms press, they slowly come down and out to the side.
new life's waiting for you.	Cross arms in front of the body, then open them up into a big circle. Step forward and slowly point toward the audience. During the instrumental, move as the spirit leads or walk back slowly and bring arm in, finish by turning toward the congregation once again.

Verse

Follow the feel, intensity, and meaning of the music and words. As the song crescendos, bring the movements more intensity. Intensity can be conveyed in dance, can be accomplished with sweeping arms, or by kicking the legs while moving the arms. Crescendo can be conveyed with a leap or jump, perhaps while looking up. Consider the space available, and allocate it depending on the intensity of the moment. Remember you have both horizontal (stage) and vertical (high and low) levels available.

Use movements that represent the spoken or sung words either literally or figuratively. For example: Looking up, with arms reaching up, conveys God, Jesus, or Lord; hands opening like a book conveys a bible or the word; a self-hug or touching your heart conveys love; crouching down and lowering the head and eyes can convey shame; hiding the head in the hands can indicate sorrow.

The rest of the song:

Feel free to repeat movements, if the verse repeats using the same lyrics, and definitely for the chorus. To maximize interest, consider varying the location of the dancers, or changing the level of intensity expressed by the dancers.

Lyric	Choreography and Notes
I made some choices I'd like to take back.	Quarter turn as hands pull open one at a time. Take two steps forward, reaching one hand at a time. Suddenly pull both hands back into chest, and kick your leg out front. End with hands back.
My heart is beating, but it's beaten blue and black.	Open arms and pull hands into your heart, as you step back. Quarter turn back to the congregation. On "beating" press both hands forward on the rhythm, palms facing out. Dramatically step forward as you make a fist and punch your other palm, then punch toward the ground one fist at a time.
A deep secret pain that's hidden from view...	Slowly come up. Arms slowly open out and up, followed by one arm crossing your stomach and the other coming up to cover your face, indicating pain and hiding. Scoot back, and reach front arm up and back as you pivot away from the congregation. End that phrase, slightly crouched.
calls out for healing, and to try something new.	Scoot forward (toward audience) with a step together step, as hands frame mouth "calls" and move outward in an arch. Hands move in an alternating circling motion in front of the body, as you slowly walk backwards. Quickly step out, reach across the body, then pull hand back across face as if looking for something. Stretch this movement until the end of "new."

Chorus

It's never too late for Resurrection...	You can repeat the same choreography as in previous refrains, or vary slightly
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Bridge

Lyric	Choreography and Notes
Earth has no sorrow	1 3/4 turn, ending in a balance pose with entire body pulled into itself, indicating "sorrow."
That heaven cannot heal	Prior to this new line, shuffle back in preparation for a slight hop and kick; arms stretching out and in. Then kick out with arms reaching up on the word "heaven." Slight run back to center. then reach one hand up at a time then bring them down in an alternating circling motion in front of the body. Stretch this movement until the next line; or improvise, or make a big circle with arms and torso, then swing arms across and spin.

Love's already hear for you	Spin in preparation, bring one hand to heart at a time. Then reach both out to congregation. Slowly bring hands together, still pointing out.
Unconditional and real	Slowly walk forward, two steps, as hands press out the the sides one at a time. Then pound fists to the rhythm, and follow the music. Floating backwards

Verse

Lyric	Choreography and Notes
Can you see Jesus	Bring both hands up (palms up), flip hands and press up with resistance. Lean right as both hands push up on Jesus. Look up!
Facing his death	Bring hands in front of your face, then slowly and dramatically press both palms out into a symbol of crucifixion.
Claiming the victory	Quick bow forward as arms drop and cross in front of body. Bring them up and open them into a victorious stance.
With his last breath	Pirouette with one leg extended out. Immediately bring hands to the your mouth and mime an exaggerated breath as you lunge forward.
Father forgive, they know not what they do;	Lean right on the diagonal and reach up toward the heavens. Plead with "prayer hands" together. Then shake a finger across body, connecting with the congregation.
loving forgiveness	Two spins with arms flowing up over head and around. Let the movement and music inspire arms.
pours out on me and you.	Inspired by the the singers conviction, step back, bring hands to chest indicating "me", then press out toward congregation on "you."

Final Chorus

Lyric	Choreography and Notes
Well, it's never too late for resurrection	Begins the same as the previous chorus', but change movements to match the lead singer's variation. Light and airy three step turn, rotating 1 1/2 times, finishing in a lunge with back toward audience. Break into lead, shaking hand, then bow with arms out. Spin low, and come up slowly, as arms stretch up, then quick press up.
It's never too late for resurrection, New life is waiting for you	Connect with the congregation as you exit. Shaking hand, stretching arms, and reflecting the words however you are moved.

End

The end can mirror the beginning. Dancers can either exit slowly with graceful arm movements, or they can end in place. If they choose to stay in position, they should hold still at the end of the song for three seconds. Dancers may be swept up by the spirit. This may happen with the congregation (or audience) as well.

To view Resurrection as a praise dance featuring Rena Marie Guidry, or for sheet music to Resurrection, or for other ministry resources, we invite you to visit The Center for NonHarming Ministries, www.nonharming.com. Enjoy it in good health, and may God bless you as you move forward with your praise dance ministry.

-Rev. Dr. Lauren Speeth, Director
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