Chapter 9

Balancing three-dimensionally
Countertensions

Stillness, balance, and stability occur often in ballet technique classes. Throughout class, you:

- Embody an elongated spinal posture.
- Maintain one port de bras during an exercise.
- Suspend balances en relevé.
- Support your body on one leg for prolonged periods of time.
- Maintain epaulement positioning during centre floor work.
  and, so on...

These moments of stillness seem static, but in reality, every minor shift in a body part during a sustained balance or a maintained posture creates muscular adjustments throughout your entire body. As the position shifts, the spatial integrity of the whole body shifts. Learning how to stabilize effectively requires you to continually reinvest in changing relationships of up/down, side/side, and forward/back.

It is easy to become preoccupied with the parts of the body that are moving, but the parts that stabilize are also important. Even when only one limb is moving, the entire body accommodates spatially. For example, when your leg moves from devant to derrière in a balançoire at barre, the top of the pelvis moves forward slightly, as the bottom of the pelvis moves backwards. As this happens, the upper body shifts slightly forward and upward and the barre arm slides forward along the barre. This upper body weight shift serves as a counterbalance to the backward and downward movement of the leg into derrière. If you grip the barre or hold excess tension in your torso, you will miss out on these subtle weight shifts and changing intentions in space.

Practice a balançoire at barre. Pay particular attention to how your barre arm slides forward as the upper body shifts forward and upward in space.
Countertensions

This chapter introduces the concept of Countertensions to help you strengthen your three-dimensional, dynamic stability. Countertensions describe the oppositional (counter) spatial tensions that support human movement. Since movement is three-dimensional, oppositional spatial tensions occur in all three dimensions.

Countertensional forces are always active in the body whether or not you are conscious of them. When standing, for example, my muscles produce a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9.1 Countertensional Pulls occur in Three Dimensions</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Vertical (Up/Down)</td>
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Figure 9.1 Moving from devanti to derrière affects upper body alignment
contractile force that resists the downward pull of gravity. The resulting effect is that I maintain my uprightness and vertical axis. If I release the contraction of my muscles, gravity will pull me downward. As a dancer, you can learn to consciously engage oppositional spatial pulls to facilitate greater stability and balance.

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Find the Countertensions!

1. Practice the following movements:
   - Plié relevé sous-sus
   - Pointe tendu à la seconde and derrière
   - Balance in retiré
   - Grand rond de jambe en dehors

2. As you move through this exploration, imagine the oppositional Countertensions as laser beams radiating from the center of your body, through the limbs, and out into space.

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*Figure 9.2 Laser beams radiating into space*
3 How do up/down Countertensions support your execution of all four steps?  
In plié relevé sous-sus, for example, imagine the laser beams extending from your center downward through your legs to the ground and from your center upward through your head and arms toward the sky. Also, recall the “feet to head” connections explored in Chapter 6. They are helpful when accessing up/down Countertensions.

Figure 9.3 Embody Up-Down Countertensions in sous-sus

4 How do side/side Countertensions support your execution of the retiré balance, pointe tendu à la seconde, and the grand rond de jambe en dehors?  
As your leg passes through à la seconde in the grand rond de jambe, send the laser beams sideward beyond the edges of the fingertips in your supporting arm. Do you feel how that provides greater Spreading and stability in your body.
Balancing three-dimensionally

during the middle of the movement? Notice how this same Countertension supports the pointe tendu à la seconde and the retiré balance (note: using second position arms will highlight this) (see Figure 7.3).

5 How do forward/backward Countertensions support your execution of the pointe tendu derrière and the grand rond de jambe?

In the pointe tendu derrière, imagine the laser beams emanating from your core forward through your scapula and arm, and from your core backward through your pelvis and leg (see Figure 9.1).

The grand rond de jambe is more complex because the forward/backward Countertensions change during the movement. As the gesturing leg moves from forward to backward, the upper body moves from slightly backward to slightly forward. This oppositional relationship between the upper and lower body creates both stability and fluidity.

*Experiment with these examples.*

The experience of moving in a three-dimensional world with a three-dimensional body means that Countertensions exist between different body parts and between the body and the surrounding space. I therefore like to think of Countertensions as lines of oppositional connection that extend through my body and into my surrounding space.

Write about this in your journal:

*How did Countertensions exist between different body parts in the above exploration? And, did you feel how you could continue the intent of those lines out into space beyond your body, similar to the feeling of projecting your performance energy beyond the stage and into the audience? If not, explore the movement again with this image in mind.*

**Countertensions: technique and artistry**

Countertensions provide a “whole” picture method for understanding how alignment and placement shift in different movements. Investing in oppositional lines of pull elongate your musculature, which lessens muscular tension and facilitates greater stability and adaptability during balances.

Embodying Countertensions effectively is easier with the use of a tangible tool. My favorite tool to use: a 6-foot long elastic Exercise Band (a.k.a. physical therapy band or Thera-band™). I highly recommend you purchase one of these.¹ They are useful for strength training and for embodying the concept of Countertensions.

When you pull the ends of the Exercise Band apart, the Exercise Band reveals a visual line that stretches from one part of your body to another part passing through your center. If any body part along the line of the Exercise Band
Exploring countertensions with exercise bands!

Materials needed: one 6-foot long Exercise Band

**Countertension skill drill!**

**Relevé in first position (up–down)**

1. Stand in *first position* with your metatarsals resting on the middle of the Exercise Band. Hold the two ends of the Band with your hands.
2. **Relevé** and raise both arms to *fifth position* passing through *first position*. Press your metatarsals and toes into the band so that your feet are firmly rooted.
3. Organize your whole body along the Countertensional through-line: instead of only reaching the feet downward and the arms upward, also feel

"grips" or disengages, it becomes increasingly difficult for you to maintain the oppositional tensions. You have to reinvest in the spatial tensions throughout your *whole* body in order to maintain an easeful relationship with the Band. When this happens, the tension needed for balance and stability is diffused throughout the body.

![Figure 9.4 Exercise Bands reveal Countertensions](image)

**Table 9.2 Technical and artistic benefits of Countertensions**

- **Countertensions** are useful when:
  1. Working on alignment and placement.
  2. Sensing spatial connections between different body parts.
  3. Stabilizing dynamically in balances.
  4. Decreasing muscular tension.
  5. Making different qualitative choices about your use of space. For example, in a *piqué first arabesque*, you might emphasize the Countertension from the supporting leg to the top of the head while a peer emphasizes the Countertension from the Advancing arm to the Retreating arabesque leg.
how the front surfaces of the ribs and the tail Lengthen toward the feet, while the front surfaces of the pelvis and upper spine Lengthen upward toward the arms (feet-to-head connection).

4 Apply 1–3 to a balance in retiré, sous-sus, and sur le cou de pied.

![Exercise Bands reveal alignment differences](image)

**First arabesque (forward–backward)**

1 Attach one end of the Band to the right foot and hold the other end with the left hand. Wrap the Band around your foot twice before tying the knot on the topside of your foot.

2 Stand in fifth position with the right foot derrière and the arms in first bras bas.

3 Glide the right leg and left arm away from each other as you reach into first arabesque. The Band should cross along the front surfaces of your body. Lengthen and Widen your torso and pelvis along the line of the Band. Advance and Widen the left scapula as the right thigh reaches backward.

4 Experiment with moving the right leg from arabesque to attitude while simultaneously moving the left arm from the arabesque port de bras to first position.

5 Keep the Band attached to the same limbs, but perform the arabesque on the other side. I suggest allowing the Band to pass along the back of the right leg and torso toward the left arm. Exhale and press the two ends of the Band away from each other.

6 Repeat 1–5 on the other side.
Developpé à la Seconde (side–side)

1. Repeat Step 1 in the previous example.
2. Stand in fifth position with the arms in second position.
3. Explore the developpé first with the Band passing along the front surfaces of the body and second with it passing along the back surfaces. Choose your preferred placement.
4. As the right leg develops into space, continually reinvest in the sideward reach of the left arm in second position. To feel this, "grip" one of the skeletal joints along the band line. For example, tighten the muscles in your left shoulder joint. Then, lessen the tension and widen the left shoulder toward the left hand. Repeat this process with other body parts: the right foot or hip joint, the left side of the ribs or scapula. Each time, release the tension rightward or leftward into space along the line of pull of the Band.
5. Repeat 1–4 to the other side.

Improvise!

Here are three ideas; add to this list as you improvise with the Band:

- Hold the Band in both hands and explore various port de bras. What Countertensions do you discover from arm to arm?
- Tie one end of the band on the barre and hold the other end with the outside arm. Choose whether the Band crosses the front or back surfaces of

Figure 9.6 Explore Forward-Backward Countertensions during arabesque
your body. Perform a series of *barre* exercises with the outside arm in *second position*.

*What Countertensions help you maintain an active outside arm? What Countertensions do you notice between the outside arm and barre arm?*

**Figure 9.7** Explore other movements at *barre*

**Figure 9.8** Explore how the vertical axis changes
• Tie one end of the band to one foot and hold the other end with either hand. Experiment with complex movements: grand rond de jambe en l’air, fouetté en tournant, balançoire, and so on.

   How many Countertensions do you discover in these movements? Do you notice how your head, ribs, and pelvis have to shift weight in order to stay “in line” with the Band?

As you become more comfortable using the Bands, notice how you engage multiple parts of your body collaboratively in order to achieve elongated, dynamic stability.

**Note**

1. I recommend purchasing a medium-level resistance band.