

DANCE STYLE AND STUDY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF MUSIC AND MUSICALITY

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The partnership of dance and music is centuries-old. It is often said that dance and music never existed one without the other. Still today, we all know the power of music to make us want to move, to dance ourselves, and to enhance the dance that we watch on stage. Indeed, the choreographer, Antony Tudor (1976; p.260) suggested rather cheekily that, most of the time, when we see dance in the theatre, it is the music that engages us, not the dance. His subtext, perhaps a rather extreme view, is that most dance that we see is poor quality of music. But he does pinpoint the very powerful propelling quality of music, very familiar to us in social dance, and which encourages our physical engagement with dancers on stage.

Yet, genuinely "musical" choreographers and dancers are surprisingly rare, and there are many stories about music and dance creators not getting along; choreographers making cuts without consultation, dancers counting their roles so hard that they do not hear their music, and dancers failing to communicate in the precise terms that make sense to musicians. No wonder that, in such a climate, musicians have often despised dance. In the 19th century, of course, they used dance as a stepping-stone towards working in the much more prestigious art of opera. The partnership, therefore, has often been uncomfortable.

There is also the problem of a lack of general awareness and communication skills when it comes to these important musical issues. So

often, information on the subject of dance and music is vague and there is an inordinate amount of misinformation about musical choreographers visualising or mirroring their music. Very soon, indeed, any discussion of music and dance requires at least a basic expertise in and technical knowledge of both music and dance.

Why this situation when dance and music are such natural bedfellows? I suggest that it results from the isolation and backwardness of dance in relation to the intellectual climate of the other arts, and isolation, ironically, when, of all the arts, dance is one of the most naturally collaborative. For instance, thinking is backward in terms of consideration of structural issues in dance, issues of large form and of rhythmic and spatial aspects, and it is impossible to discuss dance and music with any degree of subtlety without introducing structural issues. The anti-theoretical thrust of much of the dance profession, especially of ballet, does not help. But I also suggest that rhythmic subtlety, rhythm being the major link between dance and music, is not part of our theatre dance culture in the way that it once was.

I hope to suggest here ways in which the standards of musicality in dance can be improved, using my own experience and work, not only as a writer (currently researching for a book on music and ballet), but also as a dancer and teacher of choreography and contemporary dance technique in both professional and non-professional dance contexts. First, it is important to suggest that musical/choreographic considerations are key to the identity of any theatre dance, and that we should use an integrated approach when discussing musical/choreographic relationships, rather than separating out the analysis of music and dance. Choreographers have choreographic styles, but they also have musical/choreographic styles. Furthermore, when a work is revived, we might do well to consider its musical/choreographic style in interpreting the work; we might also research the musical sources, recordings and style of musical performance that informed the work at its premiere.

Following this line of discussion. I will consider how we might educate dance students in the broadest sense to appreciate musical aspects, in

performance, choreography, dance analysis and appreciation, whatever they may eventually do in dance, whether they train to be professional dancers or choreographers, teachers, dance writers and administrators, or simply dance spectators and dancers in leisure.

To demonstrate the point about musical/choreographic style, my first example is from the work of the British choreographer, Frederick Ashton. Here, there are shifting relationships between dance steps and the musical bar line and overlapping of dance and music phrase units. This is Ashton's unusual Sarabande solo, created in 1968 for the Prince in *The Sleeping Beauty* (inserted before he sees Aurora in the Vision scene of the ballet). The interaction between phrase and metre is an extremely subtle and important feature of this solo. Dance steps recur here, but most often in a new dialogue with the music; what we see for a second time is differently inflected. Fig. 1 indicates the positioning of the opening *développé posé fondu* in arabesque (a) followed by a step back (b). When we first see this, the high point is the strong downbeat of the bar, and the step back occurs on the second beat of the bar. The moment is soon repeated, but this time, the *posé fondu* occurs on the third beat of the bar, and the step back meets the downbeat of the next bar. The continuation of the phrase is faster than before on repeat.

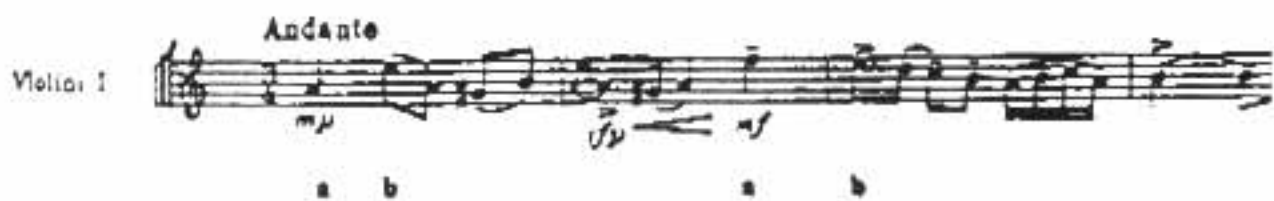


Fig 1. *Sarabande from Tchaikovsky's The Sleeping Beauty.*

There are many other examples of steps that shift in rhythmic and dynamic tone in this way. Then, there is Ashton's delayed response to the return of the opening musical theme at the halfway point. That downbeat beginning in the music is the final reverberation of the previous dance

phrase. Ashton's new phrase then begins a beat later than of the music, like an afterthought reawakening after a slight indulgence in time.

There are also constant shifts in speed and dynamic in this solo, which are not suggested by the music, sharpnesses in steps, brisk switches of the arms, little stuttering jumps and, after the slow opening, a broad, sweeping galloping step that begins the last section of the dance and which takes the Prince in a big circle round to the back of the stage. The pressure against the structure and dynamic implications of the music only heightens the sense of change.

Now, considering the effect of these devices, we come to a point about meaning, how constantly shifting musical/choreographic relationships contribute greatly to the instability of mood and ambiguity in this short solo: impetuosity, passion, uncertainty, searching, gentleness, nobility, thoughtfulness. The effect is of continuous change, process rather than finished, stabilised statement.

This Sarabande provides an example of musical/choreographic style. The solo is in many respects a typical, if rather extreme, example of Ashton's treatment of music, and I emphasise that creates meaning. Interestingly, in more than one revival of this solo, the rhythmic subtleties, and therefore the musical style of this solo, have been lost.

This may well be a result of the particular rhythmic difficulties that it possesses. Anthony Dowell, who first danced the solo, confirmed, in a 1993 interview with me, that dancers commonly experience problems with its timing when they learn it. But this may also say something about the musical training and alertness of our dancers.

The Russian/American choreographer George Balanchine provides a contrasting example of musical/choreographic style, one that is often driven by a motor pulse. In this respect, he shares the inclinations of his collaborator, Stravinsky, the discipline of pulse being part of the cool, modernist, machine age aesthetic to which they both belong, a reaction to the language of the emotions fluctuations in tempo and intensity of the Romantic era. My example is from the opening of *Agon* (1957), the

Stravinsky/Balanchine collaboration, a point when the dance clarifies an ambiguous sense of pulse and metre in the music (Jordan, 1993). The music is rhythmically very irregular, and Balanchine clarifies its framework. Four men are seen in a line dancing in unison. Balanchine choreographs the beats that are in silence, including the one at the beginning of the score. This is a simple example of this preoccupation with pulse: a regular marking of every beat. There are far more complex examples than this. Once again, dancers have problems with the timing here, but Balanchine had the advantage in that he was able to read the musical score.

Another characteristic of Balanchine's musical/choreographic style, which derives directly from his attention to pulse, is his introduction of passages of crossmetre. Temporarily, the dance functions in a different metre from that of the music. There is a simple example in the woman's solo in the *Tchaikovsky pas de deux* (1960). The music remains in 2/4 time, but a dance combination introduces a passage of 3/4 time against the music: piqué, close in fifth position, entrechat trois (Fig. 2: dotted lines indicate the dance metre), the passage lasting for six bars of music.



Fig. 2. Woman's solo from Balanchine's *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*.

The step seems to aerate to solo, freshening it after a series of square, regular rhythms. There are countless instances of this device being used in Balanchine's work: they are part of his style. They can also achieve different

effects, sometimes of music and dance gently swimming through each other, sometimes of racing competition, sometimes of a brilliant machine with interlocking parts.

None of the above examples has been concerned with visualising, imitating or mirroring music. Instead, they open up concepts of conversation and counterpoint. I have also touched upon the effects of such conversation in terms of meaning. It is this kind of rhythmic conversation, and the excitement, playfulness and sensuality that stems from it, that could well be one of the main reasons why we watch Astaire, Torvill and Dean or Michael Jackson.

At this point, it is pertinent to note the musical issues that are important in the process of reconstructing or re-staging dances. Here, we should consider not only musical/choreographic style, but musical performance style and original musical sources. A most striking demonstration is in *Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor* (1938), the Bach piece choreographed by the American modern dance pioneer Doris Humphrey (Jordan, 1986). Of prime importance here is Humphrey's attachment to Leopold Stokowski's 1922 orchestration of Bach's organ work. There is considerable evidence that Stokowski's was Humphrey's preferred version of the work and that she continued to see her own work in terms of this setting. Yet, it is the organ score that has been most often used in reconstruction. My point is that an examination of the Stokowski quickly reveals relationships with the choreography that are not apparent when Bach's organ writing is put next to the choreography; indeed, it clarifies where and how intense the climaxes of the work should be, the degree of change within the dynamic shape of the work. The issue is not whether interpretations of Humphrey's work are right or wrong, rather, analysis opens up questions for consideration, asking dance reconstructors and musicians to take note of these musical aspects. After all, our musical decisions in revival can affect in important ways the structure and meaning of a work.

Now, we might ask how we can increase sensitivity to these musical aspects, particularly through dance education. I draw here from my general

dance experience and from teaching in higher education: the liberal arts context of a general undergraduate education in dance, where a few students may go on into professional performance or choreographic work. As for the profession, it plays only lip service to musicality. It is not an integral part of dance training today, which continues to stress the accumulation of dance technique above all else. Hence the problems for dancers learning the Ashton solo. Who gives exercises in conversation and phrasing with music, and who analyses the models of fine dancers working with music ? A few blessed choreographers and dancers may come into the profession with all the information they need as a natural gift. Others might be guided. Is it by chance that Balanchine, one of the most musically interesting choreographers, also had a musical education ? Yet Balanchine maintains that

with intelligent application, any student can develop certain sensitivities to music that will improve the quality of her dancing immeasurably
(1978: p. 770)

My own teaching experiences confirm Balanchine's view; they also point up the value of dealing with musical issues across the curriculum, and thus confirming their importance from different angles, combining practice with analysis, making dances with taking ideas from repertoire models.

For instance, in a choreography course, I have given a series of rhythm workshops in which I might start by giving a phrase of repertory to demonstrate pulse, metre and varied rhythmic patterns within a metrical framework. Rhythmic terms are used precisely: a major problem with the dance writing about rhythm and music is its casual use of terminology. Then, I might ask the students to make their own metred rhythmic phrases in other dance styles, with varied rhythmic patterns. We might also put their phrases together in counterpoint. Structures and the effects of different structures are topics for discussion. Further practical exercises might involve working rhythmic patterns with and against music, exploring breath

rather than metred rhythm, playing two phrases together to find connecting points of punctuation between them, and so on. The precise timing depending on the fluency and energy of a class, video examples from the repertoire can be introduced to provoke further thought or to add stimulation. Examples might range from post-modern dance – Michael Clark using hard rock, Lea Anderson using *Strangers in the Night*, both making fascinating counterpoint against the music – to Astaire and to ballet.

In performance classes now, I experiment more and more with musical ideas. I teach a version of the Cunningham technique class, already renowned for its sophisticated rhythmic requirements. But I am now introducing studies which lay special emphasis on musical issues. A recent study, for instance, for second year, elementary/intermediate level undergraduate students, introduced rhythmic complications all along the way: the variety of different rhythmic issues within a short space of time is part of the point here. The phrase was sixteen bars long, in 3/4 musical time. It included two passages of 2/4 against the music, a set of four steps forwards that fitted into one bar of three beats, an accent to be hit just before the downbeat accent in the music, and a running and jumping ending which was meant totally to ignore the musical beat structure. There were no major technical difficulties here, but even the most advanced dancers found the phrase difficult, and it needed considerable practice. I recommended marking through it out of class time, with a partner clapping the musical metre against the movement. The students who worked hard at the phrase gradually learnt to relax into their rhythmic material, an important learning experience in itself, began to stop counting feverishly and to listen to and enjoy the music in counterpoint against them. The best students could even introduce a sense of rubato: a slight play with, or freedom with, the pulse. And, at this point, through rhythmic play, they could discover pleasure, sensuality and a release of physical tension. Next time, the students are likely to find such a task easier. A second task for the same students was to learn in silence a much longer phrase, with many changes of tempo in it, and to hold their own against a non-rhythmic sound score by Brian Eno.

This is in the Cunningham tradition of working with music and it provides its own different rhythmic background, has proved an excellent framework for dance counterpoint.

Few of my regular students are intending to dance professionally. My hope is that they will think about these musical issues and, just as important, their effect, and think in cross-curricular terms. They might draw upon them in their own choreography – even post-modern choreography with political subject matter or pedestrian movement contains dance passages which may be rhythmically enlivened. They might use these ideas in teaching and rehearsing other dancers and recognise these musical devices in their dance analysis courses and when they watch dance in the theatre.

Meanwhile, some questions that dance musicality possesses remain intriguing. My experience from teaching is that our rhythmic sense today is "dormat". Yet, the court and theatrical dance of two centuries ago, which had its roots in our folks dances, displays astonishing rhythmic subtlety. I am toying with the idea that the pictorial came into prominence in the nineteenth century, the sense of woman as object to be watched, subjected to the male gaze, was developed in the ballet, and we are now experiencing the after effects of that shift of emphasis. After all, most dance training still tends to stress position and line rather than rhythm and phrasing as the foundations of dance activity. Ironically, the dance critic Arlene Croce (1989) puts the blame back on music, or at least today's popular music:

Rhythmically, rock is irrelevant – it may reverberate but it doesn't swing. Some of my worst nightmares these days have to do with the deteriorating sensibility of American popular music, particularly in respect to dance rhythm.

On the other hand, watching a recent revival of Balanchine's *Serenade* (1934), I was reminded, by virtue of its absence, how one or two musically acute dancers (like Darci Kistler and Kyra Nichols of the New York City

Ballet, in another performance of this work) can make us hear not only musical rhythm, but also melody. Fred Astaire, disarmingly casual in his precision, educates us musically in the same kind of way. Tiny buoyancies and sensitivities to the outline of peaks and troughs in melodic contour, spicy connexions between dance and musical moments, bring a fresh awareness to our eyes and ears. Some dancers, after all, make sense of Balanchine's creed about total integration of the two elements: "See the music, hear the dancing " (Kirstein, 1977: p 10). While not all dance sets out to make an important point about music, much of it could gain if we recognised the richness that can emerge from dialogue with music. Here, too, is a source of excitement and pleasure for all of us in the act of dancing.

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Abstract

Aunque es generalmente reconocido que la música juega un papel clave en la danza, la naturaleza y potencia exacta de esta aportación musical se han considerado muy poco. Este artículo propone que es clave la integración de la música y de la danza para la forma y el significado de un baile, y que, mientras los bailes demuestran estilos coreográficos, también demuestran claros estilos de música y de coreografía. Puede ser útil un mayor entendimiento del papel de la música para el restablecimiento y la reconstrucción de los bailes, desde un examen de las fuentes e interpretaciones musicales además del estilo musical y coreográfico. Este estudio también considera aspectos pedagógicos: cómo las cuestiones musicales pueden incorporarse en la formación de bailarines y en cursos de coreografía.