

# **Teaching and presenting technical material in the dance studio: some musical concerns**

by Christian Cherry, U of Oregon  
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## **Introduction**

Having played and taught many classes in the dance studio I am often struck by the seemingly endless variety of things that work and things that then, immediately after, I fall flat on my face or hear a horror story from a colleague how a “musical disaster” struck their own class. It is a tenuous battle we fight to use music judiciously in the dance technique studio. I have had the privilege to play for many wonderful teachers. Almost all found unusual and insightful ways to use music to serve their purpose. In every case these masters knew music well, its details and elements. I do not want to write here of these details of music, but of their application in a pedagogic plan for modern dance technique classes.

- 1. Purpose**
- 2. Strategy – Learning mode**
- 3. Form**
- 4. Presentation and Clarity**
- 5. Performance**

## **Purpose**

When organizing a specific exercise for a dance class, the overriding organizing principle is its purpose, its function in the overall class (e.g., use of space, warming up the back or foot articulation). It is the single most important element of design for a dance teacher and, not coincidentally, for the dance musician. We might ask, “What does this particular exercise aim to do?” From a clear organization of purpose, the rest of the organization usually flows. Music serves the purpose of reinforcing both the intent (I will call this “purposeful energy”) and the structure of each exercise. Music then can put the exercise in the context of each class, lending an over-arching structure, shaping an experience. Involving a musician in the original purpose is therefore extremely important. When the purpose is explicated, the chances for pedagogic success increase dramatically. If you establish the purpose of each exercise as you plan it, consider the musical ramifications. “Is this a flowing, lyrical and relaxed warm-up exercise or is it a percussive articulation, or both in contrasting sections?” A musician’s job in this energetic shaping is to understand the purpose of each exercise within the context of the class, to facilitate the rhythmic structure and finally, to make music (often improvised) that “rocks” the entire room into the willful euphoria of dance. If we come close to this in some of our best moments we have accomplished something.

Usually the communication of purpose is done by some tacit (silent and passive) or intuitive approach whereby musicians read the minds of the teachers and try to discern what is appropriate or simply rehash what has been done before. From a musician’s perspective, often there is little guide except trial and error -- experience. Dance teachers often say nothing to

musicians except when things are “not working.” This negative feedback serves to undermine the purpose of collaborative spirit inherent in the dance studio. When a dance teacher’s purpose is clear, the musician can then make solid, informed choices about accompaniment. Often this clue becomes clear to the class and the musician through the introductory remarks that a teacher makes. “Let’s warm up our feet now” or “we’re going to work on double frappé.” These cues are not directed specifically to the musician, but it is her job to make the information contained there pertinent. Dance teachers, on the other hand, have little time to coddle a musician into divining the purpose. It must come from the dance musician’s own spirit of educational pursuit and experiment. On the other hand, a little direct communication can make all the difference in the world, especially when we are trying to build community, surely one of the distinguishing characteristics of dance. What we need is a shared vocabulary. This most often comes in the form of rhythm but need not be limited to that element alone.

The dance teacher must be organized or, at the very least, familiar with a planned structure to effectively communicate purpose. There could be some acknowledgment when the purpose is proposed. Many musicians simply wait until the rhythmic structure is laid out before they begin to pay attention. This is a crucial error. By that time in the presentation of material to a class a teacher is already halfway down the list of concerns we are outlining here – the cat is not only out of the bag, it is half-way down the street and having milk on the neighbors’ back stoop. If there has not been eye contact and a trust established by the time the class has learned the rhythmic structure, much of the communicative momentum has been lost. At the first moment of presenting an exercise, a teacher could communicate what the purpose is, how the next exercise fits with the last, whether it is based on familiar movement, formal organization, what the meter is, what body part is focused upon and a myriad of other possible tidbits, any of which may be a clue to appropriate musical accompaniment. Yet, at this moment, many dance musicians “check out.” Most teachers don’t realize the importance of that moment, because they are so occupied with the combination itself. And so the misguided experience is perpetuated.

Here are some things to try to bridge this unfortunate gap in awareness:

- Discuss the overall structure of class with the musician before class.
- Make sure both the class and the musician are watching and listening to the presentation of material by establishing eye contact before presenting material. Be visible.
- Create within musical structures that are either familiar and useful or unique to engage the musician fully. ABA or AABA or rondo, for example.
- Ask for something specific like a musical form: tango, tarantella, mazurka, blues.
- Describe the flow or form of the exercise. Or describe the energy you want from the dance and/or the experience.
- Use your voice to inflect movement in a melodic and meaningful way.

For the musician there are many other ways to make informed choices. These ways include traditional models, energetic mirroring and, the more literal and overused, dance visualization. Various combinations of the list above are also possible. Traditional models include using music in the style of the technique, like using Baroque for movement based on

principles from Doris Humphrey or heavy atonal modernism for Graham-based movement. When I play for people from the Limón Company, they invariably like the formal aspect of classical music, especially Bach. It has to do with the weight of the movement and the music together. It gives “the right feeling” or so I have been told. On the other hand, judicious use of popular forms is often welcomed in dance classes. Sometimes a pop song at the hardest technical exercise at the *barre* is just the ticket for lightening the mood in a ballet class.

Energetic mirroring is by far the most useful tool for a musician. It assumes that the musician visualizes the exercise by learning it visually. Then, according to the form and energies involved in performing the exercise, he designs a music that has similar energetic intent. This is a game of nuance and taste garnered with experience. Let’s say for the sake of example that the *rond de jambe* exercise has a part A which is repeated to the back. Its flow is apparent in the movement and its slow tempo allows for some *rubato* even. This takes four 8s. Invariably there comes next a port de bras or *cambrai* that we’ll call part B. It is only two 8s and then there is a balance of undetermined length with a *soutenu* to the other side. If I see this, I immediately form a melody which will serve for part A and for its repeat to the back. Perhaps for variety I might make a variation on the theme. Then for part B, I move to a secondary theme with a different harmonic center (say, the relative minor) with more subdivisions of the beat and even more legato. This encourages graceful use of the arms and back. Finally, I keep track of the 8s so that I can arrive at the balance at a harmonic point of suspension, i.e. a 6/4 chord. The final denouement is easily accomplished by registration or with some modulatory return to the harmonic center of the part A theme for the second side. A little extra *rubato* will encourage them to move to the second side. A modern dance example might look a little different.

In modern dance I might use the metaphor of being “off center” to organized a harmonic motif. An open fifth in the bass might serve as being “centered.” As the exercise explores off center, I might wander away from my base fifth and embellish the melodic content as I get further away. Add a little developing rhythmic interest and the concomitant return to the basal fifth and you have musical, gestural envelope in which the dance can thrive. Keeping track of the actual organization is paramount. If there are an odd number of 8s, there is the potential for not meeting at the second side if the musician and the teacher are not communicating. Again, being clear with the purpose and the organization will solve many problems for all parties.

### **Strategy - learning mode**

By strategy I mean the manner by which a teacher presents movement. There are many different ways to learn movement. The most common is to hang movement within a rhythmic structure and then to teach that structure. This tried and true model has been useful over the years. It is especially utilitarian when inexperience in any of the three participating members (teacher, student and musician) exists. Alternately, it can be a hamstringing mode. There is, after all, no rule that says that music must be organized in the same beat structure as movement. In fact, many more recent models suggest that movement can have its own ebb and flow of rhythm and will coexist with music organized in an entirely different way rhythmically. The old model works fine for many situations. This newer model works well when movement is not particularly even in its flow or articulation of body rhythms, or is organized in a

special spatial emphasis (thus de-emphasizing other elements). Organizing music with movement can have many different points of contact. Meter is but one of them. Other points of contact could be psychological mood, melodic shape or even a spatial metaphor using registration on the accompanying instrument. The essential primacy of improvisation is clear here. All parties must be able to react and inter-react. It requires a certain confidence, a secure musician and a secure teacher. The two must have a shared trust. It also serves as a recreation of performance practices by many contemporary choreographers.

Other strategies include having musicians play a piece of repertoire or starting from some musical motif. I have seen very successful phrases taught cumulatively in a stream of consciousness sort of way. Music could be included in this mode very easily. A musician could make one music for the learning and another for the “performance.” Another way to treat the moment is to have the musician use alternate sound: reading the newspaper aloud, making nonsense syllables or freely improvising following the dance or (hold on) even with no particular reference to the dance at all. These are all useful in an “open” studio. We are too often held hostage by our past experience. New experiences are important in a pedagogic sense because they break down the inherent baggage that comes with doing things by rote. Each of these alternate methods can amplify the performing mood in the studio.

## **Form**

The form of an exercise is vitally important as an organizing principle because it reinforces the learning mode. If an exercise is in a clear AABB or binary form, there is a certain resonance to this poetic form that is inherently clear. It hangs easily in our minds. Music and dance have always had a formal sister in poetry. The same is true of ABA or ternary form and even of Rondo. I am not suggesting that every exercise should be organized around a poetic form rather than most exercises have a defined logic. One easy way to do this is to ensure that you have beginnings, endings and clear sectional contrast. Any musician should be capable of seeing binary or ternary forms. Reproducing them on the fly is another story, but the potential is there. The goal is to make sense with forms that are familiar, not to jam movement into a form that is inorganic for the sake of form alone. More experienced musicians can differentiate much more complicated forms.

We come now in our discussion to a dilemma. What does one do if an exercise doesn't fit neatly into some form? The answer is not simple. There are certainly times when an extra four counts is needed to make things “right” physically. It is the job of the musician to be aware of these little curlicues when they arise. A dance teacher should try to use their own musicality to avoid the little extra bits that tend to hang off bodies when they are trying to make things come out on the other side for example. There is usually a way to make movement and music square, if that is desired. In any case a little verbal cue to the class and the musician should suffice to let everyone know that “this is a little extra bit I am going to put here.” It requires a *priori* knowledge however. I have played for people who refuse to make any square movement because they are either not musical enough, are using some other organizing mode or simply figure that it is my job to make it work. On the last point, they are right in a sense. But, and this is a big but, if they want me to make good music of their structures, an occasional familiar form might do the trick nicely to underscore intent and make everyone a little more at ease. Music is

partly a game of building expectation and either meeting it satisfactorily or purposefully deceiving the listener for the sake of development. There is a reason that certain forms are reiterated over and over by creators. They work or better they satisfy. A dance teacher needs to know music well enough to simulate these forms in their exercises.

## **Presentation and Clarity**

We have come up against this idea over and over in this essay. It bears a little elaboration. I think that a clear demarcation of subdivision and a song in the head are key to the delivery of material. If a teacher can know the metric organization of the music they are hearing in their head, they can usually communicate that to a class of eager dancers and a musician in the corner. The clarity aspect includes establishing eye contact with a musician from across the room and being available for questions. Another model for clarity is to include a number and a movement cue for each verbalization, e.g. “and rond-de-jambe **one** and **two** and re-verse **three** and **four**.” The point is that people learn differently. Some hang on numbers and others hang on the visual or the verbal reinforcement of the visual. I think this is an important skill to develop but hard to accomplish all the time. Another more easily accomplished rule of thumb is to try to present movement in tempo all the way through the exercise. This gives everyone a framework out front. A student can see what they already know and focus on unfamiliar material, a musician can think of music that fits and the teacher can then rely on better reproduction of the material. Most teachers break off the demonstration of an exercise in time after the first few counts. I believe this is a mistake. We do have the pressure of time working against us, but we often compound the problem of presentation by “marking quickly to save time.” Experience is the best teacher on this point. With a tightly scripted and familiar vocabulary, more shorthand can be used.

One final point on clarity: verbal clarity is extremely important. We all have preferences with regard to meter. When teachers get tired they often lapse into rounding off the sound of their presentation with a three. For musicians, a three is not necessarily more round. For a dancer, a three often means legato. This is a common area for miscommunication. Verbal clarity will make many things clear. The more subdivision is explicated, the more likely everyone will anticipate what is coming musically. It is obvious that the “dancer counts” would be clear but a musician is hanging on the subdivision, not the division. A good teacher uses the end of the 8 to give clear subdivision or will use it intermittently to clearly show how things are subdivided, a.k.a. meter.

## **Performance**

On this point I will no doubt make some enemies and rouse some champions. I feel it is incumbent upon us to practice performing in all aspects of a performance art. The studio is the place where we practice the day-to-day details of how to do that. There are studio dancers and studio musicians who never really reach a level of accomplishment that would be effective on stage. Everyone can gain something from the experience of performance, however. Small demands by the teacher can compel people to be committed to the art form. It is an expressive means of communication. We should practice expressing both literal and abstract ideas and emotions. The aspects of line, shape and flow are all part of this practice. The commitment of

the musician to this enterprise is one of the intangibles that makes a great dance musician different than the average musician. For the musician, this means seeing as many dances as possible and developing an eye for dance and movement. I recommend that dance musicians also take class so they can internalize the effort and feeling of performing movement.