

Paper presented to the
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by Christian Cherry
University of Oregon

By way of greeting and entrée into this discussion, I wanted to retell an anecdote. Richard Schenk, a founding member of this organization, and the person who got me started playing for dance, sent me this email on the eve of my departure to the conference. "Last Friday a guest artist - young professional, graduate of the Connecticut College program - was back to teach a master class. I introduced her to her accompanist, a young drummer. She said 'thank God, not piano.'" Is more proof necessary for us to look at attitudes toward the role of the piano? [BTW, Richard wishes he were here and sends his regards to you all.] I hope you will listen to this rough draft of ideas on a gnarly topic; and that we can follow it with some discussion which I would greatly appreciate.

I started writing an essay last year with a definite slant to be submitted to a journal at some later date. It was called: "How the Mighty Have Fallen: The Demise of the Piano in the Dance Studio." My original perspective has changed. I am glad now that I stopped writing so I could re-process the feelings I had to present here to fellow practitioners of the art of making music for dance and for dance class. I realized that I don't rue the ground shifting change from piano centric to electronic instruments; rather, I lament some of the implications that the ubiquity of loop-based music has on dancers' ears, their musico-choreographic development and their artistic sensibility. I will admit now that I am grappling with making the enthusiastic electronic musician I am, live within this piano playing, perhaps aging dance pedagogue body. I imagine that I am not alone in this struggle and know that it has always

been thus. That is, that as trends in musical culture change and the dance community embraces disparate elements, we as committed dance collaborators in and out of the studio have to adapt. At this time though, we have a unique chance to help to determine our own fate, and not tacitly allow a certain obsolescence to happen to us. To quote Catherine David in her inspiring book, *The Beauty of Gesture*, "the aim is not to solve the mystery but to unravel it and learn from it."

At the outset I can imagine splitting this audience into camps by virtue of practice; one group, the acoustic musicians perhaps, lamenting the changed role of the piano, and the other, electronic musicians celebrating newfound freedom from that "black beast in the corner." There are those amongst us, most of us probably, who play anything we can get our hands on and continue to experiment with various media and idioms. We have sought to both capitalize upon and, at the same time, to neutralize the cultural predispositions of obvious instrumental idiomatic bias; we sing nonsense syllables, we hit the side of the piano with a stick, we play along with a drum machine. No matter what camp we belong to, we must note as practitioners that the ground has shifted toward recorded music in class; a CD, a beat box (for lack of a better term) or a loop-based sequencer. [I consider instruments like the Octopad, DrumKat and the Handsonic as essentially acoustic instruments, though they are not in the strictest sense, of course.] This discussion assumes that you are in the camp that acknowledges the pedagogic value of music in the dance studio, though dancing without music has always had value too. As Walter Kennedy, a long-time Lewitzky dancer and colleague of mine said in an email on the topic, "The 'charms' of music are undeniable and its place is pivotal in the technique studio. It is a vital supporting element to movement learning." All movement, even that

without sound, implies some musicality in my mind. They are linked as time-based art forms. More on that later.

Recently, say in the last 15 years or so, the piano's role as a primary in the studio technique context has dramatically changed. This discussion seeks to expose some of the ramifications of this shift and to develop a group dialogue about what we as practitioners value. I want to discuss this with you all at the end of my talk in an open forum. Please stop me along the way, if you wish to make a point or clarify something.

First, let's make some observations about the state of things in the dance studio. Ballet teachers, of course have had a long relationship with music, based somewhat on performance practice that is energetically linked to the basic elements of music: rhythm, melody and phrasing or form. Many authors have written more eloquently than I could about the music dance relationship, notably Katherine Teck, who is here, and Harriet Cavalli, authors to whom we are indebted for laying a discursive foundation. In my experience the ballet use of piano has essentially remained intact with some welcome innovations, like the prevalence of improvisation. But now the general use of CDs to provide "accompaniment" as either recorded piano or recorded ballet repertory is rampant. There are also many CDs from accomplished (and some not-so-accomplished) dance musicians who improvise in classical styles. These provide a ready-made, "dance bag portable" version of music that can be called up, and replayed, spliced and diced in any number of ways to fit the needs of the ballet teacher. "No need to engage a musician for classes at all." The savings for small studios is too alluring. It simply is cost effective. As a living, breathing ballet musician, I have some obvious objections to this rationale which I will bring up later. I understand how

and why this happens but there are some ramifications to using *prêt-à-porter* music that are rooted in the current musical culture. But the core of my argument rests in the modern technique studio.

In the modern dance studio there exists the practicality dilemma noted above and, yet another set of pressures pushing us away from the use of piano or any live accompaniment. When a dance teacher has a musician engaged for technique class, there is an all too often unspoken contract struck between collaborators – namely, that the musician has an historical awareness of what music might best serve certain movement idioms. This is a delicate proposition. Musicians who make their livelihood as musicians in dance must know how various stylistic expressions of movement have been set musically. The historical precedents are strong: Graham and Horst, Limón and triple meters, Humphrey and Bach, Wigman and her drums! These traditions are the foundation upon which musicians in dance have based their own efforts in this context. Here though I am preaching to the choir. You know all too well the pratfalls our delicate art.

After post-modernism and its concomitant emphasis on pure movement independent of musical structures, there was a logic that strongly distrusted music's "bossiness." Elizabeth Streb, for example, has famously said, "Music is the enemy of dance." Yvonne Rainer's wonderful score to *Performance Demonstration* includes this passage quoted here from Banes. Note her musical playfulness.

I would like to say that I am a music-hater. The only remaining meaningful role for *muzeek* in relation to dance is to be totally absent or to mock itself. To use 'serious' *muzache* simultaneously with dance is to give a glamorous "high art" aura to what is seen. To use "program"

moosick or pop or rock is to generate excitement or coloration which the dance itself would not otherwise evoke.

Why am I opposed to this kind of enhancement? One reason is that I love dancing and am jealous of encroachment upon it by any other element. I want my dancing to be the superstar and refuse to share the limelight with any form of collaboration or co-existence. *Muzak* does not accompany paintings in a gallery...I simply don't want someone else's high art anywhere near mine... I don't collaborate...Furthermore, I am all for one medium at a time.

In this world, music has a younger sibling who rightfully needs to develop her own individual aesthetics, to grow out of the shadow of music and her cloying forms. This process of rejection of the traditional roles is a part of the artistic revolutions that have made modern dance so vital from the beginning. Practices in the theatre of the time certainly demonstrated that dance could be extremely successful with no music, with text accompaniment or even with textural sonic treatment of the space. In the studio, a parallel practice developed. A new generation of teachers experimented with dance to sound without a direct, beat-driven relationship to music. I have fond memories of reading the newspaper at Louise Burn's request for class at Ohio State in the late 80s. There was also Minimalism that shares characteristics with the current popular pulse driven subculture of much of today's music.

Mind you, I am not opposed to using different modes of accompaniment in class or performance, or using different modes of eliciting dance from students; or finding new ways to teach about the complexities of dancing. I am, in fact, addicted to the very experimentation that the dance studio has prodded from me as a collaborator. But there is now a different aesthetic afoot which carries a

healthy disdain for the piano, like Richard's alum that I mentioned at the opening. There has come to be a rift of communication. This rift has not been filled with the usual musical materials, i.e., the piano because of its traditional role and its traditional baggage. Rather many musicians have turned to electronic, sampled means to fill the disconnected void. We have this conference to share ideas on this way of thinking about how to make the music in dance happen. Beats, samples and ambience are often the materials of the modern dance musician now. I have used Reason™, Live™ and even ambient groove CDs that I made away from class to bring in textural, electronic energy. It has presented itself as an outcome of the disdain for counts, and a parallel discomfort with structures and specifically musical structures.

As this new collaborative language continues to present itself, there has been a notable shift to musicians who can improvise and create in such an environment with many wonderful new tools other than piano. Simultaneously, teachers who are able to describe what they need, or have language for suggesting suitable sound are fewer and further between. Though the piano remains a most flexible and capable instrument, it has come, in its iconic downfall, to mean "classical," stilted, unhip and old-fashioned. Many in modern dance fear anything classical sounding because of the "ballet backlash" that can come from inexperienced dancers when they hear classical music.

Here we have reached a set of questions. Is there still a marked advantage for live music in the technique studio? What are the benefits and/or problems therein? What issues does loop-based accompaniment have inherent in it? Are we in our eagerness to satisfy our dance cohorts, tacitly ignoring a great chance to rethink the pedagogy of music to the

dance community? How do we reflect performance practices? Of dance, of music? Is this important? How do I continue to be a model artist in the studio?

Many dancers extol the synergy of live music and dance in the studio. There is ample testimony from teachers of both ballet and classic modern dance techniques that musicality is a quality to be fostered in a dancer. For Ballet, there is less and less live piano accompaniment, improvised or otherwise, as more and more teachers and choreographers use recordings, even in performance. Mr. Kennedy makes an interesting observation about live music in the studio, one that sums up my own approach over the years:

Music in the dance space over the years has run the gamut - I think now we are less concerned with trying always to be "dead serious mid-century moderns" or "anarchistic post-moderns" and we are now in a place where we use what works- lounge music or prepared piano--- percussive prances to Rachmaninoff knock-offs if necessary. Baroque and blues simultaneously if need be!

So variety is important. What better way to have variety than to use recorded music? There is also the obvious question of practicality with CDs. Pianos take tuning, must be good instruments to serve the needs, they take upkeep and must have a good pianist to bring them to life. Mike Vargas, a long-time friend and amazing dance musician in his own right says,

One of the sneaky issues with continuing to use pianos in studios is the horrible default position of a piano in bad shape, that sounds bad, and a musician who doesn't care about what they're playing, because they

can't possibly make good music, since no matter how good their composition or improvisation may be, it just won't sound GOOD,...

Of course, if the budget doesn't allow, there can't be musicians or pianos. But let's assume this is possible. What do we prefer? There is the performance practice of using recorded music for dance; sometimes original and commissioned, sometimes reworked but most often, recorded music, and usually not intended for dance at all. Aside from the appropriation question, certainly another paper in the making, and from the copyright issues (see Bill Moulton's session for that), I think that this affects the studio greatly. People now seem to like to dance to music in technique class that is part of their *lingua franca*, everyday experience. Or to put it in semiotic terms, the sub-cultural signifier that music used to be, in this context, is now different. We don't want to dance to Brahms because it is too laden with baggage, or with another dance/music symbolism and moreover, is way too "bossy" for the dance practitioner of today. I would like to explore the explosion of recorded music briefly, as a cultural phenomenon.

With the advent of the iPod™ and the concurrent perceived need to declare one's personal music and carry it with you, there is a whole range of issues which affect our discussion here. First, there is the problem of sound quality. Mp3s are inferior and that is that. They are based on a psychological modeling of the hearing process and are notoriously bad at reproducing certain kinds of music. [Pop-quiz here: Guess which kinds?] Second, there is the not unrelated delivery system or access culture which simultaneously honors the variety of music available and makes it more disposable. "We are supposed to listen to music while doing something else." This is the iPod's *modus operandi*. While I laud the variety of music available on iTunes™ and other mp3 services, I wonder about the cultural

significance of having music be so ubiquitous as to be piped into our craniums, especially while doing something quotidian. I revel in ritual; I do it; I practice it everyday in the studio, but I worry about the devaluation of the music because we choose inferior audio clips of it to accompany our tasks. Jeff Stolet, my colleague at the University of Oregon writes in an article from *Teaching Dance Studies*,

Audio recording technologies, in their many manifestations, have led to what I call 'the radical portability' of music. Radical portability is visible in almost every area of daily life, ranging from home stereos to the mall, from car radios to elevators, from handheld MP3 players to television. Whereas music was once significantly autonomous from pedestrian activity, music via its recently found portability attaches itself to our lives in every conceivable way, locale, and life context.... Today we have chose to soundtrack our lives and, specifically, to soundtrack the physical activities in our lives.

Moreover, we have made music the ultimate wallpaper, popular pabulum. It is no longer an artistic signifier in the same way, rather it accompanies our menial activities and is less valued. Our entire relationship to music has changed with the advent of the iPod. When we couple the preponderant, readily-available music: repetitive, flabby pop, with its function for every task we do, we get the ultimate *Gebrauchsmusik*; one which has changed if not the tools, at least the language we must use as dance musicians. There are, of course, amazing examples of snippet-rich music that is clearly not part of my vitriol here.

A personal complaint I have to reconcile with some of the music my students bring in is its rampant substitution of rhythm for other musical elements. It is at the core of redefining the styles. I do it in my own compositions a lot. It is Reich's *Clapping Music*, and *Different Trains*. The

rhythm of much music today is the primary element. Melodic content is subsequently limited and is more a counter-rhythm. I am fine with polyrhythms; I love them in fact but “moderation in all things.” However, the real clincher for me is the flattening of the harmonic tensions and the distinct lack of sectional variation or development. I sound like the graying father of a son who is out in the garage jamming with his band. He just shakes his head.

Another interesting argument about the explosion of recorded music comes again from Mike Vargas,

One thing about the explosion of recorded music, and the availability of examples of most of the excellent music ever made in the last 1000 years by humans, is that people's standards of excellence has gone up, when it comes to taste in music. I'm talking not about a standard that would place one style above another, but about excellence with regard to execution, production values, good instruments, and so on. Regardless of the inevitable fact that in any given pool of musics, most of it will be mediocre at best, the cream does rise to the top, and people do in fact get exposed to excellence, no matter what flavor they favor.

Let's look at specific studio experiences. Sarah Franco is a new colleague in Oregon. She is influenced by both old and new schools of thought and has taught with a percussionist/synthesist most recently. Her influences are decidedly release based though she trained as a ballet dancer as an undergraduate. By her own admission post-modern dance has radically changed her way of thinking about movement. My point is that it also changed her way of thinking about music without her monitoring it in the same way. She is still developing her musical vocabulary as a teacher. Most of the time, when I enter the space we will make class together in, she has her iPod on and running as she marks movement. She looks up

and says "hello" and goes on prepping for class. I don't know what music she is listening to, but she is surely not listening to the music I am about to create afresh for her. It occurs to me that she is a good example of the new pedagogue who is teaching movement based in release. Here is what she wrote in an email to me about the role of music in technique studio.

The musician, and the music they bring to class, consciously and subconsciously informs dancers about the nature of the movement presented and give information about possible approaches to each combination. Music serves as a source for inspiration and invites a more-complete physical embodiment and exploration of artistry. In that way, music teaches about movement as much as I do.

Here we have a more open ended kind of contract than the Limón classes I played for Betty Jones at ADF. Betty always encouraged me to experiment and even loved stride piano mixed in with the Bachian improvisations she requested. Ms. Franco and I are still using dancer phrasing of 8s, but I can tell she is eager to break away. She has responded every time I play with, or elide the phrase structure for variety. She has encouraged me to bring in my "toys." She is very easy to work with, partly because she can hear the music/dance connection in both new and old-school ways. My job is really to convince her that I see what she is doing and can respond. I will pull out the Electribe soon to see what happens.

I have had the honor of playing for many practitioners of the Ambient Textures School: some preferring acoustic approaches and some wanting full on tribal groove. I remember well how Irene Hultman, a Trisha Brown alum wanted me to play "Eastern European Folk Music" because she wanted to push against its charming energies. What a sensibility that

was! It always presents a challenge in this situation for me as a musician, because I am so eager, trained to feed my dance eye, to catch the nuance of the movement and try to reproduce it in musical terms. If they don't want my intrusion but crave energy commodified I must do something else.

When the goal is to provide a fabric for dancing which is not linked rhythmically to the movement but energetically, the syntax of accompaniment is radically different. Sometimes these teachers have come to know what music they like and can describe it in some detail. Most have formed long lasting working relations with musicians who play for them regularly. Experimentation is an obvious solution here. But much loop-based accompaniment I hear mimics a musical sensibility that is rampant in the iTunes™ libraries of my students. They light up like the sun when I bring out my Electribe™ for the end of class. In my own music for modern class, I always try to create as much timbral and stylistic variety as I can; I play drums, piano, viola, to sing. I don't always use electronic support. Sometimes I just get in a mood and bust out the beat box. In any case my choices are based on a desire to provide as wide a range of appropriate support as I can. But I realized that what I am after most often is making time feel a certain way through musical expression. The fact that dance and music are time-based art forms makes a point of contact that can be really fertile as a philosophical locus for improvisation.

One of the most successful musicians at this kind of accompaniment is Albert Mathias. He uses Reason and triggered textures from an Akai midi performance controller as well as his voice and an electric dhotar to play classes. He has worked this out over a long period of time with his movement collaborator Kathleen Hermesdorf. It works for

them because the dance counts are generally not set. The dancers dance and the music makes a great vibe to the whole experience - not for everyone, but nonetheless effective. Another fine electronic percussionist is John Hanks who has played for modern and jazz classes at ADF for years with an electronic setup. Yesterday we saw two very well developed and clearly effective demonstrations from Rob Kaplan and Corbett Lunsford. Certainly it can be done and well by a practiced and talented artist. So what am I on about here? I believe that we are after is a considered approach, not a canned feeling. My objections to using groove loops a lot is that it can eliminate some of the key musical material that I think dancers need to be conversant. It further can play into the pablum of the everyday. Finally, we have to remember that the piano is a most effective communicator of many musical ideas.

I want to say that I think that the psychological effect of choosing electronic percussion samples for movement is somewhat counter intuitive to many dance musicians who have developed their skills with traditional (albeit western) music values in mind. Mike Vargas makes a great point about the physicality of playing an acoustic instrument.

The piano still feels like an amazingly powerful and important instrument for the support of a dancers' education. Let's say for example, compared to a plastic synthesizer that weighs only 10 or 20 pounds, the possibility that a musician playing for dancers moving their bodies, could ALSO be moving his/her body, in fact could throw their WEIGHT into the instrument with visceral and passionate force, means that the musician playing a piano in class is connecting directly (though perhaps subliminally) with the dancers through the physical nature of the shared activity in the moment.

I should point out that I think this applies to any acoustic instrument: drums, kalimba, or didgeridoo for that matter. Dancers understand the agogics

of playing an acoustic instrument inherently. This is at the core of Tigger's vocalization rhythm methods.

We have reached a kind of crisis of musical culture. Most of my students don't hear music in terms of anything but rhythm. They don't understand consonance or dissonance (even rhythmic versions) because they don't listen to music that has very much harmonic information. The repetitive musical phonemes or *musemes*, as Russell A. Potter has called them are at the root of the cultural shift. In his essay, "Not the Same: Race, Repetition, and Difference in Hip-Hop and Dance Music" in *Mapping the Beat*, he discusses the sample's function in hip-hop,

Repetition, in fact is often perceived as a type of 'noise' – not on account of its content,...but on account of its interruption of the expectation of longer phrasal movement. The more one expects such movement, the more 'noisy' a sort cycle of tropes becomes. Hip-hop's 'breakbeats' are in this sense just that; they 'break' sampled beats away from their original aural context, and thus 'break' down the sound into unexpected units, often using scratching to percussively flip-flop the initial sound, or leaving drops of sonic blood...The effect is both to invoke the original sound and yet to puncture or punctuate it with the sings of its own status as a fragment; just as the surrealists made art by tacking urinals to a gallery wall, hip-hop DJs tack up sonic ready-mades...Drum machines programmed a beat, they used its mechanical lack of variation as a variation, just as their Jamaican cousins capitalized on the 'narrow compass' of cheap Casio keyboards to intensify the stark melodic hooks of dancehall styles.

He says a bit further in the same article, "Among fans of many current pop music genres, the awareness that their music constitutes noise to others has become a definitional aesthetic and driving force." This smacks of modern dance's roots to me – rejecting the ballet aesthetic. Dancers get

this kind of energetic bartering much more easily than they get the complexities of a Neopolitan Chord.

I am of a mind to propose a process of detente at this juncture. It occurs to me that as musicians in dance whose constituency has changed its listening habits we might do well to do exactly what we always have, namely adopt the elements that make sense to us. As master improvisers, this is excellent fodder for growth. At the same time, we must now use our position as dance educators to wean the students from their daily pablum music with which they accompany their lives with for music with real interest of whatever genre. Again, there are fine examples of these pop genres.

Is the piano incapable of making this change? It is if students can't hear what a pianist is doing. There is no piano equivalent for the style known as drums 'n bass or house or many other 'dance styles.' Conversely there is no equivalent to barrel house or boogie-woogie. If you are trying to make the music that most music consumers are listening to you may well have to invest in some software and a laptop and a good keyboard amplification system. But, I am still reticent to throw out the instrument that I have spent a lifetime using and which I am sure is among the most complete and flexible of sound makers. I have also learned to play class without piano. I am even learning to play class without acoustic instruments altogether. Certain classes I have played in festival contexts are best done with electronic sonic environments. This is where some are going who resent the dance count strictures of the past.

As an aside, one modern classical style that works well in the modern dance studio on the piano at least, is Minimalism. It has rhythmic

drive and hypnotic appeal and, in capable hands, great harmonic ebb and flow that are infectious. Our friend André Gribou first introduced me to the appeal of Glassian jams. Mike Vargas introduced me to Reichian versions. I remain indebted to many of you here who have allowed me to beg, borrow and steal your best ideas. Such is the life of a vagabond dance musician.

As mentioned before, the crux of my recent explorations come down to a very basic principle that is shared by dance and music – that the energy is time-based and there are numerous styles that can affect a time sense in a performative context. Baroque keyboard music and minimalism can share a kind of sewing-machine sensibility that is highly ordered. An adagio is just another kind of down groove or ballad. The piano remains my most easily accessed gestural machine. I think Mike Vargas states it nicely:

...with a good instrument and an enthusiastic, skilled musician, I also believe that the deadening monotony of pop music's vibrations can in fact be exposed through interesting and provocative choices from combination to combination. It can wake people up in a ballet class to suddenly hear a Ska version of the Kink's "All Day and All of the Night" played for a tendu exercise. If that is followed by a Stravinskian improvisation with fun-but-ugly harmonic surprises, and that in turn is followed by a country western waltz for the pliés, and if all of this is delivered up with the same dedication to excellence and detail by the musician, with delightfully unexpected nuances WITHIN each of those genres, the possibility for a LIVING, creative, experience is there.

I thank you all for the chance to spout here. I want to open the discourse up to you. I hope you will all continue to experiment. I fumble

with knobs and limp back to the piano. I play piano with grooves I made the night before. I play toy instruments and amplify them. I read the newspaper aloud. It takes a certain humility and trust to carry it off but, if I really mean it, it usually works.

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