

Musical Imagination



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Musicians are often tasked with teaching dancers how to “speak about music”. When I was first starting to teach, dance programs wanted me to teach musical terms as a way to encourage dancers to speak about music. Most of the musical terms were new to these students, which gave them a feeling of being beginners at music. I noticed that this made them feel disconnected and estranged from their own individual understanding of music and dance. The students were not beginners at music, they had been working with music for many years and already had a great understanding of how music worked. Knowing how music and dance work together has little to do with understanding musical terminology.

There are situations where having a stronger grasp of music theory is helpful, but they are specific to a few genres of music and dance. Outside of tempo and meter, when applicable, collaborations will thrive when all parties can use detailed descriptive language to express ideas and needs. I handle hundreds of new scores each year and over the last 20 years, I have only worked on a handful of new scores that needed a deeper understanding of harmonic or rhythmic theory. I love harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, and other forms of music theory. I have spent my life going deeper and deeper into music theory. When I encounter a dance student that wants to learn more about music theory, I absolutely help them, but I do not assume that all students want or need to follow the same path.

Too often, I hear choreographers say, "I do not know how to speak about music correctly". This breaks my heart a little, because it is never the case. We need to reinforce that there is no "special or specific" way to

speak about music in dance. In fact, I find it much more helpful for the collaboration when a dancer feels comfortable speaking to me like they would any other dancer. As soon as I communicate this with a collaborator, there is an instant feeling of relief. The most successful collaborations happen when a musician has had enough experience with dance to listen to what a choreographer is describing about the movement, and then being able to interpret that language into music. It is a synergistic relationship.

Musical Practice

Find a few 3-5 minute videos of choreography. They can be recordings of a performance or a collection of short screendances. The more dynamic the videos are, the better the experience for the students. Luckily, so much dance is available online on various platforms. I would highly recommend something like [films.dance](#). There are plenty of films here that are from all over the planet and incredibly inspiring.

First, play one of the videos with the sound on mute. Ask each student to use their "musical imagination" and imagine what sounds could support this movement. Then watch it again and ask the students to write down what they are imagining musically in a chronological way, for example:

(0:00 - 1:30) - Low drone with the sound of playground noises. (1:30 - 3:15) - The playground noises fade away and the drone turns into a driving rhythm that is subtle, but very fast. (3:15 - 4:30) - The sound of a harp that feels broken comes in on top of the rhythm. (4:30 - 5:00) - The rhythm fades away and the broken harp sound slowly blends back into the playground sounds.

This practice can be done several times in a class. Ask a few students to share what they wrote and why. Encourage the students to use the language that feels most comfortable for them to use. Dancers are experts at ideas in space over time, and I use this chronological layout of descriptive language in every collaboration. This is a practice that students can do many times on their own. The more it is practiced, the better they will get when it comes time to collaborate with a composer. The goal is not to teach dancers how to express their ideas in musical terms, unless they ask specifically to do so. We want to empower dancers to speak from their voice, their feelings and their ideas expressed in whatever language works best for them as individual artists.