

Starting a Collaboration



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Almost every collaboration starts with an email request to the composer. This is the time when details about the project are discussed, which will lead to concrete plans. I always look for answers to fundamental questions.

What's the overall concept?

How many dancers does the piece call for?

Will I be performing live, or using pre-recorded audio?

How long will the piece be?

What kind of rehearsal schedule do you anticipate?

What is the budget for the piece?

Why have you chosen to work with me?

Answers to each of these questions help me decide what is possible and whether the collaboration promises to be a good match.

Overall concept - What is the piece about? What are you trying to accomplish? Some concepts are based on a few words, an idea, or a feeling. Other concepts are process-based and will be revealed through collaborative work. Concepts can also be media- or site-specific. One wonderful part of being a composer for dance is the variety of concepts that I'm asked to engage with.

If you're soliciting a piece from a composer, my recommendation would be to write a short descriptive paragraph about the concept and plan to dig deeper into it after the collaboration has begun. If there is a name for the piece, go ahead and share it. That can really help with organizing file names from the start of the process.

Timeline - A timeline helps me schedule a project so it fits in with my other work. (Most working composers have five to ten projects running at the same time.) A good timeline covers three things.

When work begins.

When drafts should be delivered for feedback.

When the final music is due.

All collaborators work differently and have unique processes. Some prefer drafts to be delivered before rehearsals begin because the choreographer gets inspired by the music. Other artists like to discuss a few musical ideas and then start working on a piece, allowing for the music to develop throughout the process.

It is rare that I write music for a piece that is completely finished. This sometimes happens with screendance. Mostly, though, this occurs if an issue has come up at the last minute and I am asked to step in weeks (or even days) before a performance.

Rehearsal schedule - Concrete dates help a composer schedule when they can provide drafts to be tried out in the studio. The rehearsal schedule is not always fully fleshed out at the start of a project. Usually, there are a couple of targets that can be shared: the date rehearsals start and performance dates. An alternative is to supply a time interval during which material will be developed.

The number of rehearsals also affects how I plan to deliver drafts. If it is a short collaboration, I'll always try to get near-final drafts right away. If it is a longer process, spread out over months, I will move more slowly to give the piece time to develop. If music is not requested at the very beginning of a long process, I have found that I can save a lot of the time and budget for a piece by being patient. Of course, it is important that I communicate this with the person I am working with to make sure we are on the same page.

Number of dancers - Knowing the number of dancers in a project helps me imagine how the music will affect the environment during the performance. In my mind's eye, I can imagine how differently a piece of music will be experienced with one person on stage versus many people on stage. I don't have rules for composing for solos or duets or big group pieces. Knowing the number of dancers is simply another piece of information I use to build upon.

Ultimately, I am always taking my cues from the choreographer and the descriptions they use. When I know the number of performers, I can take those cues and have a good idea whether the music will

support their vision.

Budget - The budget determines what is possible for a project. It's not the only factor, and is by no means a guiding light (at least for me), but it does shape project planning.

A skill I have developed over the years is to communicate what options are realistic for a project based on the budget. For example, I would not write a piece for a string quartet to be played live with a budget of \$300. Instead, I'd inquire about the original impetus of using a string quartet and then endeavor to find a less expensive way of achieving a similar result.

I take responsibility for helping to resolve budgetary issues when a request is made. For me, the budget is not a reflection of respect (or disrespect). It is simply another parameter that makes up a project.

Live music vs. Recorded music - Using live music for a performance requires different planning than using recorded music.

Live music can be costly, but spending money is not what makes the use of live music successful. Communicating a clear plan as early as possible is the key factor. Being strategic about when you want to have musicians and dancers in the same space working together can keep costs down. Give the dates of the performance, tech runs, and rehearsals right away.

Depending on the process for a collaboration, I don't always need to come to rehearsals at the start. My time is better spent making and rehearsing music with the musicians. I usually like to come to rehearsals closer to the tech week. Schedule time during tech for sound balancing in the space. (One to two hours should do, depending on the complexity of the music.)

Using recorded music can be just as magical as live performance and has unique strengths. Most importantly, it is more cost-effective. Most composers have their own spaces to produce music. This is the main reason I am able to keep costs down for collaborators.

Another important point is that recorded music allows me to use textures, instrumentation, and arrangements that would not be possible with live music. For example, I can use sampling techniques to create complex layers of sound that would be very difficult to replicate with a live ensemble. I can also create all of the music before the choreography has started.

Length - Budget does not determine length. A five-minute piece for five trumpets, harp, drumset, tabla, and string quartet would be more expensive to produce than a forty-five minute piece consisting of a long drone with a few single piano notes.

The length of a piece is a very specific agreement for any collaboration and can be a source of conflict if it changes drastically throughout the process. I can say from experience that it is challenging to navigate a project that starts at ten minutes and develops into one hour. This may be why so many collaborations end up being one-offs instead of the start of long-term relationships.

Most composers will not have a problem accepting more work from an expanding project. But it is vital to communicate clearly from the beginning and to provide additional budgeting for the project if it changes

from the initial agreement.

Why do you want to work with me? - I started asking collaborators this question a few years back. The answers have helped me learn about how to approach a project with a new collaborator. Maybe someone has heard a specific piece of mine that has a certain feel to it that they would like to replicate. Maybe somebody has a specific tempo, instrument, or meter that they find inspiring.

Sometimes I discover that someone has approached me, but has never heard any of my music. In those cases, I usually make them a playlist of a range of my music that might work with some of the information they have provided about the project.

Music Practice

Have each student write an email as if they were starting a collaboration. Then read and discuss each other's email. Like so many things in our careers as artists, practicing this will benefit your collaborations for many years to come.