

Choreographic Listening



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Dancers and choreographers spend a great deal of their lives developing the ability to talk about movement. One of my favorite things about collaborating with dance is the unique way each person describes dance. Even before we talk about any musical ideas for a collaboration, we talk about context, inspirations, and movement sections that will make up the piece.

This is the practice for developing language for dancers to communicate with collaborators. Like we have discussed with musical language, there is no "right way" for a dancer to communicate with a musician. My experience is that it can be quite shaming and limiting to reinforce the idea that choreography has to be expressed to a musician in strictly musical terminology. It is much more helpful for musicians to spend time learning how dancers work if they choose to collaborate with dance.

It can be difficult for some students to share their choreographic ideas in front of their classmates, and I never force it. I try to set up a safe and supportive space to encourage the students to openly share. While the student sharing their ideas learns so much by bringing voice to their movement imagination, the students listening to those ideas will also learn so much. Students develop tighter communities together when they start to hear how their peers think and dream about movement. Hearing someone else speak their ideas empowers others to also bring voice to their imagination. The more this practice is done, the easier it will be to communicate in collaborations down the road.

Music Practice

Prepare 3-5 pieces of music that are each around 5-7 minutes long. Play the first piece of music and ask the students to listen and let their choreographic imagination respond to what they are hearing. After the music is finished, play the music again while the students write down how they would choreograph to the piece of music. They can use a chronological approach or freewrite. The goal here is for the students to write as much as they can with as much detail and descriptive words as possible.

Ask a few of the students to read what they wrote. All ideas are welcome. Continue to encourage each student to be curious about "why" they wrote down what they did. What type of language did they choose to use? What do they think about costumes, lighting, amount of dancers, and other production elements? Why do they think they responded to this piece of music in these creative ways? This is a time to let the students dream freely about making choreographic ideas in response to sound. Repeat the exercise a couple more times if possible with the other pieces of music you selected.

During the last part of this class, leave your students with these ideas to think about:

When listening to a piece of music, think about how it was made.

What instruments were used to make the piece of music?

When do you listen to music?

How do you listen to music? Speakers, headphones, or laptop top speakers?

What are you doing while listening to music?

What platforms do you use to find/listen to music?