

Music and Process



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Music can come into a choreographer's process at many different points. The three common times are at the beginning, during the middle of the process, or at the end.

The Beginning - When a collaboration starts at the beginning of a process, there is usually just a concept of the project. This is a time before rehearsals have started with the dancers and before any choreography has been made. What I am looking for are as many descriptive words as possible and any musical references that have been inspiring the choreographer. The choreographer might prefer to start with musical ideas from me before starting to create the movement. My goal is to find a way in, a way to start developing a musical idea that will inspire the first section of the piece. From there, we look for other themes that the piece is going for and get those ideas going musically.

It is possible that the choreographer might want to complete the music before rehearsals start. In these situations, it is most helpful if the choreographer has a good layout of the structure of the piece. If it is a larger piece, I will recommend that we get the music 95% of the way complete and leave just a small amount of the budget to make any adjustments in timings or transitions.

The Middle - The middle of the process is when some of the choreography is created. At this point there is usually video of rehearsals. I go through the same process of gathering concepts of the project, identifying any established sections and matching them with any of the rehearsal footage. Some choreographers will

have used “temp music” while rehearsing. I collect and listen to all of the temp music. Since the majority of collaborations I do are remote, the more information I can gather, the better.

With temp music, I try to discover what about the music has been useful. What about that piece of music is inspiring and attractive to the choreographer. It is important to discuss this, because what I hear in the music could be totally different than what the choreographer has been keying in to. For example, I could end up responding to the mood of the track and the instruments used to make it, while the choreographer was using the track because the tempo was perfect. Using temp music can be a great way to get to what the choreographer is looking for.

I do get asked to “replicate” a piece of temp music sometimes. I love this challenge. I find it to be a unique skill, that can be developed, to come as close to the original track as possible without simply just using the track. In some cases, the choreographer has really been inspired by this piece of music, but can not secure a license to use the track in a performance. I find it helpful to remind the collaborator that the new track we make will not be exactly the same, and that we are very clear about that. This helps manage expectations when the choreographer really would like to use the original track. Licensing is not the only reason to try and to replicate a track, it could also be just a jumping off point.

The End - This part of the process is when almost all of the choreography has been created and the structure of the piece is set. There are usually videos of the entire piece from rehearsals and lots of different temp tracks. In some cases, I am completely replacing music from a piece that has already been performed. This can happen if the piece was created in an academic space, where licensing wasn't needed. But now, the piece is going to be performed in a theater or there is now a budget to create new music.

All of the same steps apply for me as in the other moments of the process. The main difference is how much time I have to create the new music. These situations are usually quick turnarounds. It is critical for me to find out how many rehearsals are left and when they will be. I then establish a detailed plan of when I will deliver drafts of the music and when I will need feedback. My goal is to get sketches of each of the sections as quickly as possible, get feedback and then develop the tracks fully. Making music at this stage of the process is a lot like playing for a technique class. The process is fast and I lean on my years of playing for class to be the most effective collaborator that I can.

In some rare situations, I have been asked to make music for a collaboration that has already had a composer working on the project. Unfortunately what has happened is usually some sort of disagreement, or other complication, that has caused the choreographer to need to reach out to a new composer. I am very sensitive to these situations, and try not to spend too much time going over what was not working with the last composer. I do not gossip, and always steer the conversations away from speaking ill of the other composer. I focus on all of the same steps described above, and try to move as quickly as possible. These situations usually have smaller budgets, because of the time spent with the other composer. Again, we establish the budget available and work from that place. In the most extreme cases, I have composed music for entire evening length pieces days before a performance and even have walked on to a stage to play for a piece I have never seen before!

No matter when music comes into the process, I want to be ready to support the process of the collaborator. There is no right or wrong time for music to come into the choreographic process. I enjoy working at the many different times I get brought into the process.

Music Practice

Hold a discussion where you talk through the advantages/disadvantages of bringing music into the beginning, middle, or end of the process. Take time and ask the students to write hypothetical emails for each of the times a composer could come into their process. What other situations/circumstances would determine when music would come into a choreographic process? When do people like to bring music into their process? What experiences have they had with when music was brought into choreographic processes they were a part of?