

Working with an Accompanist



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Working with a musician in class is one of the core environments of collaboration between music and dance. There are three elements at play; the teacher, the students and the musician. In a way, this is a reflection of the choreographer, dance company, and composer dynamic. As a teacher (choreographer) you are practicing communication with the musician (composer). That teacher is then communicating how the music will work with the students (dancers in a company). Those students are then practicing how to navigate the combinations (choreography) with the accompaniment (score).

The musician (composer) is translating the instructions from the teacher (choreographer) into music (score) that will accompany the combination (choreography) and how what they play (compose) works with that movement. I find that "How" each person shows up in this collaboration reflects how they will show up in the choreographic process, so there is so much we can learn by taking and playing technique class.

I have taught thousands of classes for dance students and educators, but I want to be clear...I have never taught a dance technique class. Although I have accompanied tens of thousands of dance classes...I have never come close to teaching a technique class. So, as I offer my perspectives on working with a musician in class, I recognize that I am speaking from my own experience as an accompanist. Like other

aspects of music for dance collaboration, my hope is to help normalize having live music in class for those that might be new to it. Let's look at three different aspects of starting to work with an accompanist:

- 1. What do you need to know about music?
- 2. Communication
- 3. Working with new accompanists

Every dancer possesses exactly the right amount of musical knowledge to start working with an accompanist in class. If it is a dancer that loves working with counted movement, then they will be able to show how the movement is being counted in their mind. If it is a dancer that does not work with counted movement, then they will be able to show the movement and describe how they see it being best supported with sound. Now, in either case, that does not mean the way the dancer counts the movement or describes the sonic environment will make sense to the musician playing the class. You do not need to be able to count, read and notate complex rhythmic passages to work with counted movement. You do not need to know every aspect of how sound design and non rhythmic music is created to work without counts in a class. As with any collaboration, communication is the key to working with an accompanist.

"How" you communicate with an accompanist, and how they communicate with you, is more important than "what" you are communicating. The toxic days of "experts", either musicians or dance instructors, cruelly demanding their needs is over. I also hope that the days of not saying anything at all to each other are gone as well. I know exactly how a class is going to go within the first five minutes of a class depending on how the teacher communicates with me and the students. Now, I've played many wonderful classes where I did not speak the same spoken language as the teacher or that were "silent" classes where we did not use any spoken language to practice deeper awareness of what we were working on in class. After years of playing class, I do not "need" to have instructions for what will best support counted or non-counted movement, because the music and movement are our shared languages.

Not saying anything to each other in class can be a form of stone walling or even gaslighting. I have been in situations where the teacher would not say anything to me, yet would move in a way that let me know that they were really happy with what was happening musically. We all have bad days, and I have spent plenty of classes in my own head, upset, not saying anything and just not present in the classroom. We are humans and that does not change just because we are in a dance class. I know that how I communicate, with spoken language or body language, can have a huge impact on the students' and teacher's experience. So, if I am in a dark place and having a hard time, I do my best to communicate that right at the start. When teachers, or even students, do the same, we all have the opportunity to support each other. Our community is so good at supporting each other. It is not easy all of the time, but communicating with kindness and curiosity of where others are is a million times more important than whether the movement is in a 3 or a 4.

So if kindness and grace are more important than music or movement theory, how do we get started with working with an accompanist? The goal is to meet each other where we are. If the students are new to working with counted movement, it's probably not a great idea to shame them for not being able to count movement. If a teacher is demonstrating a movement phrase that is in counts of 8s, but is counting in 7s, it

is not a great idea to correct them in a shameful way without being asked. And if a musician is playing in class for the first time, they will not know what "...now lets do it on the other side." means. If we meet each other where we are at, class can be magical...no matter how experienced any person is.

One of the best approaches is for the teacher and musician to meet before class. If the teacher is new to working with an accompanist, then do your best to explain the arc of your class. How does it start? Is the movement counted, and if so, what are the meters and tempos you will be using. Ask the musician if there is anything they need from you throughout the class. Let them know what you are hoping the students get out of the class. If the musician is new to playing class, ask them what instrument or instruments they play. What type of music do they play? It is so important to find this out prior to the start of class. It can be crushing to a new accompanist to show up for the first class with a drum set and then be asked to do big piano waltzes or quiet sustained ambience for 90 minutes.

What we do is very different from what other people do each day. Technique class is a unique experience and can be intimidating for new accompanists. I don't think I became comfortable playing class for about five years. I still get nervous playing for a new teacher, so I make it a point to connect with every new teacher I am going to be playing for. I tell them all of the types of music and instruments that I play and all of the different movement styles I have had experience playing for. I ask about the arc of their class, what the students are like and what the general "vibe" they are hoping for with the music. I am surprised how few people do this. Even as an experienced accompanist, it can be jarring to find these things out while I am playing a person's class for the first time. Most of the communication struggles that can happen in a class could be averted if you make time to connect for 15 minutes prior.

Music Practice

I'll be making a course on accompaniment and working with an accompanist that will go into much more detail. For now, ask students what they have noticed about how the teachers and accompanists they have seen interacted. Are they interested in working with live music? If you do not have any accompanists, ask them if they know of any students that play music. Usually musicians in the jazz program or electronic music program will have the easiest time learning to play class.

As an exercise, ask one of the students to play the role of the teacher and one to play the role of the musician. Pretend that you are meeting before a technique class and model what that conversation might sound like. Take turns practicing these conversations while the rest of the class observes and then offers feedback. Discuss and discover as a class how this conversation can be the most useful.