

Licensing



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Licensing music is a big part of our dance community. Dance companies and choreographers license music for performances and screen dances. Similar to budgets, many musicians have different approaches to licensing their music. Sometimes, especially in university/college spaces, licensing is made to feel like something that should be avoided. There is a sense that it would be too expensive and almost impossible to accomplish. Although this could be true in some situations, licensing is super common and really straight forward.

Licensing a piece of music means that you contact the person who made the music and ask them if you can use the music for your project. Depending on the piece of music, the scope of your project and the artist who made the music, the fee to license that music can vary.

Almost every musician is familiar with licensing, but not all musicians have experience with licensing their own music. For a musician, there are advantages and disadvantages with charging licensing fees. I did not charge any fees for the first 10-15 years of my career. I saw the huge advantage of letting folks use my music for free and how much that encouraged the spread of my music internationally. When I started charging a fee, I started small at \$25.00 per track and free for students. I slowly raised the prices to \$100.00, with discounts for folks that subscribed monthly to my website (\$50.00 per track) and \$25.00 for students. For two years, during the pandemic, I canceled all licensing fees and have only recently returned back to those prices.

There are three things that I noticed over the years that our dance community needed differently than how licensing works in other communities like film and music: Pricing, ease of obtaining a license and communication. One of the guides I use for the current state of licensing is a company named MusicBed, which provides a large library of original music for filmmakers to license. Their pricing is based on the size of potential viewership and prices for a single track start around \$250-\$350.00 per license and go up from there. For our community, those prices simply do not work because most situations are just a single performance run with 2-3 showings of a piece. The reason that MusicBed charges that much for a license, is because film and video makers need the licenses to be valid “in perpetuity”. This means someone just needs to license the music once, and that track can be used with that project, and only that project, for as long as it is needed. If the filmmaker wanted to use the same music for another project, they would need to purchase a new license to use it with that new project.

For the dance community, I translated that into “performance runs”, meaning if a company licensed a piece of music, and they did 10 shows in one or two weekends at the same venue, they would just need one license. If they had 10 shows in ten different venues over the year, they would need a license for each of those venues, or performance runs. Since most dance projects only see a few performances, I could lower the cost of my licensing fees. This is why I never decided to use a company that would license my music for me. Just like budgets for composing, licensing fees need to be flexible in our community.

The other two aspects of licensing, ease of obtaining a license and communication, also need to work differently for the dance community. It is hard to find out “how” to license a piece of music at first, but when you do, it can really help build relationships between musicians and choreographers. The easiest way to think about it is, to find out who (the musician, band or record label) can say “yes or no” to using the music with your project. Sometimes folks will reach out to that person and not hear anything back, or there will be an expensive fee to just apply for the license. If you don’t hear back from someone, you run the risk of them eventually responding in some way that doesn’t allow you to license the music. If that music was critical to your choreography, then you would need to remove it which could be problematic for a performance run or screen dance.

My advice is always to try to obtain a license. Although it is rare for folks to get into some kind of legal trouble for using music without a license, you should try. If you do not hear back or the licensing fee is too expensive, I would not use that music for performance or a screen dance. Especially with how much we are using video to share our work these days. There is a trend in higher education to encourage students to first ask for a free license. I would instead, lead with just a simple request to license the music and discover the cost before asking the musician/label to think about adjusting the fee to your budget. Musicians want to work with dancers and choreographers, they just don’t always know how to get those relationships started. Reaching out for licensing is a perfect way to initiate future collaborations.

Music Practice

Start with a discussion about licensing. Have folks ever licensed a piece of music? What was the experience like? What is most confusing/intimidating about licensing? Do they think licensing is a good practice?

Have each person pick a piece of music that they have always wanted to choreograph with and try to license it. First, visit the artist's website. Usually you can find licensing information on an artist's contact page. If not, send an email to their contact address requesting to use the music for your project. If you do not hear back, or cannot find a contact address, look up the artist on Wikipedia. In some cases, you can even look up specific songs or albums on Wikipedia. Usually right under the artist's picture on a Wikipedia page, there will be the information about the music and people who made it along with the record label. Next, go to that record label's website and look for the licensing page or contact information. This is a fun project to do with a class, just ask them to follow the process right up until there is a fee to be paid. If they end up speaking directly with the artist or label, tell them to let the people know they are doing research for future use. This simple exercise can have a huge impact towards normalizing the licensing process.