

Choreographers and composers, why collaborate?

Composer Christopher Best reflects upon traditions and assumptions surrounding collaboration between music and dance.

I am a composer who works frequently with contemporary dance. I have been drawn into this world along many routes; not simply as a composer, but also as an educator and facilitator; delivering modules in music and dance collaboration at Universities, giving conference papers on processes of dance music composition and co-directing the 1998 and 1999 Composers/Choreographers Exchanges at the South Bank. To this list I must now add occasional contributions to dance and music journals.

Along the way I have had the good fortune to meet some breathtakingly gifted dancers, inspired choreographers and dedicated like-minded musicians. I have acquired the impression that the marriage between music and dance, despite its longevity, is as healthy and well nurtured as ever.

Marriages change as they mature however. A friend might ask a couple; 'how and why did you get together?' 'Was it love at first sight or did you learn to get along so well?'. A counsellor might dig deeper; 'How did you work through those bad times?' 'So you feel that one partner is more dominant in this relationship' 'You think that your feelings of insecurity and inadequacy come from not being the bread winner in the partnership?'

This article derives from the realisation that, when it comes to working at dance (if not at my marriage!), I have never properly asked these questions either of myself or of those with whom I have interacted. I have certainly never managed to arrive at any wholly satisfactory answers. This is a little disturbing to me given that my educative work focuses on methods of collaboration, drawn from personal experience and observation and discussion with other artists.

The Composers/Choreographers Exchange is a case in point. This annual 6-day course for ten composers and ten choreographers is designed to explore collaborative process by enabling each composer and choreographer to work as a pair for one hour, giving each participant ten such workshops in all. Alongside these one-to-ones the course facilitates group discussion, offers case studies, guided viewings and listenings and performance visits. I took part myself as a participant two years before directing the event and can certainly vouch for its tremendous value in informing and inspiring the creative process. What it hitherto appears to have side-stepped is the central question of why anyone should wish to collaborate in the first place. It preaches (perhaps inevitably) to those already converted to the cause.

So why do we choose to collaborate?

Let me turn very briefly to the recent history of collaboration. Looking back

across the century we find a busy world of ballet and opera, fed by musical contributions from the very top names. The early work that survives conjures up the names not of the choreographers or librettists, but of the composers. We remember Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*, Puccini's *La Bohème*, Stravinsky's *Firebird*, Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, Britten's *Peter Grimes*. This could mislead us into concluding that the collaboration was heavily one-sided in favour of the composer. Yet it is known that Tchaikovsky, for example, structured his material around very detailed frameworks of beat patterns, tempo, duration and character given to him by his choreographers. It is also significant that composers generally felt the need to re-work material before it could be released into the concert hall, indicating that a different artistic judgement was being brought to bear when considering the specific needs of the dance.

As this 'marriage' progressed, so new relations between the two art forms were explored. Changes in dance vocabulary introduced by successive innovators such as Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham or Merce Cunningham, mirrored radical movements in musical language as typified by Varèse, Cage or Feldman. The blow-by-blow correlation within a piece between dance rhythms and musical rhythms, between physical gesture and musical event, dissolved into parallel worlds of sound and movement which at most engaged each other in dialogue and at times simply co-existed in mutual disinterest. Cage and Cunningham's conscious decision not to allow music and movement to correlate except purely by chance represents the culmination of this trend.

Had the history ended there, we would have nothing more to say about collaboration. But recent trends have shown a return to a more eclectic approach, embracing various degrees of common ground between the choreography and the musical score. One indication of the move back towards inter-connectedness has been the increasing popularity of minimalist music amongst choreographers of New Dance. Choreographers have allowed themselves to respond to the music's heavy emphasis upon repetition, unmitigating rhythms and thematic simplicity, whilst retaining and evolving a freer movement vocabulary which is not forced to re-inhabit the formal language of ballet.

Whilst we may see minimalism as a vehicle for the re-emergence of a strong dialogue between music and dance, it cannot be claimed as evidence of fresh collaborative enterprise. In truth, minimalism has grown much more symbiotically with theatre (Philip Glass/Robert Wilson, Steve Reich/Beryl Korot, John Adams/Alice Goodman) and with film (Glass/Godfrey Reggio, Michael Nyman/Peter Greenaway), than with dance. With the exception of isolated collaborations between Philip Glass and Lucinda Childs, minimalist works have most commonly been lifted from the shelf and choreographed, rather than commissioned for this purpose.

If choreographers can produce perfectly satisfactory results by choosing

music that has already been written, why should anyone wish to commission a composer and enter the high-risk domain of collaboration?

Let us consider the risks. Making an artistic statement by committee requires either complete mutual trust or a strong hierarchy. The end result can be compromised by weaknesses in either the music or the dance or indeed simply by the non-compatibility between otherwise strong components. Creative blocks by either side can delay or hi-jack the making process. Misunderstandings may abound, technical problems proliferate and costs escalate!

To be honest, I would love to know more about choreographers' motives for approaching composers to work with them. I can but hazard a guess and offer some personal reflections. To start with, let us consider the effect that laying choreography over a work written for the concert hall has on the music itself. This music will generally have been composed as an end in its own right, with a sense of an 'ideal' listener who can follow and appreciate the many levels of discourse within it. Composers know that no such listener exists, but are mostly driven by an inner faith that what inspires them to evolve such subtle relationships somehow communicates something of that experience to the audience.

When this music is choreographed it engages the senses differently. In many ways the eye takes precedence and leads the ear, preventing the brain from drawing meaning from the music alone. Yet the ear distorts the visual experience, adding an emotional subtext and re-defining the context of much of the visual gesture. In a successful piece, the effect of the music on the dance and vice-versa is not important; we become affected overridingly by the combined experience. But even with exceptionally sensitive choreography of a concert piece, this experience will be something quite unlike that of listening alone, therefore forcing the music into a role for which it was not designed.

One might compare this to the setting of beautiful poetry to music or adding music to a piece of dance originally intended to be performed in silence. The artist's intention is bulldozed over and subjugated to the will of the choreographer. One can be left with a feeling of cultural over-load or of a gaudily painted lily.

This may partly explain why off-the-shelf minimalist scores work so effectively. Early minimalist composers were not seen as coming from the popular tradition, but from Cage's avant garde. This is primarily because, like Cage, their music challenged the assumptions of the average concert-goer that there should be a narrative structure and engagement of the intellect. Plenty of space is left, therefore, to be filled successfully with another layer of meaning and structure.

When a composer works with a choreographer on a joint project, both are

aware of the presence of the other's artistic input and space can be made available to ensure that the combined experience is greater than the sum of the parts, thereby avoiding a collision between two competing aesthetic intentions.

Choreographers' willingness to engage with a musical partner could be in part attributable to their methods of working with their dancers. Increasingly the act of choreography is one of workshopping movement ideas with the bodies that will dance them; setting tasks and moulding movements generated by the company. In this context the idea of similarly evolving the sound score as an integrated process becomes logical and unthreatening. This sense of joint ownership and common purpose may seem alien to many composers, though the jazz or rock musician would probably recognise the process more readily.

And what of the composer's motives for entering the world of dance? I have encountered many, from lofty artistic ideals involving new forms of expression to lowly urges involving shapely bodies on dance floors! Probably the most common include the promise of repeat performances, exposure to new audiences, freedom to explore styles, forms and media that do not sit well in the concert hall and extending possibilities for commissions or other funding. Above all, composers I have met who work with dance do so principally because they love dance as an art form and wish to gain a fuller understanding and appreciation of it through their own involvement.

I remember in my early collaborations that I tended to carry a secondary agenda with me in the making of dance music; a need to see that the score had a separate identity, either as a concert piece or as CD material. I understand why; given the amount of work and creative energy involved. I harboured a fear of being wholly reliant upon the dancer to keep our creation alive. But as alluded to earlier, this engendered a conflict of function within the music, having both to serve the larger experience as a dance work and to stand up as a complete musical statement in the concert hall. One example would be *Pretended Flight* which I wrote in 1992 for dancer/choreographer Sarah Whatley. This powerful electro-acoustic score at times overwhelmed the soloist, despite her excellent choreography and performance, and I now prefer it to stand alone as a piece of abstract music under a new title.

It was in confronting myself with this hidden agenda that I turned to the Composers/Choreographers Exchange in 1996. As I have said, the Exchange failed to ask the big questions, but at that stage they were not the ones I wanted to ask. Working so intensively with ten choreographers, each for just an hour, I found myself accessing new levels of inventiveness, flexibility of approach, quick-wittedness and risk taking. The numerous starting points that we evolved often came as a response to the space in which we were working, as the need for almost instant inspiration led us to grasp any stimulus we could find. The whole process encouraged an atmosphere of

democracy and play. In this situation, any consideration of the value of the music divorced from the dance context became a nonsense.

After the Exchange came the challenge of re-integrating these discoveries into the real world where collaborations are often at a distance and subject to intense time pressures. I was fortunate to have the opportunity shortly afterwards to work on a project with Kaleidoscope Integrated Dance Project (first performance 23 September 1997, choreography by Louise Katerega) making music for a piece involving able-bodied dancers and a wheelchair user.

In a spirit of play reminiscent of the Exchange, we recorded sounds of the wheelchair with its motor noises, horn and tyre squeaks. The dancer had severe cerebral palsy which restricted her speech, but her enthusiastic vocal sounds (in particular her infectious laughter) all formed part of the final musical score. Under immense time pressure I was also forced to borrow some phrases from a recent composition written for the Spitalfields Festival and thereby discovered a healthier form of recycling; de-constructing concert material for dance rather than trying to assemble dance material for the concert hall.

My most recent collaboration was with Janet Smith for Scottish Dance Theatre's 1998 work *Playfall* (first performance 25 February 1998). I would not deny that motives here certainly included the kudos and exposure of working with such an eminent choreographer and the artistic challenges of being involved with such high level dance and choreography. But the brief of taking the slow movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* as the catalyst for a whole series of original variations for piano was also particularly fascinating.

Some very practical pitfalls of collaboration emerged during this project, particularly in relation to the rehearsal process. As the music unfolded I sent regular cassettes of sequenced material to the company, enabling them to develop movement material alongside the music. The sequencer allowed me in turn to make cuts or insertions easily and quickly. Only when everything was in place did I call in a pianist who recorded the whole score on a real piano. The crisis came when, having been conditioned to the robotic qualities of the computer, the dancers were suddenly confronted by a human performance. Unknown to me, certain moments that had been crucial reference points had subtly shifted prominence, position or tempo and thereby thrown the dancers into chaos until the new musical interpretation was internalised.

For the 1999 Exchange I will be careful to ensure that questions about the nature and purpose of collaboration are more fully discussed. I believe that an awareness of the multifarious motivations that lie behind the desire to collaborate can inform and assist the processes that we use. If the playfulness and democracy that typify work during the course are desirable, but damaged by the funding structures, institutional hierarchies and logistics

of real life collaboration, then strategies for either minimising this effect or capitalising upon it need to be explored.

Follow-up opportunities, such as the new Sound Moves venture at The Place, need to allow collaborators not only to delve deeper into their collaborative methods, but also to begin integrating this into their external working methods.

We must be careful not to lose sight of the true purpose of all this discussion, sharing and bonding. The definitive test of a successful collaboration must be the strength of the work itself, not how sweet and amicable the working relationships between its creators prove to be. For the marriage between music and dance to be healthy we do not necessarily require an unbroken honeymoon between composer and choreographer. Each partner may well have to argue their case vociferously to protect the well being of their joint offspring, regardless of sensitivities of the other. If great art comes out of struggle, then perhaps here lies the ultimate value in encouraging hot blooded creative individuals to collaborate!

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