

The art of collaboration: *Sound Moves* — Creating dance and music

David Sutton-Anderson

Royal College of Music, Junior Department, UK

Contact: sutton1234@hotmail.com

Avril Anderson

Royal College of Music, Junior Department, UK

Contact: sutton1234@hotmail.com

Iris Tomlinson

Independent Dance Artist

Contact: tomlinson.iris@gmail.com

Introduction

In the pairing of a composer and a choreographer, can the identity of each be enriched through a collaborative process? From the experience of directing a dance and music initiative — *Sound Moves* — in a variety of educational settings (primary, secondary, and pre-vocational schools) over many years, the answer is a resounding “yes.” *Sound Moves* has three main educational aims: 1) to give young choreographers the opportunity of working with specially composed live music; 2) to broaden the experience and consequently the musical imagination of young composers; and 3) to enable collaboration between choreographer and composer through providing a stimulating and supportive environment, including learning one another’s “language.” Dance and musical terminologies are frequently alien and confusing to the uninitiated — as are developing social skills (for example, learning when to “give and take”). Depending on the setting of the project and those participating, the structure and process of delivery must allow for considerable fluidity and adaptability, but these three tenets remain the same.

Methodology

As a starting point for each project, a theme, chosen by the creative team, is introduced to the participants. Different for each project, this is neither music nor dance specific and will act as a springboard and provide a focus for the participants’ creative imagination. Themes have typically been drawn from the fine arts, literature, and philosophy, and are deliberately open-ended rather than literal; they are designed to stimulate a myriad of

possibilities when interpreted as musical/movement ideas, either in terms of material or structure (or both). An initial “ice-breaking” workshop session is given to all the participants, including the dancers on whom the choreographers will make their dances. This includes inter-disciplinary music/movement-related tasks (e.g., rhythmic dances such as gumboot or flamenco, which are both enjoyable to learn and a way of demonstrating the symbiosis of sound and movement), and exploratory improvisation exercises based on the theme and discussion about terminologies to avoid misunderstanding when working together — for example, the words “suspension” and “dynamics” have quite different connotations for dancers and musicians. This session ends with the choreographer/composer pairs brainstorming ideas from the theme (possibly developed from the improvisation exercise) and agreeing a blueprint/structure so that each can subsequently begin formulating material in the knowledge that both will be “reading from the same hymn sheet.”

Making the work

After the initial workshop session, the choreographer/composer pairs now begin to develop their respective dance and music ideas both alone and together. The sharing of sound files and video clips maintains a flow of communication in-between dedicated studio time when the choreographer, composer, musicians, and dancers can all work together. It should be pointed out that the composers also provide the music as performers in each other’s pieces. The choreographers, advised not to perform in their own work in order to devote total attention to the realization of their material, are encouraged to welcome creative input from their dancers, whose contributions can enrich the choreographic process. The time allotted for this creative period can vary considerably depending on the setting and overall structure of a given project.

Learning outcomes, evaluation, and conclusion

As an integrated performing arts initiative, an important aspect is the preparation of the pieces for a scheduled open/public performance; when working at the pre-vocational level, this can involve studio-theatre or theatre performance, where costumes and lighting design are further elements for consideration by the choreographer. This creates a deadline to work toward, and with it, the responsibility of delivering the material on time and rehearsing it to the highest possible standard. Teamwork is essential for this to be achieved effectively, and developing the necessary practical and social skills is one of the major learning curves of the *Sound Moves* project. Composers and choreographers are encouraged to discuss their

work at the performance, relating it to the project theme and briefly describing the process of creation. Articulating working methods in this way can be a valuable process of self-evaluation.

Young choreographers frequently have to rely on existing recorded music for their dances. The nature of the *Sound Moves* project and the choreographic flexibility it provides opens up many new avenues of (self)exploration, developing the ability to work as a successful collaborative partnership being just one of the learning outcomes.

Particularly at the pre-vocational level, composers are used to working alone at the keyboard, desk, or laptop. Sharing, and agreeing, on ideas and strategies with a choreographer, and composing for dance — where music represents one aspect of the artistic whole rather than, as with “concert music,” the complete experience — lead to new ways of thinking about music and its function. This can be creatively liberating as well as provide challenges that have to be met. Composing “on-the-spot” in the studio is sometimes required, and the ability to think quickly as well as to understand the language of movement and the role of the music are necessary attributes that can only be learned through practical experience.

For the creative team, the continuous evaluation of a *Sound Moves* project as it develops is vital. Each collaboration will run its course uniquely, often with “ups and downs” — arguably, without any “downs” to be resolved, less would be learned — and the extent of guiding/supporting/leaving alone/intervening must be carefully monitored and assessed at all times to ensure the best possible outcome. A positive collaborative experience cannot only enhance a sense of identity — the meeting of individual minds — but, through a shared identity and artistic purpose, can bring into being something new.

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David Sutton-Anderson has worked extensively in dance as a composer, musical director, teacher, and pianist with Hilde Holger Dance Group (1980-2002); Northern Ballet Theatre and Birmingham Royal Ballet Education Departments; Amici Dance Company; Young Place (1988-97); and has directed/taught courses for accompanying contemporary dance class (London and Caracas). Currently resident dance rehearsal pianist with the Royal Opera, Covent Garden, London, UK, he regularly plays class for dance companies, including Mark

Morris and Michael Clark. He works extensively in dance as a composer, musical director, teacher, and pianist. He is Head of Composition at the Royal College of Music Junior Department and Associate Professor at the University of Notre Dame.

Avril Anderson is a composer, lecturer, and animateur, directing workshops for Unicorn Childrens' Theatre, education projects for London Festival Orchestra, Colourscape Festival and Lambeth schools, and as composer-in-education for the Performing Right Society. Before teaching composition at the Royal College of Music Junior Department, London, UK, she was composer-in-residence for the Young Place. She has worked with David Sutton-Anderson on collaborative projects at the Royal Ballet Senior School and *Sound Moves* at The Place. She is co-founder and director of Sounds Positive contemporary music group, for which she has recently curated a series focusing on Raqs Sharqi.

Iris Tomlinson is an independent dance artist, co-director of *Sound Moves*, and t'ai chi tutor at Middlesex University, UK. She directed and developed the pioneering children's work of her teacher and mentor, Jane Dudley, at The Place over three decades, nurturing and inspiring young dancers, many of whom are currently performers, choreographers, and rehearsal directors. An innovative animateur with London Contemporary Dance Theatre's touring workshop unit (1970's) she has created more than 40 original works with and for young dancers, many in collaboration with *Sound Moves'* co-directors, Avril and David Sutton-Anderson.