

The Scoville Series: *Part II*

Working with a Composer

By Jon Scoville

One of the greatest sources of artistic pleasure and occasional pain is to collaborate with a composer. It brings the joy and energy of synergy. It fires up the furnaces of contrasting aesthetics. It has produced some of the great works of Stravinsky/Nijinsky, Tchaikovsky/Petipa, Bernstein/Robbins, & Copland/Graham. But it is also fraught with stories of missed deadlines, blistering fights, and irrevocable mis-understandings. With that in mind, and more than 30 years of providing scores for numerous choreographers, I am including the following notes on the process:



Stravinsky/Nijinsky c.1911

CREATE A COMMON METAPHOR:

Under the assumption that the choreographer may not be conversant with music terms, or the composer with dance vocabulary, it is extremely helpful to speak the language of image, metaphor, and illusion. Share the poetry of your concepts, the images that you have wrapped around your movement ideas, and the arc of your piece: where does it start conceptually and/or emotionally; where does it end -- back where it started or with some type of transformation.

BE AS SPECIFIC AS YOU CAN:

Stravinsky once said that if someone proposed he write a score for a new ballet, he had little interest. But if they told him how long, how many sections, tempo, meter, etc. his imagination and sense of form were simultaneously engaged. How many dancers, qualities of energy, lighting design, costumes, division of solo and group sections. All these will help to prod the imagination of your composer. And remember that paradoxically, the more restrictions that there are, the easier it often is to create. Total freedom can be totally paralyzing.



CONTRACTS AND DEADLINES:

Here's where it often gets sticky, tricky, and somewhat picky. **UNLESS YOU KNOW THE COMPOSER VERY WELL**, and have had a past working relationship, it is extremely useful to put money matters and expectations in writing. Start with the deadlines: when are the first rough versions going to be available; how many changes will the composer be willing to make and up to what point in time (if, in the last two weeks, you decide to make changes in the choreography which then require changes in the music, you may be putting unfair pressure on the composer who may have gone on to other projects or doesn't have the time to make changes at a late date). By the same token, the composer needs to be flexible and certainly, in the first half of the choreographic process, be willing to make significant changes. Sometimes the choreography is completed and the composer needs only to create the score to a video. This has many advantages in terms of time and knowing what form the score should take, but it doesn't allow the back-and-forth of the creative process which can take both musician and dancer to new and productive places in their imaginations/aesthetics.



The issue of payment and royalties should also be carefully negotiated. Often the choreographer and composer settle on a flat fee, paid in one, two, or three installments. Generally the rights to the music go to the choreographer, but in the interest of fairness it may be advisable to build into the contract royalties for use of the music beyond its original intention and any other exceptions that might appear during the life of the piece. And if the composer wants to include her or his score on a CD, typically one credits the dance company, but does not pay for the use. Another issue is that after a certain time (3 years or so) will other choreographers be able to use



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the music? Often this is resolved by a payment to both original choreographer and composer with mention in the score of the provenance of the music.

Ultimately, the rewards of such collaborative ventures reach far beyond the scope of money and deadlines and creates art, like the Beatles, that is greater than the individual talents involved. Give it a try. Surprise and synergy are volatile but powerful fuels.

This is the second in a series of articles by Jon Scoville on working with music / musicians. The first article was on working with an accompanist.

Jon,

What are the best instruments for a dance teacher to have to accompany their own class?

Anonymous

Well, if I could bring only one instrument to class it would be a bass drum – either the large concert bass drum (36” in diameter), or the smaller “kick” drum used in a rock or jazz drum kit. These run anywhere from 16” to 24” in diameter and are easier to transport and store than the concert version (though not as dynamic in range). The beauty and utilitarian value of a bass drum is that it has a very powerful sound with many tonal possibilities and, best of all, it can be used effectively even with limited drumming skills. The Mary Wigman/Hanya Holm/Alwin Nikolais tradition always insisted that dancers be able to accompany their own classes (usually on a single tom tom or bass drum), a program which, thanks to Elizabeth Hayes and Joan Woodbury, continues to this day in the U. of Utah modern dance curriculum.

I recommend that you remove one of the heads to allow the sound to carry, and also duct tape a small 2-3” square piece of felt in the center of the remaining head. Put the drum on the floor and prop it up a few inches off the floor with anything available – a blackboard eraser or an extra mallet make good props. Then play it sitting in a chair with one foot placed on the head so that with different amounts of pressure you can produce considerable tonal variations. The bass drum’s tone will have a much richer sustain than high pitched tom toms or conga drums, and thus one can play less notes and still sound good!

The disadvantage of this arrangement is that it keeps you, as the teacher, partly tied to your chair as you lead the class. But I have seen many effective teachers work this way including Tandy Beal (my current wife -- of 45 years) and Murray Louis. An alternative approach might be to use a Wigman drum (a 16”-20” frame drum similar to the Middle Eastern def) which allows you to walk around as you accompany. This lets you keep a beat, though you will be limited to playing with one hand, and thus monotony becomes a clear and present danger. A combination of working at different times with the two drums might be a good solution.

Ask a Musician



Do you have a question that only a musician can answer? Do you need recommendations for music to use in your studio or performance? Now is your chance to ask Jon Scoville. Submit your questions to sean.guymon@hotmail.com, and after Jon answers them we will print them in a future newsletter.

About Jon



Jon Scoville is a composer, author and musician. An Associate Professor/Lecturer at the University of Utah, Professor Scoville teaches music resources for dance, rhythmic analysis, percussion accompaniment, aesthetics, and choreography. He has toured internationally as co-artistic director of Tandy Beal & Company, and is the author of *Sound Designs*. Professor Scoville is a prolific composer for dance, including scores for the faculty as well as choreographers Alwin Nikolais, Murray Louis, Laura Dean, and Sara Rudner, among others.

*Edited from <http://www.dance.utah.edu/people/faculty/Scoville.html>
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