

Composer/Choreographer

Dance Perspectives, v. 16, pp. 8-11 (1963)

In this article a number of composers and choreographers were asked their thoughts on the interrelationship of music and dance. This was Vivian Fine's response.

Music and dance are two languages with a common source. They come out of the same stuff—the same stuff, as Shakespeare wrote, “as dreams are made on.” Before an idea finds its way into form, there is the as yet unlabelled sensation—a sensation that one recognizes as the modest herald of a new work. Out of this basic sensation of movement the dancer creates choreography; the composer, music.

What is different in composing for dance is that the initial stimulus is not connected with a sonorous image. In writing for dance, the musical ideas are stimulated by ideas the dancer has conceived. These may be ideas of a dramatic nature or, as in the earlier works I wrote, the completed choreography. In either case, the body sensations that are the response to an idea (though one is hardly aware of them) are similar for dancer and musician.

This underlying sense of movement is the first expression of a feeling we carry with us always, but keep concealed from our awareness: the feeling of the inexorability of the time-flow. The relationship between music and dance might be called a dialogue concerning silence. It is the silence that is the silent motion of the flow of time. We measure the passage of time by the motion of the stars: we see in this sidereal movement a demarcation of the measureless universe, without end in time or space. So, too, do movement and sound evoke the mystery without beginning or end. Within their ordered measures are framed a portion of unending time and space.

Each art tells of this mystery with its own signs. Music speaks through symbols we hear; dance speaks to the eye. So the two sisters—one having no voice—can speak at once, each telling us of their mysterious mother.

Evoked by imagery outside the contained world of sound the musician inhabits, music for dance has a special character. This can perhaps be described negatively, as music not having the same intensity of articulation required for “absolute” music. Music for dance can “stand alone,” but it still relies to some degree on the choreographic and dramatic ideas that inspired it. The composer articulates the dimensions of his sonorous universe through the musical resources at his command. His burden is less when the movements of dance articulate forms in space.

In modern dance it is not the metrical aspects of rhythm that unite dance and music. In the free interweaving of movement and sound there is a link to deeper rhythm. Free of superficial points of rhythmic contact, music and dance create patterns of inter-relatedness that enhance the total work.

Roger Sessions has said: “Music is a gesture.” In composing for dance one must have a willingness to absorb from the dancer his basic gesture and to inflect the musical gesture with the images of dance and theatre.

The above speculations are strictly after the fact. I have written for dance intuitively, without theorizing. The problems were no different from those of composing any other music—except that the feeling of “rightness” was related to something outside, rather than to the conscience regulating the sonorous world of the composer.

Of the five principal works I have written for dance, two are in a humorous vein: *The Race of Life*, written for Doris Humphrey, and *Opus 51*, for Charles Weidman. The problem was to capture the kind of comedy involved, the particular area of the human dilemma. In addition, *The Race of Life* (based on drawings by James Thurber) had a story and definite characters, while *Opus 51* had neither. In both works I had to discover the serious musical stance from which humor could be achieved.

In comedy one has an especial sense of being both doer and observer. In Thurber’s world, marvelously made to live in the theatre by Miss Humphrey, our fears and foibles are plain—we are able to laugh because Thurber himself is so very human and intelligent. He shows us the war between men and women, their competitiveness and triangular jealousies. The actions of his people are never threatening, nor do they come close to real anger or hate. While we know these jealous quarrels are no laughing matter in life, for the moment we see them without fear of consequences. Perhaps it is this dual state of being both actor and spectator that gives an air of elegance to good comedy. All good comedians have a certain meticulousness about them.

Opus 51, lacking story or characters, was almost pure comedy, if there is such a thing. In it Weidman achieved a kind of collage. No attempt was made to create situations leading to a comic “point.” Instead, we were shown unrelated actions strung together, the ultimate expression of the absurd. Comedy makes the everyday seem absurd by taking it seriously; leading us close to disaster, and then saying: “but it’s not real!” Weidman, using illogical sequences of action, succeeded in making us laugh by treating these sequences as seriously as if they were the normal course of events. In this rearrangement of reality, we sensed that reality was perhaps just another arrangement, and we enjoyed the upsetting of the proper order of things.

The music for both these dances was written after the dance was composed, although not after the entire work was finished. I would write a section as each new part of the dance was completed. In composing for choreography there is the problem of developing a musical structure and continuity. I was able to do this by not composing for individual moments or patterns, but by sensing the impulse that moved the dancer.

The first of the two works I wrote for Hanya Holm, *Tragic Exodus*, was a single movement, about ten minutes in length. *They too are Exiles* was longer, in a number of movements. Both dealt with “social” themes, but the strong emotional drive in these works made musical identification comparatively easy. In *Tragic Exodus*, inspired by the

plight of the Jews under Hitler, I used a baritone voice employing only vowel sounds. This recalled Hebrew chants, although no authentic material was used. The piano was plucked, adding to the sense of history with sounds reminiscent of the lyre. *They too are Exiles* had sections with a strong ethnic flavor, which presented the problem of creating of homogeneous musical fabric. This large work really needed orchestral support, but in 1940 two pianists at one piano were the principal musical resource of dancer and composer.

Alcestis, written for Martha Graham, was composed from a script prepared by the choreographer, in contrast to the previous works, which were composed from the dances themselves. Miss Graham's compelling power is as operative in the composer-dancer relationship as it is in the theatre. But in the working relationship she never overwhelms. Rather, she evokes through the magic of her imagery and feeling. She made me feel I was writing, not about an ancient myth, but about the living present. Of all the dance works I have written, I feel *Alcestis* comes off best as a musical work. This is due in good part, I believe, to the fact that my only guide-lines were dramatic, allowing more freedom in the development of the musical material.

Archilochos, in a poetic monologue written in the seventh century B.C., urges himself to "understand the rhythm that holds mankind in its bonds." I have tried to indicate that it is within the bonding rhythm that both dancer and musician find their common ground. To make us aware of flow by stopping it is a basic contradiction in the work of the artist who, like Prometheus, is bound. Chained to the rock of his mortality, the artist seeks to create immortal gesture.