



Dance and music

Dancing a whole performance in total silence? The initiative was taken by the American Doris Humphrey who created “Water Study” in 1928, a work acknowledged as the first-ever choreography to be completely performed without music.

For the spectator, however, experiencing a dance performance without any musical media is highly particular. “Dancing without music”, wrote the ballet theoretician, Georges Noverre in 1760, “is no more intelligible than singing without words” because movements become “extravagant” and devoid “of meaning”¹.

During the baroque period, the dancing master knew how to tickle the violin – the logo of the corporation – as he used it to accompany his lessons. This just goes to show the close, almost intimate, links that the two arts have fostered over a long time and, which are organized in a thousand and one different ways.

Let the dancer be guided by the music? Merce Cunningham spurns this form of subjugation. In the 1960s, the American choreographer came up with the idea of making dance and music totally independent, the only dividing line between them was a shared period of time. With this as their cue, the postmodern dance artists, such as Trisha Brown, took on silence and endorsed another relationship between the body and the choreographic gesture. Since then, dance has turned the sound back on². As if it couldn't resist the call from the beat! So, how are dance and music articulated, how are they organized based on periods, styles and artists? How do they harmonize with each other to make sense and to offer a performance? The eight sequences of this Thema are an invitation to watch the music and to listen to the dance, to discover the musicality of an interpretation or of choreographic writing.

1. The classics

Agon / Le lac des cygnes

“Watch the music, listen to the dance”: the expression has been borrowed from George Balanchine. The Russian choreographer, established in the United States, who had his eyes set on becoming a composer, entered the world of dance by chance. He created his ballets exactly like a variation of music, though not as an illustration. He worked hand-in-hand with Igor Stravinsky, his compatriot and friend, more than twenty times. On the likes of “Agon”, created in 1957. The partition, which satisfies the dodecaphonic principle, is organized into twelve parts, which twelve dancers, split up into a variety of forms, echo: duos, trios...

¹ Jean-Georges Noverre, *Lettres sur la danse*, 1760

² « La danse remet le son », dossier de la revue *Mouvement*, novembre – décembre 2012, n°66, pp 35-55.



During the pas de deux, that this sequence comes from, the ballerina guides her partner, just like the violin which pre-empts the other instruments. She is raised up, using the brace, the supports that he offers her, just like the violin when it is highlighted through the musical backdrop. For Balanchine, it is up to the choreographer to invent this play on relationships, on links. As such, he said “choreography [creates] its own form regardless of the musical form [without] duplicating the line and the rhythm”.

A slow tempo, ample arm movements, legs that sketch out lines in space, this is the very nature of an adage, like the one of the pas de deux in Act II of “Swan Lake”. The expression itself comes from musical vocabulary – adagio –. Because it plays with equilibrium and aplomb, through major figures developed, through attitudes and arabesques, the adage represents a moment of poetic brilliance and lyricism that lends itself in particular to the expression of amorous commotion. With Marius Petipa, it is established as the first part of the pas de deux. Co-author of the Lake, this French choreographer, who lived in Russia, like the ballet masters of the period, dictated his choices of rhythm, of number of bars, of character to the composers. Considered as mere performers, the latter were held in low esteem in Russia. Tchaikovsky, on the other hand, was a renowned composer of symphony music, a music that was deemed nobler. When the Bolchoi requested his work in 1875, he accepted. And launched himself the challenge of giving ballet music a reputation for excellence. Mission accomplished: Swan Lake has become the icon of classical ballet and is recognized throughout the world.

The rhythmic

Samanvay / Jazz Tap Ensemble

Every Odissi dancer has to be a musician! This dance, just like the other classical styles in India, is fundamentally organized around rhythm. The choreographic structure emanates from the musical structure, established on cycles known as talas. The dancer's feet follow the rhythmic pattern played by the talams, a pair of small cymbal-like instruments, which are also amplified by the drum (pakhawaj). The ankle-bracelets covered in small bells heighten the sound of the stamping feet. They help make the performer, who is usually a soloist, a fully-fledged instrumentalist. As such, the seven dancers grouped together by Madhavi Mudgal in this work become a real orchestra in motion.

In tap dancing, the feet are also percussion instruments, even if this time around it's the special shoes that provide the sound. The wealth of rhythmic and acoustic combinations are above all the result of the variety of impacts on the ground, impacts made by the heel, the tip of the foot or the flat sole of the shoe. Through its name – Interplay – played



by the Jazz Tap Ensemble, suggests the play on relationships, on interactions and reciprocities that the dancers create between themselves, and with the orchestra. When the orchestra remains silent – musical break – it is a way of better highlighting the corporeal and musical capacities of the soloist, who improvises complicated step sequences magnificently.

2. Music to dance to, music to make you dance

Tango Vivo / Dix Version

Jazz music led to a myriad of dances, including tap dancing. As such, it belongs to the “music to dance to” family. Tango also falls within this category. Established at the end of the 19th century as a result of the interweaving of black, Creole and European cultures that had immigrated in Argentina, it was of musical and dance genres. Although close links were woven between the two, the musical genre gained its independence and dared to exist in its own right. In the 1980s, after a long period of decline, tango underwent a revival following the performances of the Tango Argentino show in Paris. There were ever greater numbers of dances, conferences and workshops which helped re-promote tango, as music. In “Tango Vivo”, by the Lyon company Union Tanguera, the choreographed sequences of the group alternate with moments when couples improvise, as they would do in a genuine ball situation. On the duple and quadruple beats, they roll out a walk unto which, based on the different degrees of speed, they graft figures, such as the corte (suspension), the double eight (trajectory described by the feet) and the gancho, a sort of suggestive leg-hook. But the music itself is showcased, as the orchestra is given considerable space and the singer is able to move across the stage, among the dancers, from one side to the other.

It's one of those types of music that makes you want to dance. And when the body language adheres to the rhythmic, when a sort of osmosis appears between the two, well the pleasure of the movement fans out and reaches the public. Like in this sequence from “Dix Versions”, one of the first choreographies created by Mourad Merzouki. The dancers perform popping, a style of dance that appeared with funk music at the end of the 1970s in the United States. Different parts of the body are contracted during the upbeat part of the beat. The other types of movement such as the twist flex (where the head, the torso and the limbs twist in different directions), the walk-out, which is smoother, and isolations blend together in a way that is always synchronized to the beat. This produces a mechanical effect that is somewhat related to the rhythms of industrial robotics.

3. Partner independence

Roaratorio /Fase



In "Roaratorio", by Merce Cunningham, there is no coordination between dance and music. Although John Cage's work suggests jigs and reels from Irish folklore, with a host of sounds added on: the cries of a baby, the noises of rooms, of the street, the dancers seem to disregard them. They plunge, jump and turn, yet their movements are not related to the acoustic partition. Dance exists regardless of the music. And if ever a link seems at times to appear, it is simply the result of fortunate coincidence. As for the performers, now deprived of all musical support, they need to have a real internal sense of timing and need to be highly aware of their partners. These are the key principles that Merce Cunningham developed in the 1960s. Notwithstanding, for this piece of work, the musical partition, which was created at an earlier stage, influenced the American choreographer, who turned to the vocabulary of traditional Irish dances. Yet, there is no synchrony intended between the dancers' joyous hops and skips and the rousing melodies of the jigs.

As for Anne-Teresa de Keersmaecker, she pays the utmost attention to the music. Because it is her inspiration. Not because she wishes to illustrate music through dance but because this Belgian choreographer, first of all, appraises the formal structures, the architecture and the rules of composition that characterize a partition before she actually transposes it in a choreographic way. This analogical relationship may bear on the organization of space, the processes for sequencing movements or even on the body language itself. In *Violin Phase*, a solo created in 1981, which she went on to incorporate into the "Fase" performance, Keersmaecker reproduces the principles of repetition and phasing-out developed by Steve Reich. A single phrase or "pattern" is reproduced by several violins, but in a staggered way. This leads ultimately to melodies bursting forth. As such, the choreography strives to highlight the melodious result of these superimpositions. It segues several sequences of movements, based on the spin and swing of the arms, which is repeated over and over, just like the music. Next, its gradual transformation, caused by phasing-out, is revealed through the arrival of a new movement (such as the jump), incorporated in the sequence, or through a change in direction that splits the first circular space.



To go further :

BALANCHINE, Georges, MOISSEEVITCH VOLKOV, Solomon, DAY, Carole (trad.). *Conversations avec George Balanchine : variation sur Tchaïkovski [Balanchine's Tchaïkovski]*. Paris : L'Arche, 1988. 220 p.

NOVERRE, Jean-Georges. *Lettres sur la danse*. Paris : éd. du Sandre, DL 2006. 219 p.

APPRILL, Christophe. « Le tango, une 'musique à danser' à l'épreuve de la reconstruction du bal », in *Civilisations*, n°53, 2006, p. 75-96.

Credits :

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