

June 23rd, 1996

# Music Abused

## *Choreographers Get Too Used to Using Music*

**BY CHRISTOPHER  
GAINES**

**L**nsensitivity to music is epidemic among young choreographers and dancers today, and I'm trying to understand why. Too often, as I look at dance, I hear the sound of one artist abusing another artist's work.

Since 1992, I've sat on panels at the Gowanus Arts Exchange to select new pieces for its showcases; as lighting designer for Movement Research, The Field, and Gowanus from '91 to '95, I watched hundreds of dances by young artists. I've encountered choreographers who can't come up with the name of their music, its composer, or the performers; some who create blissfully unaware that their score has been indelibly rendered by the likes of a Balanchine or a Taylor; and once a trio who didn't know they had combined the last movements of one concerto with the first movements of another (the tracks were adjacent on the same CD, after all). Countless dances merely paste music up innocuously in the background; others chop and mix recordings like fixings for salad.

Experienced choreographers too take advantage of music. Last fall I saw (as a work in progress at Gowanus) Allyson Green's beautiful new solo *Elegy for an Angel Crash*, its first section danced to violently amputated fragments of plainchant edited from a recent Anonymous 4 CD, pierced by silence—a vivid audio metaphor expressing the angel's catastrophe. This use of music—though highly effective theatrically—disturbs me, because it violates the integrity of the musical text as a score and as a recording, and violates the intentions of both composers and musicians, without illuminating the music.

Similar uses of recorded music are so common in the Downtown dance world that we take them completely for granted. One choreographer cuts and

yond a certain level of exposure, choreographers dare not treat recordings in this way, but in many Downtown venues no kindly producer asks, "Unh, do you have the permissions?"

variety of body rhythms. But without an accompanist, how many teachers give a fast 11-beat phrase, or a slow 7, or a 3-against-4 polyrhythm? With remarkable consistency, unaccompanied and uncounted technique classes drift into a comfortable moderato and a vague left-right-left-right 4/4 (the human body's default periodic rhythm). Without the discipline and challenge of music, dancers easily delude themselves about the rhythmical variety of their phrasing in class, in choreography, and

poser's door with only musicless training and cassette tomfoolery in their knapsacks, and a vague feeling that dance onstage is boring without sound. Or they come with a recipe, a shopping list for a score. Or they want music that will stay out of the way, like a well-domesticated pet. In real collaboration, choreographer and composer expand, challenge, and change each other. Both compromise, but neither is compromised. Neither is diminished; both are enriched.

At the Studies Project, the Cunningham-Cage model was repeatedly invoked as the extreme limit of non-collaborative collaboration: the relation between music and dance reduced to mere simultaneity. True, music and dance *need* only share time and space, but they *can* share much more; dance music the world over has been since the beginning a special genre in which sound and movement entwine in time's most intimate embrace. This in no way limits dance to "Mickey Mouse" (a term that unfairly insults Disney's composers) or "music visualization" or other despised forms of simplemindedness. In Irish or Balkan folk dance, in India's classical dance theater, in West African rituals, in Balinese and Japanese and Korean court dance, music and dance do not relate simplistically. The world's classical and folk traditions are far more musically sophisticated and disciplined than most Downtown choreography; some incorporate complex improvisation and intricate rhythmic counterpoint that put our dominant styles to shame.

Cunningham and his composers made a revolution by divorcing dance from music, in theory to benefit both partners. It works for him, because his work is music, all by itself. And though I think his dances are often best seen in his studio, without the predictably random electronic soundscapes that mainly accompany them in the theater, he in no way disrespects music. But Cunningham's theory, which in part simply justifies a working method that suits his temperament, is unconsciously abused Downtown, to license laziness



The writer in cassette tech hell at DIA

In 1975, Paul Taylor ignited a brushfire of controversy when, for *Esplanade*, he combined movements from two of Bach's violin concertos, disregarding their proper sequence and key structure. When he did the same thing with the *Brandenburgs* in 1988, no one batted an eye. The relatively

especially in improvisation. There is nothing inherently wrong in working without music, but nothing inherently right, either. Even at the Cunningham Studio, home of dance disconnected from music, classes always have an accompanist, as panelist Elizabeth Keen pointed out during Movement Re-

TERU KUIWAYAMA

rearranges John Adams's *Shaker Loops*; another fades up halfway through a single-movement Morton Feldman piece; a third splices an old disco hit into Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (examples chosen randomly from dancemakers I know and respect). In every case, the piece "works," but would the composers, if asked, have consented? If musicians used dances in the same way (to make music videos, say), imagine choreographers' wrath. An artist should not fragment, quote, or collage other artists' work merely because it's convenient.

Recordings are *music*, but they are also *things*, consumer products; we buy them, own them, make mix and party tapes, dub them for our friends—copyright laws or no, we do what we like with them, and the tapes can't fight back. Sampling, so prominent in pop music, uses recordings as a resource to be mined and reinforces the habit. Be-

self-contained movements of Baroque music (and the success of *Esplanade*) partly justify the tactic. When choreographers today splice and resequence music in much more extreme and insensitive ways, no one seems to notice or care. We always ask, "How does the choreographer use the music?" To use, to be used, to be used to: these figures of speech reveal the mix of domination and habit with which we commonly approach recorded sound.

Responsibility lies partly with current dance training. Unlike ballet and traditional modern dance, most "post-modern" release work and contact-improv teaching (including almost all technique classes at Movement Research) occurs in a music-free zone. An unquestioned dogma extends the independence of dance and music beyond the stage to the classroom: music's intrusion would hinder movement training, its absence will liberate a greater

search's Studies Project, "Time, Musicality, and Dance," at Experimental Intermedia in May. At the very least they have Cunningham, whose fiercely syncopated hand-clapping is a rhythm education in itself.

Dance and music meet on the ground of time, and music's exile from the classroom leaves dance forlorn. Dancers and choreographers don't need vast technical knowledge of music (not that it could hurt). They do need to experience the widest possible variety of time's divisions—pulse, meter, rhythm, cycle, accent, dynamics—not to learn to rely on music, but because there is no better place for learning to relate to it than daily practice. As all dance and music therapists (and all drummers) know, rhythmic entrainment frees, rather than limits, muscles, imagination, and intuition.

Seeking collaboration, many young dancemakers knock at a com-

and choreography that won't listen. As in most divorces, one partner suffers more: in our community, music has a miserable alimony settlement, and lousy visiting rights.

Cage and Cunningham cleared away a tangle of rank brambles—lazy habits and received ideas of decades ago—but their model doesn't invalidate any other. We have different lazy habits and received ideas now. I reject no particular approach to time, musicality, and dance; I do object to haphazard and inconsiderate approaches. As a community we no longer expect freshness, innovation, vitality in the relation between dance and music. But in a clear field, with fertile soil, anything could grow. ❖

*The final Cage-Cunningham collaboration, Ocean, opens at the Lincoln Center Festival on July 30.*

*Deborah Jowitz is on vacation.*