

Musicianship for the Dances of Universal Peace

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Spirit Ripening II

Music for the Dances of Universal Peace

In this short paper I'm setting forth some approaches to musicianship for the Dances of Universal Peace from my experience. This discussion is by no means complete or definitive and is intended to simply encourage discussion about the many possibilities inherent in the subject.

Music for the Dances bridges two worlds - the world of dance music and the world of "spiritual" music, the latter being music that evokes sacred sense. In each world the music has certain requirements. Dance music needs to serve the dance, communicate the information needed for dancing, enliven and animate our bodies and quicken our steps. "Spiritual" music must connect with something very deep within us, unify the experience of the dancers, and name the sacred. To create music that embraces both the dance and spirituality, we need understanding of the essential elements of both worlds. We also need to be serious students of our instruments so that technique can serve both worlds.

In India, performers of classical music do not make their public debut until they are in their 40's. A lifetime of study and spiritual practice is considered prerequisite in order to be "in tune" with the entire cosmos before rendering music which recapitulates that cosmic order. In the Dances we are not able to go that far, but we can at least approach our instrument with a strong dose of humility. Naming the sacred moment though music means being totally *in* the moment, getting the ego out of the way and putting the mind in service of the heart. You will know this is happening when you find yourself playing things that you did not know you could play. Equally, you will see it when you make wrong notes or errors as a result of thinking "Wow, this is wonderful!" The mind has stepped in, taken credit, and wreaked havoc.

Basic Principles

In addition to a basic level of technical proficiency on our musical instrument, we must have:

- 1) Attentiveness - Being attentive to the dance leader and dance circle is perhaps the single most important element of effective dance musicianship. Attentiveness is essential to the cohesion or "unity" of the circle's experience and the strength of the container of the dance.
- 2) Attunement - Attunement begins inwardly. If we are not attuned to our essential being and to the emotions and sensations that are taking place within us, we cannot be attuned to the dance or to the music. Inner attunement will extend outwardly, to the dance leader, the dancers and the material. The musician must have a very clear understanding of the dance leader's intentions and his/her needs for the dance. The music must capture the feeling of the sacred phrase and also be in harmony with the tradition from which the dance comes. Musical attunement means giving expression to the truth of the dance through music.
- 3) Effacement - As every new dance leader soon finds out, bringing people into the dance requires getting out of one's own way. The same applies absolutely to the dance musician. Effacement does not mean that the musician becomes invisible, but rather that the music serves the dance rather than drawing

attention to the musician. A famous blues musician once stated his recipe for success: "Play the music, lose the ego, love the people." If we attempt to impose a personal style, to introduce elements that may be foreign or inappropriate, or to take the dance in our own direction, then we have wandered far from our purpose as dance musician by bringing in the ego. Obviously, if we *try* to lose the ego we are simply imposing something else through the back door. We really just have to surrender everything, including thinking about how we look, whether we might make a "mistake", or whether people will think we're talented. We must be totally present and bring everything we have to our instrument, to the dance leader and to the dance - which we cannot do if we are holding back something for ourselves. "Playing the music" means letting out what is already inside of us, striking the chord or note that is so totally right, ripe, in harmony with everything else, that it is unmistakably sacred.

If attentiveness and attunement are in place then effacement will be less of an issue.

Specific Roles of the Dance Musician

The dance musician provides many support functions for the dance and dance leader. A few of these are:

Teaching the music - giving pitches to dance leader; playing sections of the music as dancers walk through the dance; being attentive to needs of dance leader for music

Starting the dance - The dance must begin with a clear rhythm and not falter.

"On the Breath" passages - Beautifully holding the "container" when the voices have stopped

Closing the dance - Adding retard, if any, and a clear ending.

Musical Language in the Dances

There are many terms we might use to describe our approach to the music. Here are a few:

Use of silence and sound - This means sensing when to play and when not. Silence is important as the ground against which the music appears.

Dynamics - Well defined volume in music: very soft and refined *ppp*; really loud *fff*.

Rhythm - The lifeblood of dance music, rhythm must be clearly defined at all times.

Melody - Must be true to the dance literature without errors.

Harmony - May be modal (horizontal accompanying lines, as in open guitar tuning) or "western harmony" (vertical harmony), depending on the feeling of the dance and what is called for.

Tension and Release - In J.S. Bach's music, tension and release symbolizes Christ giving up the ghost on the cross. In dance music, the cycle of tension and release can be a metaphor for giving up the ego.

Syncopation - At certain times, emphasizing the normally "weak" beats, such as beats 2 and 4 in 4/4 time, adds life and lift to dance music.

Rubato - Term denoting a certain elasticity and freedom in tempo

Spaciousness – Not really a musical term but sometimes used in the context of the Dances to describe an expansive, "time-free" feeling in the music. Music seems "spacious" when the tempo is relaxed, not hurried, with a steady, stately rhythm.

The Elements as Musical Language

The Elements as used in the walks can serve as an excellent metaphor for our approach to the dance music. For a wonderful treatment of the elements see the new Foundation Dance Manual. Can you play your instrument in these ways?

Earth - 4/4 meter, grounded, strong, purposeful, solid, very present, intelligent

Air - Light, airy, plucked, pointillism, feathery, creativity

Water - 3/4 meter, flowing, sighing, undulating, waves, emotion

Fire - heat, drama, sizzle, ecstasy, passion, truth

Ether - mystical, sounding from far away, other-worldly, viewed from a great distance, "Plutonian"

Mysticism of Sound and Music

Each quality of sound we bring forth from our instrument (by particular strumming or drumming techniques, articulation of the melody line, choice of chord harmonies, etc.) evokes a particular feeling. Every dance musician should become intimately familiar with the range of tonal capabilities of their instrument *and how these sounds feel in his/her body*. This is the first step toward connecting with your own inner music, which is not separate at all from the universal music that is going to move dancers. If what you are playing moves you and feels totally appropriate, others will no doubt feel it too. Then, the many become one. Becoming familiar with these instrumental possibilities requires much experimentation and practice.

The stylistic elements employed - different strumming or drumming techniques, chord positions and substitute chords, octaves of the melody, volume levels, etc. all add a particular flavor and feeling to the musical accompaniment. If we liken the dance to lotus unfolding, then what is appropriate later in the dance may not have been "ripe" or appropriate earlier. Try feeling the music of the dance, and the dance itself, as a story being told. It has a beginning, a development, a climax (perhaps), and an ending. Feel what needs to happen in each of these sections and play accordingly.

The appropriateness of anything we might do musically has to be tested in our own hearts and bodies. If we are free of ego then our decisions will be good ones.

"On the Breath" Passages

When the dance leader takes the dance "on the breath" words are left behind and we enter a realm of pure presence to one another through dance and music. This can be the most pristine and evocative moment of the dance. The musician must serve that moment as completely as possible. Better to stick to the melody line played with great sensitivity than to venture an improvised line, unless you are totally comfortable with your instrument and the solo can be done completely within the spirit of the dance. As a rule, solos should be played within the modal or melodic scale of the dance itself and not bring in new material, such as from jazz or blues idioms.

Playing in Ensemble

Occasionally more than one instrument can be combined to great effect. Drum, guitar, and a solo instrument such as flute or violin make a nice ensemble. Ensemble playing adds yet another level of complexity to dance musicianship. Rehearsal is indispensable to make the ensemble "tight" and ensure that tempo changes, starting and stopping the dance will all be right. The more you play together, the greater will develop your attunement and sensitivity to one another.

Sometimes it is helpful for the ensemble to designate a lead musician who will watch the dance leader at all times as well as communicate with the other musicians through visual cues or by playing in a manner that signals tempo changes, etc. This can produce a tighter ensemble than if all the musicians are watching the dance leader and attempting to interpret what is being called for.

Musician Etiquette

Different parts of the country and dance settings have differing etiquette applying to musicians. At some Ruhaniat gatherings musicians can enter the circle and play mostly at will. In other places and dance camps the dance leader may call on particular musicians to play, or choose to lead the dance without accompaniment. It's obviously a good idea to find out what the local protocol may be before entering the circle to play and best to have a clear invitation from the dance leader to do so.

Though not everyone agrees on this point, I feel that the dance is enhanced when musicians play from the center of the circle, except where the dance circle is too small or where it may impair dance turning or other activities taking place in the center. Removing musicians to the outside of the circle isolates the music and changes the energy of the dance, sometimes with less effective results. However, I feel that musicians in the center of the circle should either be seated *on the floor* or dancing themselves, modeling the movements if possible. A musician standing still like a post in the center of a dance drains energy from the dance circle and is a distraction to dancers attempting to see the dance leader. If you can't play your instrument and dance, move or sway at the same time, it's less distracting to remain seated. Again, not all agree about this, and cultural differences on this should certainly be respected.

Musicians should be focused on their jobs and not make eye contact with the dancers. Musicians' eyes should be on the dance leader and/or the lead musician. When the music concludes, remain absolutely still until the dance leader has closed the dance with "amen" or some other closing.

Acoustics

In the "perfect" dance hall, dancers and musicians are all able to hear one another clearly at the full range of dynamic levels, and the feeling of the dance can range from extremely intimate to expansive. Acoustics of the dance space very much impact how the music and the dance will go. Musicians should be cognizant of acoustics and work with the space accordingly. In very live dance halls, the number of musicians should be reduced (perhaps to zero) to avoid muddiness and difficulty in hearing the voices. Outdoors, the problem is reversed, and the number of musicians should be increased to help carry the dance. I have found the most ideal dance hall, oddly enough, to be a carpeted floor, but with a hard ceiling (not acoustic tile). In "dead" spaces (such as carpet + ceiling tile) the number of musicians should perhaps be increased, but beware of overpowering the voices. Also, such halls may contain acoustically dead "pockets" where no one can hear, which may cause problems in the dance.

Key Signature

The keys given in the dance booklets should be taken as guides only. The key of the dance music should be chosen which allows the melody line to fall within the comfortable singing range of the large majority of dancers. Generally the keys of C major (no flats or sharps) and C minor (3 flats) work very well for many of the dances. The SAM dances using "Allah", etc. work best in G major (open tuning), but can be done as low as E flat effectively.

If an energetic dance is pitched too low (falling at the low end of everyone's singing range), the dancers will likely become out of breath and the dance will sag. So, higher pitched keys work best for jelal or active dances.

It is interesting to consider the musician's responsibility when the dance leader is not comfortable with the "normal" range or key for the dance. Usually when this happens, the dance leader is not yet comfortable with his/her own voice range and wants to pitch the dance too low. The musician in this case should advise the dance leader of the potential problems of doing the dance in the key suggested, and then do whatever the dance leader wants.

Notes for Guitarists

The guitar is well suited to the dances because of its versatility. The guitar is a melodic instrument, a harmonic instrument, and a rhythmic instrument. Played well, the guitarist takes advantage of all these capacities in rendering his/her offering.

The open tuned guitar is ideal for music that might traditionally be performed with drone or sympathetic stringed instruments, such as music from the Hindu, Sufi/Islamic and Zoroastrian traditions. The drone of open tuning can evoke a wide range of feelings.

In traditional Indian music, the sympathetic strings represent the Om, the universal sound or field of pure potentiality, from which all creation is born. Against this drone, the main strings play the melody, which represents the emergence of manifest creation. Musicians can use this metaphor of figure and ground in structuring their approach to the music. Try creating the feeling of unity by playing with the drone strings, then allow the melody of the dance to emerge from this, while keeping the drone feeling going.

Standard tuning works best for "western harmony" dances, including many from the Christian and Jewish traditions. On some dances we may combine open-tuned and standard tuned guitars to produce a very interesting sounding ensemble.

To take advantage of the guitar as rhythmic instrument your strumming needs to be absolutely in rhythm. If your strumming is uneven or lacks energy, the dance will too! Experiment with different ways of strumming the guitar and notice how dancers respond to your strumming technique. For example, try playing the bass line (the note on which the chord is built) on the 1st and 3rd beats with a down/up strum on beats 2 and 4. Or, if there are other musicians, and a drummer playing the downbeat, you can try adding syncopation on the off beats (beats 2 and 4) on the up stroke strum, to enliven the music. There are endless possibilities.

Try not doing the same thing throughout the dance. Vary your strumming, your positions, volume and melodic work depending on what is happening and "what time it is" in the dance.

Notes for Drummers

It goes without saying that drummers need to be technically proficient on their instruments. In the case of dances in which drum is the only accompaniment, as in the Native American or World dances, the rhythm needs to be played as authentically to that tradition as possible. If you do not know how the rhythm should be played, the dance leader should be able to communicate that to you. Study and practice of the traditional rhythms in these cases is essential.

More generally, drumming for the dances can be very simple and straightforward, but is often made unnecessarily difficult by failure to observe 3 simple principles. 1) Stay awake; 2) Play a clear down beat; 3) And a little something else.

Staying awake, watching the dance leader like a hawk, is the most difficult task. Attentiveness, as noted earlier, is what this is all about.

Dancers have to know where the downbeat is. The downbeat is the first beat of the measure and tells the dancer whether the right or left foot is supposed to be coming down. Whether playing dumbek, zarb, or tar the principles are the same. When in doubt, simply watch the dance leader's feet and play the downbeat.

Then you can play "a little something else". This can be anything you feel like playing, as long as it is in keeping with the spirit of the dance and is not distracting. There are traditional Middle Eastern and African drum rhythms that could be played - and if you know them, then wonderful - but it is not essential to know these (except perhaps in the case of solo drum, as noted above). It is more important that the drumming be in harmony with the spirit of the dance and what is played be an expression of your own inner rhythm. I have heard Middle Eastern rhythms like ballady played mechanically and "mindlessly" - technically correct but very un-musical.

Be careful about "weighing down" the dance with too many teks and other filler material that goes too far. You may be able to play the most elaborate rhythms, but if they do not serve the dance, you are making noise that the dancers and dance leader will have to overcome.

Drummers make music and music comes from within. Technique can be acquired, but it is not music until the heart is connected with the technique.

Other Musicians

Wind and bowed instruments add a very special ambiance and flavor to the dances. Think about using your instrument sparingly and with great care. These instrumentalists need to pay special attention to the unfolding of the dance and what feels appropriate. It is not necessary to play on every chorus of the dance. In fact, if you lay out for a round or two and then come in, it will feel more special and add a much greater luster to the ensemble than if you are constantly sounding your instrument. Also, you can support other members of the ensemble by playing long tones - notes you choose from the chords being played - instead of just repeating the melody over and over again. Make your contribution like the sparkle in a rich jewel - the essence of the music!