

Hearing the Dance and Watching the Music

Echoes and Anticipations

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Abstract: *The term “music visualisation” is familiar to dance theorists, historians and those engaged in what are now called choreomusical studies. It is an aspect of choreomusical tradition that deserves more attention, where relations might be less obvious and less persistent. Here there is an analytical approach demonstrating both disjunction, linkage and more in between. It is important that informing my work are theories of embodied cognition: we understand music and dance physically through mimesis. I illustrate these theories as they apply to the work of modern dance choreographer Doris Humphrey and of British ballet choreographer Frederick Ashton. My main examples are three contrasting sections from Richard Alston’s work Brisk Singing (1997) to music from Rameau’s Les Boréades. We see that music and dance map on to each other in unexpected ways and engage with new meanings. The research suggests new ambiguities and subtle distinctions, structural sophistication alongside emotional pressure.*

“How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Mickey Mouse” must be one of the most unforgettable sub-titles in dance scholarship. It appears in 2006 in *The Opera Quarterly* dance issue, heading an article by American composer Barbara White.¹ Meanwhile, the term music visualization rings familiar to dance theorists and historians (those, at least, involved in dance analysis) as well as those engaged in what are now called choreomusical studies, crossing both disciplines. There was an outstanding moment in dance history (c. 1919) when two Americans, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn (Denishawn), came up with the title “music visualization” to announce their shift from making ethnologically-

1 Barbara White, “As if they didn’t hear the music,’ or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Mickey Mouse,” in *The Opera Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 65–89.

inspired dances to those prompted by musical detail, mostly within western music.

The detail in the case of such music visualizations was considerable; consequently the technique was sometimes belittled as “Mickey-Mousing,” borrowing the well-known musical action feature from Disney and other cartoons. But soon, dance began to enjoy a less rigid, less mannered approach, in a tradition of music dances continuing into our own times and that features celebrated choreographers such as George Balanchine in ballet and Mark Morris in recent modern dance. Now, as White goes on to suggest, the field is much wider open for choreomusical practices. Perhaps it needed a composer to say that in so many words.

In this article, I draw attention to an aspect of this tradition that deserves more attention—and where relations might be less obvious and less persistent. Yet here is an approach to choreomusical practices that demonstrates both disjunction and linkage. The dualism that I stress treats music and dance no longer as inert phenomena, rather as bearing forces of attraction and loss.

Informing my work are theories of embodied cognition, in that we understand music and dance physically through mimesis. To borrow the mimetic hypothesis of Arnie Cox from his book *Music and Embodied Cognition*,² a significant part of how we comprehend music as an audience member is by imitation, covertly (through the imagination), and by activating particular areas of the brain dealing with motor behavior. So Cox writes of “feeling” rhythm through our imagined bodies, the shared experience of physical exertions. (He refers just a little to dance with music, but does not discuss the rhythm of dance exertions or choreomusical relations.) On the other hand, elsewhere in music psychology research, there is evidence of our capacity to “hear” visual rhythms, evidence that we tend to hear rhythms in the mind’s ear that are synchronized with visual changes.³ Furthermore, useful to this paper, just as we talk casually about likeness and harmony (or not) between the two media, recent studies in science have emphasized the up and down of audio-visual, Cross-Modal Correspondences (CMC—the term that is used by music theorist Zohar Eitan⁴).

2 Arnie Cox, *Music and Embodied Cognition* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 12, 34–5.

3 Sharon Guttman, Lee Gilroy, and Randolph Blake, “Hearing What the Eyes See: Auditory Encoding of Visual Temporal Sequences,” in *Psychological Science* 16, no. 3 (March 2005): 228–35, accessed 10 January 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0956-7976.2005.00808.x>.

4 Zohar Eitan, “Musical Connections: Crossmodal Correspondences,” in *The Routledge Companion to Music Cognition*, ed. Richard Ashley and Renee Timmers (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 213–24; “Cross-modal experience of

In this article I focus on subtle choreomusical relations that are not simply simultaneous, in other words, that are neither regularly synchronous, nor bound to duplicating structures of rhythm and pitch across the two media. These relations either involve overlap in time or an actual gap in time, and they pull upon our memory. First, I introduce three relatively simple and brief examples encountered in my previous work within choreomusical studies. Then, I discuss various examples demonstrating further range and sophistication within the work of the British contemporary dance choreographer Richard Alston, all to be discovered within his dance *Brisk Singing* (1997) to music from the tragédie-lyrique (opera) *Les Boréades* (1764), by Jean-Philippe Rameau. All my examples are from non-narrative dances without plots or named characters. Each is fundamentally a series or suite of dances.

My first example of more subtle forms of visualization stems from research in the 1980s into the 1938 setting of J.S. Bach's organ *Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor* by the American contemporary dance choreographer Doris Humphrey.⁵ I identified a dance rhythmic motif in the *Passacaglia*, which used as its starting point Bach's one-measure, short-long, crotchet-minim ground bass rhythm (crossing the measure-lines and starting on the upbeat). This rhythm continues without a break through the entire bass line of Bach's *Passacaglia* (in total, twenty variations). Humphrey borrows this rhythm for much of her choreography, but shifts it to happen one beat later, thus fitting between the measure-lines, starting with the short move leading on the downbeat. The result introduces syncopation, with a stressed accent on beat 2 of the measure. Her motif also introduces many different movement ideas to what is fundamentally the same dance rhythm motif.

In a number of variations, Humphrey turns her motif into a body and arm shift that she referred to as her own "ground bass" because it resembles the musical device. This is relevant here to my argument that there is here a close, even if tweaked, relationship between dance and musical structure. The choreography is especially striking when the chorus halt and, on the spot, perform the rhythmic motif in sharp tilts forwards and backwards in profile to the audience.

There is an element of disjunction here, a sense of being out of "sync"—you both hear and see a similar rhythm embedded within the musical meter, but you are also aware of a jarring factor that draws from the past, leaving a severe

musical pitch as space and motion: current research and future challenges," in *Body, Sound and Space in Music and Beyond*, ed. Clemens Wöllner (New York: Routledge, 2017), 49–68.

5 Stephanie Jordan, *Music as Structural Basis in the Choreography of Doris Humphrey* (PhD dissertation, London University, Goldsmiths' College, 1986), 246–50.

shadow. Humphrey sought variety through her choreography, and the effect here is of resistance, an awkwardness, the dancers tugged along behind their music before ultimate resolution with musical structure.

Distant relations, however, can be much less constrained than this and are often less about motifs, and more about moments of attack. If, for instance, we turn to Balanchine's *Agon* collaboration with Stravinsky (1957) and its canons, we not only experience actual canons within the choreography but also a semblance of canons that involve the music.⁶ The coda of the *pas de trois* provides an example of this and we see/hear it twice, with the repeat of the music. We first watch left to right across the three dancers in their racing canon of *entrechat* jumps and high kicks. These, in turn, would seem to prompt a series of high notes at the top of their register, on piercing flutes: the peak notes in this coda. After this, the opposite: the dancers' high kicks continue as the flute line descends. Through likeness, the dancers seem to carry with them the sound of the peak notes, as if these still ring out to us in a series of reverberations.

Other examples of visualization involving cross-reference are not about overlap between what you see and hear; they tend instead to involve a gap in time, a dance motif separately identified and seen before it is "heard," or vice versa, starting with the music. An example of this occurs in a ballet by the British choreographer Frederick Ashton, his *Enigma Variations* (1968), which is a piece about the friends of the composer Edward Elgar. Here, we see the choreographer playing with the motif given in "Variation 6" to the dancer representing the young woman in love Isabel Fitton. Her motif anticipates the music: across the measure-line, two little stutter jumps with feet together and a third jump spreading into second position. In other words, Fitton dances the motif across a legato moment in the music, but as if thinking ahead. Her rhythm only coincides with the music the second and third time round, at which point she becomes more settled, the tension resolved. Here you can read the anticipation as an indication of character, a display of eagerness in love or impatience as Fitton takes her opportunity to display her feelings. And this choreomusical moment really stands out, all on its own, but not without a charming eccentricity.

I turn now to my main example *Brisk Singing* by Alston, who created the piece in 1997 for the Richard Alston Dance Company.⁷ For eight dancers, this is a setting of various numbers extracted from Rameau's opera *Les Boréades*. Alston

6 Stephanie Jordan, *Music Dances: Balanchine Choreographs Stravinsky* [DVD] (New York: The George Balanchine Foundation, 2010).

7 The section of this article on Richard Alston's work will be used and developed during Jordan's current research on Alston. It will be incorporated within her forthcoming book focusing on work for his recent dance company, the Richard Alston Dance Company.

has not set many of the opera's original dance numbers, preferring choruses, arias, recitatives, and orchestral pieces. His emphasis is on community, covering groups of all sizes, but no solos. Alston used the 1990 John Eliot Gardiner recording of this music. He did not use the arcane libretto about ancient dance and music-loving inhabitants of an imaginary kingdom at the back of the North Wind. Relevant to the points I make here, Alston's program note explains his love of the music:

Known in his own time as "le dieu de la danse," Rameau's flow of lyricism, made edgy with wonderfully odd phrasing and urgent rhythm, speaks to dancers in a similar way to Stravinsky in our own century; both composers seemed able to breathe movement into all their music.

I discuss here three contrasting sections from *Brisk Singing*. Straight away this is challenging because of the sheer amount of information—in the music, for instance, shifting counterpoint between orchestral groups every few measures—and we might be forgiven for not spotting the exact ABA structure of both music and dance at early viewings. In section A, with exuberance, six dancers sweep across our vision—remember the allusion to the wind—forever assembling and re-assembling in triangular trio formations, single and double lines, often in the air and on the re-bound. Meanwhile, long skeins of movement develop without internal repetitions.

There is the challenge to mix our hearing with our seeing. At the start of the music, as the curtain rises, the dancers are arranged in two diagonal lines across the floor, their backs turned from us, knees bent upwards. They hold this position for several measures. The music begins with a key motif: minim-minim-semibreve, quick-quick-slow in unison across the full orchestra (mm. 1–2). Mm. 3–4 introduce smaller note values: repeating crotchets and stepwise falling quavers from horn and viola. But now, an echo on the woodwind breaks the phrase symmetry, m. 5 echoing m. 4, an elongation that disturbs the forward drive. The dancers seem suddenly to awaken, three times lightly tapping their heels to the quick crotchet beat, but before we fully register these tiny motions, they scramble to their feet ready to dance.

Such heel tapping is an odd introduction to a dance, indeed to the whole piece—so quick, you might blink and miss it—but it primes us for everything that follows, and the stress on two different speeds of regular beat, crotchet and minim, quick and slow, is highlighted by strong percussive attack or the light touch of pricking the ground. The silent beating of our own toes or tongues may well simulate these patterns, punctuated by brave flourishes of the arms and joyous leaps that sing from the bigger body. But let's go back to the feet again, for we may find ourselves "hearing" the quick and slow patterns of footfall as a

visualization of the past. We remember patterns that were articulated musically now finding their way into physical statements. Especially strong is the effect of a dancer stepping straight out towards us, commanding our attention.

The central dance section B begins playfully, the quick beat suddenly super-clear in four little pizzicato jumps, from right foot to left four times, music visualization in the old, strict sense, echoed in the legato rippling of the arms that follows. How surprising then to see these jumps and ripples both starting and finishing the slow duet that follows, carried over into a totally different context! This may be what Alston likes to call “tying the choreography together,” a technique that modernists in both dance and music have long favored as a useful unifying principle. But here it also suggests rhythmic whispers from a distance, hearing the past in the present.

A *rigaudon* in the second half of *Brisk Singing* finds the group at their most earthy, like a folk ensemble, shedding any mythical bearing that might be left. The raw beats of the tambour are for stamping, and sharp, almost mocking, up-and-down leg and arm gestures are both heard and seen, all smack on the up-and-down notes of the melody line. This is the most “mickey-mouse” dance in the whole work, and with music and dance strictly in harness.

Brisk Singing ends with the entrée from Act IV of Rameau’s opera, originally introduced to mark the arrival of Polimnie (the Greek muse of song and dance). Alston’s program note prepares us by quoting conductor Gardiner describing the entrée as “perhaps the most melting and gravely sensual writing for orchestra to emerge from the entire Baroque era.” It seems immediately to pull us more deeply into our private physicality. It is also a song without words: the movement set to it “sings.” Finally the focus is on a man and woman whom we will grow to know particularly well, this time attending to the articulation of their torsos and arms rather than their feet. This is the longest dance of all in *Brisk Singing* and, despite its intimacy, it becomes the emotional climax of the whole work. Alston’s duets are, after all, widely considered especially moving—some of his finest choreography.

A dominant motif led by a long, two-measure high note (D two octaves above middle C) is visualized by a breathtaking “big-lift” stage center. The woman is raised high to arch back over the man’s head, her toes to toes pulled up beneath her to form a V, her arms, knees and body opened wide, an exhilarating image—but with darker connotations. There is something mysterious, even disturbing, about that lift as both dancers’ faces are hidden from the audience’s view. Next, the high D falls away into a descending octave scale. Alston borrows Gardiner’s image of “melting” into the music as she slides gently floorwards, a slide that seems to last forever, with a long ripple through her spine bringing her to rest. Along the way she borrows an additional long

note and descending scale from the bassoon, drawing our hearing downwards. It is as if she is taken over by the music in overwhelming lament. She also seems to be obsessively needy with another personal motif, another arching back, fists and elbows multiple times raised as if in supplication.

The lifts and gestures, however, develop into a story despite the musical structure, a story that weaves its way through the full five minutes, with, in the second half, more frequent use of the floor and alternatives to the opening lifts. Even though the music is in a plain four-part repetition structure of AABB (binary form), with A and B balancing each other in length, the choreography relinquishes this constraint. New harmonies surprise us in the B sections as the dancers reconfigure in stretched diagonal formations, while, at two other points, they stand apart and hold still, listening to the big-lift music. Are we urged to listen differently back beyond what is actually seen and heard? Are we still visualizing something that is no longer actually there and that might seem even stronger in its absence? Are we still haunted by that big-lift? We, too, listen differently when the dancing stops. I count at least eight occasions where a long note is stressed in this way, and six of these during the B sections in a process of continuous development. Alston's large structure is much more about a series of choreomusical meetings where music and dance map on to each other in unexpected ways, and engage with new meanings.

The end of this duet is a surprise. There is one more big-lift, but it is not set to big-lift music: it is grounded by a modest cadential figure that matches the one at the end of Rameau's section A—no long high note followed by a downward scale, no longer any sense of a lament. For the first time in this context, the woman throws herself into the big lift and descent, now turning from upstage, then deftly rolling over on to on her back and drawing her knees upwards to assume the opening position of the whole work. It's a quick, quiet finish. The man observes from close by. The lights dim. Questions are raised about what this ending might mean: is there unfinished business here? Is this a temporary calm? Where do we go from here? Just as this ending might suggest a second beginning, it is also a point of relative closure—a point about musical form—the final perfect cadence and tonic chord now creating the end of a dance form. Such choreomusical interactions across time are unsettling—they were, too, in my earlier Humphrey, Balanchine and Ashton examples—and here they suggest new ambiguities and subtle distinctions; they certainly have little to do with Mickey Mouse—here, more likely, pathways to expression that are well worth exploration. The duet is a brilliant example of structural sophistication alongside emotional pressure.