



Dana Hanson of Pacific Northwest Ballet School and pianist Yelena Golets

Find Your Groove

Three ways to teach musicality

BY MADELINE SCHROCK

Musicality enables dancers to groove to a beat, follow a delicate melody or syncopate their movement with nuanced accents. There are many ways to improve your students' ear and make musicality part of the classroom conversation. Here, three teachers share the benefits—and challenges—of using a live accompanist, musical props or recorded music. All agree that music and prop choices should be simple and supportive, so they don't overpower your dancers' own sense of rhythm. And of course, your approach will vary depending on the style of dance and your students' ages.

LIVE MUSIC

Swells of live piano music fill the studios at Pacific Northwest Ballet School on any given day. Live music has long been preferred in dance class because of the flexibility it allows. If the music just isn't clicking with dancers, an accompanist can adjust the tempo or tone on the spot. But working with a live accompanist poses unique challenges. PNB School faculty member Dana Hanson recommends, "Be very clear in

your timing when you set your exercises. Sometimes I might say, 'I want less music.'" Minimal melodies allow dancers to create rhythm instead of just mimicking it. For example, if the pianist plays one chord for four frappés, dancers must sense the phrase's length and keep the beat for four even strikes. "There should be very simple, straightforward music at the barre and, in the center, just really danceable music that's in simple phrases."

And if students' dancing becomes too even or robotic, nothing gives an instant boost to their musicality like a pop tune on the piano—as long as it's not too distracting. "I had somebody play Justin Bieber once. If a song is too current, the kids start to fall apart," says Hanson. She suggests The Beatles, Gershwin or Porter for their melodic yet syncopated sound.

THE POWER OF PROPS

Creative movement classes are the perfect platform for introducing musicality to even the youngest dancers. When teaching concepts like beat, tempo, rhythm and movement

Photo by Lindsay Thomas, courtesy of PNB



Beverly Spell's rhythm rings help children sense the even musical phrasing as they bend and sway; Adriana Durant says the set timing of recorded music lets dancers know if they're cutting corners.

quality, Beverly F. Spell, developer of the Leap 'N Learn curriculum for early childhood dance education, turns to props and games. For tempo, she'll have youngsters place their hand over their heart to sense the steady beat. Then they'll run around, stop and notice how it quickens. Later, she'll add in tiny maracas, having students keep time as they dance.

Rhythm sticks are also great for sharp, accented movements like marching. "Every time their foot steps down, they tap the sticks," she says. Plus, these instruments keep the whole class engaged when you're working in groups. Let half the class march while the other half stands to the side, keeping time with their rhythm sticks.

For slower, less percussive movement, Spell recommends scarves or rhythm rings, a Leap 'N Learn product that's a plastic bracelet with attached satin ribbons. Have children rock side to side as they bend and stretch in second position, while swinging their prop to sense the even, looping phrasing. The youngest dancers can rock a Beanie Baby in their arms instead, Spell says, since they'll be familiar with the slow, easy tempo of rocking a baby to sleep.

CAREFULLY CRAFTED PLAYLISTS

While you may grow tired of what's in rotation on your iPod, Adriana Durant says the consistency and familiarity

of recorded tracks allow students to cultivate an interplay with the music. As lead dance teacher of a new program at Nicholas Senn High School in Chicago, she says, "I'll use the same playlist for a good three to six weeks. Once they know the music, we can dig deeper into it, and, therefore, we dance. I stress different accents and syncopations in the music. If I keep changing it, they have a lot more to negotiate."

Plus, she says the set timing of recorded music lets her students know if they're cutting corners. If someone consistently finishes a phrase early, it's often due to quick, tiny preparations. For a modern phrase, "if you're early in the music, it's because you're not using your legs," she says, reminding them to build in time for deep plié preparations.

Durant also experiments with duration, peppering her phrases with surprising timing. "Instead of every movement taking one to two beats, we'll do something that lasts one beat, then six, three, two." She'll put accents in unexpected places, like an explosive jump on count 1 instead of 4. Since many of her students are beginners, she says, "it teaches them to value all of it."

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