The Art of DJing
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In the early development of Western music, instrumental music in particular, composers were confronted with the problem of maintaining a listener's attention and interest for more than a few minutes. How can a composer keep the listener engaged in a lengthy piece, anywhere from 5 to 60 minutes? A solution was developed in the Baroque period called the ritornello form, and one can hear this, for example, in Bach's Brandenburg Concertos. A different solution was developed in the classical period, called the sonata form, and one can hear this in any classical symphony, such as Beethoven's No. 5.

What does this have to do with DJing? Simply put, a set of music for dancers – lasting typically two to four hours -- is like a symphony, it is a lengthy listening engagement, albeit with dancing. If not constructed properly, the dancer will lose interest in listening and therefore stop dancing.

This paper will present a set of principles for constructing engaging sets of music for dancers, principles based in part on the proven techniques developed by classical composers and best practices of DJing.

The purpose of dancing is to express emotion through dance movement. I have discussed this in a separate paper.[1] We must always keep this in mind as we discuss how to construct DJ sets below. In particular, we must be vigilant for emotional fatigue when DJing.

The Rules

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed account of the ritornello or sonata form. I will just give the principles and discuss each at length.

The following principles from classical music are followed when creating large music structures:

- Avoid repetition
- Change the harmony (the key)
- Change the tempo
- Change the dynamics
- Change the texture
- Apply variations
- Create contrast
- Create and resolve tension
- Have an arc

The following principles are from best practices of DJing. Each will be discussed below.

- Use the best quality recording available
- Use the best version of a song
- Use the classic version of a song
- Play a song which makes people dance
- Understand the quality of each song
- Place a song in its proper context
- Have a purpose for a song
- Introduce novelty
- Follow the 90/10 rule
- Maintain forward motion

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[1] *Musicality in Dancing: From A to M;* Peter BetBasoo; http://www.boogiedrop.com/midfam.pdf

Avoid Repetition

Avoiding repetition is an over-arching rule which applies to all other aspects of DJing discussed in this article.

Repetition creates fatigue and causes the listener to lose interest and the mind to wander onto other thoughts. It applies to all arts, literary, visual, musical. The human ear is remarkably sensitive to repetition. The psychology of repetition is as follows. The first time the idea is heard with attention; the second time it is heard to confirm the initial understanding and interpretation; the third time the mind turns off, because there is nothing new to be heard or processed.

It is no coincidence that avoiding repetition is nearly an iron-clad rule in music of all genres. Only in exceptional cases is it broken. We see this in the very structure of popular music. For example, the form of a swing/jazz song is AABA, the form of a tango song is AABBCC.[2]

It is obvious that a DJ would not consecutively play the same song twice, not even twice in the same night. Repetition not only applies to songs but to many other attributes:

- Orchestra/band
- Genre/style
- Tempo
- Dynamics
- Formula
- Key
- Emotion/Feel
- Metaphor

Some of these are more obvious than others, but the less obvious ones have subtle effects which must be considered. The attributes with subtle effects are Key, Emotion/Feel and Metaphor. The effect of repeating these is cumulative rather than pronounced.

If one repeatedly plays keys in major, the ear will eventually be fatigued. It is best to vary between major and minor keys. This could be major-major-minor, or minor-minor-major, or alternating major and minor. The repetition rule applies to this as well, only rarely and with purpose should three majors or three minors be played consecutively.

Emotion/feel is more pronounced than key. It applies more to instrumental music, but can also be perceived in vocal music. One should not, for example, play happy songs repeatedly. Emotional content/feel should follow the repetition rule, else emotional fatigue will occur. This is critically important because, as we stated above, the dancer is expressing emotion through dance movement, and expressing the same emotion more than twice consecutively will cause the dancer to lose interest.

The same applies to metaphor. This is more clearly perceived when there are vocals, but it can also be perceived in instrumental pieces.

The orchestra/band should not be repeated more than twice. Even though the songs may sound differently, each orchestra/band has a distinct and identifiable sound – that is what makes them successful.

In most dance styles, one is free to change orchestras/bands between songs, but in Tango dancing it is the norm to play sets of 3-4 songs from the same orchestra. This presents challenges in avoiding ear and emotional fatigue. Here the DJ must vary the tempo, dynamics, emotion/feel, metaphor and key.

It is typical to DJ for a particular style of dancing, swing, tango, salsa, so varying genre/style does not usually apply. But where it does apply, such as a general ballroom social dance where all dances are performed, the repetition rule should be followed with respect to genre/style.

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[2] See *Lindy Hop and Argentine Tango*; Peter BetBasoo; http://www.boogiedrop.com/lingo/lingo.pdf

Dancing is a physical activity. Varying the tempo allows the dancer to cover a range of intensity, subject to the repetition rule. Here the rule is slightly more flexible but applies non-the-less. One can repeat the "medium tempo" for a given dance style perhaps 3-4 times, but that would be the limit. Fast and slow tempos must be played for relief, and should be strictly subject to the repetition rule. One should not repeat fast or slow tempos more than once.

Dynamics, by which we mean the energy/intensity of a song, not its volume, must also be strictly subject to the repetition rule.

Formula is particularly egregious and should be avoided, because once it is recognized it is met with cynicism or even derision by the listener. Formula refers to the blueprint of a song. This occurs when an artist has a hit with a song and follows with a formulaic copy with his second song. A very good example is the band Eurythmics, whose song *Sweet Dreams Are Made of These*[3] was a hit in 1982, and they followed in 1983 with *Here Comes the Rain Again*[4], a practically indistinguishable copy. An example of this from Tango are the songs *Percal*[5] and *Que Falta Que Me Hacés*[6] by the Miguel Calo Orchestra. Many Tango DJs commit the sin of playing these two songs back-to-back.

Throughout history artists in all genres have engaged in formulaic copying of their own music or the music of others. Songs of these types should never be played back-to-back, it is almost the same as playing the same song back-to-back.

Texture and Variation

It is important to change the texture of the music if possible. By texture we mean orchestration/instrumentation. For example, typical swing music is Big Band, which is dominantly brass in nature, with five saxophone, five trumpets and five trombones. Playing a swing song with different instruments, say guitar and organ, introduces relief and variety and makes the return of the brass sounds more impactful and enjoyable.

Variation at the song level is when a song is transformed into another genre but is still within the dance style being played. For example, a swing song is played as a slow blues song, a tango song is played as a milonga, a salsa song is played as a Cha Cha Cha. This adds very effective contrast and is appreciated by dancers. This is even done within the same song, such as *St. Louis Blues*[7] by W. C. Handy, which starts as a tango and switches to a low-down blues.

Contrast and Tension

Since the smallest unit a DJ works with is a song, contrast is best used when a song is diametrically opposite of the song which preceded it. It can be opposite in many ways:

- Tempo
- Emotion/Feel
- Dynamics
- Texture

The most effective contrast is dramatic (emotion/feel). For example, following a very percussive, energetic and fast song with a poetic, lyrical and slow song. The contrast must have a sudden quality to be effective. An example of this from tango is to play the song *Poema*[8] by Canaro after any fast milonga, such as *La Milonga Que Faltaba*[9], or vice versa. An example

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[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeMFqkcPYcg
[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pohZ0dqaP64
[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENdbOAyqiEY
[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLkFC5KaAH8
[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i58rN88xDMQ
[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyyw6FN4dtk
[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIlt_8ZnhBw

from swing would be to follow a slow tempo swing, such as *Easy Does It*[10] by Count Basie, with a very fast, energetic song such as *Traffic Jam*[11] by Artie Shaw.

Tension is creating a conflict in the music which requires resolution. Each song does this since songs have a beginning, middle and end. Since songs are the smallest units a DJ works with, creating tension is limited. The best way to do it is with contrast, as discussed above. But in this case one can contrast two, three or four songs with what follows them. For example, three songs can be played, each slower than its predecessor, and the fourth song will be very fast. The tension being created here is the slowing down of the tempo. The listener is left uncertain how long this will continue. The reverse, speeding up the tempo, can also be used.

Tension can also be created by varying the dynamic (energy/intensity) of a series of songs, increasing or decreasing it to setup the expectation in the listener's mind and finally resolving it. Resolution invariably involves a contrasting element.

Best DJ Practices

All other things being equal, the best quality recording should be used. If available, stereo recordings are preferred over mono recordings. A mono recording is used only if it is superior and of good quality, containing no scratching or hissing sounds. Compare the 1942[12] version of *Minnie the Moocher* by Cab Calloway with the 1980[13] recording.

The best version of a song should be used. This is almost always also the classic version of a song – it is classic because it is the best. An artist may have recorded many versions of a song, there is no reason to use any one other than the classic version, which everyone is familiar with. Using a different version subverts the listener's expectation and sets him up for disappointment because the alternate version fails to deliver the emotional satisfaction and quality.

With rare exceptions, this also applies to a cover recording, i.e., a recording by a modern or contemporary orchestra/band of a classic song from another orchestra. It is extremely rare for the new recording to be as good as the classic one, and playing the cover only sets up the listener for disappointment and the DJ for failure. An exception is *Oye Como Va*[14] as covered by Santana, this has become the classic version because it is better than the original version, recorded by Tito Puente.[15] Many other artists have recorded this as a Cha Cha Cha. Do not play theirs, play the classic version.

Play a song which makes people dance, this should be obvious. Put another way, the DJ's opinion, likes and preferences are irrelevant. A song may be excellent artistically but not for dancing. Play songs which make people dance. See the 90/10 rule below.

As a DJ, you should have four lists of songs, called A-list, B-list, C-list, D-list. The A-list are the best songs in all respects, these are guaranteed to always get people dancing. The B-list are the second tier. These can be played if carefully positioned in the playlist so they are sandwiched between A-list songs, which give them support. C-list songs are rarely played except for special purposes. D-list songs are never played.

This brings us to *context*. Placing a song in a proper context can turn it from a B-list song to an A-list song and conversely from an A-list song to a B-list song. For example, *Poema* is one of the most beloved classics of tango, renowned for its beauty, lyricism, tranquility and contrasting and dramatic staccato sections. Playing this song after a similar sounding song would steal its thunder, so to speak.

When creating a playlist, careful attention must be given to what comes before and after each song, so that the song is allowed to have maximum affect.

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[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjPB9xJ8h84
[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRZREQMTY1c
[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNJQ8VFVqwA
[13] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJqh_KX5x3o
[14] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7ATTjg7tpE
[15] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpAXzTpANNw

Each song has a purpose, and this can be one of three things:

1. Create continuity
2. Create contrast
3. Create tension

A DJ must know what is required at a position in the playlist and choose a song for the appropriate purpose.

Novelty is critically important. It provides a welcome relief for the ear and mind. By novelty we mean playing a song outside of the genre. For example, playing salsa in a swing or tango dance, or a swing in a salsa or tango dance. The effect of novelty is to relieve ear and emotional fatigue and to rebuild expectations in the listener. It is like leaving home on some adventure and returning to the safety of home. It greatly enhances the effect of the regular music being played. Also, many dancers are able to dance in more than one style.

The 90/10 rule states that if more than 10% of the dancers are not dancing at any time, there is something wrong with the music. This should be observed. If it is a one-time occurrence – and this sometimes happens, especially with a small number of dancers – it can be ignored. But if this occurs for two or more consecutive songs, or intermittently during the dance, the playlist needs to be examined and corrected.

Be aware of a false positive when it comes to this rule. It is possible for more than 90% of people to be dancing despite the music being bad, this is because the dancers have no choice since there is only one DJ most of the time, so they are forced to dance despite disliking the music. Learn to feel the energy in the room, to distinguish between positive and negative energy.

Arc and Forward Motion

I have left arc and forward motion for the end. These are intertwined and concern the large-scale structure of a music set.

A set of music, a playlist, is like a symphony, it must have a beginning, middle and end, it must have varying dynamics, it must at all times convey forward motion. This is the *arc*. These are structural aspects, and are not subject to the repetition rule (except for varying dynamics).

When creating a playlist, one must be cognizant of the beginning, middle and end, and how to get there and what should occur at those points. This gives the DJ goals and milestones and allows him to observe the rules of dynamics, purpose and context stated above.

Depending on the nature of the dance, the beginning can start gradually or with a bang and begin to work toward the climax at the midpoint.

The midpoint of a playlist, in terms of time, should be the climax, and the playlist should build up the tension up to that point. For example, the midpoint can be the place to play the best music, the best orchestra or band, or the place to bust out into a dance jam circle (for Lindy Hoppers) or a performance. Regardless of the nature of the climax, there should be a build-up toward the midpoint. This is achieved by controlling the energy and dynamics at each point prior to the climax, slowly increasing the dynamics, energy and intensity.

Working toward the end is the reverse, an unwinding toward closure. Like the beginning, this can end gradually or with a bang.

It is important to vary the energy, intensity and dynamics of the entire playlist. These must not be flatlined, they must rise and fall. This is what gives the sense of forward motion, and this is achieved by adhering to the repetition rule.