

Musicality in Dancing: From A to M¹

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Dancing is a 4-dimensional art. It is the movement of the body in the three spatial dimensions, synchronized to an external rhythm which exists in the fourth dimension of time. Dancing cannot exist without the fourth dimension, the external rhythm which we call music.² Since music drives dancing, we judge the quality of a dance by how well it connects to music -- a connection we commonly call *musicality*.

It is difficult to define the term musicality because part of the definition is aesthetic, and this is subjective. At best we can specify a minimal set of requirements, which must be satisfied to claim that a dancer is being musical or -- more to the point -- *not*. But we cannot use these requirements to say that a particular choreography is good or bad, because that is subjective.

We shall use the term choreography to denote a dance performance. This can be *spontaneous choreography*, dance movement that occurs organically on the social dance floor, when dancing to music that is not known in advance, or *planned choreography*, dance movement that is prepared in advance, and performed to a specific and known piece of music.

Choreographic interpretation is the process of matching dance movement to the mood and rhythm of a musical piece (henceforth, song). To do this effectively, one must have an understanding of a song on a rhythmic, harmonic and emotional level. This comes fundamentally from being completely connected to the song, from being one with the song, from literally becoming another instrument within the band. Once this is achieved it actually becomes trivial to choose the proper dance movement (assuming a sufficiently rich dance vocabulary exists).

To create effective choreographic interpretation (i.e., dancing) we must perform a highly detailed analysis of the rhythmic, harmonic and emotional content of a song, which will result in segmenting the piece into distinct motifs and phrases, which can be of any length and may cross measure boundaries.

We shall now discuss the two aspects of a song: music and emotional content. We shall give examples from Swing and Tango music, but the analysis applies to most genres of music. Our discussion is aimed at social dancers (Swing, Tango, Salsa and others), who may not be aware of some or all of these aspects of musicality. Professional dancers and choreographers will most certainly have this awareness.

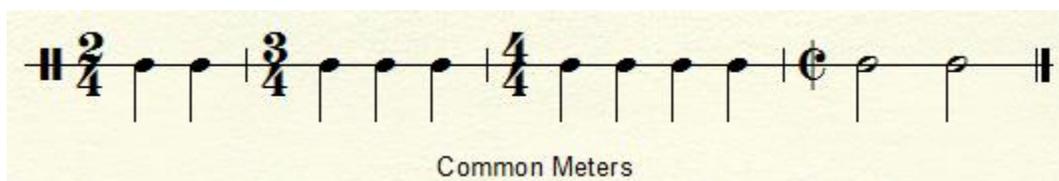
Music

There are three musical aspects of a song: rhythm, form and harmony.

Rhythm

Rhythm exists on three levels in a song. We shall call them meter, metric rhythm and melodic rhythm.

The first level is the *meter* of a song. Meter is beats per measure. For example, 3/4 (Waltz, Tango), 2/4 (Tango, Polka), 2/2 or 4/4 (Swing, Salsa).



The second level is the *metric rhythm*, the general rhythm of a song, which in most cases will not be the same as the meter. For example, the following tango is written in the 2/4 meter:



A Su Majestad, by J. & M. Canaro

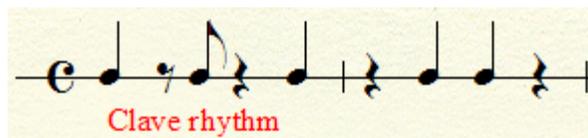
But the rhythm of the song is not 1-2, it is the *habanera* rhythm, the defining rhythm of tango, and is played by the left hand above (the bottom staff). The rhythm is:



Similarly, a typical swing song is written in 2/2, but the defining rhythm of swing is:



A Salsa song is typically written in 4/4, but the rhythm of Salsa is the *Clave* Rhythm:



The third level is the *melodic rhythm*, the rhythm of phrases and melodies within a song, as expressed by various instruments or vocals. This is a nearly infinite source of variation and, again, in most cases this will not be the same as meter or metric rhythm. For example, in the following:



St. Louis Blues, W. C. Handy (original score, 1914, Handy Bros. Music Company)

The vocal melody is in the top first three measures, and its rhythm is not the same as the metric rhythm (bottom measures), as shown in the following rhythmic analysis:



We see that in the first measure the metric rhythm is the same as the meter, but in the second and third measures it is not. The melodic rhythm is completely different from both in all three measures.

Form

A song may be compared to a piece of written text, which has letters, words, sentences and paragraphs, as well as various forms of flow control (i.e., punctuation symbols: period, colon, semicolon, exclamation mark, question mark). Music has notes, which comprise the alphabet of music, groups of notes which form words, groups of words which form sentences, and groups of sentences which form phrases and paragraphs; flow control in music is achieved by the proper use of meter, note durations and rests.

A song typically has 3-5 sections, sections typically have 4 paragraphs, and paragraphs typically have 2 sentences.

For example, a Jazz/Swing Section has a number of *paragraphs* strung together; the typical section layouts are as follows:

Jazz/Swing	$8 + 8 + 8 + 8 = 32$ bars (AABA)
Blues/Swing	$12 + 12 + 8 + 12 = 44$ bars (AABA)

A Jazz/Swing section has two statements of paragraph A, a statement of paragraph B (new material), and a repetition of paragraph A. This is the most common formula; other formulae exist.³

A Jazz/Swing paragraph is typically two sentences, conveying the feeling of call and response or question and answer.

Tango music is similarly structured. The form of a Tango song is typically AABB or AABBC, where A, B and C are 8 measures in length. Thus a section in tango can be 32 or 48 measures in length. There are usually 2.5 to 4.5 sections. The .5 is found at the end of the song. For example, the song *Derecho Viejo*⁴ has the following arrangement:

Paragraph	AABB	AABB	AA
Length	8888	8888	88

Harmony

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a thorough discussion of harmony. We can, however, make a few general remarks. A song is written as a series of chords (e.g., A minor, E major) which provide the harmonic foundation and convey a sense of forward motion, as well as impart (in conjunction with rhythm and form) the mood and feeling, *viz*, the *emotional* content. There are well defined and recurring harmonic formulae, groups of 2, 3 or 4 chords, and with practice one may learn to recognize them. Much like words and sentences, each formula conveys a particular mood and emotion in the music.

A song is written in a key, e.g., C major, and, for most of the music we are considering, usually remains in that key. In Swing/Jazz music it is rare to change keys. In Tango music it is common to change between the minor and major modes of the same key. These two modes, major and minor, also convey different moods and emotions.

This will be discussed further below.

Dance Musicality

With this knowledge of what constitutes a song, we are ready to make some general comments about what it means to be musical when dancing. We shall not comment on aesthetics, i.e., whether a dance is "good" or "bad" or "beautiful" -- that is subjective. We can, however, say whether a dance is connected to the music, in ways we shall describe below.

The first and most obvious requirement, and the minimal one, is that a dance must match the meter of a song. One cannot dance a waltz (which is in 3/4) to a song written in 2/4 or 4/4. But dancing strictly to the meter would be boring.

A dancer must also begin the basic step of the dance on the beginning of the measure or phrase. For example, a Mambo or Cha Cha begins on count 2 with the first step forward.

The next level of connection between a dance and a song is the metric rhythm. This will be different from the meter. For example, in tango the rhythm of the dance is the *Habanera*, and moving to this rhythm would produce a more interesting result. But once again, dancing strictly to this rhythm would be boring, since it is repeated throughout a song.

The next level of connection between a dance and a song is the melodic rhythm. This offers a vast variety of rhythms to follow in a dance. But dancing strictly to the melodic rhythm, as represented by vocals or instruments, would appear too busy, too dense.

If a dancer is connecting to the music in one of these three ways, we can say he is being musical (again, without making an aesthetic judgment on the quality of the dance).

A more satisfactory dance connection to a song would be on all three levels, switching between the three. A dancer must establish a connection on the meter and metric levels, and depart from that to the melodic level throughout the choreography. The meter and metric connections establish a frame of reference from which to venture out and to which return. This provides for rhythmic contrast in dance movements, which makes them stand out from each other.

Emotional Connection

Rhythm, Harmony and Form are the three building blocks of a song. A song is the sum of these three parts, but the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Rhythm, Harmony and Form are the devices used to convey the emotional content of a song. Put another way, the three parts, when put together, create a fourth part, the sum of the others, and this fourth part conveys the true message/emotional content of a song.

It should be noted that lyrics also play this critical function. In fact, lyrics can replace the form completely; the form of the song will then be prescribed by the lyrics.⁵

This brings us to the second aspect of a song. We have discussed the first, the music, with its three parts, rhythm (meter, metric rhythm and melodic rhythm), harmony and form. Now we shall discuss the second and most important aspect, the emotional content.

The emotional content of a song are the moods, images, feelings, emotions, sounds conveyed at any given instance by the *whole* song. This emotional content may be accentuated by one or more parts of the song (e.g., an instrument or the singer), by one of the rhythms, by the form or by all of these. But it should be stressed that at any given instance the entire song, i.e. the sum of all its parts, will be conveying the same emotional content.⁶

Put differently, when one listens to a song, one must ask "what is the song saying?" and "how is it saying it?" A song may speak of death with deep sadness (the deceased has departed) or with deep joy (the deceased is in the Grace of the Lord). A song may speak of love with happiness or with anger.

The emotional connection, the fourth level of connection that arises from the sum of the other three connections (or the Lyrics), is clearly the most important; this is the connection to which a dancer must listen. A dancer must convey through his movements the emotional content that is given by a song at any given instance. All other devices -- dance vocabulary, rhythms, forms, harmonies -- exist to convey the emotional content of a song and must be subservient and consonant to the emotional content of a song.

We are now ready to state the following principle: *dancing is fundamentally equivalent to acting and miming*.

Rudolf Laban states the equivalence of dancing to acting and mime as follows: "...an actor would never achieve the display of personality required in acting without having previously experienced full abandonment to the passionate human urge for movement as manifested in mime and dance."⁷

Acting uses body movements and facial expressions (visual) and voice (audio) to convey emotional content. Miming is closely related. It does not use voice, but uses body movements and facial expressions to convey emotional content, as well as portray imaginary objects (i.e. a wall or a table). Visual or audio devices are used to convey the emotional content. In other words, like rhythm, harmony and form, they are the parts that combine to create a new whole.

From this perspective, there is no difference between slamming a fist on a table to express anger in a film and dancing a Cha Cha to a song. In both cases, movement of the body, or a part of the body, is being used to express some emotional content.

It is possible for a dancer to do this mechanically, without connecting to the emotional content of a song, and this should be avoided. As we said earlier, dance vocabulary, rhythms, forms and harmonies exist to convey the emotional content of a song, which means that a dancer must be connected *emotionally* to a song. Once this is achieved, dance movement and rhythmic, harmonic and form connections become fluid, organic and secondary.

The question then is how does a dancer connect emotionally to a song? There is no easy answer. To attempt at an answer, we must delve briefly into acting and miming technique, discuss the role of lyrics and harmony in music, as well as submission to the music.

Acting Technique

There exist many schools of acting technique. We can broadly classify them into two camps: *technical* and *method*.

The technical style, also called objective style, was developed for the stage. It has a long history and is designed to be seen from a distance. It is a highly formal style. It conveys a character, but does not necessarily present a realistic or natural depiction. Technical style emphasizes physical expression and projection of a character.

The method style, also called subjective style, has many variations⁸, each emphasizing a particular aspect. It was developed by Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863 - 1938), a Russian actor, theatre director, teacher and co-founder of the famous Moscow Art Theatre. The method style is intended for up close and personal viewing, as in films. It attempts to realistically convey a character using introspection to internally assume the identity of a character. It portrays a character through subtle and intimate acting. It also allows an actor to improvise in new or unexpected situations, acting and reacting as if he is a real character in life, because method style prescribes that an actor actually become the character being portrayed in all ways. To achieve this, a method actor uses many tools, including *substitution* (with similar circumstances) and *affective memory* (emotional recall) of real experiences from his own life (anger, love, happiness) to portray a character.⁹

Movement in acting and mime "...is the result of striving after an object deemed valuable, or of a state of mind."¹⁰ The motivation, the inner impulse from which movement originates -- the *effort*¹¹-- comes from within the actor or mime.

According to Laban:

"In theatrical acting, which is artistic enhancement of human action, the controversial tendencies contained in the thinking and feeling of the various characters are expressed both in words and in gesture. In mime and ballet the dynamics of thought and emotion are expressed in a purely visible form. They are, as it were, written into the air by the movements of the performer's body. What music, the audible part of a ballet performance, does for dancing is partly to heighten the rhythmical components of bodily movement, and partly to translate their emotional content into sound-waves."¹²

Here we must note that for most dancing, and for the social dances we are considering, the music comes first and the dance emanates from the music, so that sound-waves are translated into emotional content by the dancer -- the reverse of what Laban says above, and the reverse of acting or miming, where the effort originates from within the actor or mime, and not from an objective, external source. However, both in dancing and acting/miming the intent is to convey, regardless of its source, emotional content through movement (or speech).

On mime, Laban states:

"A mime often transmits to the spectator what kind of an inner struggle his character is going through, solely by his body carriage or posture without perceptible movement or sound."¹³

"In the art of mime the visible movements of the body are used as the sole means of expression;"¹⁴

The salient point to take from the quotes above is the conveyance of emotional content through body movement (which includes facial expressions).

There is another aspect of mime that is of importance to dancers, and that is the spatial and geometric relationship of the mime to his imaginary universe.¹⁵ We have all witnessed a mime interacting with an imaginary wall, chair or table, and the effect is realistic, as if a real wall blocks the mime's path. To accomplish this, the mime must have a 3-dimensional map in his mind of his imaginary universe. This is fundamentally equivalent to a dancer's awareness of his body and its movement in three dimensions. The dancer will have the same 3-dimensional map in his mind, only it will be of his body as it moves in 3 dimensions relative to a fixed frame of reference (his partner, the floor, the walls, the ceiling), and the shape and geometric arrangement of his movement.

On this Laban says "...it is important not only to become aware of the various articulations in the body and of their use in creating rhythmical and spatial patterns, but also of the mood and inner attitude produced by bodily action."¹⁶ He summarizes this in the following table¹⁷

	Effort Elements (inner impulses)		Measurable Aspects	Classifiable Aspects
<i>Motion Factors</i>	<i>Fighting</i>	<i>Yielding</i>	<i>Objective function</i>	<i>Movement sensation</i>
Weight	Firm	Gentle	Resistance strong (or lesser degrees to weak)	Levity light (or lesser degrees to heavy)
Time	Sudden	Sustained	Speed quick (or less degrees to slow)	Duration long (or lesser degrees to short)
Space	Direct	Flexible	Direction straight (or lesser degrees to wavy)	Expansion pliant (or lesser degrees to thread-like)
Flow	Bound	Free	Control stopping (or lesser degrees to releasing)	Fluency fluid (or lesser degrees to pausing)

A dancer must analyze his dance vocabulary and assess the quality of each movement with respect to its emotional content, *viz*, the emotion it conveys. It is possible, of course, for a movement to convey a range of emotions; put another way, most dance movements are emotionally neutral and can express the emotional content of a song at any given moment. As we stated earlier, once a dancer is connected *emotionally* to a song all other connections and movements become fluid, pliant, organic and secondary.¹⁸

For dancing, the Technical style of acting suggests itself for planned choreography (performance exhibitions) because of the stage-audience relationship. The Method style suggests itself for spontaneous choreography (social dancing) because of its intimate nature. The methods may be combined, of course, for both types of choreographies.

Connecting Emotionally to Music

How does one establish an emotional connection with the music? The happy answer is that we do this all the time, that is why we like some songs, hate other songs and love a few. But the question should be reversed. It is the music that connects to us -- if we let it.

If a listener is attentively listening to a song, without distraction, he will experience its emotional current. If he allows the music to enter freely his conscious and subconscious, and to dominate them, he will become one with the music.

It is the same for a dancer; he must completely submit himself to the music, so that he becomes one with its emotional current. Complete submission, complete surrender, to the force of the music is critical in achieving an emotional connection. In a literal sense, once the dancer has submitted himself to the music, he has no conscious control of his emotions -- they are guided by the music. It becomes a hypnotic trance.

"It is, however, probable that liturgical praying and ritual dancing coexisted in very early times; and so it is also probable that the spoken drama and musical dance have both developed from worship."¹⁹ It is not a coincidence that praying and ritual (trance) dancing are performed in religious services.²⁰

If a dancer allows the music to take control of him, by totally submitting to it, his movements, which are emotionally neutral, will be colored by the emotional content of a song at any given moment without any conscious effort on his part; the movements become conduits for the emotional content of a song.

"The mediating activity of the actor demands veracity in a higher degree. The competent actor, mime, or dancer strikingly reveals the possibility of expressing the values and all their complications through bodily action."²¹ Here veracity means submission, of ceding subconscious control to the music.

The role of the conscious then becomes selecting the sequence of movements in a dance, either in advance for a planned choreography or spontaneously for a social dance. Which movements to select will be guided by the dancer's technical level, the breadth and depth of his vocabulary, his aesthetic sense of the song, his choice of what level of connection to use, his personality and his physique.

Though the subconscious is completely under the control of the music, the dancer still consciously interprets the emotional content by focusing on harmony, lyrics or rhythm and choosing movements to *represent* the emotional content. The choice of which movement to execute is conscious, but the emotional color to apply to it stems from the subconscious, which is under the domination of the music.

Listening to music, to the same song repeatedly until it is thoroughly understood, will greatly improve the dancer's ability to feel and react to the emotional vicissitudes in a song.

Harmony is perhaps the most important factor in conveying emotional color. Some songs are happy, some sad, some are light and airy, some are ponderous and thick. This is accomplished by the mode of the song (e.g., major, which suggest happiness, minor, which suggest sadness²²), the various chords used and their arrangements, rhythm and the form of a song. A dancer can learn to recognize all of these features on a conscious level by listening to music and recording his emotional reaction to each part of the song. These reactions will differ in small and large degrees from person to person. Music is subjective, one must remember. Strictly speaking, there can be no wrong interpretation of the emotional color of a song, but some interpretations can be better than others.

Lyrics are also an important source of emotional color. They explicitly indicate the mood and feeling of a song, and are not abstract like the music. Lyrics are easier to interpret for emotional content than instrumental music.

If an emotional connection is established with the music, the dancer proceeds to dance not by asking what movement he should execute, but what feeling (coming from the music) he should convey with his movement. *Dancing at this highest level will always be first a question of what emotional content to convey, then what movement to use to convey it.*

The technical aspect of executing a movement, once it has been chosen, is described in four phases:²³

1. Attention: Object of the action and the situation of its execution are inspected and considered.
2. Intention: determination to act.
3. Decision: action
4. Precision: anticipation of performing the actual deed

Note, these are not subconscious level actions, these are conscious level decisions made by the dancer. This is where the technique and artistry of the dancer is displayed.

Conclusion

We have discussed musicality in dancing, from acting to mime, and have shown that to be musical when dancing one must connect to the music on various levels: rhythm (meter, metric rhythm and melodic rhythm), form and harmony. We have also shown that the most fundamental connection to a song is at the emotional level, which is achieved by the sum of rhythm, form and harmony.

We have asserted the fundamental equivalence of dancing to acting and mime. We have shown that dance movement must convey the emotional content of a song. We have shown that to emotionally connect to a song we must use some of the same devices that actors and mime performers use, and we must allow the music to take control of our subconscious. In doing so, we change our thinking from what movement we should execute to what emotion we should convey, the movement being of secondary importance.

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² Solipsism aside, we are concerned with dancing involving at least two persons, at least one of which must be dancing, hence the need for an objective external rhythm by which to judge 3-dimensional movement.

³ Here are some examples of sections from Swing music:

- 8 bars: How Long, How Long the Blues, Count Basie.
- 12 bars: *Sent For You Yesterday*, Count Basie (<http://www.boogiedrop.com/lingo/SentForYouYesterday.mp3>). 8 measures introduction, three 12 measure sections, 4 measures transition, two 12 measure sections, 4 measures transition, three 12 measure sections, 8 measures closing.
- 32 bars: *Take the A Train*, Duke Ellington (<http://www.boogiedrop.com/lingo/TakeTheATrain.mp3>). 4 measures introduction, two 32 measure sections, 4 measures transition, one 32 measure section, 16 measures closing.
- *Dipsy Doodle*, Larry Clinton (<http://www.boogiedrop.com/lingo/DipsyDoodle.mp3>). 12 measures introduction, one 44 measure section, 4 measures transition, one 44 measure section, 8 measures, 12 measures closing.

⁴ *Derecho Viejo*, Juan D'Arienzo y Su Orquesta Típica: <http://www.boogiedrop.com/lingo/DerechoViejo.mp3>.

⁵ For example, Debussy's *Prelude to an Afternoon of a Faun* has no classical music form (i.e., Sonata or Rondo), it is a tone poem that gets its form from the poem it is based on.

⁶ This is true for the music we are considering, but for more sophisticated music (i.e., Classical) it will not be true and more than one emotion may be conveyed simultaneously.

⁷ Rudolf Laban; *The Mastery of Movement*, 3rd edition, 1971, page 102; Plays, Inc., Boston.

⁸ Meisner, Stella Adler, Michael Chekhov and others.

⁹ See here for a more detailed discussion: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Method_acting

¹⁰ Laban, page 2.

¹¹ Laban's terminology, *Ibid*, page 10.

¹² *Ibid*, page 8.

¹³ *Ibid*, page 121.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, page 103.

¹⁵ I wish to thank Luciano Brigante, an internationally renowned tango instructor and dancer, for pointing this out to me.

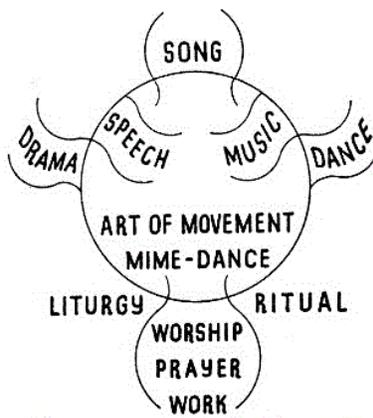
¹⁶ Laban, page 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, page 84.

¹⁸ "The greater the economy of effort the less apparent is the strain. High economy of effort makes movement look almost effortless." *Ibid*, page 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, page 5.

²⁰ This diagram shows expressiveness in the art of movement, *ibid*, page 5.



²¹ *Ibid*, page 115.

²² Major and minor are not intrinsically happy and sad. In Middle Eastern music, for example, the minor mode is used in happy songs. The association of sadness with the minor mode occurs in Western music. Never-the-less, there is a melancholy quality in the minor mode.

²³ Laban, page 115.