DANCE COMPOSITION
THE CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

Dance composition includes exploring a variety of methods of choreographing dances. The study of dance composition enables us to create interesting and well-structure dance pieces.

**STIMULUS**

- Decision on type of dance
  - 5 types
    - 
    - 
    - 
    - 
    - 

- Presentation of the stimulus
  - 5 types
    - 
    - 
    - 
    - 
    - 
    
      - Representational, or
      - Symbolic

**IMPROVISATION**

- 

**MOTIF**

This can be phrased:
THE CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

The next stage:

MOTIF (Phrased)

Definition:

CHOREOGRAPHIC DEVICES

List all 16
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Phrases/ Sequences/Sections

Definition of all three:

COMPOSITIONAL STRUCTURES

List then
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Transitions

COMPOSITION
STIMULUS

A stimulus can be defined as something that gives you an idea – an inspiration, a starting point. It is the beginning of the choreographic process.

Examples of stimuli for dance:

**AUDITORY**  
*music* – choreographer must be aware of nature of music and if it complements or conflicts with the dance idea. Dictates mood, style, length, phrasing and overall form.

*voice, poems, found sound (effects)* – little restriction in the ways these can be used.

**VISUAL**  
*pictures, sculptures, objects, patterns, shapes, etc...* – lines, shape, rhythm, texture, colour, imagined associations. Provides more freedom for the dance choreographer, can be unaccompanied by the stimulus or used in the setting of the dance work.

**KINESTHETIC**  
*movement itself* – has no communicative purpose, it does not intend to transmit any given idea but does have a style, mood, dynamic range, pattern or form, e.g., tip, fall, walk, turn, etc.

**TACTILE**  
*feel of a piece of material, clothing, object, etc...* – produces kinesthetic response, e.g., full skirt may provoke swirling, turning, freely flowing, etc.

**IDEATIONAL**  
*to convey an idea or unfold a story or an emotion* – e.g., if it is war the choreographer’s range of choice is limited to movement that will suggest this. If it is a story then it also has to be sequentially portrayed in a narrative form.

The stimulus forms the basic impulse behind the work. Often several stimuli collectively will influence the work, and perhaps the stimulus accompanies the dance.

The choreographer – once made the decision on how to use the stimulus – must then decide whether or not successful communication of the idea depends upon knowledge of the origin. Some choreographers use the stimulus to accompany the work (e.g., music, set, text, etc.) others provide a programme note as a brief explanation, some just use the title to give some insight (or not!).

**Stimulus** – something that excites or evokes  
**Stimuli** – more than one stimulus
PRESENTATION OF THE STIMULUS

It is probable that the stimulus that gave you the ideas for the dance also suggested images of movement that communicated that idea. It is necessary at this stage to decide how the movement content is to be presented by the choreographer. (This must work alongside the style and type of dance you want to do – see next section).

An example of an idea could be one such as ‘sadness’. The movement images may well be a bent spine, slow moving, introvert small movements, swaying, hand wringing, etc.

If you were to depict these human movements exactly as they are in real life, then you will be using **REPRESENTATIONAL** presentation (like mime).

To use these movements extracting the essence or main characteristics and adding other features in action or dynamics, then you will be making a **SYMBOLIC** presentation.

To symbolise something suggests there must be a certain sign or signal which links to its origin, and other aspects of it may be unique and may be unreal. For example, you may just take the swaying idea of ‘sadness’ and work with that. By presenting the idea in this way, the dance may be open to more than one interpretation of its meaning.

Most dances are symbolic presentations of the stimulus.
TYPES OF DANCES

Dances may be classified by their style (genre), such as:

- Ballet
- Modern / Contemporary
- Jazz
- African
- Indian

They may also be described in terms of how they are choreographed. Here are the five main types of dances.

1. **Pure Dance**
   This deals only with movement itself. For example, a jazz dance based only on the movements of that technique, there is no meaning to interpret. These dances may, however, come from an interpretation of the music.

2. **Abstract or Non-Narrative Dance**
   Abstract is a confusing term. It means the choreographer has taken out (abstracted) thoughts about something and put them into movement terms. An audience may not interpret them in exactly the same way as the choreographer and this is not necessarily important. It does not tell a story – it is just a series of movement ideas strung together in the choreographer’s own way.
   e.g., *Time* can be shown in many different ways in one dance – see if you can think of some of the ways you may show this in movement.

3. **Lyrical Dance**
   This suggests the quality of the dance. The dictionary says it is ‘...having a relatively light, pure, melodic quality’. It could then be a characteristic of a pure or abstract dance and not just a dance in itself.

4. **Narrative Dance or Dance Drama / Dramatic Dance**
   A dance-drama, or narrative dance on the other hand, has a story to tell, and does so be a series of episodes arranged in logical sequence (many ballets are often like this).
   Because both types are concerned with people and their emotions, characters are involved.
   In order to make movements dramatic, the effort put into them are important. Also, in dramatic dance there are relationships between people which are emotive.
   A dramatic dance concentrates upon a happening or mood which does not unfold a story but perhaps suggests one.

5. **Comic Dance**
   Movement in a comic dance may be unusual. Very often the movements are mimetic in nature (*they are based on realistic movements*) and exaggerated to make them peculiar.
IMPROVISATION

The choreographer has made three decisions so far:

1. chosen the stimulus,
2. decided on how the stimulus will be presented,
3. decided on the style and type of dance.

Improvisation must occur next to enable experimentation with movement ideas. Imagined movement can be tried and new ideas will evolve.

Improvisation is spontaneous, transient creation – it is not fixed, it is not formed. During improvisation there are moments when a movement ‘feels right’ and fits the choreographer’s image. When this occurs, the movement or movement phrase can be

**SELECTED and REFINED** (where appropriate)

to provide the basic ingredients for the composition.

*How does a choreographer evaluate what is useful?*

*The following criteria may help.*

1. the movement has meaning and relevance to the idea for the dance,
2. the movement is interesting and original in action, dynamics and spatial patterning,
3. the movement has potential for development.

Once selected, evaluated and refined, this movement or movement phrase is called the

**MOTIF**

Webster’s Dictionary (1966) defines the work motif as:

*... a theme or subject – an element in a composition, especially a dominant element.*

*Remember* improvisation is not over here, it may be used again and again when developing the motif.
**MOTIF AND DEVELOPMENT**

**MOTIF**: a motif is a movement or short movement phrase that forms the basis of the structure of a dance.

It can:
- a) convey the theme / idea of the dance in physical form
- b) mark a recurring feature of the accompaniment, e.g., chorus of the music
- c) convey a character
- d) reflect the initial visual stimulus, e.g., pose from a picture, photograph, sculpture, etc.

### 16 Ways to Manipulate a Motif

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>1. Repetition</strong></th>
<th>Repeat exactly the same</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Retrograde</strong></td>
<td>Perform it backward. Start at the end and follow it back through space – like a movie run backward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Inversion</strong></td>
<td>Upside down ( becomes ) or lateral ( becomes ). For upside-down inversion, you may have to lie on the floor or stand on your head. (This can be tricky and often impossible, but don’t dismiss it on those grounds.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Size</strong></td>
<td>Condense / Expand. Take the motif and do it as small as you can. Try it even smaller. Now take the movement and make it bigger, as big as you can.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. Tempo</strong></td>
<td>Fast / Slow / Stop. Take the motif and do it as fast as possible. Try again, even faster. Be careful not to let it get smaller. Do it as slowly as you can. Remember to keep the space constant, the same size it was originally. Find places for stillness in it.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6. Rhythm</strong></td>
<td>Vary the rhythm but not the tempo. The variety and pattern of the beats should be altered, not the speed or the length of time it takes to accomplish. If, for example, the original rhythm was , try doing it .</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7. Quality</strong></td>
<td>Vary the movement quality. Try the same movement quivery, drifting, with erratic tension, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>8. Instrumentation</strong></td>
<td>Perform the movement with a different body part; try several different parts of the body. Let another performer do it. Have a whole group do it.</td>
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<td>9. Force</td>
<td>Vary the amount of force you use in producing the movement. Do it with a great deal of strength, from beginning to end. Now repeat it again, with very little force, gently, weakly. Carefully try to keep the change in force only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Background</td>
<td>Change the design of the rest of the body from its original position and repeat the motif. Let the rest of the body be doing something while the motif is going on. Sit instead of stand. Try perhaps twisting all the rest of you into a knot while still performing the regular motif. Add another person (maybe having them wrap around you). Add to or change the set, the lighting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Staging</td>
<td>Perform it at a different place on the stage and/or with a different facing to the audience, sideways or on a diagonal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Embellishment</td>
<td>(Ornamentation). The movement itself can have the embellishment (e.g., little loops or jiggles occurring along the path of the movement); or a part of the body can be embellished as it is involved in the movement (as the arm moves, wiggle the fingers or make a fist); or try embellishing both the body and the path of movement at the same time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Change of Planes / Levels</td>
<td>Change the motif to a different plane: the horizontal, the vertical, the sagittal plane or any other slice of space. Do it on a different level. Trace the path of the gesture and use it as a floor pattern. Move along that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Additive / Incorporative</td>
<td>Additive: while doing the original motif, simultaneously execute any kind of jump, turn, or locomotor pattern (triplet, run, slide). Incorporative: make the original motif into a jump, turn or locomotor pattern. Although this can be tough or impossible with some motifs, approach it with a sense of “how can x [original motif] be jumped, turned, moved from place to place?” A series of chassés would be an example of the way an arc could be realised as a locomotor pattern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Fragmentation</td>
<td>Use only a part of the motif, any part. Use it as an entity in itself. Use it to attend to a detail, a part worth isolating that might otherwise be overlooked. Or use several parts of it, but not the whole thing – such as the beginning third, a tiny piece halfway through, and the very, very end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Combination</td>
<td>Combine any of the above so that they happen at the same time. This lets you combine affinities (faster with smaller) or antagonists (faster with larger) for choreographic interest and technical challenge. Fragmentation is particularly effective when combined with others. You may combine three or four manipulations at the same time (fragmentation/inversion/embellishment, or inversion/retrograde/slower/different background). Variety and complexity grows as you combine more and more manipulations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FORM

There is much more to a dance than just arranging movements. It has a form, an overall shape, system, unity, mould or mode of being. Having seen a dance, the viewer does not remember each and every movement or their order, but the impression of the whole. For instance, whether it rounded off as it began, the excitement of the development into the climaxes, the main message it conveyed and how original and interesting was the overall impact. Therefore, the choreographer has two main tasks which should occur simultaneously:

1. to select the movement content
2. to set the movement into a constructional frame which give the whole its form.

Types of Form

**Binary Form**  
(A B)  
Commonly used in dance composition. The first Section A is contrasted by a new Section B, but both have a common thread which binds one to the other. Each section may have contrasting elements, but there must be something similar in nature too.

**Ternary Form**  
(A B A)  
A conventional and satisfying form because going back to the beginning ‘rounds it off’. The return to Section A can be achieved by exact repetition of the initial section, or by reversing, highlighting parts, changing a few elements and changing the order of elements. They must be closely linked, while Section B forms the contrast.

**Rondo Form**  
(A B A C A D A)  
This provides the choreographer with a verse and chorus framework which gives room for variation in the verses and development in the choruses. Variation can produce something new each time, but it must still have enough of the original to be considered a related part to the whole. Development can recall the origin in many ways without changing the essence. This is again a satisfying form to watch, as the viewer can quickly identify the chorus movement and enjoy its repetition – it becomes a ‘joining-in’ process.

**Theme and Variation**  
This is a free-er, more asymmetric and exciting form. The theme provides the basis for the variations. Often called a sequential form – the initial statement is followed by a
number of developments or variations. The initial statement is not made again, and each variation becomes a basis for the next variation. Therefore, the dance can finish with movement which is very different to that of the beginning. The choreographer has a freedom but must pay attention to the connection throughout – even if the movement phrase is not repeated, something of its nature should linger on in the variations.

**Narrative Form (Episodic)**
A gradual unfolding of a story or idea. The movement content is sequentially arranged into sections A B C D E F G ..., etc., and each section is a further exposure of the ideas or story. The choreographer must consider the linking of each section so that it naturally flows into the next in a logical sequence – the sections in it may not always be apparent to the onlooker, although the choreographer would probably find it useful to work with it section by section to ensure that it has richness, contrast and variation in each part of the whole.
**Compositional structures**

This is a way of forming art, a traditional framework with set patterns. We can find firm in man’s existence – man/woman did not invent form it is all around us.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>FORM</strong></th>
<th><strong>LIFE</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning, middle, end.</td>
<td>Birth, life, death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea of climax</td>
<td>A Volcano, making love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABA</td>
<td>Day, Night, day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme and variation</td>
<td>The four seasons (year after year following the same sequence but never exactly the same)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Forming has a dual function:**
1) The process of developing material
2) The process of giving it a structure

**The AB structure – binary (two part)**
One of the simplest, like a verse and chorus of a song. Similar to 2 sides of a coin, A and B share a common arena but may be opposing or contradicting perspectives. A and B need a transition or a link.

**ABA structure - ternary (three part)**
So the beginning and end are same with a contrast in the middle. Like chorus verse chorus. You can develop the 2nd A to be ABA'.

Example:______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________

**ABACADAE – Structure – Rondo**
A further extension of AB. The idea that A keeps returning. Martha Grahams Frontier’ (1935) was in Rondo.

**Theme a variation – A1, A2, A3, A4**
Varying a motif, not developing but changing the dynamics, mood, space, style.

**Episodic structures**
All the other forms mentioned so far are also musical forms. This one is not, you would find comparisons in literature, as a story unfolds.

Example:______________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

**Collage**
Sometimes juxtaposing the unexpected cab create a unity of its own. Which often creates surprises for the audience. Pina Bausch tends to use the structure in many of her pieces.

**Chance**
The chance structure was the beginning of the Post-modern approach which highlighted an interest in the creative process for its on sake.

Example:______________________________________________________________________________
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**To conclude...**
The types of form appear cut and dried and easy to distinguish from one another, however, this is not always the case in practical terms. Many dances are not true to the conventional forms and may be an amalgamation. There are numerous possibilities open to the composer in the arrangement of the overall form. The essential thing to remember is that each part of the dance must have relevance to the whole.

References used:

J Smith  ‘Dance Composition’
M Tufnell
C Crickmay  ‘Body, Space, Image’
Worksheet 1

- Which question will you be answering in your choreography?
- Why did you choose it?
- What type of stimulus is it? (aural etc)
- What ideas do you have for the dance? Explore ideas. Take another full sheet and develop ideas - you may draw pictures.
- Are there any particular movements that you have already played with? Or visualised - must be in direct relation to stimulus.
- What ideas would you like to try out next week - you need to have a motif for homework!! This may be only a few movements.
- What dance training have you done this week to prepare you for performance?
- How will you rehearse this week?
- What type of dance can you see it becoming? (pure, dance-drama etc)
Worksheet 2

• Describe your first motif (The movements, the intention and what you are conveying).

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____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
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• Draw a stickman of how it ends below (remember the rule stickmen need a floor and a nose):

☐ ☐ ______________

• Why did you choose these movements from your initial improvisation? How does it relate to the stimulus?
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

• How did you refine your motif?
____________________________________________________________________________
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____________________________________________________________________________

• How have you developed the motif? (What choreographic devices did you use?)
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• How different does this new phrase look? Is there different timing? Does it travel? Do you use different levels? Have you added anything?
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• What do you want to do with it now?
____________________________________________________________________________
Worksheet 3

• Describe another motifs that you have choreographed using body actions, dynamics and use of space.

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• How does it relate to the stimulus?

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• Draw a stickman of a key moment (remember to draw a floor and nose).


• How have you developed the motif? (What choreographic devices did you use?)

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• Notate the original motif and the developed motif using laban motif writing.

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Worksheet 4

- What other key motifs have you choreographed describe the movements and say how they relate to the stimulus. - you may need to continue on the back of this sheet.

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- Notate a floor plan and two of your motifs.

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- What choreographic devices have you used? How has it developed the movement material.

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- Notate the original motif and the developed motif using laban motif writing.

_________  __________

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Worksheet 5

- Identify and further improvisation tasks that are needed and why? Describe them and how they relate to the stimulus:

- What is your dance communicating? Are the meanings clear in relation to the question? Suggest some improvements.

- Notate a simple travelling sequence from the dance:

- **Range of dynamics** (the weight, speed, flow and energy of movements) Suitable selection? Do you have any variations? Improvements? Describe the quality and dynamics of the dance and how this relates to the stimulus.
Worksheet 6

- What other choreographic devices have you used? With which motifs?

- Structuring - compositional structures. What is the structure of your dance? How many sections do you have? How do they relate to the stimulus?

- Notate another travelling phrase from the piece say what section it is from and how it relates to the stimulus.

- Draw a floor plan of one of your sections and say how the design of it relates to the stimulus.
Worksheet 7

• Rehearsals - When did you rehearse? How often? What did you rehearse?
________________________________________________________________________
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• What have you used to aid the dance in rehearsal e.g. mirrors, other dancers, teacher feedback, video? Using these tools to improve your performance what changes have you made?
Give three clear examples:
1)________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
2)________________________________________________________________________
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3)________________________________________________________________________
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• What physical skills do you think that you need to improve? E.g. Flexibility, alignment. How will you train yourself before the performance? E.g. exercises.
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• Look at the physical skills sheets and see what you need to improve.
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• Interpretative skills - read the pages - in ‘Essential guide to Dance’. Say which skills you need to improve. Also fill in sheet 8.
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Worksheet 8
Choreography
Physical and Interpretative skills

Tick the boxes below

Student:

Date __________________

### Physical skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posture and alignment</td>
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<td>Flexibility</td>
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<td>Strength</td>
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<td>Balance</td>
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<td>Body awareness</td>
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<td>Co-ordination</td>
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<td>Use of extension, contraction,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to reproduce movement</td>
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<td>accurately</td>
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<td>Whole body participation</td>
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<td>Application of dynamic range</td>
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</table>

### Interpretive skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working with the music and use</td>
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<td>of phrasing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrating use of emphasis</td>
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<tr>
<td>and facial expression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Projection/Focus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Range of dynamics</td>
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</table>

So what from the list above need improvement?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

What can you do to improve?

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Worksheet 9

- What music or sound score have you chosen? Describe the components of the music, tempo, instruments etc.

- How does your dance relate to the music - does it evoke the same quality, feeling, mood? Does it directly correlate or mutually co-exist?

- What costume will you be wearing and why? How does it relate to the stimulus?

- Will you have any set, lighting or props?
# Work sheet 10
## Relationships between Music and Dance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Relationship</th>
<th>Example of professional work</th>
<th>Advantages /Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct correlation</td>
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<tr>
<td>The dance and the music work together. For example, in the quieter moments in the music, softer dynamics are used.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mutual co-existence</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The dance holds its own identity against the music. Neither the music or the dance dominate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disassociation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both the music/sound and dance exist independently from each other.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Call and Response</td>
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<tr>
<td>The master drummer signals to the dancers when to change steps by calls on the drum. In Indian dance the musicians watch the dancer and change when the movement does.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Music visualisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being able to hear the music and see the dance. The result is movement, which has a life of its own and yet subtly results to the musical structure. Emphasising a character or narrative.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>