



'BALLET DANCERS TEND TO FOCUS ON MELODY. IT'S WHAT THEY RESPOND TO, NOT RHYTHM. IF YOU WATCH A DANCER, THEY ARE FEELING THE ENTIRE LINE.'

in their heads. As lovely as it is, the sonata repertoire they spent hours learning in their uni accompaniment class is useless when the teacher asks for something in a bouncy 3.

"Musicians often don't like ballet because they know too much," says pianist Jonathan Still. A veteran of company class, rehearsals and exams with the top companies in the United Kingdom and Europe, he's seen his share of dancers. "You've got this sort of top-down bias as a musician because you know how the music goes and how it looks." Ballet dancers do everything from memory and don't necessarily read music, so they experience music in a different way.

Take a waltz, for example. Says Still: "A dancer will hear that and think it's in four because they will count along the line of the tune, whereas a musician will say 'No, it's in three,' and the only reason the musician knows it's in 3/4 is because they've seen it

written down." Because dancers use the music to help them order their steps, it seems logical to assume that they value rhythm over melody; a waltz is a waltz whether it's Strauss or Shostakovich.

But according to Still, who has seen hundreds of dancers in action, this is not the case. "I was talking to a colleague about this the other day and our feeling is the actually the opposite," he says. "Ballet dancers tend to focus on melody. It's what they respond to, not rhythm. If you watch a dancer, particularly if they are dancing to slow music, they are feeling the entire line of something. A musician will watch and count beats and feel like the movement is out of time."

Form is another kind of shorthand that can be baffling to new company pianists. Knowing that when a teacher requests a mazurka he or she means something in a lively triple meter with accent on the second or third beats is an

enormous time-saver. Though the dancers don't actually do the steps for a polonaise or polka, the exercises were standardized in the nineteenth century, when everyone did.

Even the idea of rhythm itself is different in a dance class. "If a teacher marks an exercise in three, you could choose something in 6/8, 12/8, 3/8 or even 4/4 in triplets," says Still. "As long as the underlying rhythm is right, how it is notated doesn't really matter. It quite often happens that you read things that are really in three and have been written in three but should have been notated in 12/8 or 4/4 with triplets. Some of the nocturnes, for example, are in 4/4 but anyone who doesn't know the score would feel a definite triple pulse. After a while, you start to think of your repertoire in terms of how it sounds rather than how it looks."

Other ballet pianists have taken advantage of this and have cleverly transformed pop songs into the polonaises, waltzes and polkas required for company class. Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" transmogrified for the *Ballet Goes Pop* album into something suitable for *battements frappés* still retains the bounce that made the original such a delight.

Back at the Royal Opera, the class is winding down. The controlled movements of the opening exercises have given way to stitched-together sequences of runs, turns and jumps. The pianist plays a juicy Viennese waltz, the fat downbeats of which launch the barrel-rolling men like a series of circus trampolines. Maloney requests a coda and almost immediately the man in the corner delivers a slightly less manic 4/4; all the better to support the showing off to come. The girls spin away, trying to match the 32 *fouettés* of Odile and Swanilda. The boys jump and turn faster and higher, with flourishes impressive enough for any Russian judge. Then, with a delicate cadence and a thank you very much, it's all over. For now. After rehearsal for most and performance for some, the whole thing starts again tomorrow. ■

EN POINTE

Playing the Barre

The invisible but indispensable ballet rehearsal pianist.

By Marcia Adair

A ROOM FULL of the what looks like the world's most flexible hobos *plié demi* and *grande*, the sea of arms waving as gracefully as any anemone. All the while, the slow movement of Beethoven's Op. 13 Piano Sonata burbles along, framing, but not restricting.

The most smartly leotarded man in the room, the Royal Ballet's recently retired soloist Brian Maloney, issues an elaborately coded set of instructions. Arms and torsos stiffen and the legs begin a series of small, controlled movements. Beethoven is left behind and a relaxed but jolly "The Entertainer" gives the whole scene a look of mechanical toys.

It doesn't matter if the dancer debuted in *Giselle* last night or went on an epic bender: the morning company class is a non-negotiable ritual. Ninety minutes of movement warm the body, center the mind and prepare the company for the next twenty-four hours of rehearsals and performances. The general order of the exercises is the same as it has been since the dancer's first lesson: barre work,

traveling, turning, jumping—but it is up to the teacher to determine what exactly will happen, rather like a church service or yoga class.

This flexibility and reliance on memory can undo even the most experienced instrumental accompanist. The received idea of ballet pianists is that they are at the bottom of the totem pole, working, as they do, out of the public eye with people who don't really care about music. On the surface it seems easy enough—small bits of light classics in triple and duple meter with maybe a show tune or two thrown in for fun. *Plié. Sauté. Soutenu.* And again on the other side.

Ballet pianists at a top company will have about ten seconds to choose the music for the exercise from the library of tunes



STOCK4B, JEAN-ERICK PASQUIER/GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES