

For these schools, the answer is an enthusiastic yes!

When Brenda Didier moved her studio, Lincolnshire Academy of Dance, to its new location in Vernon Hills, Illinois, she made sure the new setting could accommodate all the necessary elements: barres, mirrors, dance floors—and space for accompanists to play for the school's classes.

"We have three studios and we

have three pianos, plus drums and congas and a lot of percussion instruments," Didier says about the scene at her 450-student school, located 29 miles north of Chicago. "I can't imagine teaching without live music. It makes the class experience more special."

The impact on students and their understanding of the relationship be-

tween dance and music is invaluable, says Nicholas Mishoe, co-director of Academy of Dance Arts in Red Bank, New Jersey, who uses accompanists for the studio's ballet classes. He has considered having live music for other classes, but at the moment, he says, he can't afford to do so.

Live music, Mishoe says, "trains the students to listen. The pianist

might play a different piece of music for the same exercise, so it automatically trains the students to be attentive to the music and to be musical dancers. Sure, you can crank up the volume on a CD or your iPod. But when you actually have a musician in the room playing for the exercises, it creates this whole energy that isn't just about volume. And that's kind of awesome."

Mishoe and Didier are an increasing rarity these days—private studio owners who have opted for live musical accompaniment despite the higher cost compared to using recorded music. While financial considerations often make live musical accompaniment at private studios prohibitive, accompanists are considered standard at most schools affiliated with professional dance companies and in most college dance programs.

Teachers who use live accompaniment at their studios say local connections and word of mouth are the best methods they've used for finding their accompanists.

Didier found the three musicians she uses through colleagues in Chicago's theater community and at Columbia College in Chicago. Mishoe says that two of the three pianists who play for classes at the Academy were already at the school when he took over ownership; the third was found through a local music conservatory.

The cost, they agree, is a necessary expense. Didier pays her musicians \$30 an hour; Mishoe says he spends about \$30,000 a year between salaries and maintaining the pianos.

Wherever it is utilized, the embrace of live music reflects an age-old tradition that cuts across generations, dance styles, and educational settings.

"The live music in African dance is like breathing. The music is giving the dance its breath. The music is as important as someone dancing," says Maguette Camara, who teaches West African dance for The Ailey School and companies in New York City.

"You need the music to feel what you're doing, and the music needs that dancer to give back whatever he is giving. It's a giving back and forth between whoever is playing and whoever is dancing."

In tap, the difference between using live and recorded music can mean crucial differences in the dancers' ability to communicate nuances and varied interpretations, says Brenda Bufalino. "The difference between teaching to live music and teaching to a recording can be dramatic. If you're working to recorded music you don't have to listen to it; that's what I see from students. To them, [the recorded music] just becomes background for the class."

Bufalino, who teaches and per-

music is live you're relating through the person, through the playing, to the music. With live music, dancing becomes a much more intimate and detailed experience in terms of your relationship to the movement."

And, adds teacher Gerri Houlihan, live music can elevate the class experience from mundane to something special. "A good accompanist can make class magical," says Houlihan, who teaches contemporary classes at Florida State University in Tallahassee and also teaches during the summer at the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina. "I think there's a kind of organic sensibility and a connection between the rhythmic phrasing and the kinetic sense of moving through space. When it really



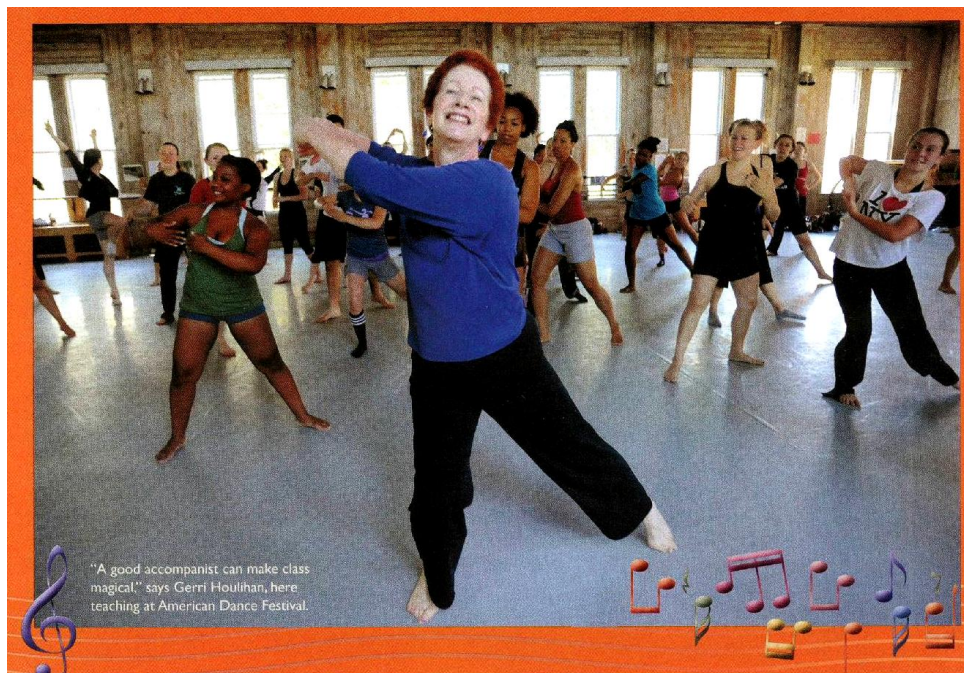
Academy of Dance Arts dancers learn to become attentive listeners with the help of accompanist Zanona De La Pena, 81. OPPOSITE: West African dancers and class instrumentalists participate in an exchange of energy and rhythm at The Joan Weill Center for Dance in New York City.

forms around the world and founded the American Tap Dance Orchestra, adds, "I know instructors can't afford live music all the time, but I always try. Students need to actually relate to how the artist is playing. If the

works, when you have a wonderful musician, it can make an ordinary class just fly."

Houlihan doesn't work with just any accompanist. She works on a daily basis with Douglas Corbin, one





"A good accompanist can make class magical," says Gerri Houlihan, here teaching at American Dance Festival.

of the most acclaimed and recorded piano accompanists for dance, particularly ballet. Corbin, who teaches music at Florida State University along with his duties as an accompanist, says the experience of playing for dance classes can be as fulfilling for the musician as it is for the teacher and dancers. How the musicians view their role in the class plays a part in that perception, he says.

"I see my role as supporting the movement somehow or enabling the dancers to execute the movement," says Corbin. "Sometimes, in the body, the impulse comes before the shape they're going to make. So sometimes you want to cue them for that impulse so the dancers can get on top of the beat and be more successful in achieving the shape."

That theme of helping dancers be successful was echoed by other accompanists like Daniel Berkman, a percussionist who plays for classes at ODC School in San Francisco. "My goal is to make class an extraordinary experience for them. I try to tailor

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—Nicholas Mishoe

what I play to what I feel the teacher wants to convey on the count and in their body language," Berkman says. "I'm like an interpreter. I kind of interpret the teacher's body and sensibility and personality and try to infuse [the class] with a musical experience that is uniquely mine."

Suzanne Knosp, a seasoned accompanist and music professor who leads a graduate-level program for dance accompanists at the University of Arizona in Tucson, says accompanists are crucial: they help dancers develop an appreciation for and ability to dance to a variety of music. "If the dancers are having a hard day, I as the accompanist can make choices that make them fall in love with dance again. Or there are times when I can challenge them with a rhythm that might challenge how they're perceiving the music in their own bodies," says Knosp, who is president of the International Guild of Musicians in Dance.

"A good musician helps make the class. A tendu is a tendu is a tendu.

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"I can't imagine teaching without live music. It makes the class experience more special."

—Brenda Didier

LEFT: Live music provides the breath that lifts these West African dance students to new heights at The Joan Weill Center for Dance in New York City.

## Tips for Working With an Accompanist

There's more to finding success with an accompanist than just placing a musician in your studio. Here are some tips from accompanists about what works and what doesn't.

**Suzanne Knosp, University of Arizona, Tucson:** "For me, the finest teachers are those who are able to demonstrate in tempo, who are very clear with their phrasing, who provide a rhythmic energy to their demonstrations, and who are very clear about the meter. Teachers who are able to demonstrate the exercise with those components are the ones I am most inspired by."

**Douglas Corbin, Florida State University, Tallahassee:** "The freer and more open the communication between teacher and musician can be, the better. You start there and everything else will fall into place. Anything that might irritate the other ideally can be taken care of if you can talk about it. For the musician, I would say to listen closely to the teacher. Hopefully the musician will be sensitive to movement and movement possibilities because if not they're not going anywhere."

"In ballet, the phrasing is a stumbler for everyone because no one writes music that is phrased totally in eight-bar phrases. That's something you have to get used to."

"The other things are more subtle, like when and where to let the dancers do more and you do less. Of course this is with a more advanced dancer, but I did learn after many years that there are times when you can lay back and let the dancers take the impetus. Merce [Cunningham] taught me that."

**Daniel Berkman, ODC School, San Francisco:** "The hardest thing for me is tempo. I admit I do have a tendency to rush. Musicians have to remember that the tempo you're setting has to live in the dancers' bodies comfortably. So if it's the slightest too fast it could make whatever they're trying to do that much more difficult. If it's too slow that can make it difficult, too."

"I really appreciate it when I work with people who allow themselves to be moved by the music. There are certain teachers who are more prone to appreciating what's happening with the music and letting it inform the class. It's not just me putting down a tempo. I like it when there's more of a symbiotic thing, an interplay happening."

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But you can do it so many different ways and it's important that a dancer knows that," Knosp continues. "I feel like my job is to help a dancer discover not only the music and musicality, but the joy in the movement."

Given the popularity of his CDs of dance class music, Corbin is well aware that many teachers have shifted to using recorded music for dance class, often out of economic necessity. But, he said, the CDs can't begin to compare to the experience of having a live accompanist. Teachers at all levels of the spectrum agree.

"Relating to the music is a big part of dance. And if the music is live in the room, you're relating through the person playing the music," Bufalino says. "The music changes all the time; even if it's the same song, it changes moods."

"Your relationship to the movement, whether it's modern or classical or tap, is much more intimate and always collaborative," Bufalino continues. "At its best, what happens in the studio is a collaboration between the dancers and the musician where you spur each other on. It can be absolutely magical." ♦

