Working with Composers

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Choosing a composer is probably the most important decision that I make every year. I have always found it difficult to work with pre existing music, though that is the most economical option as producers often point out to me! The idea for a new dance work is also the start of the search for the 'right' composer for that particular piece. At this time I have not made a single movement or set foot into the studio so the idea exists only as certain primary sign posts within my head. Usually one of these sign posts is to do with one aspect of the music. When I was thinking about the dance work "Phantasmaton" I knew that it had to have voice. The movements were going to have a looped, systemic feel and I wanted to counterpoint that. I did not want a European sound world nor an Indian one. They were both too close to me and the connections were too literal. As I was mulling over this I chanced upon an article in The Guardian which featured Jocelyn Pook where she spoke about her use of voice from many different cultures. I knew Jocelyn's work and had heard her music but the article and what she said suddenly made connections with what I was thinking.

Long conversations in Jocelyn's home followed. I was reading 'The cyborg manifesto' by Donna Haraway and 'How we became post human' by Katherine Hales and thinking about the culturally hybrid body as a kind of cyborg (a 'manufactured' person). The borderland between animal and human and between human and machine were things that I knew I wanted to explore in the studio.

I imagined that the music would have an electronic element which would be quite aggressive partnered by voice. Jocelyn played some music by Natacha Atlas and I knew I had the vocal culture that I was looking for.

The generation of movement in the studio is always to silence. We started off thinking about mythical animals, those historic cyborgs of the imagination – unicorns, mermaids, dragons – and making up our own such mutants. Jocelyn visited us at various times with sketches. We played whatever she had brought with her alongside the movement material that was ready in the studio. If memory serves me right getting the correct match was not easy. Some of her initial sketches had a lyric,organic sensibility that did not match the dysfunctional sound world that I was running in my head for the dance. We decided to explore the staccato vocal syllables that are used in Indian dance music as one of the layers in the score. I arranged for these to be left on her ansaphone by a couple of the dancers during their lunch break and these then became part of a section that she christened 'telephone piece'! Without me realising it the music was arranging itself into separate songs with breaks in between which gave me some interesting options. We danced over some of the breaks and others we exaggerated by lengthening them.

Jocelyn was a very generous collaborator in that she was very open to making the music work for the dance. I appreciated this all the more since I gradually realized that we had very different sound worlds in our heads. Originally she had thought of strings as the lead sound but but then settled on clarinet as a less 'historic' and more urban sound in deference to the intentions of the dance work. I spent quite a lot of time in her house listening to the choices that she offered me from her computer. Once, towards the

end of a session she said “here’s something that I am sure you wouldn’t like. It is a bit weird.” She seemed to dig it out from the depths of her computer and I am glad she did because it is now one of my favourite bits of the score. It featured an aboriginal voice which she had expertly woven in to produce a rather asymmetric and yes, decidedly weird effect. As with much of her vocal layers she set it teasingly just off the beat which continued to trip up unwary dancers who tried to use it as a rhythmic landmark for quite a long time!

There are many ways that a choreographer can work with music especially if one is lucky enough to have something especially written for the dance work. Using it to generate movement is one of these and it is one that I used very sparsely. Certainly in Phantasmaton all the movement was made independently of the music, set along the shifting, physical dynamic count of the body rather than a metrical musical one.. For example, we had been looking at the very stylized way in which Indian classical dance deals with dressing and making up (following on from our starting point of artifice) and using that to invent phrases. In the course of making this material and seeing something in the chemistry between two of the dancers a duet developed. For quite some time I used the ‘telephone piece’ to partner this in the studio. Later on, due almost to a process of elimination and juggling the duet ended up sharing the same slice of time as a very tender Arabic lullaby. This had the effect of pulling the movement in a potentially different direction. The spaces between the dancers’ bodies somehow became harmoniously resolved rather than left bristling as had been the case earlier. After thinking about it (I did like the lullaby and Natascha’s rendition of it) I felt I could still rescue the original dance narrative if I put certain survival tactics in place. This meant using the lighting design to disrupt its flow

and choreographing a somewhat brusque new section with the other dancers to counterpoint the duet towards the end. The dancers who performed the duet were asked on no account to dance to the music they were hearing but rather to dance against it. In some performances I feel it succeeds in that the intentions of the movement and the emotional climate of the song slightly pull against each other to create an unsettling effect. In others I regret that I ever made the change from 'telephone piece'!

The way I work with music has changed over the years. The decisions that I take in the partnering of dance and music tend to be instinctive and subjective and led by the dance narrative. They are very rarely based on a shared count. The various dance episodes that are made in the studio are like characters in a drama each with their own distinctive personality. The music also contains its own equally strong dramatis personae. I have to make the script whereby they can both interact coherently and interestingly and without the dance losing its integrity.. Sometimes one puts a section of the dance with a section of the music and I just know it is wrong. Not wrong per se (since I don't start off with any rules so there is no case of breaching any) but wrong for that particular dance work and what I want to communicate with it.

With most composers one inevitably hits a spot in the music where nothing that has been created in the studio is quite right for it. Explaining why this is can be quite difficult for the simple reason that not being a composer I do not have the technical language to talk about the music and quite often the composer does not have an equally literate hold on the dance. Also there is no particular musical reason for this impasse only a very subjective one of my own artistic judgement not of the music but

of the combined effect of the music and the dance. Sometimes a composer would come into the studio to look at the troublesome bit and be genuinely bewildered as to why 'it wasn't working'. The answer to that lies in my own intuitive intentions for the general narrative progress of the piece- intuitions about which at that stage in the making I probably cant be very articulate about .

I hit just this type of impasse with the composer that `I worked with last year for my site specific piece [h]Interland

When I heard the Irish composer Donnacha Dennehy's music on his demo CD, a couple of years ago I mailed him almost immediately to say how much `I loved it. It had a wonderful mixture of formality and aggression that `I related to immediately. It managed to be both street and salon at the same time. The score that he gave me for [h]Interland was just what `I had imagined for the emotional landscape of the dance. It was music that gave nothing away- constantly shifting, predatory and painted in the charged neon colours of a cityscape at night. The dance work included a live web cast from `Bangalore, digital film and two real time dancers all happening within the art deco space of the Greenwich Borough hall. I could not have asked for a more appropriate score except for a three minute section one third of the way through it.

Unlike Phantasmaton where it was possible for the composer to drop in to the studio Donnacha was in Ireland and then in Amsterdam when he wrote the music. All our collaborations were over the phone and he did not see any of the movement till the premiere. In our conversations we used the time code to identify the bits of music that we wanted to talk about. The tension created when detailed movement is forced to be delivered within

the constraints of swiftly passing time, where the dancer is constantly trying to square the circle of shape and extreme speed, was a strong starting point of the dance. The goal posts for the dancers were set just a fraction out of reach so that there was a feeling of desperate energy. About one third of the way into the music Donnacha completely called a halt (at least that was what it felt like to me) and the music gradually, in stages ground down to almost stand still point before building up again. None of the material that we had in the studio seemed to sit happily with this section of the music. Whereas the rest of the time the music was so densely layered that it could almost take anything this particular bit, perhaps because it was stripped down to a very strong but unified musical gesture I felt that only movement that was absolutely tailor made for it could possibly work. However the progress of the dance was not taking it in that direction. The dance could not work with the music nor could it work against it.

Many long, tortured late night phone calls to Amsterdam followed which consisted of Donnacha patiently and with commendable articulateness explaining why the section made perfect musical sense to him to which all I could offer was that in the studio the dance and the music seemed to 'cancel each other out' . I made many attempts at resolving this problem but with little success. For the dancers it would have meant such a dramatic change of strategy , tantamount to changing from being hurdlers into long distance runners in mid race. On the other hand I realized that for Donnacha it was a point that could not be revisited.

I was fortunate in that [h]Interland wasn't totally a dance work; there were also Pete Gomes' films about Bangalore that were part of it. I ended up partnering the section is question with one of the films where the rhythm of the edits and its acid colours placed

alongside the long intense strokes of the music seem to mutually benefit each other.

The conversations about this small part of the music with Donnacha were difficult and frustrating at the time, He probably felt hounded by my nightly phone calls! However, there is also something quite exhilarating (savoured only in retrospect, needless to say!) about going on such a frank , uncompromising and revelatory journey with another artist no matter how maddening at the time. When it is with an artist whom one admires and respects, as was the case with Donnacha, it is also an immense privilege.