

DO THE M@TH

Air de Ballet



M. MOSZKOWSKI: PIANO ALBUMS

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Recently I was asked to guest lecture for the Mark Morris Dance Accompaniment Training Program led by Sarah Marcus and Robert Boston. Without much planning, I spoke about my history with dance and offered humorous anecdotes. Afterwards, in conversation with students, I realized it might have been more helpful to talk about where to find inspiration and play examples of 19th-century European repertoire that worked well for class. So:

Dance is a wonderful art form. Playing piano for dance classes is a good way to have fun while making some cash. Roland Hanna, John Cage, Frederic Rzewski, and — for whatever it's worth — myself all did it, so there's no doubt it is an honorable tradition. I still play class for Mark Morris and his dancers once

in a while, and a couple years ago I created the original score *Easy Win* for Dance Heginbotham, which was a kind of apotheosis of “Iversonian dance class piano.”

My first mentor was the great Pearl Lang at the Martha Graham school, who taught me how to provide noisy Bartókian propulsion for classes that were generally quite fierce in atmosphere. At the other end of the spectrum, serious ballet classes requires romantic-era piano repertoire with qualities like grace and rubato.

Besides Mark’s comparatively informal ballet class, I have only played for college ballet classes. As far as modern goes, in addition to several other teachers in the Graham tradition, I’ve played for teachers in the Isadora Duncan, Merce Cunningham, José Limón, and Paul Taylor traditions. There were also tango classes and tap classes: For a couple of years there in the early 90’s, I did damn near *everything*, and making a living, too.

I’m out of touch, not having played for anybody besides Mark Morris in twenty years, but I suspect many current American modern and ballet classes probably need some of both traditions.

Ballet class is probably harder to learn how to play for than modern class. In some modern classes — *not* for, say, Pearl Lang, but some — you can bring in drums or guitar or drone a George Winston white key fantasia for an hour and get by. A ballet class pianist needs some familiarity with 19th-century European music, the tiniest amount of comprehension of *plié*, *assemblé*, and *relevé*, and to always note when a combination at the *barre* goes to the second side.

An important book on the subject also has a Morris connection: *Dance and Music: A Guide to Dance Accompaniment for Musicians and Dance Teachers* by Harriet Cavalli, who created a score of ballet class music excerpts for Mark’s wonderful early dance *Canonic 3/4 Studies*. To understand the combinations of movement in ballet class, read Cavalli or talk to some dancers.

Many NYC dance class pianists are jazz musicians at heart. We are most comfortable improvising music in class based off of standard pop tunes and jazz forms. However, at one point in my own development I wanted to include more sounds that were from the romantic-era of European piano repertoire, especially if the class was ballet-based. If others are feeling the same urge, here’s a few ideas to help get started.

In all the recorded examples I play a “lead in” or “four for nothing” introduction as if I were in Mark Morris’s class. In proper Russian ballet it is common practice to simply arpeggiate tonic and dominant before the combination starts. Other teachers might simply count it off. In the end, at least a basic level of mutual understanding between instructor and musician is a crucial part of making the class enjoyable for all.

One thing that makes appropriating the great composers difficult is their lack of square phrases. For example, the old “Turkish March” of Beethoven has seen many years of proud service for ballet jumps. The problem is that the phrase structure is 8 – 4 – 8. The solution for 8 – 8 is to improvise a short ending.

Anton Rubinstein’s flashy arrangement is the most common form of this piece, but it might be a bit thick for casual performance. There’s no reason not to thin it out on the fly.

Turkish March

from "The Ruins of Athens"

Revised and fingered by
Carl Dois

L. van Beethoven
Arranged by A. Rubinstein

Allegretto

Piano

pp una corda

27953rx

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Another familiar Beethoven dance is the little Ecossaise in G. This is in 8 bar phrases, perfect, but perhaps it could use some improvised amplification in the bass to help the dancers attempt to defy gravity.

ECOSSAISE

für das Pianoforte

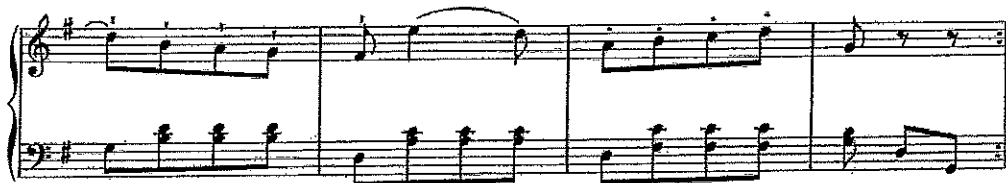
Beethoven's Werke.

VON

VOLUME XXXII. 306.

L. VAN BEEHoven.

Allegro.



B. 306.

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The sound of Chopin would seem ideal for ballet class but there's not so much that is readily usable, again mainly because the phrases are uneven. However the famous E-flat nocturne is in 8s and certainly does the job. (As a bonus, note how the whole piece is just like an AABA standard with another bridge and A out — just like if you were making a three-minute record with Billie Holiday.) For class, you shouldn't play the piece with the dramatic rubato required for recital, and there's no need to play the fancy ornamentation, either. A "straightened out" and "improvised" version in waltz time is fine. (Amusingly, IMSLP has the following "easy" arrangement.)

Nocturne

Fr. Chopin, Op. 9 No. 2

Andante

Pespr. dolce

cresc. *p* *cresc.*

p *p*

pp poco ritard. *f a tempo* *poco rall.*

f p *cresc.* *p*

simile *simile*

Edition Schott No. 06861

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There are marches, polkas, waltzes, and other dances by many great composers. However at some point I tire of fussing with the canon and prefer to go further afield. For my "improvisations in the styles of European composers" I have been repeatedly inspired by the "B team."

One hundred years ago, when there was a piano in every home, publishers produced countless collections of medium difficulty pieces by good composers who were a little too predictable to retain much of a hold in the repertoire. These anthologies are now dirt cheap in used book stores, but IMSLP

does have some scans, for example *Anthology of Modern Classics* ([http://imslp.org/wiki/Anthology_of_Modern_Classics_\(Oesterle,_Louis\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Anthology_of_Modern_Classics_(Oesterle,_Louis))) and *The World's Best Music* ([http://imslp.org/wiki/The_World%27s_Best_Music_\(Various\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/The_World%27s_Best_Music_(Various))).

For ballet class, it is particularly helpful to find a book of Russian composers, simply because Russia is where so many of the great ballets come from. One could easily play a whole class out of the three-volume *Album of Russian Piano Music* ([http://imslp.org/wiki/Album_of_Russian_Piano_Music_\(Oesterle,_Louis\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Album_of_Russian_Piano_Music_(Oesterle,_Louis))). Again, I'd stay away from big names like Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Scriabin, but instead look for not-too-difficult pieces in 8 bar phrases by minor composers.

I am a pretty good sight-reader, and part of how I got that way was by simply playing through any of these anthologies whenever I found one when young. Below I'm going to read the first page of a few things from *The Pianist's Anthology* ([http://imslp.org/wiki/The_Pianist%27s_Anthology_\(Oesterle,_Louis\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/The_Pianist%27s_Anthology_(Oesterle,_Louis))). My rule with my iPhone recorder is "first and only take," so there are plenty of mistakes. Doesn't matter! In fact, dance class is an ideal situation to learn how to "keep going no matter what" in repertoire.

"Jadassohn" is not a name that has maintained too much relevance. There's no reason to turn a page or get stuck with an odd bar phrase so I just improvise a turnaround.



Souvenir.

(Andenken.)

Edited and fingered by
W^m Scharfenberg.

S. JADASSOHN.

Lento. Tempo rubato.

Piano.

dolce molto espress.

animando.
poco cresco.
f espress.

ritard.
a tempo.
p

string.
stretto.
ppp

13500

Copyright 1892 by G. Schirmer.

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“Lack” offers an intro that I couldn’t resist. (Before I start I could tell Mark, “Two bars of vamp to begin.”) Naturally I fake the arpeggios at the end of the bridge.

Idilio

Editado and fingered by
LOUIS OESTERLE

THÉODORE LACK. Op. 134

Allegretto grazioso

Piano

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Copyright, 1896, by G. Schirmer

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This Paderweski waltz might have a bit more genuine compositional/pianistic interest. Ignore the written intro and go straight to the tune.

Au Soir. (At Night)

Edited and fingered by
Louis Oesterle.

I. J. PADEREWSKI, Op. 10, No 1.

Andantino, quasi Allegretto.

a tempo

13500 r

Copyright, 1897, by G. Schirmer.

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Two second-tier composers especially good for class are Moritz Moszkowski and Carl Czerny. Moszkowski is almost in the regular piano repertoire: Horowitz played a few small pieces and the substantial "Caprice Espagnol" is beloved by virtuosos blessed with quick repetition.

In my regular dance class days I would get ideas by reading out of a nice set of 26 famous pieces collected by Schirmer ([http://imslp.org/wiki/26_Pieces_for_Pianoforte_\(Moszkowski%2C_Moritz\)\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/26_Pieces_for_Pianoforte_(Moszkowski%2C_Moritz))). Moszkowski's music is always attractive and wonderfully written for the hand but stops just short of

genius. Perhaps if he used fewer regular 8 bar phrases he would have had a better shot at immortality. Still, that regularity makes Moszkowski perfect for dance class.

edited and fingered by
KARL KLAUSER.

Mélodie.

M. MOSZKOWSKI Op.18, N°1

Moderato.

piano.

p cantabile

For the Mazurka there is a ballet intro already given:

Mazurka.

Op.10, No 3.

Allegro.

The musical score consists of five systems of piano notation. Each system includes a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes various dynamics such as *f* (forte), *riton.* (ritardando), *a tempo*, and *crusc.* (crescendo). There are also performance markings like *rit.* (ritardando) and *acc.* (accelerando). The score is annotated with fingering numbers (1-5) and includes a small square box on the left side of the fourth system.

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Some jazz harmony in this one:

Berceuse. (Cradle - Song.)

Op. 88, No 2.

Andante.

16588

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One time I was involved in a Vince Giordano soundtrack to a Harold Lloyd film and this boogie-woogie turned up.

Revised and fingered by
Wm Scharfenberg.

Scherzino.

M. MOSZKOWSKI. Op. 18, No. 2.

Allegro.

PIANO

The musical score consists of five systems of music for piano. The first system begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a common time signature. It includes the tempo marking 'Allegro.' and dynamics 'mp' and 'staccato.'. The second system features a dynamic marking of 'f'. The third system includes a dynamic marking of 'p'. The fourth system is marked 'scherzando'. The fifth system includes a dynamic marking of 'ten.'. Fingerings are indicated with numbers 1-5 throughout the score.

15594

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As is, "Monologue" might be too sparse for class, so I play it as a tango.

Monologue.

Op. 31, No 1.

Andante sostenuto.

Piano: *mp*

l'accompagnamento molto p

1059A

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A repeated note idea for a "big waltz."

Czerny exercises have a long history with ballet. There are anthologies of Czerny just for ballet class; Cavalli used some Czerny for *Canonic 3/4 Studies*, the Harald Lander choreography *Études* has Czerny orchestrated in the manner of *Les Sylphides*.

Playing through *The School of Legato and Staccato*

([http://imslp.org/wiki/Die_Schule_des_Legato_und_Staccato,_Op.335_\(Czerny,_Carl\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Die_Schule_des_Legato_und_Staccato,_Op.335_(Czerny,_Carl))) might be helpful practice for dance class pianists. Eventually improvising in the style of a Czerny étude won't be that difficult.

It goes without saying that you never play *that* soft for dance class, one must push those bodies around with the force of your playing. The following piece is much harder *pianissimo* — that's Czerny's point — but I can just read it down like ragtime.



Das leichte (zarte) Abstoßen mit ruhiger Hand
The light (delicate) touch, with the hand taken off gently
Le Détaché léger (délicat), la main tranquille

Allegretto vivace (♩ = 138)

6.

pp *leggiero, stacc.*

pp

ritorn.

cresc. -

p

Edition Peters

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In general the "staccato" pieces are more relevant than those promoting "legato." But Czerny was a proper composer with nice voice leading, and the following might be good for dance class.

Das strenge *Legato* im langsamen mehrstimmigen Gesange, wo jede Note genau nach ihrem Werte gehalten werden muß
The strict legato in a slow melody of several parts, in which every note must be held exactly its full length
 Le *Legato* sévère, dans un chant lent, à plusieurs parties, où chaque note doit être tenue exactement suivant sa valeur

9. *Andantino* (♩ = 72)
molto dolce

The musical score is for a piano piece, likely for the left hand. It consists of five systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef). The tempo is marked 'Andantino' with a quarter note equal to 72 beats per minute. The mood is 'molto dolce'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and fingerings. Performance markings include 'molto dolce', 'dimin.' (diminuendo), and 'dolce'. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

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One can practice leaps at the piano while the dancers practice leaps on the floor.

Allegro vivo (♩ = 84)

16.

The musical score consists of five systems of piano music. The first system (measures 16-20) features a complex texture of sustained chords in leaps, with dynamic markings like *p* and *pp*. The second system (measures 21-25) continues this texture, including a section marked *p dolce* and *legatissimo*. The third system (measures 26-30) shows a transition with markings like *crase* and *dimin.*. The fourth system (measures 31-35) features a melodic line in the bass with *dolce* and *dimin.* markings. The fifth system (measures 36-40) concludes with a *pp* dynamic and a final chord.

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These are starting to get too hard for sight-reading, but...

Kurz abgestoßene Oktaven, mit möglichst ruhiger Hand
Octaves in a short staccato, with the hand as quiet as possible
Octaves en Staccato bref, la main aussi tranquille que possible

Allegro vivo (♩ = 132)

25.

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Finally we have a piece that Cavalli appropriated for *Canonic 3/4 Studies*.

47. Allegro molto ♩ = 120

p con legg.

cresc.

f

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A logical next step is improvising a Czerny-style etude on jazz changes. Here are three bad examples. This is arguably truly *terrible* music. But when you play for class a dozen or more hours a week this kind of thing makes sense: You push yourself as some kind of wacky creative pianist and the dancers don't mind.

(I'm rusty at doing this kind of thing. During the years I was Mark Morris's class pianist and endlessly practicing Cavalli's *Canonic 3/4 Studies* for tour I would have been a bit more brilliant.)

Autumn Leaves:

3:00	00:00
	00:00

Ain't Misbehavin':

3:00	00:00
	00:00

Out of Nowhere:

3:00	00:00
	00:00

FIN.

—

BONUS TRACK: Working on this post was a real trip down memory lane. I had meant to include something by Cécile Chaminade but most of her work seemed too difficult and elusive pianistically. However, researches brought me to “Scarf Dance”...

“Scarf Dance!” I hadn’t thought of this work in decades but it helped me understand the harmony of Monk when I was *very* young. Recently on DTM I contemplated how some of the jazz pianists might have learned to play before there were jazz harmony books (<https://ethaniverson.com/theory-and-european-classical-music/>). In my case, Chaminade’s extensions on Eb7 and G7 were duly noted!

Just for fun — and to take the taste out of my mouth from that jazzy Czerny — here’s a “Scène de Ballet” with Monkian overtones and improvised elaboration.



40
Scarf-Dance.
(DER SCHÄRPENTANZ.)

Revised and fingered by
Wm Scharfenberg.

Scène de Ballet.

C. CHAMINADE.

Allegro. (♩ = 64.)

Piano.

10183 r

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41

First system of the musical score. It consists of two staves. The upper staff is a single melodic line with dynamics *p*, *dim.*, *pp*, and *cresc.*. The lower staff is a piano accompaniment with dynamics *f*, *dim.*, and *pp rubato.*. Fingerings and articulation marks are present throughout.

Second system of the musical score. The upper staff continues with piano accompaniment, featuring a *cresc.* marking. The lower staff continues with piano accompaniment, including *pp* dynamics and articulation marks.

Third system of the musical score. The upper staff continues with piano accompaniment, including *dim.* and *p* dynamics. The lower staff continues with piano accompaniment, including *pp* dynamics and articulation marks.

10177

Fourth system of the musical score. The upper staff continues with piano accompaniment, including *p delicamento.* marking. The lower staff continues with piano accompaniment, including *pp* dynamics and articulation marks.

Fifth system of the musical score. The upper staff continues with piano accompaniment, including *p* and *dim.* dynamics. The lower staff continues with piano accompaniment, including *pp* dynamics and articulation marks.

Sixth system of the musical score. The upper staff continues with piano accompaniment, including *cresc.*, *f*, *dim.*, and *p* dynamics. The lower staff continues with piano accompaniment, including *pp rubato.* marking and articulation marks.