

Animation Inspired by Dance: Analyzing the Ways in Which Story and Movement Can Complement Music

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Abstract

In my first-year film, my main goal was to create a close relationship to music and animation, similar to the relationship between dance and music. I have been inspired by “lyrical” dance and Disney’s musical animations to create an animation that moves along to the music but also tells a story. I review my process of creating an intimate relationship between animation and dance by looking specifically at how I developed the story in relation to the music and how I implemented individual movements to match the music. The film has a story based on a song, and the movement within the film was determined by analyzing choreography from a dance made to the song. While I was able to create a close relationship between the animation and music, I found that in some ways the story and the movements competed with the music. I realized that instead of trying to create an animation that matches up to the same level of intensity as the music, it would be more successful to consider how the animation can complement the music and vice versa.

Keywords

animation, music, dance, lyrical dance, choreography, story development, movement, Disney

1. Introduction

In my first-year film, I attempted to create an animation that had a close relationship to music. I grew up watching dance, and I wanted to capture the relationship between dance and music in my animation. The type of style I was drawn to is called “lyrical,” which not only had movement closely connected to music, but also strong emotions and a sense of story. Lyrical dances also were typically accompanied by pop songs, which I felt were strong and interesting to listen to on their own. Watching these dances gave me the idea to create an animation that had both strong visuals and strong music that were intimately connected. The movement would bring focus to the music without overpowering it, and the music would support the story of the animation. However, I came to discover that this goal was difficult to put into practice, as rather than support one another, the music and animation would instead compete for attention. I will review the process of my first-year film and analyze what should be considered for creating a supportive relationship instead of a competitive one.

2. Background

In order to analyze my process, I want to give a background of what motivated me to create this film.

2-1. Inspiration from Lyrical Dance

The main inspiration behind the musical animation that I wanted to make was “lyrical” dance. From the time I was in junior high school, I had friends who took dance classes and I would see their performances; I found myself really drawn to the dances in this “lyrical” genre. I continued watching these performances throughout high school, and even in university, I went to performances held by university dance clubs. However, while the label “lyrical” was used in the performances I saw, the term itself is not clearly defined or recognized in the dance world. Fisher (2014) says that the lyrical genre is defined as a style that “includes elements of ballet, jazz, acrobatics, modern dance, and hip hop, without falling into any of those categories exactly. It has been

strongly associated with clearly displayed emotional moods, fast-moving choreographic strategies, emphasis on virtuosic display, illustration of song lyrics, and, in group form, exact unison.” This definition closely fits my experience of lyrical dance.

Lyrical dance has two specific qualities that move me. The first is the way in which the movements of the dancer are connected to the music. I feel a very satisfying sense of excitement when a movement perfectly lines up with a beat, and I sometimes even experience frisson. I also believe that not matching every beat but only certain ones brings more impact. A listener does not know what beat the movement will match next, which builds up suspense, and there is also more focus on the specific beat that is hit as it stands out. Movements also tend to match up to a specific timbre of the music, such as the voice or an instrument. Throughout a song, the movements may change to line up with different timbres of the song which brings attention to those specific parts. This variety also helps build that same suspense of waiting to see what timbre will be matched to next. Moreover, it also causes me to experience the song in a new way as instead of taking in all of a song at once, I am guided to listen more to different parts. The second quality that moves me is the expression of the movements. Even if a dancer has a neutral facial expression, I can feel so much emotion just from the way they are moving to the music. It is through these expressions that I can feel a sense of story. If the expressions start out light and fast, they may give off a feeling of happiness, but then if they slow down they give off a feeling of sadness. This change in emotion creates a sense of story even if I do not know what the specific details or plot of that story is.

For more clarity, I would like to look at a specific example, “Cranes in the Sky” by CompanyFAM (2018). Looking at just the beginning, the music starts out with just drums, and there are two specific repeating beats. The dancers match these beats with their hands and arms, but they do not do so on every repeat. Once the lyrics come in, the dancer on the left starts moving her arms to the word “away” in the lyrics, and then her arms move to match the bass. Then both dancers move to the lyrics “I tried to dance it away,” and as they are moving to this, their hips also move in unison to the beginning double drum beat. The movements are constantly and fluidly changing what

part of the song they are matching up with. At the beginning, I feel so much more aware of the drums since they specifically only match that, but once the lyrics come in my focus shifts away from the drums. Once I have almost forgotten about the drums, they match the beat again while also still moving slowly to the lyrics. It allows me to experience the music in a way that I would not be able to if I was just listening to it on its own.

In terms of expression, while at the beginning the hand movements are sharp to fit the drums, both dancers are also slowly swaying their bodies. This swaying motion fits the solemn tone of the song. As the lyrics come in, the dancers gradually stand up and start to have more sharp and intense movements. And then, as the song progresses, the dancers return to their original, slower movements before finally sitting back down. To me, this dance tells a story of experiencing painful feelings and desperately trying to escape them, but coming back and accepting those feelings. This type of dance goes beyond simply the visual representation of music and communicates a message that the music alone may not be able to communicate.

These qualities of impactful movement and portrayal of a story are things that I felt could be also achieved in animation. Animation can also fit music really well. There is also so much more visual information that can be added since animation is not limited to a physical body and space, and so it can easily communicate ideas.

2-2. Inspiration from Musical Animations

I really love dance and want to capture its relationship with music in animation, but this begs the question of, “why animation in the first place?” My first experience with seeing visuals paired with music was in Disney films. The Disney Sing Along Song series was one of the methods used by my parents to soothe me when I was a baby. I believe Disney’s musical animations influenced the way I perceive music and imagine visuals to it. What I really love about animation is that it can fit so closely to the music while also expressing complicated ideas that cannot be done with the physical body of a dancer. One of my favorite musical animations is the “Pink Elephants on Parade” sequence from the movie “Dumbo” (Walt Disney Productions, 1941). This sequence has

a huge range of visual content that changes so drastically yet fluidly throughout the song. For example, there is a sequence of metamorphoses from a camel-shaped elephant that changes into a snake, then back into an elephant, then into a basic circle, and finally to an eye. Despite these elements all being completely different from the other, they are seen as a single entity connected through metamorphose. And all of these elements are shown and able to be fully processed in just a span of just 10 seconds.

Not only is there a wide range of content, but the content itself expresses music in a way that I think is only achievable through animation. For instance, there is a scene with elephants in the snow shaking to the sound of maracas. In the same cut, lightning appears between the elephants to the sound of a cymbal. Both of these elements of snow and lightning not only have movement that fits the sounds such as shaking movement to the maracas and a fast bolt of lightning to the drum, but the actual imagery of snow and lightning brings in an extra layer to the sensation of the music. It is as if the sound of maracas and the sound of a cymbal are taking the physical forms of snow and lightning.

Animation can communicate very detailed concepts while keeping a close relationship to the music. I wanted to create an animation that can paint detailed concepts but that also had the same emotional depth as lyrical dance.

2-3. Ultimate goals

There are two facets in the relationship between music and animation that I wanted to achieve. First is the progression of the story guided by music. With the dance by CompanyFAM (2018), the dancers start sitting, but then stand up, move around, and finally return to sitting. I think this change in position is guided by changes in the music. Although “Pink Elephants on Parade” does not have a clear story, there are a lot of major changes in content and scenes, which are guided by the musical movements. This progression of scenes has a relationship to the music. The second facet of the music-animation relationship is how the individual movements align with the music. One example of this concept in dance would be how individual hand movements match

the drums. I want to achieve that exciting sense of matching to the music.

I will review my first-year film through these two facets.

3. Developing the Story

3-1. The Problem with Basing a Story on Music

For my film, I originally decided to use a cut-down version of the song “How to Draw / Petrarch” by The 1975. This song starts out very gentle and then builds up to the lyrics “I have learned how to draw” (The 1975, 2018). The song then becomes calmer and instills a sense of sadness, but then builds back up into beat music as the lyrics return, before finally ending with slow but resolute piano chords. I decided to come up with a story based on these musical movements. This would be a story that slowly builds up to a point, descends into sadness, and then builds up again and has a resolution. I wanted to create a story based on my personal experience, and the lyrics “I have learned how to draw” connected with my experience with art. I had discovered this passion for art and it felt like a light bulb went off in my head and I found what I wanted to do with my life. But eventually, I lost this passion and it took me some time before I came back to it. Coming back to it did not have the same “light bulb” feeling, but rather felt more calm and resolute like I was returning to an old friend. I decided to portray this story through two elements: a girl and a small planet that she holds. The planet serves as a symbol for art, which the girl creates with her hands. In the beginning, she slowly discovers this power to create and when the lyrics come in she has created a little planet in her hands. When the song changes to the sad tone, she gives up the planet and it dies. When it becomes exciting beat music, the animation is a montage of her going through struggle and regaining the power to create another planet.

When I presented this story to professors, they told me that it was difficult to grasp and that it would leave the viewer with questions. Why did the girl leave the planet alone and why did it die? What is she struggling with and how did she become able to recreate the planet? I realized that while dance can portray a sense of a story, it does not lay out the story as concretely as animation can. A dancer can display sudden

changes in mood and feel natural to viewers, but this translated into character animation can be abrasive and confusing without proper setup. Because the music is the source of mood, that setup cannot be simply added on without changing previous parts of the story. I was also given the feedback that instead of trying to portray a story, I should focus more on displaying the emotions in music as lyrical dance does. Although I wanted to show a story, because my priority was to create the close relationship with music, I decided to leave the story as is and work on the emotions.

3-2. Readapting the Story Separate from Music

I was also recommended to have an original song made for my animation, and I eventually decided to follow this advice. Using an original song opened up the opportunity to make changes to the story that I was not satisfied with. My symbol of the planet was based on the lyrics, "I have learned how to draw" (The 1975, 2018), but now I had the ability to use different lyrics or even no lyrics at all. I decided to change the planet into fire. I realized that my discovery of art and why it was so important to me was because it was my first discovery of passion. Passion is often compared to fire, but usually in a sense of fire being vibrant and strong. However, fire can also be unstable and easily extinguished. I thought it would be interesting to use this typical symbol of passion in a subversive way. Passion can be exciting and make one full of energy but it can also flicker out. Using this symbol of fire also gave me the idea to add water, which would symbolize the external forces in my life that I could not control. I used rain to put out the fire, and ocean waves to sweep up the girl. This water was able to serve as the context I felt my story was lacking, as the water became the reason for the death of passion, and provided a tangible source of struggle for the girl. By moving away from the music and thinking more about what kind of content I wanted to draw, I was able to develop a story that was more readable without having to change its plot. The story still goes through the exact same progression of emotions as the story with the planet, but this progression is now more logical.

3-3. The Roles of Music and Animation in Story

In the *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation* (Thomas & Johnston, 1981), music is

described as having the ability to “express an attitude that cannot be shown strongly in moving drawings. Feelings of isolation, rejection, an awareness of beauty, a sense of growing strength, of hope, of devotion — these are all inner emotions that are difficult to show. Fortunately, this is the area of greatest strength for music.” Music can really shine in animation when it is used as an addition to provide emotional information, but I essentially went in the opposite direction of that. Instead of using music to add context to the animation, I was using animation to add context to the music. I was providing a whole new story outside of the song, and I added too many details for it to make sense and be convincing. On top of this, I think this story took away from the music being able to bring that depth of emotion to the film because the scenes in first place did not have context or feel relatable. The story I was trying to tell was competing with the music rather than creating a relationship seen in either dance or Disney films. If I were to stay with the song “How to Draw / Petrarch” then I believe it would have been more successful to use a less detailed story and let the music be the main voice. For example, rather than having a single character that goes through an experience, I could have used a montage of unrelated images. Without the music, no clear sense of story may be felt, but with the music, a viewer may be able to feel a sense of a story or determine their own meaning from it. I think this would have better captured the relationship between lyrical dance and music. Without the music, it would be difficult to draw meaning and feel moved by a lyrical dance. The music provides an extra layer of emotional depth and context, and ultimately it is the combination of both the music and dance that makes it moving.

In the case where I want to have a story like my readapted version, then I believe that the story should be considered on its own apart from the music. Just as the song “How to Draw / Petrarch” is a song with its own story in lyrics that is meant to be enjoyed on its own, the animation would need to be something that is understandable without the music. In order for the combination of music and animation to tell a convincing story, both elements should serve different roles rather than trying to compete as the main voice.

4. Implementing Movement

4-1. Translating Dance Choreography into Animation

I wanted to analyze the timing and expression of dance and pull from that to determine the specific movements in the film. To do this I had a dancer create choreography to "How to Draw / Petrichor," and then I analyzed the timing of movements the dancer made and planned out the animation. To analyze the timing, I looked at when the dancer would make movements in relation to the music. For example, at the beginning of the song, the dancer makes steps that start on piano notes. I had the fire also make movements that started on those same notes. Another example is in the ending, the piano chords are long but the dancer makes fast movements in between that seem to counter the music. I added more swift movement of the girl twirling with the fire, and also added cuts of the fire quickly moving. Extracting the timing from the dance was useful because in the past I have tried to make musical animations and I had the tendency to hit every beat. However, I think this creates a "mickeymousing" effect common in animation, where music "echoe[s] every action on the screen" as described in *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation* (Thomas & Johnston, 1981). What I find so attractive about dance is the suspense of waiting for the movement to hit the beat and the impact when it finally does. Being able to see where exactly the movements hit helped me create the same effect even though the movements are different.

In terms of the expression of the movements, I felt that this could be translated to the spacing of frames in animation. A movement can take the same amount of time but it can express completely different emotions based on spacing. As much as I had tried to analyze and put this into the animation, it ended up completely changing with the newly created song. In the end, the final expression of movements was achieved by adjusting the frames to fit the new song. For example, the girl holds the fire and stands up. Originally, this movement was slow and gentle, but in the new song, the piano, while gentle, is very fast at this point. This movement was originally animated on threes (8 frames per second), and in general, was slow so there was no intense expression where the speed changes throughout. However, with the new music, I sped

up the movement to be animated on ones (24 frames per second) until the end of the movement which went down to twos or twelve frames per second. I realized that the expression of movement can very easily be adjusted and is more successful when going based on intuition. The animation became more expressive as I made these adjustments compared to how it moved to “How to Draw / Petrichor.” Expression is such a subjective concept and going based on intuition proved more successful than trying to carefully calculate how a dancer would move to the music.

4-2. Problem 1: Movements Without Significance

While changing the song did resolve a lot of issues with the story, at the same time it also became the source of issues for the movements. Even though the song had a similar emotional progression to “How to Draw / Petrichor,” it had a completely different timing of beats. I had to remap the timing of movements, and this showed the weakness in some of them. For example, I created a movement that is simply a perspective change from a frontal view of the girl to a bird’s eye view. Originally this movement was meant to happen quite fast and just as a way to connect the movements I really wanted to show. However, with the actual song, I ended up adjusting this movement to fit over a longer period of time with two holds. I wanted to avoid the “mickeymousing” effect of matching animation to music, but I feel that this part is where I failed. It almost felt as if the music was reduced to only serve as a sound effect of the perspective changing. Both the music and the animation were too simple over a long period of time and with the holds, it brought focus on the simplicity of the movement. When there is no tangible meaning behind a movement, the music cannot necessarily fill the gap. Instead, it is possible for the movement to lose its emotional depth and simply become a sound effect. This made me realize I had focused too much on replicating the timing and spacing of movements and not enough on why I was making certain movements.

4-3. Problem 2: Movements that Compete with the Music

I also experienced a similar struggle that I had with the story, as there were times where the song “How to Draw / Petrichor” competed with the movement. When the

beat music comes in and the girl is swept around in the water, despite the fast movement and the visuals taking up the whole screen, the animation becomes secondary to the song. Because lyrical dance works mainly with pop music, I believed that I would be able to find some kind of movement that would stand up to the song. However, Fisher (2014) says that lyrical dance “was often overshadowed...because the song had its own powerful impact, forged effectively through polished production qualities and compact cohesiveness that dominated any attempts to reflect it in movement. The dancer’s emotional reflections of the music...rarely could compete with big-budget professional pop music.” I find this really eye-opening that even in dance there is this issue of the movement being drowned out by the music. However, I would argue that the issue is not necessarily with the song, but rather is simply a matter of balancing the music and visuals just as there is a balance between the story and music. For example, I believe the dancer Haeni Kim creates compelling and beautiful movements that balance well even with complicated and multi-layered pop songs. In her choreography to “Vibe Out” (2022), she makes slow and fluid movements to a very fast and intense rhythm. These movements do hit at beats, but they do not match the intensity of the song. There are some moments of swift and sharp movements, but they are sporadic enough to not compete with the music. If she had constantly used intense and fast movements to match the rhythm, it would have been overwhelming and I would lose focus on both the music and the dance. But her slow movements pick up on a different part of the song than the dominating rhythm, which pulls me into watching her movements while still being aware of the music. The scene I had animated with water was trying to match the same level of intensity by using large movements to fill up the screen and fast movements to match the rhythm. But if I had used smaller movements or movements that were slower, I may have been able to create a similar space between the movement and music that Haeni Kim is successful in.

5. Final Remarks

Even though I experienced issues with strong music and strong animation going against each other, based on my research, I believe that they can still successfully work

together. I believe it comes down to being aware of what role each is fitting. If music and animation try to fit the exact same role, they end up competing for attention. Instead, they should complement each other. As complements, the two should combine to create a whole. However, I looked at animation as an entire whole that can be added onto music as a whole itself, which is what caused the two to compete for the same roles. If I had looked at them as two parts of a whole, I think this would have easily opened up more opportunities for a close relationship like dance has to music. Two parts does not necessarily mean two halves, and I see now that there is a spectrum of roles that the animation and dance can fulfill and it can even change over time. Maybe in the story, the music starts out with lyrics and is guiding the animation and at this point the music is taking up 70% of the storytelling while the animation is supporting it with 30%. This can change throughout the film and at some parts the visuals are the main guide while the music becomes support. I also see that now that instead of seeing the movement matching the music, I should see it as complementing it. While hitting the beat is a significant element I want to achieve, it is just as important to create the space where the movement is not hitting the beat at all. Seeing music and animation as fractions of a whole gives an infinite number of possibilities in ways that they can combine. There is still so much to explore in this relationship between animation and music. I want to keep exploring this relationship, and I will be able to do so in more depth with my newfound perspective.

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