The Role of the Live Accompanist in Ballet Training: Musical Mediation, Pedagogical Interaction and Movement Guidance

Yang Ziyun[1] & Leng Poh Gee[2]
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris
e-mail: 362412679@qq.com[1], lengpohgee@fmsp.upsi.edu.my[2]
Corresponding author: lengpohgee@fmsp.upsi.edu.my

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Abstract

Music has long been seen as an important part of classical ballet training. It shapes how movements are organised in time and how they are expressed. Although live accompaniment has always been an important part of ballet classes, academic research has rarely focused on the role of the accompanist in teaching. More often than not, they are viewed merely as providers of musical support rather than as participants in the students' learning process. This study adopts a qualitative approach, involving direct participation in real-life ballet classes, to examine the role of the accompanist in fundamental ballet classes. This study employed semi-structured interviews with music educators and combined Emic and Etic perspectives, conducting systematic observations of ballet classes whilst personally participating as an accompanist, to explore how actual accompaniment practices influence the types of musical information students are able to perceive and utilise. The findings reveal that the musical elements emphasised by the accompanist during performance directly influence what students first notice aurally and consequently affect which musical information they prioritise in their movements. This study suggests that the accompanist works as a link between music and dance in ballet classes. The accompanist shapes the conditions that help dancers develop an embodied understanding of music. When the accompanist is seen as an active interpretive participant in studio interaction, the study adds to discussions in dance education about the relationship between music and movement and about cooperation across disciplines.

Keywords: ballet training, musical accompaniment, dance pedagogy

Introduction

Music has long been seen as an important part of classical ballet training. It shapes how movement is organised in time and how it is expressed (Jordan, 2011; Cavalli, 2001). In ballet classes, live accompaniment creates a more conducive learning environment, allowing musical expression and technical movements to constantly influence one another during practice. Unlike the recorded music commonly used in performances, live accompaniment can be adjusted at any time to suit the needs of the class—whether in terms of tempo, musical colour, phrasing or dynamics. These variations directly influence the dancers' perception and understanding of the music during technical training, whilst also fostering their musicality.

Although accompanists play a vital role in dance classes, dance research rarely addresses their actual role in teaching. Much research focuses instead on the history of ballet accompaniment or discusses musical issues such as repertoire and style (Cavalli, 2001). Theoretical research on the relationship between dance and music has also largely concentrated on the levels of choreographic

structure and performance aesthetics, discussing only music and dance in their own right, whilst paying little attention to the specific influence of the accompanist on this relationship within the classroom (Jordan, 2011; Leaman, 2016). Consequently, the accompanist is often viewed merely as a provider of musical support rather than as a participant in the teaching process, thereby overlooking the fact that they are the most direct and crucial link between music and dance.

Recent research on dance learning shows that learning in ballet class does not come only from the teacher's instruction or the students' own practice. It also comes from the ongoing interaction between the teacher, the dancers, and the classroom setting (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015). In this view, musical accompaniment acts as a link. It affects when movements start, how dancers listen to music, how they understand musical structure, and how they respond with their bodies. In class, the accompanist can change the music in real time. They may change the tempo, play more legato or staccato, or make the music more or less expressive. These changes affect dancers' coordination, where they focus their attention, and how they shape their movements.

This study looks again at the role of the accompanist in ballet class training. It treats accompaniment as part of teaching interaction, not only as sound support. Through classroom observation and analysis, the study examines how accompanists help students organise movement learning, develop musical ability, and improve their understanding of dance performance.

Background

In ballet classes, piano accompaniment is not merely background music; it is the source of music that students hear most frequently and engage with most directly on a daily basis. Numerous studies have shown that, compared to pre-recorded music, live accompaniment allows for real-time adjustments to tempo, accentuation, phrasing and dynamics in response to the teacher's instructional plan, the difficulty of the movement sequences and the specific circumstances of the class at that moment.

Consequently, live accompaniment is particularly well-suited to ballet technique classes, as these sessions place high demands on rhythm, control of strength and precision of movement. In traditional ballet training, in particular, the accompanist not only helps students maintain the rhythm but also influences their understanding of movement quality, spatial orientation and overall performance sensibility through variations in musical style, structure and dynamics. Harriet Cavalli's monograph is generally regarded as one of the most representative foundational texts in this field; she defines dance accompaniment as a specialised practice requiring a simultaneous understanding of movement characteristics, class structure and musical composition, rather than mere piano improvisation or general accompaniment work. (Cavalli, 2001)

Recent research has further deepened this perspective. Davidson, using the collaborative relationship between dance teachers and dance music practitioners in ballet classes as a case study, points out that existing research on the role of ballet piano accompanists remains limited. What truly merits attention is not merely 'what' the accompanist plays, but rather how the teacher and accompanist jointly 'interpret' and generate the teaching process within the classroom. This study describes the accompaniment relationship as a 'creative cycle':The teacher proposes movements and pedagogical intentions; the accompanist responds immediately through music; and this musical response, in turn, influences the teacher's demonstration, the students' execution, and the progression of the classroom atmosphere. Consequently, the role of the accompanist shifts from that of a functional supporter in the traditional sense to that of a pedagogical participant in the classroom, possessing interpretative, responsive, and co-constructive capabilities. (Davidson, 2023)

More recent research has also explored the coordination between teachers and accompanists from a more specific technical perspective. ISsever's research focuses on analysing the coordination between ballet teachers and accompanists regarding musical technical elements, noting that classroom effectiveness often depends on whether both parties can establish a shared understanding of tempo, rhythm, phrasing, style and movement requirements.The study shows that good accompaniment does not depend only on piano skills. It also depends on whether the teacher and the accompanist have a clear, stable and workable way of cooperating. This kind of research helps shift the focus from the accompanist's individual musical ability to their ability to work as part of teaching (Issever, 2024).

Although accompaniment plays a vital role in dance classes, in many discussions about dance education, the presence of accompanists is often taken for granted, with little real explanation or analysis of their role. Much research treats accompanists merely as support staff who provide music for practice, failing to recognise their actual impact within the classroom. In fact, the musical choices that accompanists make continuously during a lesson carry pedagogical significance in themselves and influence how students understand and utilise music. In other words, music is not merely a tool to assist the teacher in delivering the lesson; it can also serve as a vital means of facilitating student learning.

In a real classroom setting, accompanists must simultaneously consider the teacher's instructional objectives, the students' ability levels, and the ever-changing dynamics of the lesson, making adjustments between these factors to influence the progression of the entire learning process. Ballet technique classes represent one of the most direct points of interaction between music and dance; the music students hear and learn in class is largely shaped through the interaction between the teacher, the dancers and the accompanist. The accompanist is therefore not merely a provider of a sonic backdrop, but a key participant in shaping the students' physical learning process. Re-examining the role of the accompanist helps to clarify how musical competence supports technical development, performance understanding and classroom interaction within ballet training.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods, primarily to examine the specific pedagogical role played by accompanists in classical ballet training. As classroom accompaniment is inherently shaped by the interaction between the teacher, the students and the accompanist, qualitative methods are better suited to capturing the true nature of these classroom dynamics. The study focuses on how accompaniment is utilised during routine technique classes, and how the musical variations introduced by the accompanist in the moment influence the students' execution of movements.

To gain a clearer understanding of this issue, the study combined interviews with classroom observation, examining the classroom from two perspectives. One was an Emic (participatory, internal perspective) , whereby the researcher participated as a pianist and entered the classroom to experience the session first-hand; the other was an Etic (external, observational perspective) , involving observation from the sidelines without participating in the teaching. This approach allowed the researcher to observe how the classroom actually functioned, whilst also hearing how the teachers and students themselves interpreted these events.

In the participatory phase, the researcher entered the classroom as an accompanist and conducted interviews with the dance teacher, the accompanist and the students, primarily to understand how they made musical choices during lessons and how these choices influenced teaching and practice.

In the observational phase, the researcher did not participate in the teaching but merely recorded classroom dynamics, such as how the teacher organised exercises, how the accompaniment varied, and how the students' movements responded. This allowed for a more objective view of the overall classroom interaction.

The interviews centred on several key questions: for instance, the role of music learning in ballet training, and whether it influences technical execution and interpretative understanding; the appropriate level of musical proficiency expected of dance students; and whether music theory is genuinely applied in practical classroom settings.

The interviews also address musical elements frequently emphasised in class, such as rhythm, phrasing, tempo and dynamics, as well as the methods teachers and accompanists typically use to teach students to listen to music—for example, rhythm exercises, performing movements to music, or basic musical analysis.

Furthermore, the interviews explore the difficulties students encounter when learning music, and whether music actually helps them to better organise their movements and perform. It also explores how dance teachers and accompanists typically collaborate, as well as identifying current issues in music instruction within dance classes.

During classroom observations, the research primarily documents how accompanists are utilised in actual lessons— for instance, whether they adjust tempo, accents or musical phrasing in

response to the teacher's requests, and how these changes influence the students' practice. Researchers also observe how teachers and accompanists communicate, whether through verbal cues, eye contact, or direct musical coordination.

The observations also documented students' physical responses to different accompaniment styles, including the stability of movements, timing of entry and exit, use of space, and variations in performance.

During the data analysis process, interview transcripts and classroom observation records were organised and compared simultaneously. Through repeated reading and categorisation, the researcher summarised the accompaniment patterns, teaching interactions and student responses observed in different classroom contexts, in order to gain a clearer understanding of the practical pedagogical role of accompaniment in ballet classes.

Finding and Discussion

Classroom observations, the researcher's own experience of accompanying, and interviews all show that the musical information students use to decide their movements in class does not come only from the music itself. It comes mostly from the ongoing process of choice and emphasis between the teacher, the accompanist and the students during teaching. The music heard in class is also usually not the full original version of the piece. To meet teaching needs, teachers and accompanists often change and simplify the music. For example, they may repeat some sections, keep the tempo and accents fixed, make the rhythm clearer, or leave out more complex parts.

Because of this, students often work with short musical sections that are easier for practice and more uniform in form, instead of music that shows full structure and change. In daily basic training, accompaniment mainly supports the training process. It helps students move together, keep movement flow, and build a shared sense of rhythm. Observations show that accompanists often use clear rhythmic phrases, steady tempo and clear phrase endings to help students complete exercises more smoothly. In this situation, students often use the music as a timing signal to start, continue and coordinate movement, rather than as a guide for understanding musical structure or expression.

As little attention is paid to the accompaniment in the classroom, students often fail to appreciate the importance of live accompaniment. In fact, every lesson gradually helps to develop students' musical abilities. Teachers need to consciously guide students to listen to the accompaniment and pay attention to the musical nuances, rather than focusing solely on the movements themselves.

Research shows that the extent to which students interact with the accompaniment in class often depends on their existing musical background. Students with less musical experience typically rely more heavily on a clear beat and steady tempo to execute movements. As one non-elective student explained, "If the piano doesn't give me a heavy 'boom' on count 1, I completely lose my entry point; I just watch the others to stay together' . For these students, the accompaniment is primarily viewed as a tool to maintain group synchronisation. Conversely, students with more musical experience demonstrate a broader auditory focus. One student taking a music class said: 'I no longer just count the beats mechanically. When the melody begins to rise and the sound grows louder, my body instinctively knows to prepare for the next leap.' These students do not usually rely solely on a clear beat to guide their movements. Instead, they listen to the overall flow of the music and the development of the phrases, using these cues to determine when to begin a movement and how it should unfold.

Students with more extensive musical experience generally do not rely solely on the beat to complete classroom exercises. They are more accustomed to organising their movements based on the overall feel of the music, and are better able to adapt to changes in accent or subtle rhythmic variations. Even when the accompaniment features syncopation, fluctuations in tempo or changes in phrasing, their movements typically remain relatively stable, and they are better able to respond with nuanced expression. For them, the accompaniment is not merely a 'timekeeper', but rather serves as a guide to the structure and emotional direction of the movement. They are better able to discern phrasing, changes in dynamics or stylistic nuances, and attempt to translate this information into spatial shifts or control of energy.

Research has also found that in regular classes, if the accompaniment is consciously designed, it directly influences students' physical responses and musical understanding. Different technical exercises can, in fact, be supported by different musical approaches. For example, in plié exercises, heavier, deeper harmonies create a sensation of downward resistance for students, thereby helping them to better control their muscles and stabilise their movements. In grand battement, if the music provides a clear, powerful kinetic cue from the outset, it helps students to throw their legs out more decisively. In petit jeté and grand jeté training, if the end of a musical phrase rises slightly or is extended, students find it easier to linger in the air for a moment longer, and the movement appears lighter.

In controlled combinations, if the musical timing is slightly lengthened or compressed, it encourages students to perform the movements as if 'breathing' rather than mechanically counting the beats. This approach helps students shift from counting beats to feeling the rhythm physically.

Research also indicates that the accompanist is constantly influencing the physical rhythm of the class. When the whole class speeds up or slows down, the accompanist can bring the rhythm back to the correct state by altering the music. For example, during a grand jeté exercise, as the students accelerated, the accompanist did not stop but immediately abandoned complex accompaniment patterns in favour of heavy, staccato chords. Soon, the collective rhythm of the students was restored, and the teacher did not even need to interrupt the exercise.

When the rhythm becomes chaotic, the accompanist can simplify the music to help students rediscover a clear sense of movement. If students' grand jetés are loose or their landings unstable, the accompanist can emphasise the staccato on the final note, causing the body to tense momentarily and thereby stabilising the movement. If students become overly tense during slow-motion exercises, the accompaniment can become softer and more fluid, allowing them to release unnecessary tension.

During the preparatory phase before a grand jeté, if the accompanist slightly extends the end of a phrase, students will find it easier to adjust their breathing and mental preparation. In balance exercises, if the accompaniment gradually fades or even approaches silence, students will shift their attention from the music back to their own bodies, making it easier to find their balance.When exercises are repeated multiple times and students begin to tire, the accompanist can lift their spirits by modulating or changing the register, for example, moving from low to high notes, or from a minor to a major key. Such musical variations often instantly improve the student's condition, preventing a decline in the quality of their movements. In terms of the overall musical structure, the accompanist's subtle handling of phrases also gradually cultivates the student's 'ballet sense'. The preparatory beat at the beginning not only sets the tempo but also suggests the style of the movement through the musical texture. A clear ending to each phrase also helps students maintain strength and integrity at the conclusion of a movement, rather than becoming loose due to ambiguous music.

Through different touch techniques, the accompaniment can also evoke distinct physical sensations in students. For example, soft, flowing music can make students feel as though they are moving through water or a soft material, making it easier for them to maintain muscle tension. One student remarked: 'When the piano sounds as though it is flowing, I feel as though I am moving through deep water; this forces me to stay in control rather than just letting my legs go.'The teacher also mentioned that she often relies on accompaniment with a continuous flow to make the students' movements softer and more extended. The music seems to 'pull' their body lines outwards. Conversely, during high kicks or stationary movements, if the bass is clear and weighty, students feel more firmly 'planted on the ground', making it easier for them to find the stability and explosive power in their movements.

The 'introduction, development, transition and conclusion' of a musical phrase are not merely musical conventions, but the very soul of the dance imagery. On the upbeat preceding the movement, the performer constructs an image of 'lung expansion' through a gradually ascending melody or a moderate crescendo in volume. This not only signals to the dancers to begin the movement, but also induces them to establish 'internal breathing momentum'. The decrescendo and descending pitch at the end of a phrase guide dancers to recover and settle their energy, ensuring that the conclusion of a movement displays an elegant sense of completeness rather than an abrupt halt. Synesthesia acts as an 'invisible muscle' within the dance classroom. When the accompanist uses the piano to simulate the physical properties of different media− such as the flow of water, the weight of

metal, or the buoyancy of air—the dancers are not merely 'listening' to the music, but 'sensing' the resistance and buoyancy that the music imbues in the space. This shift from auditory perception to proprioception prompts students to spontaneously construct mental imagery.

Table 1. *A Comparative Table of Aesthetic Synesthesia Between Musical Elements and the Texture of Dance*

Dimension of Musical Intervention	Specific Musical Treatment	Auditory Imagery & Physical Metaphors
1. Articulation & Timbre	Legato + Sustain Pedal	Water, silk, viscous fluid. Eliminates the granularity of sound, creating a space of seamless extension.
	Staccato + Strong Accents	Hard solids, metallic collision. Delivers a highly granular and penetrating physical impact.
2. Register & Spatiality	Deep, Broad Low Register	Gravity, downward pull, rooting. Heavy sound waves impart a psychological suggestion of a solid, stable foundation.
	Clear, Sparkling High Register	Suspension, thinning air, weightlessness. High-frequency sounds bring a sense of lightness and upward traction.
3. Texture & Density	Dense, Heavy Harmonic Texture	High-density space, the resistance of wading through water. Notes fill the auditory space, implying a crowded physical environment.
	Minimalist Texture or 'Auditory Silence'	A vacuum state, withdrawal of external support. Strips away auditory interference, retaining only faint single notes or silence.
4. Phrasing & Breath	Crescendo & Upward Upbeat (Anacrusis)	The 'inhalation' of lung expansion, accumulation of potential energy. The music climbs upward, foreshadowing an eruption of energy.
	Decrescendo & Cadence (Resolution)	The 'exhalation' of energy release, the settling of dust. Tension dissipates, returning to a calm centre of gravity.

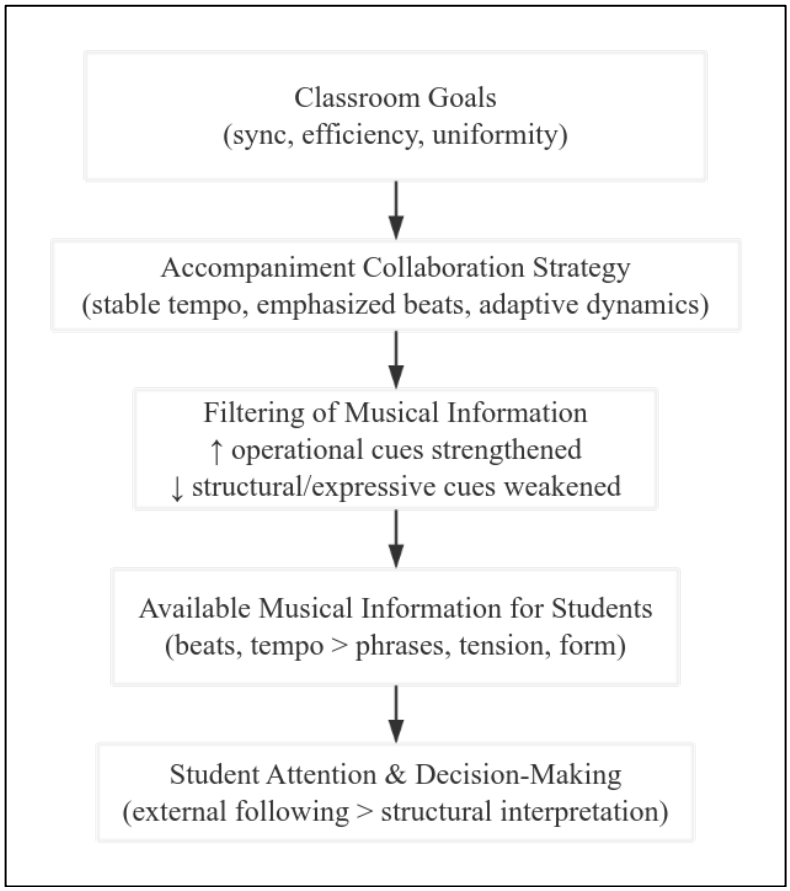

Figure 1. *How accompaniment influences the musical information students can absorb in the classroom*

The most significant finding of this study is that, in ballet classes, music is not merely a tool to help students practise technique; it actually has a deeper influence on how students learn movements, understand dance, and express themselves. The musical information that students hear and engage with in class is not determined by the music itself, but is gradually shaped through the ongoing interaction between the teacher, the accompanist and the students. Therefore, in ballet teaching, music functions more as a learning resource generated within the classroom dynamic, rather than a static backdrop.

This perspective also prompts us to re-examine the traditional 'movement-centred' approach to training. It was once commonly believed that the classroom was primarily controlled by the teacher, but in reality, the accompanist has always played a moderating role in teaching. By controlling the rhythm, tempo, phrasing and the 'sense of breathing' within the music, the accompanist continually influences how students understand the temporal structure of movements and their modes of expression. For instance, when the strong beats are clearly defined, students find it easier to establish a stable framework for their movements; if the music is more fluid and possesses a sense of breathing, students are better able to execute subtle transitions and distribute their energy with finesse.

Therefore, music in the classroom is not a neutral backdrop, but directly influences how students interpret the practice task and organise their bodily movements. The temporal and expressive cues provided by music allow the accompanist to participate in the actual teaching process of movement generation and rhythmic learning. A dance class relies not only on the teacher's instruction and demonstration, but also, to a large extent, on how the accompanist interprets the music at that moment.

The accompanist does not merely follow a predetermined teaching plan, but continuously shapes the students' perceptual environment and movement choices. When the accompanist guides students through phrasing cues, dynamic variations or stylistic interpretations, music becomes a vital pedagogical tool, helping students to understand movements more deeply and enhance their expressiveness. Conversely, if music is used merely to ensure rhythmic consistency, students are more

likely to focus solely on technical execution, whilst neglecting the development of expression. Musical cues that recur throughout the lesson gradually become a key reference point for students in organising their movements. Over the course of long-term training, rhythmic accents, phrasing variations or dynamic contrasts are 'memorised' by the student's body, becoming the rules for executing movements. Consequently, students' understanding of music does not stem solely from the theory learnt in class, but is gradually formed through these musical cues provided by the accompanist.

Within the classroom, the relationship between the teacher, the accompanist and the students also evolves as the learning progresses. At the beginner stage, the class structure is relatively clear: the teacher gives instructions, the accompanist provides a steady rhythm, and the students primarily follow. As ability improves, the class sees more non-verbal interaction; the accompanist assists the teacher in correcting movements through musical variations, thereby giving the music a feedback function. At more advanced stages, this hierarchical relationship diminishes, and the class takes on a more collaborative nature, with dancers and accompanists jointly shaping the quality of movement through real-time interaction, whilst students gradually shift from 'moving to the music' to 'expressing through the music'.

When the accompanist employs a very soft, fluid touch combined with flowing arpeggios, the music evokes the sensation of stretching velvet or moving through water. Such sounds render the dancer's movements more fluid, lending the body's lines a sense of extension rather than rigid posturing. In exercises requiring explosive power and stability, such as grand jetés or held positions, if the bass is clear, weighty, and even carries a slight 'impact', dancers find it easier to locate their points of support, resulting in movements that are more powerful and steadier.

Changes in musical phrasing also influence the dancer's physical sensation. If the music offers a slight upward thrust or gradually builds in intensity before a movement begins, dancers naturally establish a sense of 'inhaling in preparation'. This does more than simply signal when to move; it helps them tap into their internal drive. At the end of a phrase, if the music gradually fades and the pitch descends, dancers find it easier to complete the movement's resolution, making the finish appear more complete and elegant rather than abruptly halted.

In the classroom, this bodily sensation evoked by music acts like an 'invisible muscle'. When the accompaniment uses music to simulate the flow of water, the weight of the ground, or the buoyancy of air, dancers are not merely listening to the music; they are sensing resistance or support within the space through it. This sensation gradually transforms from auditory perception into bodily sensation, enabling students to naturally form mental images and sensations of the movement.

As training progresses, these musical cues also influence how students anticipate the development of movements, manage transitions, and make choices between technique and expression. Consequently, within the context of dance, understanding music is more akin to a process of bodily perception and movement interaction than the mere acquisition of knowledge.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of live accompaniment practices in ballet classes, this study re-examines the pedagogical role of accompanists in dance training, as well as their influence on the relationship between musical understanding and movement learning. The study found that the musical information students hear and utilise in class does not derive entirely from the music itself, but is continually selected and adjusted through the collaboration between the teacher and the accompanist. During training, accompaniment not only helps maintain rhythm and classroom order, but also influences where students direct their attention, how they make movement judgements, and their level of understanding of musical structure through specific musical treatments.

The study further indicates that when classroom music primarily emphasises movement synchronisation and the efficiency of practice, students' musical experience tends to be reduced to basic cues such as beat and tempo, resulting in less attention being paid to musical structure and expressive variations. Conversely, in a classroom environment where teachers and accompanists maintain a stable collaborative relationship, music is more readily utilised as a vital resource

supporting movement organisation and expressive judgement, enabling students to gradually develop a more comprehensive understanding of music and expressive capabilities during technical training.

From the perspective of 'music as an information mediator', this study proposes a new framework for understanding the professional role of the accompanist in dance teaching. Viewing the accompanist as an interpretative participant within the learning ecosystem helps to shift ballet training from a model centred on movement execution towards a comprehensive artistic learning process oriented towards structural understanding and interpretative decision-making. By strengthening pedagogical collaboration between teachers and accompanists, classroom music can be more consistently transformed into embodied resources that support the development of dancers' artistic agency.

Future research could further explore the varied forms of accompaniment practice across different dance styles, educational stages and institutional contexts, thereby deepening our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the music–movement relationship in embodied learning. Concurrently, a focus on the professional training of accompanists and interdisciplinary teaching models will provide a more systematic empirical foundation for the theoretical and practical development of the role of music in dance education.

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