

Musicality: Learning Major Phrases

Feeling the build in music

Music is written in major phrases. Many contemporary songs are written in 32-beat phrases, or 4 sets of 8 beats; blues music that follows the 12-bar blues progression occurs in 48-beat phrases, or 6 sets of 8 beats.

Each major phrase ends by resolving to the tonic. The tonic is the key, or base, of the song. When musicians play the tonic after doing a bunch of other stuff, the result is a harmonious sound that releases, or resolves, the tension that had been building up. Because the resolve is a powerful moment in the song, as west coast dancers we want to be aware of when that resolve occurs so we can acknowledge it in our dancing.

The Drill:

To learn how to listen for the tonic, you can practice a brief line dance. The dance starts with your weight on your right foot. Begin by taking slow walks for 16 beats: walk (hold 2) walk (hold 4), walk (hold 6) walk (hold 8), and repeat.

For the third set of 8, point out to the side on the odd beat and then bring the foot back in on the even beat. So, you will point left 1, step your left next to your right on 2, point right 3, step your right next to your left 4, and so on for 8 beats.

The final 8 gets a little trickier. Point forward with your left on 1. Hold beat 2. On the & of beat 2, step your left next to your right and point your right forward for 3. Again, hold beat 4. On the & of 4, step your right together with your left, and point your left out for 5. Now, keep moving every half beat: on the & of 5, step your left together, on 6 point your right forward, on & step your right together, on 7 point left forward, on & step left together, on 8 point right forward, and on & step right together.

This line dance, which comes from Robert Royston, emphasizes all the main resolves in a 32-beat phrase. The busy-ness in the final 4 beats obviously resolves into the tonic on the 1 of the next phrase. There are also changes after 16 beats (which is a minor resolve), and the dance builds energy through the entirety of the last 8 beats in order to really accent the resolve on the next 1.

When you are comfortable with the dance itself, try dancing beginning on the new phrase for a song that's perfectly phrased. (A great practice song is Heather Headley – Fallin' For You; start dancing at the "you" of "I'm falling for you.")

Bonus Variations:

Extend the line dance for a 48-beat phrase. Do the slow walks for 16 beats, the side points for 16 beats, 8 beats of the same speed forward points, and 8 beats of the half-time forward points. (For a perfectly phrased 48-beat phrase song, try Brother Yusef – I've Got the Blues.) Try experimenting with switching to different parts of the line dance at different times, and discover what feels like it matches the music.