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## **Sounding Movement, with a Light Touch: An Interview with Jonathan Zalben**

Alana Murphy

This April, I sat down with Jonathan Zalben on Zoom to discuss his experience as composer and music supervisor for the Disney+ docuseries *On Pointe*, which chronicles a season at the School of American Ballet (official school of the New York City Ballet) through the eyes of several talented and dedicated young dancers. Zalben and I talked about embodiment and interdisciplinarity, nostalgia for our own conservatory days, diegesis vs. underscore, the unique challenges of making collaborative recordings in lockdown, George Balanchine's beloved cat Mourka, and much more.



*In rehearsal at the School of American Ballet, as seen in On Pointe*

Alana Murphy: So let me just say, to start off, that I loved *On Pointe*. I had been meaning to watch it even before Stephanie [Jensen-Moulton] had approached me about interviewing you.

Jonathan Zalben: Glad to hear.

AM: It's funny, my partner had really wanted to get a Disney+ account to watch *The Mandalorian*. I said, "We have too many streaming services already." But then I heard about *On Pointe* and thought, that is tempting. And then Stephanie reached out, and I told my boyfriend, "okay, you're in luck—now I have to watch a Disney+ show for an official assignment, so I suppose we can subscribe to the platform." By the way, are there any video clips of the show that I could use when we publish this interview? Or is that verboten?

JZ: From the actual show? No, it's all copyrighted, but you can certainly include [the trailer](#).

AM: Actually, one of the first things I wanted to ask you about was the trailer. Did you write the music for it?

JZ: I did not! It's interesting—with most shows, the trailer is done separately from the film because it's considered advertising, so very often there's a whole other production team that's dealing with the promotional content for the show. And so sometimes that goes to a trailer house, or sometimes it's done internally by either the distributor or whoever is producing the project, but it's usually not done with the entire team. Sometimes they will end up using my music, but not it's not the default. It's just one of those quirks.

## Sounding Movement (cont.)

AM: An “industry thing!” I see. I asked this because I watched the trailer before I watched this series, and the trailer presented the show as this very high-stakes drama. There was a techno remix of the main theme from *Swan Lake* that made it seem like a reality show—“only the toughest will rise through the ranks!” And, I mean, I would watch that show. Absolutely. But the actual series had a very different tone, much more dignified and restrained, so I was almost certain that there were different composers behind the trailer and the show.

JZ: Yeah, there’s definitely an “art of the trailer,” in a way, because you want to try to capture the essence of a show and entice the audience to watch it. Sometimes the trailer feels different from the show itself and then sometimes it feels like, oh okay, I essentially watched the film already. So for *On Pointe* it’s a case where the series itself maybe feels a little bit different from the trailer.

AM: Different in a good way, I think! I mean, I would be there for a juicy bunhead drama with knives out and backbiting. But it’s also been done before. In *On Pointe* I was impressed with the School of American Ballet [SAB] kids and teens who got profiled. They were so articulate and dedicated. The series felt like an ode to ballet as an art form, and to the discipline and passion that young people are bringing to it.



Nutcracker rehearsal, as seen in *On Pointe*

JZ: Oh, 200%. That’s one of the things I think is so powerful about the documentary: it shows the hard work that these students do to hone their craft on a day-to-day basis over many, many years, because it’s what they love. And I think that kind of work ethic can apply to any discipline, whether it’s music or dance, sculpture, painting, or whatever else. That level of dedication at that age is obviously unique and unusual, and the series captured it with such a light touch. I feel that the kids spoke for themselves. The rehearsal footage speaks for itself; you see everybody lining up and following directions but also constantly reflecting and growing.

AM: The whole thing brought back so many memories for me. I didn’t go to SAB, but I was pretty serious about ballet as a kid and a teen. Lots of hours logged in the dance studio.

JZ: Oh really, where did you train?

AM: I grew up in California and started dancing at a local studio, then eventually did some summer intensives in the Bay Area and took classes in the pre-professional division at Santa Cruz Ballet. But eventually I got more serious about piano and had to make a choice. So I went to music school, and then I actually ended up becoming a dance accompanist as a side hustle, which really sustained me through some lean times in NYC! It also became an academic interest of mine, this relationship between music and dance and how artists collaborate. On that note: how did you get involved with *On Pointe*?

JZ: I had worked with the team [Matthew O’Neill and Larissa Bills] on their previous film, a documentary for HBO called *Finding the Way Home*.

## Sounding Movement (cont.)

AM: Tell me about the HBO documentary.

JZ: That movie was about former orphans in various countries around the world. So it takes place in six different countries and those kids were in orphanages and then got adopted, or some of them had been trafficked and then returned to their birth parents. So it got into the issue of orphanages and of kids finding their own homes around the world. I did the score and the music supervision for that film.

AM: And obviously made a good impression! So this creative team—do they tend to do youth-focused features? I mean, obviously the subject matter is quite different on these two projects, but...

JZ: That's a great question. You know, I never actually made that specific link before about the youth aspect but both projects were produced by Downtown Community Television, or DCTV. And there's a huge youth focus there. It's a community-based organization started by Jon Alpert, who's a really big director and filmmaker. He was also a producer on *Finding the Way Home*. And Matt O'Neill and Jon have worked together for many years. They do youth education classes, they have internships. Some of the students who go through their mentorship program end up working at DCTV. I've worked with some of the former mentees in DCTV who are now assistant editors or cinematographers. There's definitely a big youth, community, and social justice component to DCTV. And my colleagues, they're all great to work with; they're just super collaborative and interested in storytelling. Very detailed and just have an amazing vision. It's great to find your "people."

AM: Amen. So I was wondering, actually—was the original plan for the series to go longer than six episodes? It ends (spoiler alert!) with COVID and lockdown, and they close SAB for the first time in the history of the school, and the kids go home and we see them doing barre from their living rooms over Zoom.

JZ: Yeah, the idea was to film them through to their graduation, but I believe there wasn't a ton of footage that still had to be shot at that point. I think it was always planned for six episodes, and they had sort of gotten most of the material together for five-and-a-half episodes.

AM: COVID becomes part of the narrative structure.

JZ: Yeah, it was definitely done out of necessity, but I think it ended up working out well for the show and then we were in post-production for almost a year, from March through November 2020.

AM: No Spring Workshop for the older students, though.

JZ: Exactly, that was the thing that didn't end up happening. So instead we got to hear from the older students about their career aspirations and how they're dealing with the pandemic and coordinating with each other. Watching the pre-professional students was also especially interesting for me because I had gone to Juilliard Pre-College from 7th to 12th grade, which is right next door.

AM: Right, I saw Juilliard in your bio and was going to ask if you'd had any crossover with SAB or City Ballet back in the day.

JZ: You know, I always saw the kids, but we didn't really interact much with them. It's interesting for me now to see their experience through the lens of what I consider to be a somewhat equivalent musical experience, just in terms of how you're laser-focused on what you want to do with your life. It was cool to see that and then also to be able to participate creatively. It's definitely very inspirational to watch the kids and hear their stories and then think back to my youth. Actually, some of the musicians that played on the score I had gone to Juilliard Pre-College with.



## Sounding Movement (cont.)

AM: A Lincoln Center reunion!

JZ: I mean, they're people that I still know and now work with professionally. So there's a trajectory there. And they talk about this in the documentary too; there's this legacy of teacher to company dancer to SAB student. There's this through-line, in a way, and I think something similar exists with music.

AM: Yes, that lineage and that oral tradition makes me think of George Balanchine, the upholding of the Balanchine aesthetic at SAB that they mention in the doc. If you want to stage a Balanchine ballet anywhere you have to get permission from the Balanchine Trust and have it coached by someone who either received the choreography straight from the man himself, or maybe a second-generation disciple. And that's how they maintain the purity of this very idiosyncratic style.



*SAB faculty member Arch Higgins backstage with student Kai Misra-Stone, who is trying on a Nutcracker headpiece*

JZ: True, with some art forms, pedagogy has to happen through example. I think there's some stuff that you can learn from YouTube, but learning firsthand from someone and being able to have that passed down to you, and then hopefully you eventually get to pass that on to someone else—that's a really powerful thing.

AM: So even though you didn't mix with SAB when you were at Juilliard Pre-College, did you end up working with dancers later on in your compositional career? Before *On Pointe*, I mean?

JZ: I've done some collaborations with choreographers. And I love that—it's actually one of my favorite things to do. It's very much to me like writing music for a film. It's somewhere between a film and a theatrical performance because there's that live element, but then it's very visual because you've got the movement on screen or on stage. I love the lighting and the set design, and how the rhythm of the dance goes along with the rhythm of the music, or sometimes they're in counterpoint with one another.

AM: Yes! I sort of coined this term at one point, "kinesthetic counterpoint," to try to get at the idea of that unique audio-visual relationship. I know someone who's developing a notational system for music-dance polyrhythms. There are a lot of dimensions to explore.

JZ: There was an exhibit that I saw on African textiles [[Music and Movement: Rhythm in Textile Design](#), at the Chicago Art Institute] that were created as part of a musical and dance tradition; the patterns related to movements of dance and rhythms of music. I found that really fascinating because you can see the movement and feel the rhythms through looking at these fabrics. But I would imagine that this is something that would be pervasive in a lot of different cultures—it's just not something that I was personally aware of before. So we were talking about polyrhythm, which is what triggered my memory of the exhibit. Anyway, I love when different art forms interplay with one another. I've done a lot of stuff with art installations, too, and I love that for that same reason, and I kind of view all these things as being one and the same because it's collaboration. It's part of a larger whole. It's not just you and your work. Coming back to the textile example, I never thought about how making fabrics and sewing could be related to music and dance, you know, the act of doing.

## Sounding Movement (cont.)

AM: I think about this a lot, how contemporary American culture tends to be focused on the finished object or the end product, especially with visual arts, but physical, embodied actions always go into making something, and they kind of leave a residue of gesture on the object. The process is still perceptible somehow.

JZ: And what I really love about creating music is the process. Once the music is done and out there, I like it but I'm less interested. I love the search and the exploration of finding the notes and creating the music, and then the recording process as well—there's a search-and-discovery part to that too. I love the act of creation, more than anything else.

AM: That is a wonderful thing to hear from a working composer! So, for *On Pointe* you were both composer and music supervisor, right? That means that you wrote the original score, but you also made choices about when to keep diegetic music from rehearsal footage or performances. Tell me a little bit about deciding when to use source music vs. a score.

JZ: Well, there are a lot of moments where we're "in rehearsal" with the dancers and there's piano music playing, or we're rehearsing on stage in a concert hall and maybe there's orchestral music, but for the most part it's rehearsal piano music, so that would be diegetic. And then there are moments where as a composer you want to support the drama or the emotion, or you want to help move the story from one place to another, or underscore character development, and that's where the underscore can come in to help support those moments. And then sometimes you try to let the scene play itself, and let the characters speak for themselves. That's really important with any project, to let the scenes breathe—and the dialogue in any show is number one. We have to know what the characters are saying, what they're trying to accomplish, where the story is going. The music part has to respond to that; everything else is secondary, in my mind.

AM: That's exactly the impression that I got from your score. You used the term "a light touch" when talking about the directors' choices earlier on in our talk, and I feel like your score also had this light touch. Sometimes a score can almost micromanage the audience and dictate what they're supposed to feel, but yours very much didn't do that.

JZ: Most of the films that I've worked on don't have an agenda. I think a great filmmaker should have a point of view that should come through, but that's different than pushing a certain narrative on the audience.

AM: Oh sure, it's more that I wonder if some creative teams don't always trust the audience to draw their own conclusions, so they overdetermine emotional beats.

JZ: That happens a lot. I've found, thankfully, that a lot of the filmmakers I've worked with don't do that, but I certainly see that out there because, you know, at the end of the day, we are creating entertainment. It's for people to watch either in the theater or their homes, to escape their own lives and experience something else or someone else's.

AM: Yeah, I did get a sense of escapism watching the show. I'm sure part of it was nostalgia for when I used to do ballet seriously. But also, I wrote down some free associations about your score while I was watching the show, some descriptive words. And of course your music swelled and changed a lot but I kept coming back to certain adjectives like "impressionistic," "minimalistic," "transcendent," "diatonic" or "white notes." Also, to use a term from ballet, the music had "ballon"—that means like when you jump and you have a lot of lift and height but also a soft landing. This word especially came to my mind with your original music for the dance footage that had been slowed down—was it your call to use slo-mo?

JZ: I don't have any say whatsoever! But one of my favorite scenes was with [SAB Faculty Chair] Kay Mazzo talking about Balanchine and his cat Mourka, and I felt like that was to be in a way the essence of the show;

## Sounding Movement (cont.)

that scene was very touching, and also it speaks to what you're talking about with seeing the dancers almost float. I don't know how they move like that. It's magic to me. To have the opportunity to create music that would hopefully in some way capture a little bit of that transcendence was really fun and inspiring.

AM: Transcendence is really such a core aesthetic of ballet—as in, make the physics of the body so perfect that it can fly. But all of this ethereal stuff was taking place inside the dance studio, and then I noticed that as soon as we were out and about in NYC, you jazzed it up.

JZ: That was also a discussion from the beginning with Larissa, the director, and the editor, Jenn. When I met with them, at first, on the project, we talked about having New York as a character. That was a really important thing, and one of the sounds of New York is jazz. So, yeah, that felt very appropriate. It's energetic. It's different than the music that's happening in the interiors.

AM: And City Ballet is maybe the most jazz-adjacent classical ballet company—think Jerome Robbins and Gershwin, Balanchine and Stravinsky. So it worked for me on that level too.

JZ: I knew early on that we were going to do jazz, and I had written some sketches and my intention was to go into the studio and record with a jazz group, which obviously was not possible in the middle of COVID. So the musicians all recorded themselves individually, and then I pieced it together in Pro Tools. I gave them charts and then asked them each to do two takes of each piece. I was nervous that I wasn't going to feel the edge; obviously it's an art form where it's meant to be played live, collaboratively. And so to not have that was very nerve-racking. But I was lucky enough to work with a trio of phenomenal musicians [Arturo O'Farrill, Jim Whitney, and Hal Rosenfeld]. They just killed it.



*Establishing shot of NYC in On Pointe*

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AM: So did you have a similar recording process for the “inside the studio” parts of your score?

JZ: Hal Rosenfeld plays mallet instruments, so he played marimba and vibraphones and such. Eric Jacobson and Caitlin Sullivan played cello, and Ralph Farris played viola. They were all people I knew through Juilliard. Originally I had written some pieces for Ralph's string quartet, ETHEL, to play for the show, and then again with the pandemic—I was like, oh man, I cannot record them, so I guess I'm multi-tracking this one. I played all the violin parts. It's different than having a quartet in a room together but it still worked. And then there was a bunch of orchestral music, and I went to Budapest for that and they were open and recording so that was no problem.

AM: Oh yeah, I noticed that the credits swelled to a glorious full orchestra each time. So wait, you could still do that recording session during COVID?

JZ: They did it as an orchestra together, and I was remote-listening from a booth with a computer.

## Sounding Movement (cont.)

AM: So, re: your orchestral music, or actually all of your original score—was any of it inspired or shaped by the repertoire or rehearsal music? Like any similar motives or textures, to create continuity?

JZ: That's a good question. I did write some music that sounded diegetic that was meant to be diegetic. So there were some places where I wrote tunes that were meant to sound like rehearsal piano. But in terms of the actual score, I actually started writing a bunch of the themes before getting into the cut and the edit. At that point, I just knew that there was going to be rehearsal piano music. I knew there was going to be a lot of *Nutcracker*, so I certainly was aware of both of those elements, and I knew that I wanted to do something that was a little bit in contrast to them.

AM: See, here I was trying to be a good little musicology grad student and pick out all of your musical references and quotations. Like, I fully convinced myself that your "white notes" theme was modeled on an excerpt of Stravinsky's *Agon* that got used in the series.

JZ: No, I didn't see any footage until maybe July of last year, and we were well into the process at that point. I wasn't taking any material from the source music and putting it into the score or vice versa. We were really keeping those two elements very separate, the diegetic and the score. In terms of original themes, I did have many that were repeated throughout the series. I was thinking about trying to create coherence in that way. For example, when Kay [Mazzo] was speaking about Mourka, Balanchine's cat—there's another scene where Kay speaks about her own history with Balanchine, and I use the same theme in both of those places. And then it comes back later on where one of the students is talking about Balanchine as well.

AM: There was definitely continuity. Backing up, why did you need to compose music that sounded like rehearsal piano?

JZ: Sometimes we couldn't get the rights to what was being played in the studio, or there actually wasn't music with the original footage but we wanted something there. As music supervisor, I had to identify every piece of music in the show, and I worked with a few music consultants to help me out with that. I think there were over 350 cues in the series total.

AM: Wow!

JZ: It was a lot of music to deal with, split pretty much 50/50 between score and source. Even though we were trying to keep them separate, they have to work with each other. Like you were saying before with *Agon*, I wasn't thinking about Stravinsky when I composed the theme, but later when I put my music in the episode, I did think about how that would fit in stylistically, and what would make sense coming out of that piece of music and into the next scene. I should mention that also one of our collaborators on the show was an amazing music editor named Shari Johanson, and she was integral in terms of shaping the source music to make it coherent. She'd work to smooth out when you're entering or exiting a cue, or if there's a cut she'd ensure that it makes sense musically.

AM: I appreciated that you kept a lot of footage of the rehearsal pianists. They do hard work! The *Nutcracker* especially is a hairy score to reduce.

JZ: I actually studied the *Nutcracker* score a lot for this. First I printed out our full score, everything that I'd composed and everything we used, and cross-compared to the Tchaikovsky score to identify the exact passages that we incorporated. There's a lot of musicological work there, which you would appreciate. Even still, I probably don't know the score as intimately as the kids who dance it every year!

AM: Extremely relatable—the *Nutcracker* score is burned into my brain forever, because I danced in the ballet



## Sounding Movement (cont.)

nine consecutive years growing up. So, speaking of year-after-year, are there any plans to do another season of *On Pointe*? I want more!

JZ: I don't know—I'm not aware of anything yet. Right now I'm working on two films, and I also score a show on HBO called *Axios*, which is starting up again next week. And I have my full teaching load, so, you know, you get busy. But maybe.

AM: Post-COVID I bet your process will be streamlined.

JZ: You know, I actually didn't deviate much from my work habits during the pandemic. The tech side and logistics, going into the edit suite—I was used to doing that on my own. With *On Pointe*, I was more concerned that musicality and expression wouldn't come through with players recording separately from one another. But, like I said, the musicians I worked with were amazing. In the end it all worked out beautifully, and I think we made something really special.