

Julian Berg's

Dancing with an accompanist: a guitarist's perspective

Class Manual

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A. Instructor's intro and background information

As a guitarist, I am an accompanist first, and a soloist second. I have accompanied a lot of dancers and dance classes in the past ten years, shared the stage with Jose Manuel Leon and Carmen Fernandez, jammed with Mayte Martin and Gerardo Nuñez, and taken four and half years of private lessons with Paco Peña. I started out accompanying classes with my former teacher, Jesús Panea Morente. During my study at Codarts Conservatory, we had an accompaniment class, taught by a dancer, Irene Alvarez, and our guitar teachers every week. I was fortunate enough to complement this by also accompanying Irene Alvarez's classes outside of school. I am modelling this course based on my experience with the accompaniment class, but this time, dancers will be able to get feedback. The objective of the accompaniment class at Codarts is to prepare students for work as professional flamenco accompanists, gauged through their final exam. For mine, the conservatory brought in a singer, Bernardo Miranda, and a dancer, Yolanda Osuna, both from Cordoba, Spain. I had exactly 20 minutes with each of them, to prepare a cante piece and a baile piece. I did not know which palos they would perform, or any of their material in advance. Communication was key. Besides the obvious knowledge of the palos required, my ability to read what the other performers were doing, and to respond accordingly, was what was being tested. Now, as a graduate of Codarts Conservatory, I feel ready to teach those principles of flamenco communication. I think/hope I have something to offer the Toronto community, i.e., a different perspective on the craft of baile. I suspect that this kind of dancer-guitarist communication isn't easily refined when focusing on repertoire or technique. Through this class, I aim to help fill this gap.



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B. Course Objective

To take material you already know and learn to communicate it, improvise on it, and make it your own as you work with new accompanists. The idea of the class is to help dancers break free from choreography, improvise and communicate. We will approach this from a different perspective – I will give you feedback on what you are communicating to me, the accompanist. The details of your material are less important than your ability to convey them! **Also open to singers and guitarists:** I will help you respond to what the other performers are doing, to improvise, and to clearly communicate your intent.

Claudia will be acting as my teaching assistant, singing letras where necessary, keeping time, and helping explain my suggestions in a way that is more accessible to dancers.

C. Prerequisites & Materials

- Attendees need to bring something we can work on, i.e., an escobilla, in which you are the leader of that part of the piece, **rather than exclusively marcaje to a letra or falseta.**
- This class requires Intermediate- advanced technique so that you feel confident enough to get through your section.
- Knowledge of the structure of the palo you would like to work on.

Note: If any of the above raise concerns (e.g., if you don't know the structure of a given palo), feel free to give me a call so we can discuss and ensure you are ready ahead of time.

- I recommend you bring a notebook and camera for recording new ideas, etc.

D. Class Structure

During your session, I will be providing feedback on how you can take the material you already have and make the intentions (dynamics, musical changes, etc.) clear. Additionally, I will provide you with ideas on how you might take patterns within your footwork choreography and learn to improvise with them.

- The workshops will last for 2-3 hours. You sign up for 1 hour only but you can also learn by watching others. If there is time left over, anyone still present can get an extra turn.
- Maximum 3 registrants per hour. Spectators welcome with approval of registrants.

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E. Rules, terms, whatever you want to call them

Based on previous experiences, I have come up with a few ground rules for the classes. These are intended to help keep the atmosphere friendly, and to keep us on track during class:

- **Don't judge!** People will be attempting new things in these classes. Help me create an encouraging atmosphere so everyone feels comfortable! It is just a class, not a performance!
- **Please allow me, as class instructor, to provide feedback** (keeping in mind that the objective of this class is to receive input from a guitarist's perspective). I will then open the floor for classmates' input, *if time permits*. This is intended to help keep us on track, and so that I can highlight what I feel is the most important issue at hand. There may be multiple things that could be improved in someone's dancing, but it is easy to get overwhelmed thinking of too many of them at once.
- **Keep an open mind.** If I make a comment you do not agree with, or which seems odd, it is likely from a place of experience. Indulge me! Try to listen to what I say, and see where it goes. Please check out my background if you'd like more information on my training, credentials, and what has enabled me to design a class of this kind.
- **Be on time.** Please try to be ready to go at our scheduled start time. The sooner we get to it, the more time everyone gets during the session.

F. Testimonial—with full transparency that it is from my wife!

“While I am not able to attend nearly as many flamenco classes as I would like, in the past two years I have somehow managed to make significant strides in my dancing. Believe it or not, I owe most of my recent development to Julian. His skills and knowledge have enabled me to ‘noodle around’ with my material while having live accompaniment. He’s provided insight into footwork patterns and choreography that were not landing. He’s given me an accompanist’s perspective and an outsider’s eye as I’ve rehearsed. He’s helped me internalize footwork so that it becomes my own. He’s showed me ways to recover if what I had intended to do starts to go awry. In short, he’s taught me how to communicate. Through this, I’ve learned that communication with one’s accompanists is equally as important (or dare I say, more important) than strictly remembering a choreography. I fully vouch for Julian as an asset to one’s flamenco learning; while also being transparent about my status as his spouse.”

- Claudia Aguirre