

Freddie: 0:15

Welcome to Sound In Motion, a podcast as part of Dance Umbrella, London's International Festival for Dance. The festival is designed to be in-person across our wonderful global city and online to our international audiences. This is a podcast series where we delve into the relationship of composers, musicians, or sound designers working with choreographers. This is the unheard part of the process. My name is Freddie Opoku-Addiae, Artistic Director and Chief Executive at Dance Umbrella. Today I have the pleasure of being in conversation with Vincenzo Lamagna, composer, musician, producer, performer and all around generous and wonderful collaborative human being. For the last 20 years, he has been working as a solo artist, as well as carving a niche in the contemporary dance world through collaborations with choreographers like Hofesh Shechter and Akram Khan. At the end of 2016, he worked with Akram and the English National Ballet to produce the full length orchestral score for the 21st century depiction of the romantic ballet, Giselle.

Vincenzo: 1:39

Yeah, all of those things. Definitely.

Freddie: 1:41

When did you realise this was like a career path? Like doing this?

Vincenzo: 1:46

I'm not sure I still realise that. Yeah, it's a tricky thing of course it's a career, of course, it's a job. But at the same time, it's just what I've been doing since I can remember. You know, and it's quite funny because actually I think I picked up a guitar when I was ten. But since then, I've always tried somehow to produce music, to create, to compose. And it's very hard to say I'm a composer. It always comes with a, with a weight. You know, if I think of composers, I think of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart. And these names always bring like a sense of, oh, yeah, am I a composer?

Freddie: 2:31

So a little bit of pressure.

Vincenzo: 2:32

Exactly. Just a bit of pressure.

Freddie: 2:35

How did you come to work closely with choreographers? I mean, how did that journey start? I come across a lot of musicians that say, yeah, I want to get to work with more the choreographer, as in choreography, how do I go about doing it?

Vincenzo: 2:46

It was very organic in a way. So when I moved to London, I threw myself in a million different things and one of the first paid gigs I got was to basically playing music for dance classes. I was an accompanist, pretty much in every dance school existed in London. And, you know, you start to get to know people. And for me, it was also it was a very new thing. I didn't even know that I could have done that. So to enter a dance school and sit in a class for an hour and a half playing music, it was great fun, but it was also something that it came to a surprise. You know, it was surprising for me in a way, to have access to this world. I wasn't really connected to the dance world, which is an interesting and silly thing to look at it right now, because it's pretty much the world that I'm most connected with. And, you know, I, I was playing classes and as I said, you meet people and I started to work with a guy that we both know very well, Jorge Crecis. I think I if I remember correctly, we had we were having a chat and he said something like, Oh, I'm making a piece for, for, for the school for the end of the year. And I asked, Do you need music? And he said, Yeah. Like, well, I can do that for you if you want. So in a very simple way, that was the first thing I did for a choreographer. And I think since then, it kind of never stopped. So in a way, you know, in the space of a few years time, I found myself very involved in this world. And to me, it just made perfect sense, as I've always written music that was quite compositional if you want, like it wasn't - I worked in in the pop and rock world, but the stuff that I was writing was mostly instrumental music, quite abstract and long and complex. So it served. It was serving perfectly the purpose of the soundtrack for a dance piece, more even than a film, in a way. It's, it's, a it's a format that I love because it allowed me to go really wide in the in the aesthetics and in what I was able to create.

Freddie: 5:11

I was just thinking actually how word of mouth spreads, and then suddenly a conversation comes up to work with Akram Khan, another very much

established choreographer now. And the one score which we are going to look at, music that is from the Giselle. So how did that conversation start? That we're going to work together on Giselle?

Vincenzo: 5:28

Well, I think with Akram in general, aside from what happened with Giselle, I think what happened was very simple, that I did write a piece of music for, for a piece that I was working on with Jose. And at that time, that track was cut, which happens all the time, of course. And, you know, you got okay, fine. The funnily enough, I think Jose might played that specific track to Akram or other things of mine. I don't exactly know. But basically the relationship started there. He heard this specific track and he wanted to, he basically wanted to talk to me and see if there was space for a collaboration for some, for, for, for work specifically. You kind of like start to create relationships almost out of nowhere, but it's important that people find each other because we, I think with me and Akram in particular, we started to pull out of each other different worlds. So the music that I was creating while working for him, it wouldn't necessarily come out if I would work on my own. And I believe I've influenced his way of working because of the approach that I brought into creating the creative process specifically.

Freddie: 6:42

Exactly. I was going to say -

Vincenzo: 6:43

Talking about Giselle going going smaller, going focus on Giselle. The thing with Giselle was, I believe Tamara Rojo, director of English National Ballet at the time, asked Akram to come on board and rework classical ballet, Giselle. I wasn't present in the actual conversation, but I could imagine that Akram was very adamant that we would have reworked the score. So Akram asked me basically, we need to take this classical score and transform it as much as I'm transforming the rest of the of the work. [first track plays]

Freddie: 8:08

It is fair to say that the Giselle that you've created with Akram is like a modern classic of this work. So actually what comes up when you listen to it then now?

Vincenzo: 8:17

There's a lot of things right now, actually. There's a bit of memories of things that literally happened, like choices that were made while we were on stage. For example, the first example that come to mind is that there is a little guitar line which hopefully is not recognisable as a guitar. There is something for me about trying to contextualise the music in order to allow complete surrender to the experience. Sounds like big words, but what I mean is personally, if I'm experiencing a work that is taking me somewhere else, for example, Dimitris Papaioannou's that I saw. Or the work that we've done with Akram, it's the idea is to really go somewhere else. You're stepping out of real life, let's call it like that. And there is an either augmented reality of that or a distorted experience of life. If I - this is my own experience. If I hear a guitar, for example, that takes me out, or if I hear a very specific style of music. That can take me out unless that specific style of music is used as a theatrical device. But there's a little guitar line that comes exactly in that bit that we heard, we selected, that wasn't supposed to be there. The score was written, everything was. And then once we get to the theatre, what we thought was working very well, at some point there was something missing. Pretty much with everybody I worked with. I get so involved, which I love. It's the only way I know how to work, actually. So I start to think about ideas for music based just on what we've been talked about. And 99% of the time what we talked about at the very beginning of the process doesn't even get you know, to the end. Like it's, it gets completely changed. So everything is in constant evolution. But I'm so involved from the beginning that I basically never get to create on an image, right? And the music just evolves constantly together with the movement this time around. When I when I joined the process, there were few bits of choreography that were happening already, which for me was a treat. It was fantastic. And actually this particular one, basically, we just spent an evening together, me and Akram, talking through ideas, and he showed me a few videos. And again, this was the first time that I could see something. And there was a particular video which ended up being the opening of the piece. But the choreography was them, was a group of people pushing against a wall well what there would become a wall. And I remember seeing this image and two things came to mind. First of all was I'm doing this. This is amazing. Yes I'm in.

Freddie: 11:17

As in the project, you're doing the project?

Vincenzo: 11:19

Like, okay, great. I'm in, this is this is unbelievable. And this was a video from a phone, tiny screen. So it just it's the energy that came across there was very powerful. And when I say I have something for this, I don't know what I have it's just things that start to pop up. I don't have a clear idea of the notes, but I think that night straight away I came back home, opened the studio, and I started to write. Bringing it to the studio it goes like, this is amazing. Great. Three or four days later, whatever. I go back, see the rehearsals. Everything in the choreography has changed, of course. But it worked perfectly, and that's what I'm saying. Like the process then becomes a constant back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. And it worked, worked, worked in the studio until we bring in on stage, the orchestra is there, everybody's playing what is supposed to be playing, and it sounds great from the music perspective, but there was something missing. And we all felt it. When when stuff like that happens, you can't lie. It's like, it's not, it doesn't work. Like, Oh, the choreographer, director come to you and says, Oh, you know, I need this. Or That sometimes is very clear, but generally there is a sense, there's a feeling and we all feel it's like, mm, something is missing here. And the dancers do their own soundcheck. I make sure that I get on stage with them and they are able to tell me like, we need more, we need less. Usually they do need more. And I think it changes completely the way that they dance, or at least influences that a lot in terms of energy, which means also it informs the choreography. So we all keep responding to the process constantly. So to go back to what we heard. I ended up that day going back to the temporary studio because I think we were already in production mode. So I just brought some, some things with me at the venue and I was thinking, okay, I miss - there's something here missing. And I was very adamant I will not use guitars in this process. All right. And that's again - you can have ideas, but then you have to surrender to the process. And the thing that came to me was that little line which then transformed the track into something else. And when I put it on again, it was another moment where everybody looked at, Yeah, that's it. So you don't even have to explain or to to sell it or justify it. If it works, it works. It's flowing.

Freddie: 13:54

So the next track, we're going to listen to is Antes and then this one we have a special relationship to especially this year, as part of festival because we're going to hear it. [second track plays]

Vincenzo: 14:22

The process here. Amazing. Okay. So I worked with Joy when we did another piece with Akram.

Freddie: 14:46

So this is Joy Apuerto Ritter, who will be performing the work as part of Dance Umbrella Festival this year?

Vincenzo: 14:53

Yeah. We both met working on Until the Lions, which was Akram Khan Company. And in that particular show I was both composing and performing live. So we we got to talk. And, you know, she said, oh, you know, I'm going to start to do my own, my own work, choreography. And as I did a few years before, I said, well I make music, do you need music? That's the, that's the pick up line. Her creation period happened exactly while Giselle was happening. But in that case, I talked to her and I understood, okay, I think we can make it work, but it will have to be half and half. Certain things I will have to make from scratch for you. Certain other things - and she told me, like, I really love that track. And there was another one that she heard that she wanted to use. So it looked like, okay, half of the piece, probably we can already use what's in there, which I will have to adapt of course. But the bulk of the, of the work is done. And then I composed other things just specifically for, for her work. But of course we you know, once we got into a place where she knew what she wanted to do with that particular track, then, you know, you can stretch it a little bit or change certain things. Most of the time it's about removing for me, literally removing elements from the track to give space to what's happening on stage.

Freddie: 16:25

And why is that? I mean, why is the removing, not adding?

Vincenzo: 16:29

The music obviously can always have a light there, no the music is alive, but the music is also serving as part of something bigger. So when I get involved in the creative process, like a dance piece, I have to be the composer, of course, because I have to deliver a score in the end. But I also have to step out and look at it from the perspective of the director. Not that I'm the director of the show, but I'm co-directing it in a way. Like I'm sitting there with them like. You

need to see the work, not only from the perspective of the music, but you see it from the perspective of the work. Which means to me that the dancers and the movement, it becomes another instrument of the score. So a lot of the time you remove element from the music because you have other elements that are filling up the score, not filling up as a filler. They become, most of the time, the lead instrument. It's almost as if, the, the dance, the dancers, the performer and the movement - it becomes a materialisation of the music. Music doesn't exist it's abstract - it's the most abstract thing we have. So it's almost like the embodiment of it. It's, it's a represent - a physical representation of the music. And I, you know, I've done a lot of pieces now and I'm seeing that this process happens all the time. At the beginning I was bit surprised and I had to learn how to to go with it. But I can now see that it's a, it's a constant...gets to a place like, okay, there is too much. I cannot fill it up so much with sound because there's so much happening on stage, you know. And again, it's not as black and white as as I'm describing it right now it's a much more complex process. And you almost do it without realising it that you are doing it. As a live dance performance choreography, and something is very ephemeral that it comes and goes - do you ever go to watch the shows and then suddenly go, I'm going to work on this music. I need to go back to the music and work on it.

Freddie: 18:47

And what is that conversation with a choreographer? Has that ever happened after seeing a show? Let's say the full production is on stage of distance. You've had some distance from it and you've gone. I need to go back into his work.

Vincenzo: 18:58

I don't think so, simply because there was no possibility to do it. So every time I see a show, usually a year later or a little longer, there's always a sense of like, Oh, I could have done this, I could have done that. It's not that I'm never happy, but there's a constant sense of a change and growth and transformation. So I think it's quite natural probably for every creative person to feel that it's never finished and the could always go in a different direction.

Freddie: 19:31

You talk this, you talk about this thing of intentionality and theatricality, which we've touched on previous, in the previous conversation. How does that come into it? Like the intention of what your music is supposed to do and the

intention and the theatricality of what the choreography is intended to do. Where does that come into this?

Vincenzo: 19:48

When I create for for a dance piece, which is 99% of the time, I create for the piece. The tension is built together with the with the choreographer and the lighting designer, the dramaturg towards the piece. So as I said before, I have to keep my composer, producer, sound designer, all those hearts need to be there because I have to deliver again. But to me, the process a lot of the time is stepping out of that role and see everything from an outside perspective, embracing the intention of the work, of the piece. So for me, it's never about the music in the sense of like, Oh, but this is what I want to do, or This is a great piece of music, or this is the - which by the way, never feels like it's a great piece of music. There's always something that like, Oh, I can I how can this develop? But the hardest part of the job but is also the to me, the most profound, the most honest is to enter the space all the time - during the creation I'm talking about. To enter the space, kind of like stripped down all these clothes of the composer. I don't need to defend the music. I don't need to. I need to work for the music. I am working for the work. So it's the work that informs what I'm doing as a composer. And my intention behind the compositions and the creation of the sound. It's hopefully the same intention as the director, the choreographer, because it's the intention of the work. So it's almost as if we all try do our best to invite the work to speak to us through us, to let it happen. So I said that there's a sense of always a bit of a, Oh, I could have done this, I could have done that. Why have I chosen that particular path? But at the same time, there is also a sense of this is what it was. If we we went - there's a bit of an acceptance but in peace of....yeah, there is an evolution and I would like to change things. But at the same time the me who entered that particular creative space in that moment chose this and hopefully I didn't choose it. It almost chose myself. Yeah. You know, which kind of gives me the ability of stepping out and is like, this is, none of this is about me. I can have my feelings for it, whatever. It's, it's okay, I'll deal with that. But this is about the piece. And the piece has spoken almost it's...You know, I didn't have a chance to rework something. Meaning we never got into a space of...when, when, when I was performing with Akram, when, when we were doing Lions and I was on tour constantly, right? Yes. We were constantly tweaking things, but we were also, I was in, you know, there physically.

Freddie: 23:00

Because you were physically performing?

Vincenzo: 23:02

I was physically performing. So certain things could of constantly be changed. And also the performance itself just transforms the music. So you don't necessarily need to change the composition if you're performing it live. The performance of that night will change it, things will will you know, that, that's, that's live. A performance for everybody. For all the other pieces, we never had the chance to get back in the studio and rework certain things. Maybe we will one day, but for now, it actually feels. Yeah, that's right. And because I would probably mess around with an inspiration that was right for that moment. And it would be very different right now.

Freddie: 23:42

From gigging, performing and then moving into working with choreographers...What has influenced, or not, your practise when you come back to making your own work?

Vincenzo: 23:52

So before when I was composing and I was writing my own stuff, I was sitting down mostly on a guitar, sometimes using my voice, but mostly on a guitar. And I was writing from the instrument perspective. Now it's almost the opposite. I have a very complicated relationship with that particular instrument, which I played for 20 something years now. And I love it. It's it's been with me my entire life, you know, and I really could express myself. But number one, I've always been attracted to a million other instruments. It was very easy to me, and as soon as I had access to a piano, I learnt it by...I'm not a good piano player by any means, but I can, you know, I can write on it. Same with drums and other instruments. Like I, I'm really, I just love it. And I'm attracted by all of these different worlds. The other thing is that I've always loved composition and producing. That's as soon as I learnt my first four chords on a guitar, I started to write songs. Horrible. But I started to write. That was the thing that was an impetus to, to create something. And I remember the first time I had to tape recorders available, I started to overdub myself, and that was probably the first time I literally produced something. So I was always attracted to this wider world. And then when I when I joined Hofesh, there was

a lot of stripping down of techniques from the instrument, and that allowed for a whole new way of playing. Every style will bring images in my head, experiences, memories, and every instrument will do the same. I'm starting to try to treat them with the same approach of, Oh, I'm not a musician. How can I? What's the experience? What does the experience need? So in those examples, there is a lot of guitar. But I didn't want to put the guitar like, okay, now like I'm entering and you recognise it. It's used as another texture and instruments to create an abstraction of that world. And when I hear it as a guitar straight forward, it triggers me as well at the same time, because it's almost like if my world has been shifted completely upside down and I'm trying to seeng as much as possible, everything from this outside perspective. So rather than composing from the instrument or from just the musical idea. I, I try to adopt the same process that I would adopt in a production of what is this serving? What does the work want, for me?

Freddie: 26:54

There was a question I wanted to ask you...who else listens to the music when you're by yourself in your studio and you don't have that kind of collaborator? It's a creative process and actually there's a rawness of the sound. And then going back and forth as the musician, director and that whole process...I've just, I've just heard a lot from a lot of musicians who are virtuosos on their instrument and their practise. Like Questlove talks about the process of working with D'Angelo. Like the rawness, how D'Angelo wanted a bit more raw, not as clinical, you would say, as the sound. And it just feels you having this constant...When you're making work, you're having being a choreographer, being a composer, being a sceneographer. It feels like having all these moments on your own and actually might be something that I'm pretty sure is going to happen with your work that you creating right now you're working on.

Vincenzo: 27:38

Yeah, it sounds like that. I wouldn't go as far as to say that I would be a choreographer, neither a Lighting Designer.

Freddie: 27:44

Well, you're moving...well with what you're planning for the next work, which I hopefully could just touch on as well as that you are doing choreography, by

how you position people in space or sound in space and how we listen to it. Anyway, what's happening next?

Vincenzo: 27:56

Yeah, I think. No, no, I think you're right. There is. There is. But, but this is what I love of, of the process, the way that I was able to experience it with Akram, Jorge and all the choreographers, all the choreographers that invited me in their process. They were so generous to be so open and and make me part of the process rather than just, Oh, I need the music. So here's the score. That's it. Goodbye. Which can work perfectly fine as well

Freddie: 28:24

Have you done that as well? Thank you, here's your -

Vincenzo: 28:25

I haven't.

Freddie: 28:26

your music, see you later?

Vincenzo: 28:27

No, I haven't. I haven't done it.

Freddie: 28:28

So you make that choice there? I don't make that choice. Exactly. Exactly. I'm totally victim of my own choices in that sense. And I'm saying it because it's a very messy process. Boundaries get blurred and it's...you can come up with a lot of issues. But at the same time, to me and this is just my own personal opinion, the work...works in a certain way because of that messy process. So the art is, you know, you what you were mentioning, D'Angelo, which sounds unbelievable. I mean, he's fantastic. That stuff to me sounds great because, yes, they are incredible musicians, but they're serving not their musicianship. They're serving something else. And that work sounds so great because of that. And they're going on a quest of searching and searching no it's actually true. So in that sense, the idea of being in the studio and feel all these personalities coming in, I think it's very important to be clear that I am not a choreographer. I am a composer. I am a musician. We have certain skills. But that skills cannot kill me. Like in, in a way, we are artists that what we are, we are creating in

that moment, and we can bring in a lot of energies to then feed into what our craft is, what our talent is. That's where my talent lies in making music. But yes, I bring in all this energy and this these ideas of. Seeing it from different eyes, you know, seeing it from from different perspective. I think what to be honest, what's going on these days in the music business, especially pop and rock pop, let's say that way, you know how a lot of times it feels like, oh, you know, music is not like it was 20 years ago. There's a big crisis that are that are. I actually don't think so. I'm hearing and listening to some of the best stuff these days, because I think more and more and more musicians are getting mixed up. There is a lot of influences that are coming in. People are getting inspirations from a lot of different angles. You know, the business in itself is messed up and but that's the different chapter. The creativity, the artistic part of it, some of the best stuff is coming out these days. Exactly because of what you said. I'm seeing a lot of what to me, are the most inspiring and interesting musicians are the ones that are picking from a lot of different art forms. A lot of dance is coming into the music business. You know, in the music world - I should stop using the word business - theatre, you know. Like I know you guys have presented them like for me when I, when I saw Dimitris Papaioannou latest work, man, I mean, it was one of the most inspiring things for me as a musician. I'm not aim to do that work. But he was informing so much of how I can enter the space, my own creative space. And this leads me beautifully to the next part. So how are you going to enter this next phase of this work? And you're about to do this work that you've been creating, working on now? What's next?

Vincenzo: 31:54

I'm craving for these spaces where I can experience. Not necessary. It doesn't need to be a film. But to have a moment where I can, like, let myself go. So in that sense, I'm hoping to create a space for that to happen. So the easiest way I can describe what I'm working on at the moment is it's a concert that happens in complete darkness. It's going to be a good hour and a half in darkness.

Freddie: 32:25

Thank you. I just want to say. Huge, huge. I mean, I want to carry on for another hour, but it's been actually seriously, it's been absolute pleasure. Just really hearing talk about your work and just seeing...ss a choreographer myself, just understanding in the process of being in a conversation with a composer.

And I've always, I know it's challenging working as a composer and a choreographer, the back and forth conversation, but the work it's created and will continue to create is absolutely wonderful and is already legacy for the dance world as well as the music world influencing one another. So thank you very much and I am looking forward to the next work and I know we're in conversation. So yes, we're really excited about what's next. Away from dance or being influenced by dance. Thank you.

Vincenzo: 33:06

Thanks for having me.

Freddie: 33:12

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