

Listening Bodies: When Sound Becomes Movement

How can sounds be translated into movement? And how do new, shared forms of expression emerge from the interplay of listening, movement, and improvisation? Alexander Okhotnikov and Hannes Taljaard (AMBO) explored these questions during a three-hour workshop with second-year dance students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa. The workshop took place on September 16, 2026, as part of the “Fundamentals of Applied Dance” module at the South African College of Music. The focus was on how sound qualities can be physically experienced and how music and movement can influence one another.

At the beginning, the participants had time to settle into the space freely and move to a recording of an inside-piano improvisation by AMBO. After that, everyday objects became the starting point for shared experiences of sound and movement. Glasses filled with water produced different pitches (hummed); small styrofoam balls were moved rhythmically on the hands and accompanied by the voice; and water-filled balloons invited playful interactions in movement and sound on the floor. At first, individual sounds emerged, and then the sounds developed into a collective sonic tapestry in which the group’s voices and sounds merged.

During the next phase, the objects receded into the background. We invited the participants to focus on the qualities of the sounds they were making with their voices and translate these qualities into movements. Slow, flowing movements alternated with short, impulses. The movements were passed from person to person and explored together. Improvisation also took place with eyes closed, which brought mutual listening and the perception of the group even more into focus.

Using various instruments, including drums, shakers, and flutes, we continued this work in pairs. The participants either accompanied their partner’s movements or took the lead with the sounds they were producing. By switching roles, they were able to experience for themselves how a movement changes in response to different musical impulses and how the relationship between sound and movement can be constantly reshaped. In the second part of the workshop, each dancer developed a short movement sequence. Improvising as a group, they repeated their sequences, or mirrored the movements of others, or observed what was happening. In this way, they gradually became familiar with each other’s movement repertoire. We then requested them to combine the movements sequences with instrumental sounds and to explore further possibilities for collaboration by switching instruments and roles.

The workshop concluded with a free creative phase in which the participants brought together all the elements of the workshop. Working in two groups, they created short performances in which they revisited and combined the movement sequences and ideas they had developed. We were particularly impressed not only by the creative diversity and precise synchrony of their collective movements, but also by the tremendous energy and joy of movement the group brought to the workshop. The interpersonal dynamics were wonderful from the very beginning: the participants engaged with one another openly, picked up on ideas, and collaboratively developed new movement possibilities. Even after the workshop officially ended, they continued to dance and improvise.

This enthusiasm continued even beyond the workshop. The dancers participated in our AMBO improvisation concert the following week and enriched our sound improvisation with a collective movement flash mob. This created yet another connection between music and dance, this time within the context of a concert. The workshop and concert showed us how simple objects, sounds, and individual movement ideas can give rise to a shared artistic process. It was not just about translating music into movement, but also about paying close attention to one another, picking up on cues, and discovering new possibilities together.

How an Idea Became a Workshop

The collaboration between AMBO and UCT developed over an extended period. The initial impetus came in February 2025 when we presented piano improvisation workshops at the University of Cape Town. When Professor Gerard Samuel from the UCT Dance Department led a workshop at the mdw in Vienna in October 2025, an opportunity for collaboration emerged. In April 2026, Hannes Taljaard met with Professor Samuel and Professor Lisa Wilson at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town to discuss concrete ideas for the joint project.

The “Listening Bodies” workshop grew out of these encounters. We wanted to give the dancers the opportunity to explore musical improvisation as a tool for movement, communication, and collaborative artistic creation. For us, mutual listening was central to this process: as a starting point for movement, as a foundation for interaction, and as a way to continually discover new paths through collective improvisation.

Alexander Okhotnikov, Oct. 2026