Faculty in the Spotlight presents the inside scoop on our faculty member, Christian Matijas Mecca. As one of the field’s leading research practitioners and pianists, Christian Matijas is an active performer, repetiteur and research scholar in the area of dance music studies and has presented his work in England, Ireland, Finland, Greece, Taiwan, and North America. He has served as musical repetiteur in the staging of dances by Balanchine, Graham, Weidman, Taylor, Dean, and Lubovitch; and has collaborated with director Robert Benedetti on stagings of Marc Blitzstein’s The Cradle Will Rock. Here at the University of Michigan Department of Dance, Christian teaches Sophomore Seminar, Music for Dance, The Development of Dance Music, and RIA 1.

WHAT GOT YOU INTO MUSIC?
I didn’t plan to become a musician until I was 19 and heard Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun. I decided that day I was going to become a musician. And that was it. I didn’t know how to play an instrument. I had taught myself how to play the piano, but I had never taken a proper lesson or studied music seriously. So I just decided at that point I would do that.

WHY THE PIANO?
I had access to the piano and it seemed to be the most functional instrument that I could learn in what would be a relatively short time. I had been teaching myself and didn’t know you had to audition to get a teacher and it ended up no teacher would take me. “You’re too old. You won’t be a real musician. You don’t know any of the details so you’re not going to do it.” So I was referred to this woman who’s own career had been derailed through personal problems. She took me on as a student. She prepared me for college auditions and that’s how I got into college. I was 21 at that point. Instead of learning things in consecutive order I had to learn everything all at once.

WHEN, HOW, AND WHY DID YOUR INTEREST IN MUSIC AND DANCE DEVELOP?
That was, again, by accident. I was at the bottom of the class at a very good conservatory university program, and being at the bottom allows you two things: (1) Everyone ignores you because you suck, and (2) because they ignore you, you can actually look to the side and see what else to do. I ended up connecting with a piano teacher who had retired from USC where I was going to school. He took me on as a student, and it was the best thing I could have lucked into because otherwise I wouldn’t have succeeded. He had been married to modern dance pioneer, Valerie Bettis (look her up in the history books, she made her mark in the mid-century field) and his experience working with her led him to suggest I go into dance.

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So there was a lousy, little dance studio in the South Bay Area of LA. It was not a good studio, but I did not know that at the time and they had a piano in there. I didn’t know what a piano would be doing in a dance studio and I didn’t know what a dance class consisted of so I said, “Oh, I play the piano.” And she said, “Do you want to play classes?” And I said sure, and had no idea what that meant. So I just started working there. I learned how to play dance classes that way. I was still an undergrad at that time.

Any advice for undergrads who might have to teach a class with an accompanist?

I always learned from negative example, so if you see how it’s not working with a teacher, learn from that. I think it is helpful to know technical terms. I think it’s more important for the dancer to be able to show what they want and then try to fit whatever counts they can to what it is they want. I think dancers often worry too much about what the exact terminology is and then they get lost in actually teaching the combination. I always say, “Don’t just tell me what the meter is, show me what you want and I can follow it. And if that’s not working then we can try and figure it out. Just give me a framework and I will fill in the rest.” Ultimately all that matters is that the music fits to the movement.

Do you see yourself as a dance instructor?

I see myself as an awkward fit in a traditional model. I view myself as a dance scholar; I am a performer who’s worked in dance. I know that people don’t get it, even in music. I am a musician, my speciality is dance, and however people want to categorize it is fine. I know it never makes sense to anyone. I am able to answer questions about dance, for dancers, that nobody else can seem to answer, so I must be a dance instructor.

What are some of your hobbies or interests outside of music and dance?

I’m a big fan of movies, and I have always been a big fan of music even before I played. I am very into animals. Every month I go and take a case of food up to the humane society. I am big on museums. I’m big on driving. I’ve driven through most of this country. I like seeing places. It doesn’t have to be anything special; I just like seeing places and what they are. I’m just curious about why things are the way they are. I’m into Swiss watches, automatic (self-winding) and quartz movements. I’ve been studying the manufacture of movements: Swiss movements, proprietary movements, complex movements, tourbillons, ETAs, Chinese knock-offs, and Japanese-developed technologies. If I could afford to leave my job for 18 months, I’d go to Swiss watchmaking school to learn how to manufacture and construct movements.

Stay tuned for our Sep/Oct newsletter to learn more about the faculty here at the Department of Dance! Stefania Spadaro-Bliss has been the proud editor for the Faculty in the Spotlight newsletter for the past two years and is excited to pass it down to our very own Kaliana Basoukeas. She is excited to take on the project and will undoubtedly shed light on our faculty here in the Department of Dance. You can reach her at kaliana@umich.edu.