

POINTE



Diablo Ballet dancer Fiona Hutchens. Photo by Alison Ramora, courtesy Hutchens.

Diablo Ballet's Fiona Hutchens Shares Her Experience as a Hard of Hearing Dancer



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April 7, 2025

As Hard of Hearing dancers, [Fiona Hutchens](#) and I have a lot in common: We find hearing during tech rehearsal extraordinarily difficult, we struggle to catch corrections over music, and we get distracted in class by phone calls connecting to our Bluetooth hearing devices. However, Hutchens has trouble hearing higher frequencies, I have trouble with lower frequencies. So if you played music, we would hear (and not hear) opposite registers. High frequencies often carry the melody, while low frequencies hold the beat.

Hutchens, a 22-year-old dancer with [Diablo Ballet](#), was diagnosed with [bilateral progressive](#) hearing loss in seventh grade and received a cochlear implant her sophomore year of high school, which now renders her

hearing near-perfect. (Music, however, sounds different due to the implant's mechanics and how one's brain adapts to it over time.) I was diagnosed with moderate low-frequency hearing loss and an audio-processing disorder at age 28. I caught up with Hutchens on Zoom for a conversation about her experience as a Hard of Hearing dancer.

You were diagnosed in seventh grade. How did your hearing loss first manifest in the dance studio?

I definitely noticed it in normal life first, like when I was at school and my teachers would face the whiteboard to write and I wouldn't understand them.

I think, because I was a little more advanced than some of my ballet class, sometimes I didn't think I needed to pay attention. That led me to not even realize I wasn't hearing what [the teacher] said. Somehow, I would always stay on the music. People have always told me that I'm really musical. That's ironic, because I can't even hear it sometimes. I have this internal metronome that I rely on if I ever lose the music.

What are your coping strategies when you can't hear the music?

When you lose that internal metronome, you have to watch everybody. You're missing the most important piece, so you're just kind of winging it until you get back on. That's happened for me onstage, and it's terrifying.

Sometimes I will try to spend time listening to the music at home. I try to learn it before rehearsals sometimes. Then I can learn it, and I can deal with it better in the studio when there's pointe shoes and talking and breathing. But when it's a new choreographer or a new ballet, sometimes that's not possible. That's where I get frustrated, sometimes. I definitely have had moments of, like, "I need to take a step outside, because I'm about to start crying right now."



Photo by Neil Gandhi, courtesy Hutchens.

I feel like perfectionism is inevitable as a ballet dancer, but it's really heightened when I literally can't hear the music perfectly. How do you deal with that perfectionism?

I try to breathe. Sometimes I tell the person at the front of the room "I'm having trouble hearing this," just so they're aware. It's not something that I can change, and it's okay. I'm still just as valuable as a dancer as

everyone else, [even if] I can't hear this one section this one time.

What was the experience for you to dance to the same music, sometimes even the same choreography, after you got hearing aids?

I remember when I got my hearing aids—it was amazing. It was the best thing ever, hearing all sorts of things that I had no idea existed. Then I go to the studio after that, and I was like, “Oh, my god, music sounds awesome.” I didn't hear all these other instruments. Like in *Nutcracker*— Flowers, Party Scene, Battle—it was so much more intricate than I realized.

Hearing-aid technology has definitely improved over the years, but I still feel like I have issues, like my hearing aids popping out, especially when I spot pirouettes. Cochlear implants have two external components: a behind-the-ear processor and a magnet. What retention strategies do you use?

I make a piece of double-sided tape out of [KT tape](#). I cut a sliver of it, then I make a fold, like a circle. And then I put it on the back of my ear. It has to be KT tape because I sweat. Every other tape will fall off.

And the magnet doesn't fall off, but I had to get a stronger magnet. But if you get too strong of a magnet, it hurts.

What has your experience been like having to advocate for yourself in dance settings?

My boss, artistic director [Lauren Jonas](#) at Diablo Ballet, tells every [visiting artist] that comes before I even talk to them, which is nice. She wants to make sure everyone knows so that nothing is misinterpreted between me and the person at the front of the room, which is really valuable to me. It's very much a concern to make sure that I can be accommodated. And I barely had to put any work into advocating for myself here, which is awesome.



Photo courtesy Fiona Hutchens.

New York City Ballet principal [Sara Mearns](#) recently spoke on her Instagram stories about [using hearing aids](#), but until then there's been very little Hard of Hearing representation for young ballet dancers. What advice do you have for them?

I would say don't keep it to yourself. Honestly, be loud about it, because I spent a lot of time hiding it, and it only harmed me in the end. I was missing out on things—people were misinterpreting my attitude or behavior because they didn't know what was going on with me.

Tell everyone at the front of the room. Walk yourself up there, shake their hand, be like, "I'm hard of hearing, just so you know. I read lips." It makes such a difference. It also shows that you are hardworking, and you want your spot in the room, and you're mature enough to come and talk about what you need for yourself.

I think it's not something to be ashamed of at all. It's just something about you—that's the way you are. If people don't know about that, then they can't accommodate it.