



Some Waltz History

by Harold & Meredith Sears

A surprising number of dance rhythms are as recent as the Twentieth Century, but the origins of the Waltz go way back. Curt Sachs, a dance historian, has said that "the roots of all turning dances are lost in the twilight of Neolithic vegetation cults," and many fast and twirling folk dances are described from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Italy (the Volta), Germany (the Weller), Austria (the Ländler), in France, and in England.

The early Waltz was what we now call the Viennese Waltz. It came to Vienna early in the 1800s. In England especially, the Waltz was widely condemned as immoral, given the "closed" dance position, the rapid tempo (60 measures per minute), and the constant twirling and turning.

In order to appreciate the outrage initially caused by this new dance style, one might think of the stately, slow, and distant movements of the Minuet, the Allemande, the Contredance, and the other courtly dances of the time. These social dances of French society were characterized by a refined and stylized elegance, polite distance between the dancers, and reserved and precise movements. They were subdued, much less energetic, characterized by sternness of attitude and slow complex patterns of movement. They were performed at arm's length. Dancers wore gloves so there would be no fleshly contact even at this distance. You can hardly imagine a more diametrically opposite style of dance than those first wildly popular Viennese Waltzes.

Lord Byron (1788-1824) was a great Romantic poet and author of such works as *She Walks in Beauty*, *To a Lady Who Presented to the Author a Lock of Hair Braided with His Own*, and *Appointed at a Night in December to Meet Him in the Garden*. Well, maybe these three titles do suggest a more distant and worshipful, rather than close and lusty, attitude toward women, but Byron was shocked to enter a London ballroom and see the lady of his dreams clasped close by "a huge, hussar-looking gentleman, turning round and round to a confounded see-

saw, up-and-down sort of turn, like two cockchafers spitted upon the same bodkin."
(quoted in Silvester, 1949)

In the English magazine, *Belgravia*, there was this warning:



We who go forth of nights and see without the slightest discomposure our sister and our wife seized on by a strange man and subjected to violent embraces and canterings round a small-sized apartment – the only apparent excuse for such treatment being that it is done to the sound of music – can scarcely realize the horror which greeted the introduction of this wicked dance. (quoted in Allen, 2002)

Or consider this report on the Prince Regent's grand ball from the society pages of *The Times of London*, summer, 1816:

We remarked with pain that the indecent foreign dance called the Waltz was introduced (we believe for the first time) at the English court on Friday last ... it is quite sufficient to cast one's eyes on the voluptuous intertwining of the limbs and close compressor on the bodies in their dance, to see that it is indeed far removed from the modest reserve which has hitherto been considered distinctive of English females. So long as this obscene display was confined to prostitutes and adulteresses, we did not think it deserving of notice; but now that it is attempted to be forced on the respectable classes of society by the civil examples of their superiors, we feel it a duty to warn every parent against exposing his daughter to so fatal a contagion.

Jeff Allen has explained:

Interestingly, "voluptuous intertwining of the limbs," simply referred to the close dance position of the day. The gloved hand of the gentleman was placed gently on the waist of his partner at virtually full arm's length. The lady's left-gloved hand quite possibly was delicately placed on her gentleman's shoulder, and she likely held a fan in that same hand. The left hand of the gentleman remained open and acted as the shelf for his partner's right-gloved hand. The really scandalous point of that reporter's observation was that the gentleman's foot disappeared from time to time under the lady's gown in the midst of the dance. The bodies of the dancers were never in contact!



Whether or not you feel the closed dance position to be indecent, this early Waltz was an exhausting and dizzying experience, consisting of constant twirling without pause or break. Lloyd Shaw quotes Cellarius, a great French dancing master, who warned that, "The Valser should ... take care never to relinquish his lady until he feels that she has entirely recovered herself."

Hillgrove wrote, "When the lady expresses a desire to pause, the gentleman should take her aside and wait until she feels refreshed, and is inclined once more to join the whirling maze."

Lloyd Shaw said, "In close embrace (the Waltz position) the dancers turned continually while they revolved around the room. There were no steps forward or back, no relief, it was all a continuous whirl of pleasure for those who could take it."

Goethe said, "Never have I moved so lightly. I was no longer a human being. To hold the most adorable creature in one's arms and fly around with her like the wind, so that everything around us fades away..."

And it was fun – much too fun to remain widely condemned for long.

The Emperor Alexander of Russia and Lord Palmerston of England (with their respective partners, of course) were seen enjoying the Waltz. They whirled around English ballrooms with grace and skill, and the rest of English society quickly joined in. Johann Strauss Sr. (1804 - 1849) and Johann Strauss Jr. (1825 - 1899), the "Waltz King," wrote *On the Beautiful Blue Danube* and *Tales from the Vienna Woods* and many other pieces. Franz Lehar's (1870 - 1948) *Merry Widow* was another beautiful piece, and the Viennese Waltz became popular among all classes. As early as 1825, the Waltz became known as the "Queen of the Ballroom." In America, the Waltz was first exhibited in Boston in 1834.

The Two-Step Waltz —

Some obviously felt that the Viennese Waltz was exhilarating, but others found it exhausting, and a Two-Step Waltz developed at the end of the nineteenth century, as a reaction against the frantic whirling of the Viennese Waltz. The name, "Two-Step Waltz"

almost seems a contradiction of terms. "Two-Step" is a dance style that features a step, a close, and then a second step (hence the name "Two-Step"). We're used to dancing the Two-Step to 4/4 country music (quick, quick, slow), but of course we could Two-Step to 3/4 waltz music, too (1,2,3; 1,2,3;).



The Two-Step Waltz does not frantically whirl but calmly progresses around the ballroom in a kind of zigzag pattern. In closed position, the man faces line of dance, and both step side, close, side, toward diagonal center. Then the couple turns 1/4 left face and steps with the right foot (woman's left) side, close, side, diagonally out toward the wall. Keep repeating this pattern, and you trace a soft or stretched out zigzag around the floor.

Modern Waltz —

The Two-Step Waltz is an old style of Waltz that is not done much anymore (there are no round dances like this that we know of). It is historically interesting, but around the beginning of the 20th century it was replaced by the modern Slow Waltz, which is danced at about half the tempo of the Viennese Waltz. In essence, we have solved the problem of "waltz exhaustion" by cutting the speed in half, rather than by changing the basic step pattern.



In the modern Waltz, instead of the "fwd, close, fwd;" of the Two-Step Waltz; we dance "fwd, fwd, close;" It doesn't seem like such a big change or difference, but the overall effect is wonderfully different. Where the Two-Step Waltz is a smooth, level dance, the modern Waltz has graceful, undulating rise and fall in body position. You soar upward and glide back down. Instead of a train purposefully progressing down the track, you glide like a bird on wing, up toward the heavens and then easily back to earth; or like ocean waves. We seem to be trying for a literary metaphor here. It certainly is not a wave rising up and then crashing onto the beach.

Let's imagine ourselves out from shore and the swells steadily rising and falling. This smooth rise and fall is perhaps the most consistent and characteristic feature of the modern Waltz.

Waltz music conspires to create this rise and fall. The first beat of each measure is a heavily accented "downbeat." The music then rises to a crescendo through beats 2 and 3. At the end of beat 3, the music falls again. The dancer feels this swelling and contracting in each measure. We rise and stretch with the music. Lower in the knee with the closing step at the end of beat 3 (and compare this to the passing steps in foxtrot that help to keep us up). Stay down through count 1 with a heel lead, rise during 2, stay up into 3, and then lower. Your "fwd, fwd, close;" becomes "rise, up, lower." Often, we stretch count 2, borrowing a little time from 1 and/or 3, delaying and extending the rise, "milking" the body flight, smoothing out the turn of the figure. There is strong body sway toward the center of the turns. We can spend a measure or more developing this or that "picture" figure. The modern Waltz is anything but frantic; it is slow, smooth, and graceful.

Again, it is specifically the closing step at the end of the measure that allows you to collect yourselves and lower at the end of the measure. In a Two-Step Waltz, you can't match the rise and fall to the measures. In Two-Step Waltz, the closing step is in the middle of the measure, when you should be up. So the Two-Step Waltz ends up level or flat. Our country Two-Step (4-beat) is a flat dance, too.

Of course, we still have the Viennese Waltz, and it is still danced much faster than the modern Waltz, up to twice as fast. This means that the rise and fall is more abrupt and more shallow, and steps are small and compact. Round dance choreographers tend to use music that is at the slower end of the accepted range for Viennese Waltz (Shibata's *Que Sera Sera* (2001) times out at 52 measures/min; Goss' *Look At Me I'm Sandra Dee* (2004) is about 55), but the 1,2,3; timing would still be tiring if maintained through an entire dance, so a "canter" timing of 1, -, 3; is much used for relief. Sometimes, we even drop down to the old Hesitation Waltz pattern of step, hold, hold; step, hold, hold (*Sandra Dee* has some of this); although this takes us pretty far from true Viennese Waltz.

Some final quotes:

I've only got to set my toe in a dance hall and the adrenaline starts flowing. I can feel that music even before it starts. My big toe tells me as soon as I step through the door, that I want to get on that floor and dance. I just come down those stairs and I can't wait to get my shoes on. - "Annie, 75 years old, a London tea dancer, 1997";

True romance (of course!) Floating and tranquil. Bittersweet; like suffering from unrequited love, or the way you feel after you've moved on from someone you loved once but still feel longingly toward them every once in a while. Think of Juliet

drinking the poison at the end in *Romeo and Juliet*. Then lock that feeling in your heart. No, wait, it's a dagger: "Oh happy dagger, here is thy sheath, there rust and let me die!" – a ballroom dancer

The Waltz is the loveliest blossom of our ballroom. It is perhaps the most satisfactory dance ever achieved by man. – Lloyd Shaw, 1949

References ~

- *Old Time Dancing* by Victor Silvester, Herbert Jenkins Ltd. London, 1949.
- *The Complete Idiot's Guide To Ballroom Dancing* by Jeff Allen, Alpha Books, Indianapolis, IN, 2002.
- *The Round Dance Book, A Century of Waltzing* by Lloyd Shaw, Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho, 1949.

