

Wheel Around

by Harold & Meredith Sears



The Wheel is a Waltz or Two Step figure, but it is used in other rhythms as well. In banjo position, the couple walks in a clock-wise circle around an imaginary spot between them. We might make one full turn in two measures of music, or we might be told to Wheel to a designated position and orientation. In Waltz, the steps are forward turning to the right, forward, close; forward, forward, close. In Two Step, the steps are forward, close, forward; forward, close, forward. Sometimes the Wheel is done with all forward steps and therefore more progression. You might turn one and a half or even two full turns. We can also Wheel in a counter-clockwise circle.



One of the ways in which choreographers make the Wheel interesting is by varying our dance position. The standard Wheel is in banjo position, but we can wheel in bolero banjo, sombrero, butterfly, right-right handshake, or in a right-hand star. If we wheel to the left, we might be in sidecar or in some left-left handhold. Another variation is to syncopate the Wheel. In Waltz, we might wheel with a tempo of 1&2&3&.

Even so, the Wheel is a simple figure and two measures of music is a fairly long period of time, so we have the opportunity to do more than just walk. We have the time to think about our connection to — our relationship with — our partner. We have time to think about the shape, the line, that our bodies are making. We can sway slightly toward our partner or away, and match body lines in a symmetrical shape. We can turn our upper bodies toward each other so that shoulders are parallel and there is an awareness of each other visible in our dance position.

In Cha, we might use locking steps during the triples. In Hustle, you would want an elastic, rubber-band sort of feel in your connection and a smooth, gliding character in your movement. In Waltz, we might extend our free arms in a complementary way. In Lindy, we might be in a right-right handshake and dancing 123&4; 123&4; stepping and swiveling on each count and perhaps waving the left hands in a jazzy sort of way. Usually, we allow the woman to "be in charge of the arm work," so, men, pay attention and match her line and gestures.



In Rumba, we have a Tornillo Wheel and a Ballerina Wheel. In these figures, the woman rises to the ball of one foot and poses with the other foot against her supporting knee, toes pointing downward, and the man walks around her in six steps — qqs; qqs; — turning her in place. The two figures do differ from each other. The standard Tornillo Wheel is done in banjo position, the woman is on her right foot, and the man begins walking with his right foot (so we end with trail feet free). The Ballerina Wheel is done in varsouvienne or in skaters position, the woman is on her left foot, and the man begins walking with his left foot (so we end with lead feet free). But the essence of the two figures is very much the same. The woman is posed in a statuesque, picture sort of way. She has no steps but is being displayed, even presented, by the man to the adoring crowd. Where else do we have a better demonstration of the adage that, in dance, the woman is the work of art and the man is the picture frame?



In these Rumba figures, there is no need to think about extra styling that might be incorporated into the presentation. The beautiful picture is already there. The challenge is to do these figures without wobbling. She is poised on the pivot point, turning passively. She has no steps, no opportunity to adjust or to shift in response to what the man might do. You can imagine how easy it would be for him to pull or to push her away from the vertical, to topple her off her pedestal. No, we don't need to "fancy up" the Tornillo Wheel or the Ballerina Wheel. We need this one to be clean, smooth, and simple.



One thing the man can do is to walk a true circle, not a square, not a wandering path, a little farther from her and then back closer. He can take each step with the foot turned to the right and with left-side lead, as though he is walking on the rim of a 55-gallon drum. You don't want to fall in. You don't want to fall off. We don't want to belabor this, but the woman can't move, and if the man doesn't stay on the circle, she'll tip over; it'll look awkward.

Well, that sounded simple: stay exactly on the circle. But since it is actually impossible to walk a perfect circle, maybe the real key to success is to relax. If you maintain your usual arm and upper-body tone, the woman will feel every deviation from that perfect circle. She will wobble and waver. If both will relax, then she can give and take with shock-absorber arms. She can stay comfortably on that center point even if he does shift a bit from one side of the circle's circumference to the other.

