

Waltz Introduction

This is a compilation of information from various personal contacts and is devoted to help promote comfortable dancing and confidence. It is not meant as an absolute –Chris & Terri Cantrell, © 2007

History: The waltz swept out of Germany in the middle of the eighteenth century to conquer all of Europe. The name of the waltz is taken from the Italian ‘volver’ - to turn, or revolve. It was an outgrowth of the ländler, a country-dance in three-quarter time, and replaced the heavy hopping and jumping movements with more polished and graceful gliding. It was the rural community who first found these whirling steps so appealing, and so the waltz originally was decidedly lowbrow and provincial. In those days, there was something unsavory about a woman being gripped in a man’s embrace while whirling in a frenzy around the dance floor. The close contact with one’s partner’s body contrasted sharply with the stately dances of the aristocracy - the minuets, polonaises, and quadrilles - in which one kept one’s distance. Eventually the upper classes could not endure to have the lower classes having all the fun, and in time, the waltz finally achieved a degree of legitimacy.



Rhythm & Timing: Waltz music is written in 3/4 timing with a tempo of 28-32 measures per minute using a timing count of 1,2,3 or Q,Q,Q.

The Waltz is a traveling and turning dance. Its movement is characterized by the use of sway, rise and fall, and accompanied by leg and body swing.

Positions: In International style ballroom there are only three dance positions: Closed, Promenade (semi-closed), and Counter Promenade (reverse semi-closed). What we consider Banjo (woman slightly to the man’s right) and Sidecar (woman slightly to man’s left) are actually Closed dance positions in which you are stepping outside partner. Promenade and Counter Promenade are open positions. A position/figure that may appear to be an exception is the fallaway, but this is not the case as it actually moves backwards in Promenade Position.

Promenade (Semi-Closed) position is not much different from Closed position. The differences involved both partner’s heads turned open (his to the left and hers to the right), and the bodies are slightly “Veed” open enough to enable the trailing legs to barely get through.

The term “Open”, as it applies to a turning action, means that the final step (usually the 3rd) is a passing of the feet, rather than a closing of the feet. Hence, a maneuver in Waltz is a closed turn because the feet close at the end of the figure. This figure is also referred to as a Half Natural Turn. The Open Natural is also a right (natural) turning movement, but the “Open” in the name indicates that the 3rd is a passing step.

Five Points of Contact: There are 5 points of contact in most smooth dancing (waltz, foxtrot, quickstep, Viennese waltz).

Contact Point #1: Man's left and the woman's right hand.

Contact Point #2: Man’s right forearm & the woman’s left upper arm.

Contact Point #3: Woman places her left forearm and hand on top of the man's right arm.

Contact Point #4: Fold man’s right hand around to gently touch the woman's left shoulder blade.

Contact Point #5: A gentle connection between the right side of the lower rib cages.

Head Position: The woman's head position is generally not an independent function in most smooth dances. It generally depends on the lead given by the man in relationship to the position of the woman's body. With a very slight adjustment, sometimes not even noticeable by the man, he can switch the woman’s head position. This is a wonderful skill for him to work on for when he has mastered it, the woman’s head is at his mercy (most of the time). In many cases, head position is a matter of styling rather than technique, though some head positions may be more natural for the type of action being executed if you use the laws of physics, mainly centrifugal force, as your guide (see the Sway section below for more details). For those adventurous ladies who like to challenge the laws of physics, be very careful

not to allow your head position and orientation to influence the position and orientation of your body or else you can make the figure harder to execute and will probably get a dirty look from your partner.

Balance: The most important thing in dance is balance. If one person is off balance, the whole couple will suffer the consequences. Couples try to compensate for this loss of balance with very uncomfortable results: leaning, tugging, pulling, heaviness, teetering, hanging, dragging... Center your weight over your supporting leg/foot (the leg you are standing on) at the beginning and end of each step. A trouble spot for balance generally occurs on turning figures. When preparing for a turning figure we often see the men (and sometimes the woman) pull their topline (arms, hands, shoulders, and upper bodies) inward making the topline narrower and more compact, and lift up their shoulders towards the ears. Sometimes the man doing this also pulls his partner into him with his right hand/arm, thus pulling her off of her feet (making her lose her balance & as a result, she leans on him). This is exactly the opposite of what needs to be done to get body rotation and ease of figure execution. Couples need to relax their shoulders and keep their topline wide & open. One hint to maintain a good topline during turning figures is to take a deep breath and relax your upper body before commencing (or at the start of) turning figures.



Body Mechanics: Keep your body weight well over your supporting leg, this is more easily (& correctly) accomplished if you keep your feet offset from your partner's feet. From the man's right the feet should be in this order: woman's L, man's R, woman's R, man's L. Maintain a good top line (head to rib cage region) that is firm and toned but not rigid, that stable and wide with shoulders relaxed. Keep your head over your supporting foot. Keep your knees relaxed, never locked. Gentlemen, hold your partner with tone in the back of the upper arm (triceps) instead of the front muscle (biceps).

Backward Movement: To begin a backward moving step, bend the knee of the supporting foot, lower into the supporting leg. Reach back with the toe of the free foot, leg, and hip.

A Brief Bit on Leading: In addition to the positioning of the arms & hands, a good lead from the man makes clear his intentions to the woman, who then follows. The first ingredient of a good lead is for the man to dance clearly & confidently. Clarity from the man is important, as it enables the woman to detect the speed, direction, and feel of a figure early enough to respond appropriately. Second, leads are a subtle, but clear, communication coming from the man's body, radiating down his arms, and then to the woman. Thirdly, the man should have "tone" in his arms, using the muscles in the upper arm to keep the arms in position and thus allowing the woman to feel his body movement. Avoid the notorious "spaghetti" (limp arms) and the "ram rod" arms (arms held too stiffly and generally with a straight elbow). The woman should not try to anticipate the man's intentions, but should wait to accept & follow the man's lead.

The man's arms & upper body should create a firm frame in which the woman is gently held. Both partners need to keep some tension (pressure) in the arms. A common complaint heard from the ladies is that the gentlemen are not leading. Well, guys for once it may not be your fault. What essentially happens is that the woman does not allow the man to lead. She interferes with the points of contact (see below) by flapping her arms, bouncing around, faking the hip movement, and not sustaining hand/arm pressure when dancing. The man cannot lead arms of jelly. Men, even if you are a beginner, you can dance effectively, if you stand erect and keep a firm forward pressure towards your partner.

Chasse: A few tricks for a good-looking chasse include a proper semi-closed position, keeping your heads level throughout the figure (after the normal rise on the 1st step there is no rise or fall as the figure continues), and keeping your heads in open position. Often we see couples dancing a beautiful smooth and graceful waltz, only to come to a chasse that looks like the Easter Bunny "hopping down the bunny trail".

Additional clinic notes can be found at: <http://www.ctkr.com/> (clinic on "clinic notes")

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