

Dance Music: Matching Dance Styles with Music Types

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This article discusses the distinguishing characteristics of music associated with some of the more popular dance styles. This discussion is not meant to be restrictive or exclusive, but to provide insight that can be of use to dancers and choreographers alike.

What makes a particular type of music appropriate for a given dance style? As round dance participants, we often do not need to recognize which dance style corresponds to a particular type of music. That task has been performed by the choreographer – *correctly or incorrectly* – and we simply execute the figures with all the feeling and interpretation with which we are capable. Ideally, all choreographers should be able to answer this question fully before putting a single figure to paper. Recognition of the properties of music that make it appropriate for a given dance style are important to produce routines of the highest quality that dancers will enjoy. One might say, for example, that he/she knows “cha cha cha” music when he/she hears it, but let us go further and try to be more quantitative than that.

Once the music style has been selected, it does not in any way prevent the freedom that round dance choreographers have to adapt (or create) any figure to fit the music type.

Music is characterized by a number of factors including tempo, time signature, and arrangement which includes percussion, melody, harmony, and other instrumental choices. Musicians make selections to lead to a mood that they want a particular song to evoke. These choices might be based on historical evolution and creative invention. Various dance styles have evolved as the various aspects of the music have also come to somewhat be standardized.

The most important criteria that control which dance style is appropriate for a given piece of music are tempo and time signature.

Tempo is the speed of the music as measured in bars or beats per unit time, usually per minute. The table shows typical tempi (*the plural of tempo*) ranges for a number of dance styles.

Time signature is musical notation for the way notes are arranged into measures. The first (or top) number represents the number of beats (or notes) per bar (or measure) of music and the other (or bottom) number represents the value of those beats. For example, 4/4 means 4 quarter notes per bar. There are a large number of possible time signatures, but only a few apply to music associated with normal dance styles, namely 3/4, 4/4, 2/4 and 6/8. For example, waltz is always associated with 3/4. Basic waltz figures have 3 steps corresponding to the 3 quarter notes per bar. Notice that many dance styles

Dance Style	Tempo	Time Signature
Waltz, International	30	3/4
Waltz, American	28-30	3/4
Waltz, Viennese	54-60	3/4
Foxtrot, International	30	4/4
Foxtrot, American	30-32	4/4
Quickstep	50	4/4
Tango, International	33	4/4
Tango, American	30-32	4/4
Tango, Argentine	26-33	4/4
“Slow” Two Step	16-22	4/4 or 6/8
Rumba, International	27	4/4
Rumba, American	32-36	4/4
Cha Cha Cha	30	4/4
Mambo	47-51	4/4
Salsa	40-55	4/4
Merengue	29-32	4/4
Jive	44	4/4
East Coast Swing	34-36	4/4
West Coast Swing	28-32	4/4
Lindy	32-40	4/4
Samba	50-52	2/4
Hustle	28-30	4/4
Bossa Nova	28-35	4/4
Paso Doble	62	2/4
Bolero	24-26	4/4

are associated with the 4/4 time signature, for example, foxtrot, rumba, slow two-step, tango.

We need to examine further information related to musical arrangement to more fully understand the association between dance styles and music types. Percussion is important, particularly for Latin rhythms which incorporate rich and complex patterns of numerous percussive instruments to produce differing moods for the various music types.

This has been an introduction to some aspects of music that may make it relevant for a given dance style. Details and discussion of additional factors will be presented in a future article.

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