

Waltz and More

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, © 2002

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 and Sidecar 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 "Veel" 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.

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.

Think Forward: Men, some of the figures in waltz (and foxtrot) begin with a forward moving step, followed by a forward moving step accompanied by a slight body turn at the end of the step. So that at the end of the 2nd step, due to the body rotation, the step taken was in reality forward and slightly side. These include: Whisk, Hover, Hover Telemark... A few more hints on two of these:

Whisk: Open only slightly for the 3rd step. The upper thighs should cross tightly and your weight should be forward. Lower slightly at the end of the figure to prepare for the next figure.

Hover: To give the couple added stability (and a nicer look) after taking your 2nd step, bring/brush your free foot (man's left; woman's right) to your supporting foot, turn to semi-closed position and step forward taking weight.

Hover Telemark: The hover telemark begins just like a hover, but in addition to turning to semi-closed position the figure rotates an addition eighth to fourth of a turn before taking the 3rd step.

Chasse: A few tricks for a good-looking chasse include a proper semi-closed position (see earlier discussion), 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".

Wait for Your Partner: One of the tricks to comfortable dancing is that it is very important for both partners to be aware of the action that needs to be accomplished by their partner on each figure. In some cases this involves one of the members of the partnership to momentarily delay the taking of a step, in order to wait for their partner to complete their action(s).

A few examples when the man needs to delay include: Pickup, Double Reverse Spin (see discussion below), Telespin, Split Rhonde... The trick to the Pickup is timing when the woman should be picked up. The turning/folding action of the woman begins just after taking weight on the inside foot (man's right; woman's left) and is completed during the 2nd step. Men, be wary of picking your partner up too abruptly.



Women also have figures that they need to wait. A few of these figures include: Maneuver/Half Natural Turn, Spin Turn, Impetus... In the Maneuver, the woman needs to wait until the man has folded in front of her before committing to her 2nd step. In some figures, e.g. Spin Turn, a woman can make use of a brush on the 3rd step, prior to weight being taken. This brush helps stabilize the couple and makes her delay stepping on the foot before the man is in position/completed the rotation.

Turning Figures: There are two types of turning figures, those turning to the right (natural) and those turning to the left (reverse). The trick to determining where the turning action occurs can actually be answered by the direction. If you are executing a right turning figure the turn actually begins between the 1st and the 2nd step, early turn. If you are executing a left turning figure, the turn begins between the 2nd and the 3rd step, delayed turn. In both cases, the end of the 3rd step is used to make final body alignment adjustments and gather your feet together for the next figure. A few turning figures include: Left & Right Turning Boxes, Reverse Turn (left), Natural Turn (right), Diamond Turn, Telemarks (though technically a foxtrot figure, they are often seen in waltz), Double Reverse Spin, Telespin...

In the **Double Reverse Spin**, the key to getting good rotation and ease of motion is for the woman to take a large 3rd forward step (even though she may start out taking a large forward step, her body rotation actually makes this a side step when completed). Her 4th step is forward, but will cross due to the rotation of the couple's bodies. One of the problems with this figure is that the man does not wait for the woman to finish her steps, and therefore pulls her off balance. So gentlemen, unless you would like to drag/carry your partner around the dance floor, give her time to finish her footwork.

Sway: Sway is optional, but adds to the beauty of the dance. Sway is the inclination of the body either to the left or right toward the inside/center of a turn. When you ride a bike around a turn or when you see an airplane turning, it sways towards the inside (center) of the turn. This happens because the centrifugal force that tends to throw you "out," has to be balanced by "sway" towards the inside of the turn.



The rider does not need the sway until he/she is in the turn and the sway vanishes as the turn is completed. The same thing occurs in Waltz and other smooth dances during turning figures, not spinning figures (e.g. Double Reverse Spin) because they are done too quickly to incorporate sway comfortably.

The first part of the 1st step in most waltz figures is a preparatory step taken straightforward or backward with an upright body position. The turn and therefore the sway typically occurs sometime between the end of the 1st step and the end of the 2nd step, depending on the direction the figure turns (on forward moving figures: right sway on natural turning figures and left sway on reverse turning figures, opposite for backward moving figures). The end of the 3rd step of the figure, after the rotation is completed, is a straightening of the body and the gathering of the feet to prepare for another figure.

Sway can also be used for effect in picture figures, but we will save this for a future discussion.

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