



EDUCATION

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Round Dance Articles

How The Phase Rating System Reflects The History Of Modern Round Dancing

By Veronica McClure

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The phase rating system has the oldest material -- Waltz and Two Step -- in Phase II mostly for the simple reason that for so many years that's what we dancers learned first because it was around first. While interesting, this arrangement is irrelevant to a logical and systematic progression through the movements and rhythms we use in round dancing. Just because something is old, does not mean it is easy -- just ask dancers who specialize in various forms of historic dance!

Nevertheless I believe it is useful and interesting to review the history of Round Dancing with this information about Phase II in mind. Our dance form started with revivals of 19th century social dance. At that time, balls in America, England and the Continent consisted of group dances and couple dances. In today's language, that means squares and rounds. The squares were often called quadrilles and had choreographies which were still linked to their country dance and contradance companions. The couple dances were known as "round dances." The first round dance was the Waltz which became a mainstay in polite social dance in the early 1800s. It constantly turned right face causing the dancers to go round and round and thus gave rise to the use of the term "round dance" to mean couple dancing. This usage stuck even after non-turning figures were introduced.

Both Henry Ford (1920s) and Lloyd Shaw (1930s and 40s) based their dance revivals on 19th century ballroom dances, i.e., 19th century forms of squares and rounds. Their work became the basis of the first round dancing as we in the round dance world today know it. They were not inventing something new and original; they were reviving and altering 19th-century ballroom forms, and in the process an everyday 19th century term became the capitalized "Round Dancing."

A major difference between 19th-century social dance and current Round Dancing is in the footwork, toe lead versus heel lead especially. All polite social dance (i.e., social dancing at times and places where one put on one's best manners and behaved properly) for three centuries (1600s, 1700s, 1800s) involved dancing with turned out feet and toe leads. The larger than usual generational changes accompanying the turn of the 19th century into the 20th century were caused by the acceptance of black music and dance and resulted in ragtime. This ended turn out and toe leads for in social dance once and for all. The English even made a point of formally codifying this in their dance teachers organization in the early 1920s.

However, since the dancing Ford and Shaw were promoting was late 19th-century style, they also promoted turn out and toe lead, although the toe lead got far more attention than the turnout. Thus the toe lead idea was promulgated through round dancing long after other dance communities had abandoned it. (It is common for different forms of the "same" dance to exist simultaneously in different dance communities - consider the number of variations of Jitterbug-lindy- jive- swing that exist simultaneously and even undergo a variety of revivals and reformations.) Toe versus heel leads was a point of contention in round dancing in the early days of Roundalab.

The 19th century origin of modern round dancing is enshrined in Phase II, for both the waltz and the two-step originated in the 19th century. Most of the dances in higher phases originated in the 20th century. The tango originated in the 19th century but it was the Americanized 20th century form that first made it into modern round dancing via Tango Mannita. The sharply accented tango of ballroom competitions is also a 20th century style. The schottisches and polkas that were part of early modern round dancing are 19th century forms that have been discarded except for an occasional two-step polka. The English style of waltz introduced in Phase III is a 20th century style. The foxtrot and quickstep and the Latin dances are 20th century forms that do not exist in Phase II.

In summary, Phase II Waltz and Two-Step are the oldest dance types in Round Dancing. The Two-Step essentially drops out after Phase II while the waltz material in Phase III-VI is mostly the newer (i.e., 20th-century) English (aka "international") style waltz. Thus we have come to the point where some round dance leaders believe that Phase II Waltz and Two-Step are irrelevant to Phase III and higher dancing. Because they think this way, some of them are skipping Phase II altogether and start with Phase III.

I don't think the material in Phase II is irrelevant, but I do think that the way the phase rating system works now, it equates "older" with "easier." I would much rather see the phase rating system treat each rhythm separately, with parallel but separate lists of easy (Phase I & II), intermediate (Phase III & IV), and advanced (Phase V & VI) material.

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