

Arm Styling Tips

Chris & Terri Cantrell

The following ideas have been collected in order to assist you in comfortable and creative dancing.

Dancing is composed of many different elements covering every part of the body (yes, even the brain). Most of what we learn centers around figures, positioning, and technique. We rack our brains and our bodies to memorize foot patterns and then relearn these foot patterns with various technical elements to make execution easier, smoother, more comfortable, and a heck of a lot nicer to look at. Then our instructor asks us to do something totally unreasonable, 'to breathe'. At the same time, we are also learning that dance is a contact sport that involves the coordination of two people dancing individually, but moving as one unit. With all of this going on, sometimes the free arm, the one not being used for leading/following, are often forgotten or ignored because the dancer simply has no idea of what to do with it. Putting your hand in your pocket, behind your back, folded in front of you, or rigid at your side are probably not the most attractive options.

Technique versus Styling: The dictionary defines these two words when referring to dance and performance as:

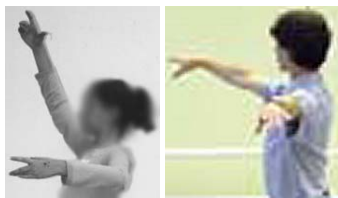
- **Styling:** "A quality of imagination and individuality expressed in one's actions and tastes; an artistic expression, execution, or performance characterizing a particular person, group...."
- **Technique:** "The basic physical movements; the way in which the fundamentals, as of an artistic work, are handled."

Styling is the way to make your dancing look and feel unique. It can be applied to several parts of the body, including: facial expression, some head movements, the speed at which figures or figure parts are executed, arm movement, etc. This article focuses on some arm styling hints. In a future article we will expand this to include specifics on the wrist, hand, and fingers styling tips.

The Technique of Styling:

Even though styling is a form of self-expression and very individualized, there are some basic techniques that can be used to help get you started in creating graceful & expressive arms.

1. **Arm Positioning in Relationship to the Shoulder Line:** Keep your upper arm, elbow, wrist, hand, and fingers in front of your shoulder line to avoid the 'broken chicken wing' look (right picture). Avoiding this not only looks & feels better to both you and your partner, but it can help prevent stress on the shoulder, back, and neck. The 'broken chicken wing' tends to crop up while in semi-closed position and is more commonly found in the smooth rhythms (waltz, foxtrot, tango, quickstep). The pictures at the left show examples of good arm positioning in relation to the shoulders.



2. **Rounded Arm:** Bend the elbow gently to avoid the 'ramrod' (straight elbow) look. In addition to increasing the attractiveness of the arm, this has many other benefits, including reducing stress on your shoulder and elbow, and allows your arm to be more easily repositioned to help keep it out of someone else's (or your partner's) face or other body part. In addition, if your arm does impact a body part, a relaxed arm with a bended elbow will react like a shock absorber, reducing the force of the hit.

3. **Energy & Tone:** Keep energy & tone in the arm throughout the movement to create fluid and natural movement. The movement may be soft and gentle or may be powerful depending on the mood of the music and the dancer. This essentially means that the muscles of the arm through the fingers are still partially engaged (aka: energized or toned) as opposed to flipping a limp spaghetti noodle arm around. On the other hand you do not want to look like a body builder demonstrating a muscle pose. Please note the energy in Ricky Martin's arms in the picture to the right.



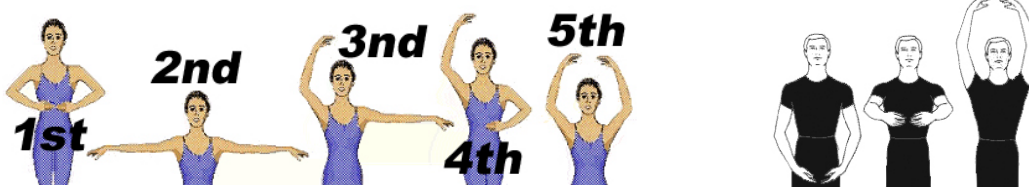
4. **Relax:** At the same time that you are keeping tone in your arm, fight the urge to rigidly stiffen your arm through your fingers. Take a breath as you move your free arm to help keep it relaxed.

5. **Flow:** When your arm reaches the first position desired continue smoothly to the next position without stopping, and so on. You can freeze in a position if you would like to emphasize that movement, but use this bit of styling sparingly.
6. **Pace:** Pace the speed of your arm to match the rhythm of the music. Let the action develop gradually, smoothly. Avoid shooting your arm jerkily from the starting position to the ending position.

Arm Position Styling Exercises:

There are no hard and fast rules for arm styling; just about anything goes. Below we have listed some basic guidelines that might help you on your way to expressing yourself through your arms for both the Latin-American (rumba, cha, etc.) and the smooth (waltz, foxtrot, etc.) rhythms.

1. **Getting Started:** A good beginning is to just let your free arm hang loosely by your side. This will most likely feel odd at first and may make you a little self-conscious, but it really does look perfectly natural. It is also a good way to start the brain thinking about control of your free arm. You will be amazed by how much concentration this action takes.
2. **Try a Little Ballet:** Ballet teaches foot and arm movements in parallel. The arms are designed to not only look appealing and graceful but also to assist with the dancer's balance. Try experimenting with several of the basic ballet arm positions. One modification should be made to 2nd position, slightly bend at the elbow. These arm positions may feel very mechanical at first, but with practice they will smooth out.



3. **Out to the Side:** Try bringing the free arm up and out to the side of your body above the waist. Pull the elbow slightly in towards your side like you would if you are wearing a sling on your arm. Ladies, if this is uncomfortable at first, try placing your free hand on your waist. Another way to think of it is to imagine that you are in a pool of water waist to rib high with your arm gently floating on top. Still another way is to imagine a balloon under your upper arm bringing your elbow slightly away from your body, but still close enough to hold the balloon.

Arm Movement Suggestions:

There are many variations and individual preferences for moving the arm. Listed below are just a few for you to experiment with. There will be more detail in a later article in regards to options for the wrist, hand, and fingers.

- a. **Extend Side:** When extending your arm to the side of your body, allow the elbow to lead the movement. Follow it slowly with your lower arm, then your wrist, next your hand, and finally your fingers. When fully extended, the elbow should still be slightly bent and all of the parts of the arm on down should remain slightly in front of the shoulders. This can be used when your arms are already in front or at the sides of the your body either above or below the waist.
- b. **Side to Front:** From the side position (#a), return the arm to in front of your body by sharply bending the elbow, the angle will depend on how close to the front of your body you wish the arm to end up. Then bring your lower arm in first, wrist second, then hand, and finally the fingers.
- c. **Side & Up:** From the side position (#a), bring your entire arm up in an arc, pivoting from the shoulder, and over your head.
- d. **Up to Side:** From the ending position of item #c, take your entire arm down, pivoting from the shoulder, in a wide arc to your side or lower.
- e. **Comb the Hair:** From the ending position of item #c, sharply bend your elbow and drop your lower arm, wrist, hand, and fingers down to along side of or in back of your head. Leading downward with the elbow, use your wrist, hand, and fingers to gently caress down the back or side of your head. You then have the choice of either returning your hand out to the side (#a) or, for those brave of heart, continue caressing



with your hand down the side of your body, ending with your arm out to the side or down by your side.

- f. **Starburst – Down to Up:** Start with your hand low (below your waist) at the side of your body. Leading with the wrist (allowing the hand & fingers to trail slightly behind) bring your hand in front of you, still low. Still leading with the wrist bring your arm straight up over your head and out to the side or continue the arc to end with your hand down by the side of your body, in front of you below the waist, or in front of you at waist level (similar to 1st ballet position).

Experiment with these and others. Observe and imitate the arm movements of other dancers on the floor until you come up with something that is comfortable for you and expresses who you are.

Arm movement alone does not tell the whole story; stay tuned for information about the wrist, hand, and finger movement next month.