



Icing On the Cake

by Harold & Meredith Sears

Sometimes, dancing is described as "walking set to music." Walking -- how hard can this be? Piece of cake. However, if your dancing is walking only, then it is plain cake, no icing. Plain cake is good, but let's think about some of the ways in which we can put icing on the cake of our dancing.

Here are six features that can turn *walking* into rich and luscious *dancing*:

- Frame
- Floating
- Dancing On the Diagonal
- Side Lead
- Rise and Fall
- Body Sway

Let's begin this exercise by imagining that we are simply "walking to the music." When we walk, our arms are loose, the whole body is loose, as we stride along. A "walking" dancer will have his right arm around his partner and lead hands joined, but his elbows might be down at his sides, and there could be a good bit of random, sloppy movement between arms and body and between the man and the woman generally. Good **frame** means that your arms are up and toned but not stiff, your shoulders are at a



relaxed, normal height and parallel to your partner's shoulders, and your body is offset slightly to the left of your partner. Good frame takes the wobble out of your walking and begins to make it look like smooth dancing. Frame is the first layer of icing on the cake.

So, let's get the man's right arm around his lady with his wrist high under her shoulder and his right hand on her left shoulder blade, the fingers together and pointed somewhat down. The lady's left arm lies gently on top of his right with her left hand slightly arched and her fingertips resting softly on his upper arm or shoulder. There should be

contact along his right and her left arms, but be sure to support your own weight. Don't lean over or hang on your partner. The man's left arm should be similarly raised and extended out to the side. The upper arm slopes slightly down, and the forearm slopes upward. Keep that elbow back. If you let it drift forward, you will push the lady's arm uncomfortably back. The lady places the palm of her right hand into the palm of his left, resting her fingers in the cradle between his thumb and forefinger. Don't bend the wrist back. Don't grip tightly. The man's elbows are a bit lower than his shoulders, but the ideal that you strive for is a horizontal oval perhaps beginning at the man's left shoulder, running around his left arm and her right arm, across her shoulders, around her left arm and back to his left shoulder. His left hand is above this plane, and his right hand is below it, but this somewhat vague oval is your "frame." Tone the muscles of your upper bodies so that this shape is maintained. Don't pump the arms or flap the elbows.

Lean a little bit back and a little bit to the left so that you are clearly in your own space and looking out your own "window," the space formed by your partner's head and right shoulder. Never dance toe-to-toe. His left foot should step outside her right, and his right must smoothly pass between her feet. Don't look at your partner or otherwise drift right into your partner's space. Don't look down at your feet or let your eyes wander around the room. Look up; the joint between the wall and ceiling is a good place to aim. Your upper bodies are apart, but experienced dance couples maintain firm contact at the hip. The slight rise of your right hipbone should fit just inside that of your partner. Can you hold it there as you dance? Curt Worlock insists that one of the most important responsibilities of the lady is to keep her hips "Velcroed" to her man's.



Second, we want to think about **floating** down the dance hall. The opposite of floating is maybe bouncing, plodding along: just walking. How can we convert a trudging walk into a floating dance? We will make use of our heels, but we will spend more time on the balls of our feet. We will bend and straighten our knees as we progress, but we won't lock our knees. These two features alone will keep us light on our feet and responsive to changes in direction. Our movements become airy and floating, rather than heavy and clumping.

A pedometer is a little instrument that you can clip to your belt, and it will count the steps that you take as you walk and so the miles that you travel. It can do this because with each step, you accelerate as you push with one foot and you decelerate as you land on the next foot. It's not quite as bad as: go, stop, go, stop . . . but there is enough of that kind of action to swing a pendulum that ticks off the steps and so the miles. Walking has a regular up-and-down motion to it, too, as we push off (and up a little), swing a leg forward to catch ourselves, and then land on that foot: up, down, up, down . . . with each step. When we dance, we don't want to land heavily on any step. We don't want the "go, stop" or the "up, down." We want our bodies to move down the hall at a smooth rate, as if we were gliding on ice skates. Our feet may be scooting about like mad beneath us, but our bodies should be floating in a dignified and stately way above it all. To do this, instead of throwing the body forward, and then taking the step, and catching our weight as it falls, we want to reach out with the foot first, begin to transfer weight, contact the floor, and only then fully transfer weight. The transfer of weight from one foot to the other then becomes smooth and flowing, rather than abrupt and jerky.



We could think of this feature of dancing as delayed commitment. We execute a major proportion of each step before we commit our weight to that step, and the woman needs to delay her commitment even longer than the man. Again, reach out ahead of your body, let your body follow, but delay final commitment. When you feel the man shift his weight, only then do you shift weight onto the moving foot. If the woman steps before the man does, he will be brought up short with a bit of a jerk (or he may even step on her toe).

Another teacher urged us to avoid seeing the end of a figure as a goal but to look beyond that step and maintain the smooth flow. Think of the Open Telemark. If you only think: forward left, side and forward right turning, side and forward turning to diagonal line and wall, you will likely take that third step with a little jerk of arrival. The Open Telemark is a discrete figure, but it is only a small part of the dance, so don't feel that you have arrived or accomplished anything. Get that

right foot moving right away, and as it is stretching out there, transfer weight smoothly, and move into the Natural Turn or whatever comes next. Rarely do we arrive at a destination where we want to stop the flow of the body. Always think beyond the next step and keep your body moving smoothly.

Our third layer of icing on the cake is **dancing on the diagonal**. As round dancers, we are well trained to think about the four cardinal directions: line of dance, reverse, wall, and center. The cue might be "face the wall and box," and we do it. If we do two forward waltzes and then a left turning box, we will carefully face center, reverse, wall, and then line again. But the other four directions are prettier: diagonal line and wall, diagonal line and center, diagonal reverse and center, and diagonal reverse and wall. Where the Left Turning Box (phase II in waltz) turns us through the four "cardinal" directions, a Diamond Turn (phase IV) turns us through the diagonal points of the compass. An open telemark is designed to move us from diagonal line and center to diagonal line and wall.

Dancing on the diagonals produces a soft, flowing pattern: a little into the center, then back toward the wall; a wave-like motion, something more like natural flow and less like plane geometry at school. Soldiers march in straight lines. Graceful dancing should mimic something more out of Mother Nature: an undulating stream-bed, a path wandering through the forest, waves running up the beach, reaching higher here and lower there. It turns out that many figures flow like this: weaves, spin turns, impetus turns, chair and slip, and many more. The orientation of these figures is on the diagonal, and our dancers' focus should be there, too. Don't "fix" it. Don't shift yourself around so you're lined up "properly." Dancing on the diagonals is both proper and graceful.

Our fourth bit of icing is **side lead**, and this feature involves diagonals, too -- not progression along a diagonal but body orientation on the diagonal. Rather than directly facing or backing the line of progression, try angling or slicing down the hall with one or the other shoulder leading the way. Instead of dancing forward with your belly button pointing where you're going, turn a bit so your left side precedes your right and your belly button points diagonally toward wall. I think of a barge plowing forward, directly into the wind and current, "breasting" the waves, forcing its way forward. Dancers

don't want to "bull" their way along. Better to progress at a graceful angle, slipping smoothly through the music, with one or the other side leading.

When you step with one foot and lead with that same side, it is simply called side or shoulder lead. You might begin a foxtrot Three Step with the left foot and with a little left side lead. Side lead is especially helpful in dancing and leading a locking action. Begin a Forward Lock Forward with the left foot and strong left side lead, and your trail foot will lock behind much more comfortably than if you have no side lead. Try a Right Turning Lock. Only if you lead strongly with your right side will you be able to lock comfortably, you in front and your partner behind, as you turn right-face.

When you step with one foot and lead with the opposite side, it is called contra body movement (CBM), and the slightly twisted (contrary) position that results, one foot placed across in front or behind the other, is called contra body movement position (CBMP). You might follow your Right Turning Lock with a Feather and step forward with your right foot and left side lead. Here, contra action helps you keep your hips together and your shoulders parallel as you move outside your partner into banjo position. Put yourselves into closed position facing reverse, and do a Back Feather. Step back left with right side lead. Contra action involves stepping across your line of progression.

CBM is also used to begin most turns. Start a natural turn by stepping forward with the right foot and use left side lead to begin the turning movement. Start a reverse turn with the left foot and right side lead. Or think about swinging the contra side forward: as you step forward with the left, swing the right hip and shoulder forward. Be natural and fluid in this movement. Don't jerk or contort your body.

The fifth example of dance styling that takes us beyond simply walking down the hall is **rise and fall**. Above, we said that bounce is awkward and unattractive, and here we're saying that rise and fall is graceful and pretty. A bounce occurs over a single beat of music. You rise as you step off and fall as you land on the next foot. Bounce is jerky. Graceful "rise and fall" occurs over a whole measure of music; it is not jerky but gentle. Rise and fall gives a whole, new layer, a third dimension if you will, of natural flow and movement to our dancing. Where dancing on the diagonal produces graceful wave-like patterns in the two dimensions of the dance floor, rise and fall adds the same kind of richness in the third, vertical dimension.

The general rule is that you lower a bit at the beginning of the measure. Lower as you begin to do a waltz open telemark, for instance. Soften the trail knee to lower and then drive forward onto the lead foot. She feels the lowering and is ready to go before you really start to progress. At the end of beat one, begin to rise. Continue to rise through beat two and into beat three. Lower again at the end of the measure. Over the whole measure, this movement is graceful and gentle, not bouncy.



Being up is not just an extended knee (don't lock your knee). It is being on the balls of your feet, and it is being erect and stretched in your torso: lungs full perhaps and back a bit arched, head up. But don't lift or shrug your shoulders in an effort to be "up." Rise and fall must not disturb your toned frame. You can distinguish between "foot rise" and rise in the rest of the body. Often, you will

rise only through the leg and torso. Sometimes, you will add that little extra with foot-rise.

Rise and fall is used differently in the different smooth rhythms. It is most conspicuous in waltz, where we spent about the same amount of time dancing "down" as in dancing "up." In foxtrot and even in quickstep, we get up more quickly and we stay up longer. There is rise and fall in foxtrot, but the overall look of the dance is flatter, more up and floating. Waltz has been compared to mountains and valleys and foxtrot to rolling hills. Tango is flat with no rise and fall.

Finally, our sixth layer of icing is **body sway**. Sway is simply inclination of the body to the right or to the left. We walk with our bodies straight up and down, but often we dance with our bodies inclined or tilted one way or the other. We have returned yet again to the idea of using diagonals in our dancing, rather than straight lines. So much of dancing is the creation of graceful and attractive lines in our bodies and in our progression around the floor. Consider that engineering drawings are full of verticals, horizontals, straight lines, and ninety-degree angles, but fine art and nature itself is all slopes and curves.

We create body sway through the use of side stretch. We have already seen that uniform stretch helps create good frame. Stretching the right side more than the left creates left sway, but in the process, don't collapse your left side. Don't drop your left shoulder or raise the right shoulder, but stretch the whole right side of your torso. One teacher told us to try and inflate the right lung a little more than the left. Surely I can't really do that, but it does feel a little like it. Of course, left side stretch produces right sway.



One thing that we use sway for is to make turns more comfortably; we try to sway into turns much as you would bank a bicycle around a corner. We've recently been working on Viennese Turns. As you turn left, use a little right-side stretch (women left-side) to improve your balance and to make the turn more easily. In Viennese Waltz, which moves about twice as fast as standard waltz, sway makes an even greater difference. Step forward on your left turning left-face, side with the right, and sort of throw that right side down the line. The result is quite pronounced left sway to reverse, and you'll lock in front in an especially pleasing contra-body position that uses both body sway and side lead to create both attractive and comfortable body lines: first the man's right side down line, then the left, always swaying to reverse. Try this on your practice floor, and then dance a phase I or II "turn left, side, lock" with your body straight up and down and your belly button pointing to reverse. The use of sway takes a frantic and clunky figure and makes it seem slow and easy. Sway helps us to navigate our turns, and it allows us to create appealing body lines.

If you can incorporate these six features of smooth dancing into *your* performance: Frame, Floating, Dancing On the Diagonal, Side Lead, Rise and Fall, and Body Sway, you will be sure to feel the difference. You won't be walking; you'll be dancing!