

History of Waltz

Waltz: from the old German word walzen to roll, turn, or to glide.

Waltz: a ballroom dance in 3/4 time with strong accent on the first beat and a basic pattern of step-step-close.

Waltz: to move or glide in a lively or conspicuous manner (to advance easily and successfully).

Waltz: a dance born in the suburbs of Vienna and in the alpine region of Austria. As early as the seventeenth century, waltzes were played in the ballrooms of the Hapsburg court.

The weller, or turning dances, were danced by peasants in Austria and Bavaria even before that time. Many of the familiar waltz tunes can be traced back to simple peasant yodeling melodies.

During the middle of the eighteenth century, the allemande form of the waltz was very popular in France. Originally danced as one of the figures in the contredanse, with arms intertwining at shoulder level, it soon became an independent dance and the close-hold was introduced.

By the end of the eighteenth century, this old Austrian peasant dance had been accepted by high society, and three-quarter rhythm was here to stay.

However popular the waltz, opposition was not lacking. Dancing masters saw the waltz as a threat to the profession. The basic steps of the waltz could be learned in relatively short time, whereas, the minuet and other court dances required considerable practice, not only to learn the many complex figures, but also to develop suitable postures and deportment.

The waltz was also criticized on moral grounds by those opposed to its closer hold and rapid turning movements. Religious leaders almost unanimously regarded it as vulgar and sinful.

Continental court circles held out obstinately against the waltz. In England, (a land of strict morals), the waltz was accepted even more slowly.

In July of 1816, the waltz was included in a ball given in London by the Prince Regent. A blistering editorial in *The Times* a few days later stated:

We remarked with pain that the indecent foreign dance called the Waltz was introduced (we believe for the first time) at the English court on Friday last ... it is quite sufficient to cast one's eyes on the voluptuous intertwining of the limbs and close compressure on the bodies in their dance, to see that it is indeed far removed from the modest reserve which has hitherto been considered distinctive of English females.

So long as this obscene display was confined to prostitutes and adulteresses, we did not think it deserving of notice; but now that it is attempted to be forced on the respectable classes of society by the civil examples of their superiors, we feel it a duty to warn every parent against exposing his daughter to so fatal a contagion.

The Times of London, 16th July 1816

Even as late as 1866 an article in the English magazine *Belgravia* stated:

"We who go forth of nights and see without the slightest discomposure our sister and our wife seized on by a strange man and subjected to violent embraces and canterings round a small-sized apartment - the only apparent excuse for such treatment being that is done to the sound of music - can scarcely realize the horror which greeted the introduction of this wicked dance."

A lot of the disapproval was voiced by the older generation, but seldom mentioned is the fact the reigning Queen (Victoria) was a keen and expert ballroom dancer with a special love of the waltz!

But as history repeats itself over and over again, the antagonism only served to increase the popularity of the waltz. The bourgeoisie took it up enthusiastically immediately after the French revolution. Paris alone had nearly seven hundred dance halls!

A German traveler to Paris in 1804 stated, "This love for the waltz and this adoption of the German dance is quite new and has become one of the vulgar fashions since the war, like smoking."

Reportedly, the first time the waltz was danced in the United States was in Boston in 1834. Lorenzo Papanti, a Boston dancing master, gave an exhibition in Mrs. Otis' Beacon Hill mansion.

Social leaders were aghast at what they called "an indecorous exhibition." By the middle of the nineteenth century, the waltz was firmly established in United States society.

Music plays an important role in dance, and every dance is dependent upon the availability of the appropriate music. The waltz was given a tremendous boost around 1830 by two great Austrian composers - Franz Lanner and Johann Strauss.

These two composers were by far the most popular during the nineteenth century: they set the standard for the Viennese Waltz, (a very fast version of the waltz).

By 1900, a typical dance program was three quarter waltzes and one quarter all other dances combined.

Around the close of the nineteenth century, two modifications of the waltz were developed.

The first was the Boston, a slower waltz with long gliding steps. Although the Boston disappeared with the first world war, it did stimulate development of the English or International style which continues today.

The second was the hesitation, which involves taking one step to three beats of the measure. Hesitation steps are still widely used in today's waltz.

Fortunately, the violent opposition faded out and the Waltz weathered an exciting and varied career, emerging today in two accepted forms, both reflecting the main characteristics of the dance. They are known as the Modern Waltz and the Viennese (Quick) Waltz.