

INTRODUCTION TO WALTZ

The Waltz is one of the oldest of our dance rhythms. Its choreography is typically rotational, floating and expressive. Its language is bittersweet, often recalling the pangs of the heart in unrequited love. Think Juliet drinking the poison at the end of Romeo & Juliet.

Its roots go back to Austria and the Middle Ages, to peasant dances known as the “weller” and “laendler.” The dance form as we know it today comes from 19th century English society, where it was first considered scandalous. Never before had a man and a woman danced publicly in a virtual embrace. When Queen Victoria became enamoured of the dance, it quickly caught on in English society. The name was changed to “walzer” meaning sliding or gliding.

The tempo also got faster when Johann Strauss began composing music increasing the number of beats per measure and the Viennese waltz was born. After World War I, the English and Americans slowed it down to the flow we know today with a gentle rise and fall action. The Viennese Waltz persists as another rhythm.

Advanced round dancing takes most of its choreography from the “international” style of dance and its syllabus of steps danced all over the world, which keeps the partners in close body contact. American style waltz uses more “open” choreography.

TEMPO & TIMING:

Waltz is unique in being written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. This means there are three beats to each measure of music, usually counted as 1-2-3. This allows a dancer to take three steps of equal duration in each measure, but, of course, there are exceptions. Many figures are syncopated, meaning two steps are taken on one beat to allow four steps in a measure of music.

Waltz tempo can range from 25 to 35 measures per minute, although most comfortably is danced with 28 to 30 measures per minute.

DANCE POSITION:

Proper dance position is not just a stylistic expression. It makes execution of advanced figures easier. You will be concerned with balance, poise and topline. Your body weight must move to be over a supporting leg. Body weight is made up of four blocks: Your head, shoulders, ribcage and hips, which should be kept in alignment. Keep your knees relaxed. Arms should be held up with the muscles on the back of the upper arm, not the biceps; shoulders should be rotated so they are down.

Dance positions include the following:

CLOSED POSITION

SEMI-CLOSED POSITION

BANJO POSITION

SHADOW POSITION

SIDECAR

MOVEMENT:

Movement considers foot placement, alignment, sway, rotation, swing and rise and fall.

A forward step begins by lowering on the supporting leg and extending the free leg with the heel ready to make contact with the floor. You will learn to “roll through your feet” to use the balls and toes of the feet to achieve the movement necessary in each step.

Backward steps are taken by lowering on the supporting foot and reaching back with the toe of the free foot. As the weight transfers to that foot, the heel of the forward foot drags back until it collects under the body.

BODY SWAY:

Sway is not only for effect but to improve balance and facilitate execution of figures. Sway is accomplished in many ways, as you will see, but it is not the result of just tilting your shoulders.

Normal sway is the natural inclination of the body from the ankles upward and away from or toward the moving leg.

RISE & FALL:

“Rise” is an upward stretch of the body starting at your feet and moving up through the body. Once you are in a “rise” position, you don’t stay there; you lower, and that is called “fall.” To “fall,” the knees and ankles are flexed or bent, ready to rise again using the power generated by the compression of the muscles in the leg, foot and ankle. “Rise and fall” is a continuous changing of body elevation in this manner.

Rise is first mentioned in the Roundalab Phase Manual at Phase III although it can—and should—be applied in the steps at all phases. Why? Do we do it to better “feel” the music we’re listening to? Yes. Do we do it to improve the quality and look of our dancing? Absolutely.

Beginning dancers can shuffle flat-footed through the early phases of round dancing. Rise and fall becomes important as a dancer progresses into more advanced figures and the body movement and shaping required to complete a step in partnership. Rise and fall also assists in maintaining proper timing to the music.

Rise and fall is also one of the characteristics that differentiate smooth dances from the Latins. It is most pronounced in the waltz.

How do you use Rise & Fall?

There are two types of rise and fall: 1) foot or ankle rise, and 2) body rise.

Foot rise starts with your weight squarely over your feet and begins as you shift your weight forward to the ball of the foot and then to the toe. As this is done, the ankle joint opens up. This can be done independently of any “rise” occurring in the body. Body rise comes from straightening the knees and may include a lengthening (stretch) through the torso and even the neck.

What is the “formula?”

In waltz, the basic formula for rise and fall is:

1. Commence rise at the *end* of step 1
2. Continue to rise on step 2
3. Continue to rise onto step 3
4. Lower at the *end* of step 3