

DAN *and* SANDI'S
THURSDAY NIGHT TRANSITION CLASS
AND WORKSHOP

INTRODUCTION TO PASO DOBLE

This is the dance of the matador, a very dramatic depiction of the Spanish bullfight. The most flamboyant of all the rhythms, Paso Doble is categorized as one of the five International style latin dances.

The names of the steps are mostly in French because the French originally choreographed the movements of the matador into dance steps in the 1920s. For example, “sur place,” a marching without moving, means “in place” in French. Learning paso doble means learning a new language, as well as new figures.

CHARACTERIZATION

Because this is the most theatrical of all rhythms, it requires that you, as a dancer, become involved in the “story” or you may feel a bit silly about the steps. It is a dance of extreme poses and positions. The man’s steps are powerful, taken with a commanding air; he is focused always on the bull because an error in timing or movement means getting gored. The lady, on the contrary, is dancing the part of the cape most often, so her movements are softer. Occasionally she is the bull, or the horse, or a flamenco dancer, but she always blends to the shapes made by the man.

A former world champion latin dancer describes paso doble as being about “challenge.” The matador challenges the bull, the bull returns the challenge, the crowd challenges the matador to be more daring.

FOOTWORK

You are working on the balls of the feet with the heels just touching the floor in most steps. When walking forward, use heel leads. There is no shuffling or sliding the feet on the floor. Each step is taken with deliberation.

A striking aspect of paso doble is that many steps begin on the man’s right and lady’s left foot—the “wrong feet”—compared to other rhythms.

BODY POSITION

Forget hip movement, even though this is latin. There is relatively little Cuban motion in paso doble. But, paso does have its own characteristic shape called the Spanish shape. The posture is very erect with the stomach pulled in, weight over the balls of the feet, hips forward and ribcage “lifted” to elongate the spine and depict the prideful stance of the matador. There is often a sense of walking straight ahead with the feet while the body is turned to the right, a contra position. (Remember, the matador walks around the ring but is often looking up into the stands to acknowledge his cheering supporters.) Mimicking the matador is more than just pushing out your chest; it requires a mental attitude that you are the star and the whole arena is cheering for you.

Arms are important in setting the stage in paso doble. Paso uses strong lines and the arms are an extension of those lines. There are five arm positions—in front of the body, behind the body, overhead, at the side and bent at the chest.

MUSICAL TIMING

Paso music is very stirring and usually played in 4/4 timing, like a march. The tempo is fairly fast—30 measures a minute.

We count paso figures in multiples of four steps—4, 8, 12 or 16. Paso was designed for show and competition. For many years, it was danced to only one piece of music, “Espana Cani,” done in different orchestrations but always with the same phrasing. Other pieces of music are used today, but the phrasing remains the same. To the dismay of round dance choreographers, this means there will be an extra “half-measure” of music (2 beats) to be dealt with somewhere in a dance.

DANCE POSITION

You will hear the term “paso closed position,” which is a variation of the closed position used in other latin dances, such as rumba. To create more space between the partners, man’s right hand holds the lady’s upper left arm and lady grasps the man’s upper right arm with her left hand. When you do some of the steps, you will appreciate having more space for leg movements.

BASIC STEPS

Sur place: Steps in place

Feel as though you are pressing the ball of the foot into wet sand on each step. This will avoid the tendency of the feet to drift from step to step. There is minimum knee action. Feel as though the ankle is a hinge point around which the foot moves up or down.

Appel: Attention

This is like a child stomping a foot to get attention. A stomp without much noise, it is a preparation step into many moving figures. It is usually done on “the wrong foot” (meaning man’s right and lady’s left). There are several acceptable ways of doing this one-count figure, but try to do it as though you are flicking a rock out from under your foot.

16: Working the cape

This is a four-measure figure, counted 1 through 16, with the man standing in place or sur placing, arching his body as though he is moving his cape from side to side, while the lady moves across in front of him.

Elevations: Side close, side close, with attitude

These will be cued as elevations up and elevations down. They are even-count chasses to the left or right, done on the toes. The arm positions will change from an elevation up to an elevation down and the carriage of the body will be different, but the footwork is the same.

Separations: Think “taunting the bull”

Partners begin in closed position and, over eight steps, they separate and come back to closed position. After an appel, man will step forward one step and close; lady will appel and step back two steps and close. Man then sur places for four counts while lady dances back to him. The man’s appel and strong forward step are like a challenge to the bull (the lady), who backs away then recharges. (We warned you, you have to get into the drama for this to make sense!)