



Dan and Sandi's
Quarterly Clinic:
Making Quickstep Do-able and Musical
May 28, 2006

Quickstep comes to us from the ragtime era, when new dances such as the Charleston, the Shimmy and the Black Bottom were in full swing. Foxtrot was new too, having come onto the dance floor out of Harry Fox's vaudeville routine. Most dancers found the fast foxtrot too fast for a night of dancing, so dance schools of the day began slowing it down. The faster version was retained in America as the "Peabody," named for a New York police lieutenant popular in dance circles. In England, the faster version was standardized as part of ballroom competition as the Quickstep.

The new quickstep moved a little like waltz, with rise and fall, only faster, and added some flourishes of Charleston and the runs, chasses, skips and hops of Harry Fox's "trot."

Quickstep is the fastest smooth rhythm we dance. Its music is bubbly and energetic. It is characterized by steps made up primarily of locks and chasses, moving briskly across the floor. You should get a feeling of wind whistling through your hair.

To make it do-able, you need to master two techniques:

- ♪ Being flexible in your knees and ankles, to be light on your feet but well grounded into the floor, and
- ♪ Dancing with one side or the other leading to move through the turning figures as the faster music demands.

Tempo & Timing

Quickstep music is written in 4/4 time, played at 48 to 52 measures per minute, almost twice as fast as foxtrot. There are four beats to each measure of music, and the basic figures are danced *SQQ*, meaning the "slow" will use two of the four beats and each "quick" will use one beat of music.

Besides getting used to faster music, a dancer also has to recognize that many figures in quickstep span more than one measure. Many need a measure and a half of music, and some up to three and a half measures, in combinations of *slows* and *quicks*. These are called "split measures" and you will find them in combinations such as *SSS*, *SQQS*, *SSQQ*, *QQSSQQ*, and even *SSQQSSQQS*.

Rhythmic Interpretation

Most quickstep figures are borrowed from waltz, which means you will know the basic footwork. These would include such old friends as telemarks, spin turns, and hovers. How they are danced in quickstep, though, is different. Timing is one major difference. Telemark, impetus and spin turn, for example, are usually danced in round dance quicksteps as SSS.

Also, rise occurs two different ways in quickstep. In chasse figures, the rise occurs gradually from the end of step one through the last step, then lowers. In most other quickstep figures, maximum rise occurs at the end of step one and stays at that level until weight is fully transferred on the last step of the figure, then lowers. Rise begins from a heel lead and rolls up to the toe (ball of foot). A step while up or continuing to rise is taken on the toe. In general, for *slows* the knees and ankles will be flexed for heel leads and for *quicks* you will dance on toes.

There is less rise (and therefore less fall) than in waltz because of the body flight you want to achieve, requiring that you keep some flex in the knees and ankles to stay grounded.

Tips

Memorize the timing for a V-6, quarter turn progressive chasse, fishtail, six quick twinkle and spin turn. The timing seldom changes and the *slows* and *quicks* need to echo in the back of your head automatically as you dance the figures.

Visualize your center of gravity and your connection with your partner higher in your ribcage than for other dances. This mental picture of elevating your center of gravity will “lighten” the lower part of your body so your feet can move more freely.

Dance with your poise more forward over the foot than in waltz, but still keeping the spine straight. Being forward will allow gravity to work with you to generate impulsion to start a figure. Use your ankles like shock absorbers to keep you grounded. Picture a boxer ‘dancing’ in the ring as he avoids punches from his opponent, or a tennis player on the court, switching from foot to foot, ready to return a serve. They are not bouncing up, but pressing into the ground so they can stop on either foot at any time.

Side leading is necessary to give you body flight through all figures. Partners’ shoulders should be parallel, so each will have stretch through the body. This means steps will often be in *banjo* or *outside partner* requiring the upper body to make more or less turn sometimes than the feet.

Making It Musical

Once you are comfortable with the basic timing and technique of quickstep, you can start to play and be creative. The body is like an orchestra; within its confines are many “instruments” that “play” independently but add to a harmonious whole. Learning to control weight changes from foot to foot is like playing only with the violin. It can make something beautiful, but you can do more by adding “other instruments,” such as shaping and swing. In the hesitation change, Lady’s shape can change not only for balance but to create a lilty feeling. In “*Hot Licks*,” we will show you how to transform an ordinary forward lock step and take a contra check beyond its textbook formulation, if you feel the desire.