



# HISTORY OF MODERN STANDARD BALLROOM DANCING



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Donna Reeve & Alan Shingler  
1998 British Standard Ballroom Champions

(Photo: courtesy of Neville Lowe)

## ABSTRACT

This article traces the history of the International Dancesport championship "Modern Standard Ballroom" dances: Viennese Waltz, Modern Waltz, Tango, Slow Foxtrot, and Quickstep.

## INTRODUCTION

The five ballroom dances: Modern Waltz, Tango, Viennese Waltz, Slow Foxtrot, and Quickstep, are danced the world over both socially and in DanceSport competitions.

The word 'ballroom' denotes a room where balls may be held: that is: formal social dances. Balls were important social events in the days before radio and television (as in 'having a ball'). The word 'ball' derives from the Latin 'ballare' meaning 'to dance'. This is also the origin of the related words : ballet, ballerina, ballad, etc. Note that this origin is quite different from that of a 'ball': a round object used for games. This derives from the Old Norse : 'bolllr', meaning 'to inflate'.

The figures in the [modern ballroom dances](#) have now been standardised and categorised into various levels for teaching, with internationally agreed vocabularies, techniques, rhythms and tempos. But it was not always so.

These 'Standard Ballroom' dances have diverse origins, rhythms, tempos, and aesthetics, but have one thing in common: they are all danced by a couple (usually a man and a lady) in 'Closed Hold', maintaining five areas of contact between the partners while performing all the figures of the dances.

### THE HOLD

The closed ballroom hold requires the maintenance of five points of contact between the partners while they are dancing. These consist of three hand contacts:

1. the man's left hand holding the lady's right hand,
2. the lady's left hand resting on the top of the man's right upper arm (behind the arm in the Tango),
3. the man's right hand placed on the left shoulder blade on the back of the lady.

In addition to these 3 hand contacts, there are two more areas of contact:

4. the lady's left elbow rests on the man's right elbow,
5. the right area of the chest of each partner touches that of the other.

Ideally, in this hold, the lady's upper arms are both held horizontal by a suitable placement of the man's arms and hands. This not only makes it comfortable for the lady to follow the man's lead, but also gives the couple a deportment of regal appearance. This deportment is a characteristic of [dances coming from Western Europe](#), and is a heritage of the origin of ballroom dancing in the [royal courts of Europe](#). The erect and fixed torso is even more evident in Classical Ballet, which had the same origins (Clarke, 1981,96).



[Louis XIV \(1643-1715\)](#) at Versailles  
Dancing the Minuet.

The peculiar ballroom dancing "Closed Hold" possibly had its origins in the time when men wore swords while dancing. This can be seen in the prints by [Hans Sebald Beham](#) (1500-1550), and in the illustrations in [Fabritio Caroso's "Il Ballarino"](#) of 1581 (Lindahl, 1996), although illustrations predating this time show men dancing without swords but with the ladies on their right nevertheless.



print by [Hans Sebald Beham](#) 1537  
Peasant dancing in 1537 with both sword and partner.



print by [Fabritio Caroso](#) 1581  
"Il Ballarino" : Gentleman dancing with both sword and partner.

As most men are right handed, it was conventional to wear the sword and scabbard on the left-hand side of the belt, to facilitate the drawing of the sword with the right hand. It is hard to draw a sword with the right hand with the scabbard on the right. Thus if a man was to put his arm around a lady's back, she would have to be on his right, or she would keep tripping over the sword.

For a simple promenade around the floor, the man would naturally take the inside of the circle, so that his sword did not hit the legs of the audience around them, and the woman would be on his right arm on the outside of the circle. They would then have to promenade

anti-clockwise which is probably the origin of the anti-clockwise progression of the ballroom dances around the floor.

As most women are shorter than most men, it might be considered natural for the man's right arm to be above the woman's left. The resting of the lady's left elbow on top of the man's right elbow is probably a hangover from the days when lady's were socially restrained from making advances to a man: the man always had to take the initiative: he offered, and the lady either accepted or rejected. He would offer his right arm for support, and if she accepted, she would lay hers on top. One aspect of this elbow contact is that the man must keep his right shoulder over his right hip and not twist at the waist, and he must also keep his right elbow in front of the line of his shoulders, if the lady is to feel comfortable.

The man would reasonably then offer his left hand for the lady to hold for additional balance while dancing. The facing of the palm of the man's left hand and the lady's right hand has its origins in the same social gender constraints as described above: the man offers his hand (palm up), and the lady accepts by putting hers on the man's (palm down). This orientation of palms has the advantage of allowing each partner to keep their wrists straight, and the hand in line with the lower arm, giving aesthetically pleasing lines. This is hard for the man as he also has to keep his left elbow up at the same height as the shoulder, and the left shoulder down, and so it requires the maintenance of a 180 degree twist in the man's wrist. Thus many teachers advocate other easier but less elegant palm alignments.

The social expectation of male initiative is of course also the reason that conventionally in ballroom dancing, the man "leads", and the lady "follows": i.e. the man is basically responsible for the choreography and directions of travel. The non-trivial female responsibility is to follow this lead without apparent effort, and to look beautiful. A common saying is that the man is the 'frame' and the lady is the 'picture'.

### VIENNESE WALTZ

The Waltz is a dance performed to music with three beats to the bar. This means that if a step is taken on each beat, then each bar starts with the opposite foot to that of the previous bar. This can be a source of great difficulty for the beginner, but when mastered gives the dance a delightful romantic lilt.

The first record of a dance to 3/4 rhythm is a peasant dance of the Provence area of France (Chujoy, 1967, 958) in 1559, as a piece of folk music called the Volta (Sadie, 1980, 20/74), although the Volta has also been claimed to be an Italian folk dance at this time (Norton, 1994, 12/426). The word "volta" means "the turn" in Italian. Thus, even in its earliest days, the dance appears to have involved the couple turning as they danced.

During the 16th Century, the Volta became popular in the royal courts of Western Europe. Arbeau describes it as like a Galliard (done to 3/2 music) but done to slow 6/4 music (Sadie, 1980, 20/74). Actually both it and the Galliard had 5 steps to 6 beats (and hence also alternated feet in alternate measures). The Volta required the partners to dance in a closed position but with the lady to the left of the man! The man held the lady about the waist, and the lady put her right arm on the man's shoulders, and held her skirt with her left. This was necessary to stop it flying up, because the dance involved the man lifting the lady using his left thigh under the lady's right thigh (Norton, 1994, 12/426). A famous illustration of this dance is a contemporary painting:



"Queen Elizabeth I doing a leaping turn of the 'Volta', assisted by Earl of Leicester"  
(at [Penshurst Place](#), Kent).

The ascription is probably facetious, as the painting appears to be from the [French Valois court](#). Glynis Johns playing the part of Mary Tudor performs this dance in the movie "[The Sword and the Rose](#)".

The Volta appears to be similar to present day [Norwegian Waltz folkdance](#). As in any turning dance, as the couple perform their step around their partner, they have to take a larger than usual step to get from one side of their partner to the other. In this Norwegian Waltz, the man assists the lady to do this by lifting her into the air as she takes this step (thus neatly accommodating the general difference in leg length of the partners).

In order to do this in the Volta, the partners had to hold each other in such a close embrace that many declared it immoral. [Louis XIII](#) (1601-1643) had it banned from court on this account (Sadie, 1980, 20/74).

Thus although the Volta may have originally been in 3 time, it evolved to be in 5 time. One of the first published dances in 3 time was "[Hole in the Wall](#)" published by [Playford](#) in 1695.

In 1754 the first music for the actual "Waltzen" appeared in Germany (Sadie, 1980, 20/200). Any connection between the Waltzen and the Volta remains obscure, except that the word "waltzen" in German also means "to revolve" (Norton, 1994, 12/482).

In 1799 Arndt wrote that

"the dancers grasped the long dresses so that it would not drag or be trodden upon, and lifted it high holding them like a cloak which brought both bodies under one cover, as closely as possible against them"

Thus the Waltzen also [attracted moral criticism](#), with Wolf publishing a pamphlet in 1797 (Sadie, 1980, 20/200) entitled

"Proof that Waltzing is a main source of weakness of the body and mind of our generation".

Nevertheless, the dance became very popular in Vienna, with large dance halls being opened to accommodate the craze: Zum Sperl in 1807, and the Apollo in 1808 (said to be able to accommodate 6000 dancers) (Sadie, 1980, 20/200). In 1812 the dance was introduced into England under the name of the German Waltz (Silvester, 1980,12). It caused a great sensation, and Lord Byron when he first saw it, found his lady friend clasped closely by

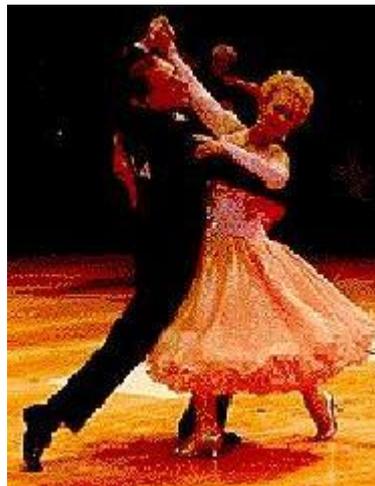
"a huge hussar-looking gentleman, turning round and round to a confounded see-saw, up-down sort of turn like two cockchafers spitted on the same bodkin"



The 9 steps of the Waltz in 1816 by Thomas Wilson.

Through the 19th Century, the dance stabilised, and was further popularised by the music of Josef and Johann Strauss.

The Viennese Waltz is danced at a tempo of about 180 beats per minute, and for many years had only nine figures, with a limited range of figures, namely: Forward and Backward Change Steps, Natural and Reverse Turns, Natural and Reverse Fleckerls, and the Contracheck. Recently the range of figures has been considerably expanded.



The author and Anna Piper dancing the "Throwaway Oversway" in the Modern Waltz

### MODERN WALTZ

In the early 19th Century, the "Waltzen" became popular through many parts of Germany and Austria, with the local variants being called by the name of the area in which they were

danced. The form from [Landl ob der Enns](#) in upper [Austria](#) became very popular, and became known by the abbreviated name of the '[Landler](#)' (Sadie, 1980, 10/435).



The modern Landler.  
(Photo: courtesy of Shelby)

Initially the Landler was danced in heavy shoes, and had animated hopping, slapping and stamping steps, with complex underarm turns. However, by 1800 the Landler was described as being done with lighter shoes, and having the same quick gliding rotating movements steps as the Waltzen but done to a slower tempo (Sadie, 1980, 20/200).

A more sedate form of the fast Viennese Waltz, danced at a leisurely 90 beats per minute, also evolved in America around 1834 known originally as the '[Boston](#)' (Chujoy, 1967,958). This version of the Waltz retained the characteristic turning figures and added others such as a dip, and was danced with the partners holding their hands on each others hips. The Boston also had the distinction of being the first ballroom dance to be done with feet parallel (rather than [turned out, as in ballet](#)) (Sadie, 1980, 3/87).

The present form of the dance has been variously described as being derived around 1910 in England both from the Landler (Norton, 1994, 12/482) and from the Boston (Sadie, 1980, 20/200). Either way, there: the dancers began taking advantage of the slower tempo to add more figures, some with extra syncopated beats, some with slow "picture" steps. These give the dance light and shade, and make it more interesting to perform and to watch.

### **MODERN TANGO**

Originally the Tango was (and still is) light spirited [Flamenco](#) dance from Spain. With the Spanish conquest of much of South America, this Tango together with other Spanish folk dances naturally emigrated with settlers from Spain, although its involvement in the formation of the Modern Tango is suspect. The Tangano, an African dance imported with the negro slaves, is a more likely precursor (Andrews, 1979, 75). Over the years one or both became merged with other dances in the New World. In particular, in [Argentina](#) in the slums of [Buenos Aires](#) in the late 19th Century, they became merged with the [Habanera](#) (a folk dance from [Havana in Cuba](#)) (Norton, 1994,11/542). The resulting dance became known as the [Milonga](#).



The private Milonga.

Although initially popular with the lower classes of Argentine society, by the turn of the 20th Century, it had gained acceptance with the upper classes there. Its importation into the upper classes of Western Europe was catalysed by France's greatest music-hall star:



Mistinguett

who gave the first ever demonstration in Paris in 1910 (Collier, 1995, 69). Interest in the dance rapidly exploded as a Tangomania, initially through Paris then London and New York. The first world war did nothing to cool this interest, with Rudolph Valentino popularising the Tango further in his film "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse"(1921). More recent film demonstrations have been given by Al Pacino and Gabrielle Anwar in 'Scent of a Woman'(1992), and by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Tia Carrere in the 'True Lies'(1994).



Rudolph Valentino and Beatrice Dominguez Dancing the Tango  
in the film "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (1921).

The character of the Milonga is of a very soft private dance, with visual emphasis on the leg movements. This character was changed dramatically in Paris in the 1930's, where the dance was combined with the proud torso of the other ballroom dances, and given a staccato action.

This moved the visual emphasis to the torso and head, a characteristic which remains to this day. The dance has been used as an example of [Irrational Dancing](#) (Herbison-Evans, 1988).

### SLOW FOXTROT

This a dance performed by couples in ballroom hold to music with a 4/4 rhythm and about 120 beats/minute tempo. A faster dance of this nature was variously called the One Step or Two Step in the Victorian era in Western Society (Coll, 1919, 73). This had one step per beat or two steps per bar; hence the dual nomenclature. It was introduced as the [Castle Walk](#) into the nightclub performances of [Vernon and Irene Castle](#), and popularised by [Harry Fox](#) in the stage show [Ziegfeld Follies](#) in New York in 1913 (Gwin, 1985, 4/913).



Irene and Vernon Castle ca. 1912,  
Practising some [Exhibition Dancing](#).

Fox's involvement has been taken as the origin of the name "Foxtrot", although there other possibilities.

The term had been introduced previously by the military for an [equestrian gait](#) (Simpson, 1989, 134) which could well have been used to describe the dance. This gait is unusually smooth. In a normal trot, the horse picks up and lands on both diagonally related fore and hind legs at the same time, left hind with right front, and right hind with left front. This means there are moments when all four legs are off the ground, the landing from which causes a jarring action. In the Fox Trot, the fore leg is moved before the hind leg, so that the horse always has one foot on the ground, which gives a smoother action and which is also less tiring for both horse and rider. This gait is so useful that a breed of horse has been developed that more naturally adopts this gait: [the Missouri Fox Trotter](#). The smooth action is also a characteristic of the Slow Foxtrot dance.

However, [the Fox itself](#) could be involved. The Fox has also been said to have an unusual gait amongst animals. It can walk with its feet under its body, so forming a single track of footprints. Early on, the Foxtrot was danced this way, with the left and right feet falling on one line of dance, each being placed directly in front of or behind the other. Only in the 1950's was the 'Revised Technique' propagated, in which the left and right feet have each their own separate tracks on the floor.

The original dance had a tempo of about 160 beats per minute, and was described as being extremely jerky (Buckman, 1978, 168). It is still taught in dance studios of the of the schools of [Arthur Murray](#) and [Fred Astaire](#). This original "Foxtrot" is called "Rhythm" or "The Blues" elsewhere (Moore, 1951, 154).



Music Cover ca.1925 (Note angle of man's left hand)

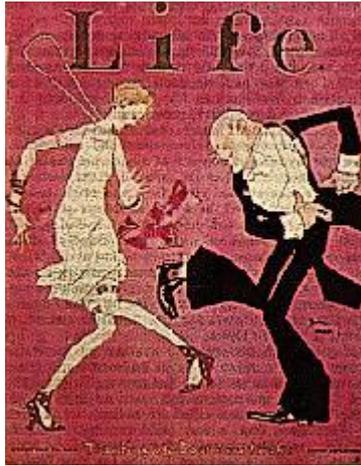
It rapidly became popular in New York and a year later in London. It was fashionably regarded as a rebellion against 19th Century dancing, as it used parallel feet (rather than the turned out feet of the Victorian dances). Around 1922, the trotting steps were discarded for a less energetic movement called the Saunter (Andrews, 1979, 79). By 1927 the dance was called the Slow Foxtrot and was characterised by smooth gliding movements (Sadie, 1980, 6/738). Attempts have been made to derive a formal grammar for this dance ([Herbison-Evans, 1989](#)).

Since that time, the dance has been developed into two derived forms internationally: the Quickstep and the Slow Foxtrot. The Slow Foxtrot is performed to slower music (120 beats/minute), and retains the walks and pivots of its predecessor. It has continued to have a smooth flowing aesthetic, (Moore, 1951, 154), which makes it a great contrast on the ballroom floor to the antithetical Tango.

### **QUICKSTEP**

As [Ragtime music](#) evolved into Swing through the 1920's, new dances such as the [Charleston](#), the [Shimmy](#), and the [Black Bottom](#) became popular.

The Charleston was said to have originated in the [Cape Verde Islands](#) (Raffe, 1964, 60). It evolved into a vigorous round dance done by Negro dock workers in the [Port of Charleston](#) (Rust, 1969, 89). It was first performed on stage in New York in 1922 in a black revue by George White. It became popular in white society after inclusion in the stage show 'Running Wild' in 1923 by the Ziegfeld Follies, which toured U.S.A. (Rust, 1969, 89). It was popularised in Europe by [Josephine Baker](#) in Paris in the 1920's. It was danced with wild swinging arms and side kicks to music at 200 to 240 beats per minute (Sadie, 1980,4/159). It subsequently became very popular worldwide, but the wild character of the dance induced many sedate ballrooms either to ban it altogether, or to put up notices saying simply 'PCQ', standing for "Please Charleston Quietly" (Rust, 1969, 89). The Charleston step and the Scatter Chasses were introduced into the Quickstep by Wally Fryer and Vi Barnes in London in the 1940's.



Life Magazine Cover, Feb. 18 1926, by John Held Jr.

The [Black Bottom](#) presumably originated in the [suburb of Detroit](#) of that name, although it has also been said to have come from [New York or New Orleans](#). The dance became popular after its inclusion in the stage show: [George White's "Scandals of 1926"](#) (Sadie, 1980, 2/769). It was done to music at 140 to 160 beats per minute, and involved swaying the torso, bending the knees and short kicks (Sadie, 1980, 2/729).

The Shimmy was probably derived from a Nigerian dance, [the Shika](#), taken to America by the black slaves. It was mentioned in the song 'The Bullfrog Hop' in 1909 by [Perry Bradford](#). It became very popular in the USA 1910 to 1920, and became a national craze after [Gilda Gray](#) introduced it in the Zeigfeld Follies in 1922. She claimed the name comes from "chemise", having been asked by a reporter what she shook when dancing it. However, [Mae West](#) claims to have done it earlier, in the show 'Sometime' in 1919, although [she was arrested for it](#) only in 1926 in her stage show ["Sex"](#). Mae West's Shimmy was described by the singer Ethel Waters saying "she put her hands on her hips and worked her body fast without moving the feet" (Sadie, 1980, 17/257). Nowadays, the word means to shake the shoulders or hips rapidly, rotating them alternately left and right forward and back about a vertical axis.

These dances became absorbed into a faster version of Foxtrot after a visit by [Paul Whiteman's band](#) to the UK in 1923, becoming known as the Quickstep (Sadie, 1980, 6/738).

Currently the Quickstep is danced at a tempo of approximately 200 beats per minute. It retains the walks, runs, chasses and turns, of the original Foxtrot, with some other fast figures such as locks, hops, and skips added.

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