

Extracts from COHEN, Selma, Jane (ed.) *International Encyclopaedia of Dance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. E-Book (2005) Articles listed under 'Social Dance'.

## **Court and Social Dance Before 1800** INGRID BRAINARD

Although social dancing has never been the exclusive property of the upper classes, the investigation of social dance before 1800 must focus on the dances of the courts, the nobility, gentry, and well-to-do citizens, for which written documentation exists, in many instances coupled with choreographic notations. While many of the social dances of the lower classes are known by name, the details of their execution—step sequences, pattern, and content—are nebulous at best; this repertory was transmitted mainly in an oral tradition that, although long and venerable, eludes the grasp of precise scholarship.

Social dancing in most cultures is a choreographic activity devoid of ritual meaning (such as dances that incite to war, honor a deity, exorcise demons, or ask for rain, victory, fertility, etc.). It is a form of relaxation after a day's work, a celebration, an expression of *joie de vivre*. It is an orderly, rhythmic activity that allows the participation of all—men and women, young and old, either jointly or in separate groups. It is healthful exercise. It entertains the onlookers and creates a sense of belonging among the participants.

Social dancing can be simple and easygoing or complex and physically demanding. It can be improvised on the spot, led by a musician or dancer whose song or steps are imitated by the rest of the company; it can consist of a sequence of known figures or step-units that the dancers combine according to their personal preference or ability (e.g., the sixteenth-century *galliards*, *canarios*, and *passamezzos* or the nineteenth-century waltzes and polkas), or it can be preset, that is, fully choreographed by a dancing master, learned in private, and subsequently performed in the ballroom. In every instance social dancing allows the participants to display themselves to best advantage: "as diamonds mov'd more sparkling do appear," as John Davies wrote in his poem *Orchestra* in 1596. Men can show their strength and agility, women their grace, and together they may enjoy the delights of dancing with and for one another. (...)

### **Line and Circle Dances**

Line and particularly circle dances create a sense of unity and community. As Davies (1596, stanza 110) put it,

All as one in measure do agree, Observing perfect uniformity; All turn together, all together  
trace, And all together honour and embrace.

The energy of the dance flows from person to person through their linked hands. Line and circle dances are the most relaxed of the social dances; the onlookers' attention is focused not on individual participants but on the group as a whole; steps tend to be few and simple; figures are rare and interrupt the directional continuity only momentarily.

## **Nineteenth-Century Social Dance** GRETCHEN SCHNEIDER

Sweeping demographic and political changes in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States brought about significant changes in artistic and expressive forms, including dance. Instigated by the development of free enterprise, capitalism, and finally industrialization, this upheaval culminated in the major restructuring of society. Worldwide, the social revolution challenged traditional hierarchical authorities of church and state and irrevocably changed western European communities by altering family, intimate associations, and the polity. The city—bonding a crowd of strangers—loomed as symbol and sign of changing social relationships and patterns of gathering. People recommitted with conscious effort to their families, intimate associations, and religious and governmental structures in order to assert their visibility and power against the threat of machines and factories, clock time and

workday schedules, and bureaucratic power structures and loss of autonomy. Associated with this tumultuous period were changes in cultural values that affected expressive forms of interpersonal communication and social rituals reflecting deep social and family relationships. Among the changes in expressive forms were those in dancing.

Dance theorists like Jean-Georges Noverre (1727–1807) and later Carlo Blasis (1803–1878) had already drawn attention to the differences in practice and performance between choreographies danced on the stage and what was conventionally termed “private dancing,” choreographies performed in the ballrooms of private homes and salons. The theatrical necessities of dancing on the stage—for example, projection, narrative pantomime, and more comprehensive training—were thought inappropriate to private dancing.(...)

## **Twentieth-century Social Dance Before 1960** DON McDONAGH

As commonly used, the term *social dance* describes partnered dancing to musical accompaniment by men and women in contemporary dress on celebratory, secular occasions. These occasions are observed in a variety of settings ranging from the informal house party to the most formal ballroom gala. They involve a variety of dances with a generally agreed upon vocabulary of steps that may be combined at will by the individual couples.

With few exceptions social dances, like folk melodies, are unattributable. They arise from among the more robust, less constrained layers of society to find general acceptance. Almost without exception, these dances, starting with the waltz in the eighteenth century, have been initially denounced for their uninhibitedness by the more conservative elements of the society and just as inevitably have been accepted by them. The resistance arises from the implicit and sometimes blatant demonstrations that these dances make about changing sexual relationships between men and women.

Developed by those on the bottom rungs of the social ladder, social dances are less bound by what is considered acceptable public expression and indicate a change—often a disturbing one—to those charged with maintaining public morals. Denunciations and at times prohibitions by social arbiters, churches, local governments, schools, and established dance teachers are an almost certain sign that the dance embodies a valid social expression.

The popularity of these dances varies widely. Most have a brief vogue like the *maxixe* and the Twist and then disappear. Others such as the fox trot and tango achieve the status of classics and are added to the standard curricula of dance schools. Unlike folk dances, which remain embedded in the culture from which they arise, social dances readily cross national borders and achieve international acceptance. Thus wherever ballroom dancing exists, the Germanic waltz, the American fox trot, and the Argentine tango are found in the repertory of accomplished social dancers.

The first recognized social dance, the waltz, appeared in Austria and Germany toward the end of the eighteenth century, coincident with eroding European monarchical power. The waltz derived from a turning dance known as a *Ländler*, which had been popular for centuries in the countryside. The waltz departed radically from the aristocratic practice of confining participants to intricate and controlled patterns executed at arm's length. In the waltz, each couple embraced and varied the pattern of dance steps to suit themselves. Social dancing arose as an urban custom, which reflected the growing economic and political power of the middle class. Such dancing eventually replaced formal, court-derived dance, but it had little or no effect on country or folk dance. (...)