

NOISES OFF

Is cha cha chattering a harmless part of a dancer's life or can lip-syncing and sound effects prove fatal to a performance? **Marianka Swain** jive talks with some ballroom experts

Eagle-eyed (or, indeed, eared) competition spectators and "Strictly Come Dancing" viewers will be all too aware of the ferocious debate raging through the ballroom world: to finger snap or not to finger snap? One might have assumed that the clicking of heels, crackling of fringe and squeaking of fake-tanned limbs offered more than enough of a percussive accompaniment to the likes of Dave Arch, Ashley Frohlick or Ross Mitchell and their wonderful orchestras, yet it seems an increasing number of dancers are keen to add something extra into the sound mix.

While this is possibly a welcome addition in the case of someone like Lulu, who was always more singer than dancer even on the "Strictly" floor, should it really be common practice among elite ballroom competitors? As with any element of styling, the approved amount of facial contortions, hissing and clicking isn't specified ▶



To finger snap or not to finger snap?

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→ KAREN HARDY

in the technique book – at least not in any chapter I've read – so this falls into the murky area of personal preference.

Choreographer and Juvenile and Junior coach Suzy Barnes notes that dancers creating their own music is hardly a radical idea – "it's a big part of tap, stepping and lots of folk styles. However, my slight reservation with ballroom dancers producing their own sound effects is that it can become cheesy very quickly – pretty much with the first lip smack or finger snap. We've had to fight very hard to convince the general public that our style isn't just fake and silly – lots of people still imagine *Strictly Ballroom* is pretty much a documentary – so dancers have to be aware of how they come across."

David Sycamore, ballroom champion turned judge and co-director of Dance Options, agrees: "Dancers should be wary of adding anything that's not a natural part of the performance, whether it's over-the-top vocal sounds, foot stamping or

singing along. Even if they're genuinely enjoying what they're doing, using those elements too much can make it seem insincere, which is a big turn-off for me when I'm judging."

However, such aural accompaniments aren't always calculated, notes Richard Miller, ex-competitor and co-founder of Miller Dance Centre. "When you're working so hard to get all your technical elements spot on, connect with the music, project a performance, keep your nerves in check and make it all look effortless, you need some



kind of release! And it's hard to dance all out with your body without letting some of that come across through your face and voice as well."

Suzy thinks the odd click or utterance is allowable, "as long as it's grounded in the dance. Part of ballroom training is learning how to take on the character of these dances, and making the leap from British teenager to

Latin lothario or fierce matador can be rather a challenge, so using a few artificial elements to help you make the transition isn't such a travesty. What I do find annoying is when couples use the same mannerisms in every style, repeating bad habits rather than giving a genuine performance."

Richard thinks these elements can be beneficial when

used correctly: "What I love about dancing is that you can express yourself, and for lots of competitors, the sound effects can be part of that – their way of interpreting the art form and putting their personality across. You have to project outwards to the judges and the audience; it's no good connecting with the dance and the music and not letting anyone else know about it. But some judges aren't keen on these additions, particularly if they're part of a style that isn't to their taste; for example, a routine with more flamboyant elements or experimental choreography."

Former champion, judge and coach Karen Hardy thinks the key to success is respect – "for your partner, for the other competitors and for ballroom itself. One of my pet hates is competitors going so overboard with their performance that they end up spitting on the floor while lip syncing or giving up on floor craft altogether. If you dance simpler figures brilliantly and bring genuine passion to them, rather than packing in crazy elements and drowning out your performance and everyone else's with sound effects, you're much more likely to impress us judges and connect emotionally with an audience."

Suzy agrees wholeheartedly: "Jolting people out of your performance by doing something forced or artificial is a cardinal sin. But if you can genuinely give in to that moment – how it feels to dance with your partner, to that song, on that floor – then the odd bar of mouthing lyrics, hissing and even, god help us, whooping is a forgivable side effect." ●