

# Perfect 10



## The Viennese waltz

In this month's instalment of our series chronicling the history of the standard ten dances, **Marianka Swain** takes the oldest style, the Viennese waltz, for a spin

**I**f there exists a form of music that is a direct expression of sensuality, it is the Viennese waltz," wrote Austrian music scholar Max Graf in 1922. To contemporary dancers, this might seem a peculiar characterisation of arguably the most conservative form of ballroom, yet the Viennese waltz is no stranger to controversy.

The origins of its scandalous reputation lie in the fact that it broke with dancing tradition: its participants had to be physically conjoined (although initially just hand to hand, rather than hip to hip, as we dance it today) and independent of everyone else, creating a private sphere in which members of the opposite sex could interact and perhaps even share unguarded feelings; as musicologist Curt Sachs puts it, waltz called for "exaltation, surrender and the extinction of the world round about".

"It's important to remember that the dominant forms prior to the Viennese were sequence dances,"

explains the World Dancesport Federation's Heidi Goetz. "They involved a large number of participants who adhered to strict rules in order to create patterns on the floor, so there was little room for individuality or interaction between just two dancers – ie between a man and a woman."

In keeping with its reputation as a low, scandalous form of movement, the Viennese waltz grew out of rural Austrian folk dances such as the Ländler, which were danced in fast 3/4 time and involved much energetic skipping, jumping and continuous whirling, as well as occasional yodelling and stamping of hobnail boots.

Both the more uncouth elements and the hobnail boots were excised when this high-voltage (and highly charged) partner dance was adopted by the upper classes and brought into the ballrooms of Austria in the late 18th century, but the waltz (meaning



Spinning around: Domenico Soale and Gioia Cerasoli

to turn) was still a remarkably transgressive style – not the last time that dance would go hand in hand with social change.

The folk dances required a hold so that the ladies could lift their skirts out of the dirt while their partners guided them safely around a raucous floor – and also initiate intimate contact. Although the ballroom version was rather more sanitised, in every sense, it still involved a certain amount of contact and the shocking sight of the occasional gentleman's foot disappearing briefly beneath his partner's gown.

Naturally, the rise of this dangerous style did not go unchallenged. In 1797, German critic Salomo Jakob Wolf published a vitriolic pamphlet entitled *Proof that Waltzing is the Main Source of Weakness of the Body and Mind of our Generation*, which sold out twice, and the dance was even close to being the cause of death by duel, as recorded in *The Times* on July 22, 1812: "Monday morning a duel took place between General Thornton and Mr Theodore Hook. After exchanging one shot each, the affair was amicably settled. It originated in a silly dispute on the subject of the dance called the waltz, the General having praised it in high terms, and the Author having bitterly reprobated it as leading to the most licentious consequences."

**D**espite such condemnation, the waltz gained many high-profile defendants, such as Goethe, who recounted ➤

his magical experience in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in 1774: "Never have I moved so lightly. I was no longer a human being. To hold the most adorable creature in one's arms and fly around with her like the wind, so that everything around us fades away..." The waltz also gained enormous popular support, thus to accommodate the growing number of waltzers several grand dance halls were opened in Vienna, such as the Zum Sperrl in 1807 and the Apollo in 1808.

Nevertheless, despite taking Europe by storm, the waltz was initially prohibited at the Prussian court of Wilhelm II and also in England. An editorial in *The Times* records the shock at the Prince Regent's grand ball in 1816 when "the indecent foreign dance the waltz" was introduced: "It is quite sufficient to cast one's eyes on the voluptuous intertwining of the limbs and close compressor on the bodies in their dance, to see that it is indeed far removed from the modest reserve which has hitherto been considered distinctive of English females.

"So long as this obscene display was confined to prostitutes and adulteresses, we did not think it deserving of notice; but now that it is attempted to be forced on the respectable classes of society, we feel it a duty to warn every parent against exposing his daughter to so fatal a contagion."

Yet this ruling from the establishment did nothing to deter European waltz mania, nor the growing number of musicians composing and playing waltz music. Max Graf described these new melodies, which drew on folk



The Johann Strauss Dancers dance in period-style costume and are touring the UK with their Viennese Ball until February 19 ([www.raymondgubbay.co.uk](http://www.raymondgubbay.co.uk))

music, as "overflowing with longing, desire and tenderness", but given a more sophisticated gloss in the mid 19th century by Josef Lanner and Johann Strauss the elder. Contemporary music critic Eduard Hanslick wrote: "You cannot imagine the wild enthusiasm that these two men created in Vienna. Newspapers went into raptures over each new waltz, and innumerable articles appeared about Lanner and Strauss."

**A**s the insidious waltz continued to spread, Lord Palmerston of England finally gave it the royal stamp of approval by

dancing it in public in the 1830s and it remained a popular style throughout the 19th century, both in high society and in competition circles, culminating in contests such as the 1918 Viennese Dance Derby.

However, on the outbreak of World War I, anything Germanic went out of vogue in many countries, and the slow waltz became more prevalent. It was only after World War II that the Viennese waltz, kept alive in its place of origin, became a popular international form once again.

Paul Krebs, a German dancer, played an important role in developing the technique of

the Viennese waltz. He and his wife, Margit, won the German Championship in 1950 and were spotted by influential ballroom technician Alex Moore, who invited them to London the following year, so that they could teach it to the British dance profession. On April 15, 1951, as *Ballroom Dancing Times* reports, "Sixty teachers and professional dancers profited tremendously under the Krebs' tuition, several of them succeeding in a correct construction of the 'fleckerl' for the first time."

Krebs himself writes in a later edition of *Ballroom Dancing Times*: "The original tempo of the

waltz when it was brought into the ballroom was 56 bars a minute. Strauss, senior, preferred 72 bars to the minute. On the continent a tempo of 60–66 was gradually adopted and today this is still considered the most suitable and is laid down for championship events... A characteristic of the modern version of the dance is an absence of variations. It contains six figures: right turn, left turn, forward change to right and left, right and left spins (fleckerl)."

American educator Dr Lloyd Shaw perfectly summarised the dance's long-lasting appeal in 1949: "In close embrace, the dancers turn continually while

they revolve around the room. There are no steps forward or back, no relief; it is all a continuous whirl of pleasure for those who can take it. The waltz is the loveliest blossom of our ballroom, perhaps the most satisfactory dance ever achieved by man."

For those with the stamina to survive this whirling dervish, his words certainly ring true today, although perhaps we should take the advice of the great 19th-century French dancing master Cellarius: "The valser should take care never to relinquish his lady until he feels that she has entirely recovered herself." ●