

ROYAL SEAL OF APPROVAL

As we await the arrival of the royal baby, **Marianka Swain** examines the complex relationship between monarchy and the evolution of dance

Trendsetting has become increasingly democratic.

Where once kings and queens had the last word on music and art, food and fashion, language and etiquette, romance and dance, now that role can be taken up by our modern overlords, namely celebrities, but just as often by bloggers and top Tweeters, the monarchs of our own making. (My personal Twitter queen is Caitlin Moran.)

With so many more sitting at the top table, fewer individuals enjoy the kind of wide-ranging influence that was once the province of the royal family. It's hard to imagine now that royal patronage or disapproval could sway a nation, rather than simply spike sales of a particular Topshop coat, but the effect of royal preference is recorded in the soaring popularity of, for example, Henry VIII's favoured real tennis or photography, which had a boost from the enthusiasm of Queen Victoria.

However, dance is a more elusive area when it comes to

tracking the role of the royals, notes historian Adam Lewis: "The difficulty is that it's a pursuit that grew from both the top down and the bottom up. The presence of a

for some time, or it might make its entrance before a monarch and, if approved, then become popular elsewhere in society.

"Another challenge is that we are, of course, reliant on anecdotal evidence when it comes to leisure pursuits, as opposed to major events like wars, but dance does play a major role in society, and therefore its presence is recorded in other art forms, like drama, painting, literature and poetry.

"Dance has always had a number of functions, from a courting or mating ritual to the maintenance of tradition or welcoming of innovation. In this latter role, it can be a useful illustration of monarchs' characters; for example, during his brief reign, Edward VIII showed his partiality for new forms of art that crossed social boundaries."

The charismatic king frequented fashionable nightclubs, encouraging the success of jazz musicians and their accompanying risqué dance styles, such as the lindy



dance style in a court could signal the acceptance of something that had already gained a foothold in less rarefied circles, and therefore had been in existence

hop and shag. This is an example of patronage both confirming and contributing to the status of dance styles, as they were in full swing (pun intended) when Edward VIII discovered them, but his modern court of fellow partygoers were encouraged to embrace and seek out new dances by his enthusiasm.

In contrast, Queen Victoria was a more conservative monarch, notes Adam, "likely to honour a social norm rather than rock the boat". This means the accounts of balls in her detailed journals give a good indication of the styles the royal family deemed acceptable at the time, notably the quadrille, a dance performed by four couples in a rectangular formation.

The quadrille had been favoured in high society since the early 18th century, but its enduring popularity is in part due to royal approval for it as a showcase of elegance and appropriate amount of contact between the two sexes. Men and women were not



left to their own devices, but there was the opportunity for courtship – vital for those who wanted to continue noble lines.

"If a member of the royal family showed a preference for a style, those who wished to win favour would do well to feature

it at a ball, or dance it well," adds Adam. "Queen Victoria's candid pleasure, recorded in her journals, would surely have been evident to those around her."

A queen's fondness for dancing could also be an opportunity to further a romance. If we go back further in history, we'll find an unattributed painting of Elizabeth I and her favoured courtier, *Queen Elizabeth I Dancing with Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester*, notes Allison Derrett of the Royal Archives. The picture, housed at Penshurst Place in Kent, shows the queen indulging in a popular style known as la volta, an anglicised version of the French for "turn".

The painting is now thought to be a form of mockery, criticising the queen for her romantic intentions, which shows the importance attached to the ritual of dance. "Adopting a French style would have indicated diplomatic warmth towards France in the code of

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court; partnering a certain noble would have honoured their family greatly,” observes Adam. “Elizabeth I dancing la volta showed her sanction of it – and indeed there are more references to it after this occasion, suggesting she impacted its growth – but she also showed her personal feelings, which could be dangerous for a monarch.”

Dance could be equally dangerous territory for those under a monarch’s gaze. Noble ladies with a gift for dancing won Henry VIII’s admiration, and occasionally his hand in marriage, while those who did not (such as fourth wife Anne of Cleves) incurred his wrath. “There are reports of the king enjoying boisterous celebrations, so we can assume that meant the rise of faster dances like the athletic galliard,” suggests Adam. “However, the stately pavane also remained popular, so the monarch’s word was not always law where dance was concerned.”

In the 20th century, monarchs continued to have an impact, but their opinions could be changed. Queen Mary opposed the scandalous

tango and other such exotic modern dances until a ball in Hampstead in 1914, where she and King George honoured Grand Duke Michael and his daughters. American dancers Maurice and Florence Walton (*pictured on page 34*) exhibited the ragtime and the tango, both popular in New York, to the surprise and

eventual appreciation of the queen, who praised the complicated figures and requested an encore of the “charming” one-step.

The tacit approval of Queen Mary (*pictured on page 35*) helped the controversial tango gain acceptance, although its appearance at court showed that it had already travelled a long way from the back alleys of Buenos Aires. The tango was de rigueur by 1921, when the Queen Mother wrote to the Duke of York about her agreeable experience of dancing it in Paris.

More recently, notes Allison, monarchs have shown their support of dance styles more directly by offering public patronage, with the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret sharing a love of ballet, the latter taking up the post of president of the Royal Ballet, but royal endorsement is no longer a critical factor. However, should Will and Kate decide to take their offspring to a ballroom class, such an example would be the jewel in the crown for delighted dance teachers. ●

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