

Dancing Cross-Step Waltz to Slower or Faster Music

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The tempo of cross-step waltz has a wide range, but it feels best at a natural walking tempo. When I observe pedestrians walking, and I time them with a metronome, the average pace is around 115 beats per minute (bpm).

Walking can be defined as slightly falling forward, then catching yourself with a walking step. Thus, we incline a few degrees forward when we walk. This forward angle is too slight to be visible when we watch others walk, but we can feel it ourselves when we walk. When we walk faster, or run, then we incline further forward. In running, this pitch forward becomes visible.

Why do we dance? One of the main reasons is joy. Dancing makes us happy; it makes our partners happy. But when the music is much slower than natural walking tempo, it can feel less satisfying, and we might be less happy than with an ideal tempo. Then fast tempos can be rough on the Follow when dancing cross-step waltz.

To increase our satisfaction with slow and fast tempos, and our partner's comfort, we can modify the way that we dance to it. Here are some suggestions.

Very Slow Tempos

When the music is very slow, don't incline forward. Remain erect as you slowly move. It is the inclination forward, which has become our natural way of dancing cross-step waltz, that makes slow music feel sluggish. It will feel better if you don't incline at all.

Then keep your weight exactly between your two feet as you extend into a step, instead of falling forward onto the forward foot. As an exercise, shift your weight from side to side, but instead of falling onto the foot of the side, you keep your weight exactly centered under your torso as you shift from one foot to the other. Do the same in extending a foot forward, into a cross-step, or walk. This advice is equally for Leads and Follows, to be happier dancing to a very slow tempo.

The next suggestion is for the Leads. If you can remember figures that your partners sometimes found hard to get, perhaps because they were too complicated, slow music is the perfect tempo for those tricky figures, and for multiple pivots.

Faster Waltz Tempos

Then oppositely, when traveling very fast, we incline forward more. Specifically, the Lead is aware of his partner's angling forward, and helps shape that pitch a little forward, so that the Follows are always comfortably maintaining their momentum. Even the turning basic is helped by an awareness of this pitch forward: the Follow turns more on the second half of the waltz, so the Lead helps the Follow slightly angle forward in a natural way at that moment.

Leads, when the music is fast, redirect the momentum of your partner much less. Find more opportunities for the Follow up to walk forward without turning, like in shadow and cradle position, and waltz walk. Avoid multiple underarm turns, pivots and spins to fast music.

Leads, instead of giving yourself a list of guidelines like that, you can use compassionate empathy. As you think of a figure to lead, imagine how your partner will feel, physically, in dancing the that figure. Will it be smooth and comfortable for her? Or will she be torqued, twisted, redirected, or spun?

If you find yourself applying force to move or redirect your partner, it's probably uncomfortable, or maybe painful. At fast tempos, *shepherd* your partners more, and force them less.

Shepherding is a concept that we borrow from sheepdogs. They don't touch the flock, but rather go around them, and move the flock by their positioning on the field. Similarly, shepherding in dance partnering is leading by body position, rather than manipulating your partner with your hands.

The other advice is to change from cross-step waltz to rotary waltz (natural turn, Viennese waltz) when the music is faster, above 124 bpm, and especially above 132 bpm. Follows, if a fast cross-step waltz is uncomfortable, you can always ask, "Do you know rotary waltz?" Or be firmer with your request.