

# The Many 19th Century Valse à Deux Temps

Richard Powers

Reconstructing the mid-19th century valse à deux temps has remained a mystery among dance historians for decades. Indeed, the mystery is a part of its fascination. Unsolved mysteries are more intriguing than easily reconstructed steps.

Some confusion arises from the fact that the valse à deux temps was not one definitive step. Several completely different steps were given this same name.

All versions contain a chassé step, and all can be reversed, turning clockwise or counterclockwise. Then each version had its unique characteristics, which were sometimes praised, and sometimes criticized, depending on the form.

Definition: A *temp* is an element that comprises a dance step. A glissade, or gliding step, can be one such element. Or a temp can be comprised of two steps, such as a chassé (chasing step). A chassé can either be a step-close, or a close-step.

The *temp* chassé is different from the *dance step* called chassé, as in the Regency Era chassé step. i.e., the first usage of chassé is a temp, or a step element which comprises a dance step; while the second usage of chassé means a complete dance step. As one can expect, this terminology can lead to some confusion, which several dance masters acknowledged.

The two temps that comprise most of the mid-19th century valse à deux temps were 1) a glissade, and 2) a chassé. This totals three weight changes. But there were also exceptions.

There are **more than seven different forms of valse à deux temps**.

## A)

A fairly common version of the valse à deux temps was the **turning galop**, later called a Two-Step.

According to the New York dance master Edward Ferrero in his 1859 *The Art of Dancing*, "The music of this dance [the valse à deux temps] is the same as that of the plain waltz, which is 3/4 time; it can also be danced to galop music, which is in 2/4 time. The step consists of two slides, with each foot alternately turning, the same as the [turning] galop step. This dance admits a variety of changes in direction."

The gent begins facing out of the room, lady facing in, in closed waltz position.

1: The gent takes a smooth gliding side step L toward LOD, as the lady takes a shorter side step R toward LOD, rotating clockwise as a couple 60°.

and: Both close their second foot to their first foot (usually in 3rd position, sometimes described in 1st position), taking weight, rotating as a couple 60°.

2: The gent brings his left foot around in front of his partner, diagonally across LOD, and ends up giving weight onto the left foot by stepping back onto it, rotating as a couple 60°. The lady steps right foot straight forward, slightly between his feet, along LOD. The gent is backing, like a protective shield, in front of her. (Some sources say that you close the free foot without weight to 3rd position as you turn.)

3-and-4: The gent does exactly what the lady did, and vice-versa.

The timing for 2/4 galop music is 1-and-2, quick-quick-slow, instead of an even 1-2-3 of the valse. Some descriptions imply a dotted rhythm, but more do not.

Here is another description of the same step, from *Diprose's Ball Room Guide* by J. Albert Jarvis, London, 1857. Interestingly, he specifies that there are two different versions of the valse à deux temps, clarifying that this isn't a misinterpretation of one single kind of valse à deux temps. First he describes version E-F below (page 5 of this handout), then he continues with this clear description:

There is another mode of dancing the *deux temps* something after the style of the French three time Valse, being three steps in the bar:—slide the left foot a little, bring the right foot up to the left—a sort of walking step—then move the left foot to the left, making one bar. The same for the right foot reversed.

**Reversing this** to turn counterclockwise is simply a matter of the lady taking the longer side step on count 1, passing the gent in the outside lane, and ending backing in front of him on count 3.

## B)

### Cellarius' Valse à Deux Temps

Henri Cellarius was the most influential dance master of the 19th century. His 1847 dance manual *La Danse des Salons* was translated into two different English versions and quoted in many more dance manuals.

The music for this version is *very* fast. Cellarius specified that a dotted half note was 88 bpm.

(1) **Metronome Maelzel, 88** .

A dotted half note is three quarter notes, or one measure. This is **264 bpm**. He also specified that the orchestra play faster than the waltz. "l'orchestre doit presser un peu le mouvement." His metronome marking for his Valse à Deux Temps was a fast 88 measures/minute.

Note: The reason why 88 measures/minute was specified, instead of 264 beats/minute, was that neither mechanical nor pendulum metronomes at the time went to 264, while 88 was within their range. The gent begins facing out of the room, lady facing in, in closed waltz position.

1: The gent turns 90° clockwise, bringing his left foot around in front of his partner (glissade), across LOD, and ends up giving weight onto the left foot by stepping back onto it. The lady turns to her right and steps right foot straight forward, slightly between his feet, along LOD. At the end of count 1, the gent is backing, like a protective shield, in front of her.

2-3: Continue rotating as a couple to complete a 180° turn. Thus the first step is a half-turn pivot (glissade), taking three quick counts, 1-2-3. It is one step per measure.

4: The lady takes a somewhat large side step L toward LOD as the gent takes a somewhat smaller side step R toward LOD.

6: The gent closes his L to his R, as the lady closes her R to her L, taking weight. Thus the second measure is a chassé.

1-6: The gent does exactly what the lady did, and vice-versa.

So therefore this is like the turning Galop step (glissade, chassé), except:

- 1) The Valse à Deux Temps is smoother (glissade instead of jeté), and
- 2) Instead of a rotary movement, all of the rotation happens in the first measure, on the glissade (counts 1-2-3). Then the chassé is done straight down LOD. This motion can be described as a "square" movement, and indeed, this same step a century later was called the "box step."

Here is Cellarius' description:

*Le pas est fort simple, et n'est autre que celui du galop, exécuté d'une jambe et de l'autre en tournant ; seulement, au lieu de sauter ce pas, il faut s'attacher à le bien glisser, en évitant les soubresauts et les saccades.*

"The step is very simple, being nothing more than the galop, executed by either leg while turning; but instead of springing, it is essential to glissade thoroughly, avoiding any quick starts or jerks."

Il faut sur chaque mesure faire un pas, c'est-à-dire, glisser le pied et chasser de l'autre. La valse à deux temps, différente en cela de la valse à trois qui décrit un cercle, se valse carrément et ne se tourne que sur le glissé. Il est essentiel de noter cette différence de mouvement, afin d'apprécier le caractère des deux valses.

"It is requisite to make one step to every measure, that is, to glissade with one foot, and to chassé with the other. Differing in this from the waltze à trois temps, which describes a circle, the waltze à deux temps is danced squarely, and turns only upon the glissade. It is essential to note this difference of movement, in order to appreciate the character of the two dances."

Note: There is a significant mistranslation in the "Drawing Room Dances" English translation of Cellarius. It says, "It is requisite to make one step to every *beat*..." instead of measure. This has thrown many dance historians off the track, if they didn't consult the original French.

But Cellarius, in the original French, was clear that you take one step in each measure. Glissade in one measure, 1-2-3; Chassé (side-close) on 4-6; Glissade on the other foot, 1-2-3; Chassé (side-close) on 4-6.

**Reversing this** to turn counterclockwise works better if the gent begins facing forward LOD, with the lady backing. He steps forward L on counts 1-2-3, somewhat between her feet, as she reaches back diagonally R, placing her back to the center of the room. Counts 4 and 6 are again a side-close chassé toward LOD, with the gent now passing the lady in the outside lane.

### C)

Another version of the 19th century **turning galop** step was somewhat different. The gent backed in front of his partner on count 1, similar to the valse à trois temps, before doing a chassé with the other foot. For instance, Robert Coote's *Ball-Room Dancing Without A Master*, circa 1868, has the gent beginning back on his left foot on count 1, but this description is unclear.

This interpretation would make it similar to Cellarius' valse à deux temps, but in 2/4 time, quick-quick-slow.

### D)

An earlier valse à deux temps appeared in the **1843 *Etiquette: Or a Guide to the Usages of Society with the Rhenish or Spanish Waltz***, by Count Alfred D'Orsay, New York.

He described two different but similar versions. To slower music:

(1) Hop on the R foot keeping the left foot free, (2) Glide L to 2nd position, (3) close R then glide L (chassé), turning halfway CW or CCW.

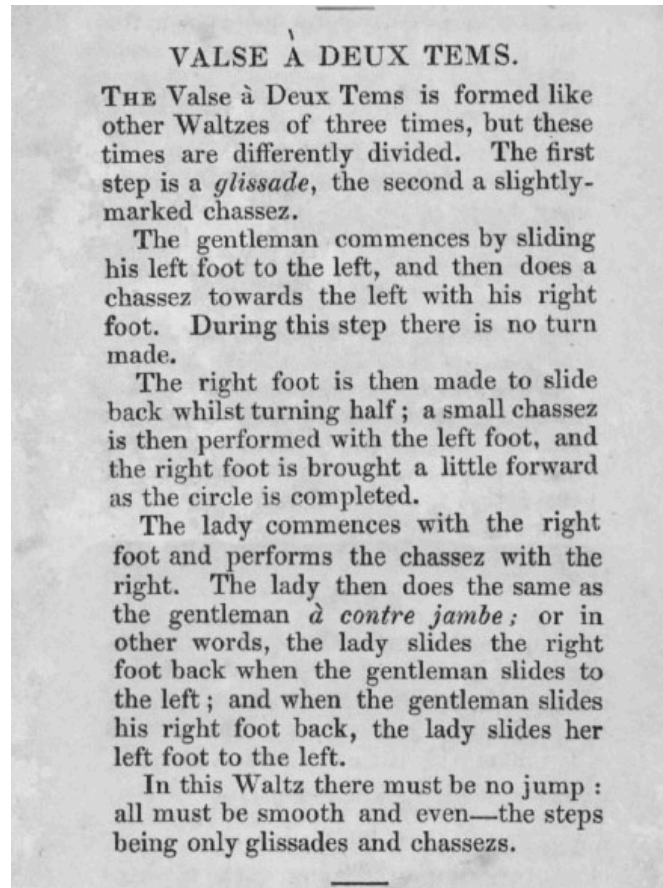
Repeat opposite.

The timing is "one, two, and-three."

(1) Glide L to 2nd position, (2) close R and glide L (chassé), (3) hop L, turning halfway CW or CCW. Repeat opposite.

The timing is "one, and-two, three."

### E)



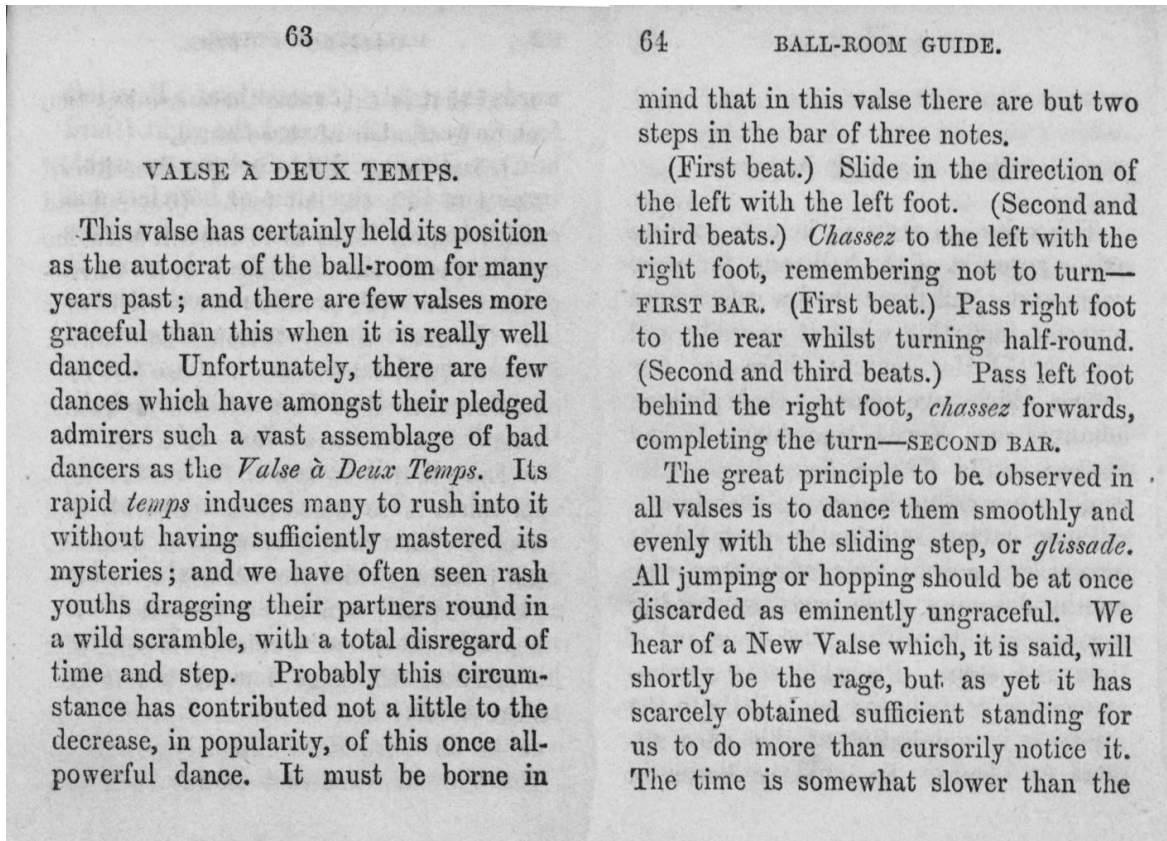
This is from *Rock's Ball-Room Hand Book, Quadrille Preceptor, Cellarius Instructor and Polka Companion, and Valses a Deux Temps Danseur*, London, 1845. This description was so confusing that more than a dozen different dance manuals copied this description verbatim, word-for-word.

To explain: If a dance master understood a dance, he described it in his own words. Thus each dance manual usually had different ways of describing the waltz, polka and schottische. But if a step description that was found in another dance manual was not understood, but the professor still wanted to include that dance in his book, he would just pass it on as he found it.

### F)

Here is my interpretation of the above description.

The key is finding a clearer description of this version. Here is the best one, from *The Ball Room Companion*, published by Frederick Warne, London, 1866. It is also found in *Routledge's Ball-Room Guide*, circa 1868, and in *Beadle's Dime Ball-Room Companion & Guide To Dancing*, 1868.



This is better than Rock's 1845 version, because 1) the timing is clearer, and 2) the gent's second bar (the lady's first bar) is more detailed.

In my opinion, this version is somewhat similar to Thomas Wilson's 1816 French Slow Waltz, except with the feet reversed, left-for-right. In both of these steps, the gent travels toward LOD on the "inside lane," passing by his partner who is almost stopped in place in the "outside lane" doing a pivot in place. Then vice versa.

In Wilson's Slow Waltz, the gent travels LOD with a Pas de Bourée, R-L-R, as his partner Pirouettes in place L-R-L. The gent actually travels in a slightly curved arc, around the pirouetting partner, but Wilson's diagram shows it as a straight line. I think this is significant.

In the above version of the valse à deux temps, the gent travels with as L-R-L glissade and chassé, as his partner Pirouettes in place R-L, then advances R. The gent's path is actually a slightly curved arc, around the pirouetting partner, but, like Wilson, it's described as a straight path, "without turning at all."

For this to work the best, the gent begins facing on the diagonal, LOD and toward the outside wall. The lady is backing up, facing diagonally to the center of the hall.



First bar, count (beat) 1: The gent glissades to the left side, LOD, with his L foot, as the lady crosses her R foot tightly behind her L ("pass the right foot to the rear").

Count 2: The gent closes his R to his L (probably in 3rd position) to begin a chassé, as the lady pivots a half-turn on the balls of both feet, which therefore passes the left foot passes the left foot behind the right foot, taking weight on the left foot behind.

Count 3: The gent finishes his close-step chassé by stepping side L again, as the lady steps R forward toward LOD, between his feet. This description does not continue with, "the right foot is brought forward," but most other descriptions of this version do include this last line, including 1845 Rock's.

It might be hard to understand, but counts 2-3 for the lady—giving weight on the left foot behind, at the end of the pivot in place, then stepping forward right foot—is a valid form of chassé. Close-step. So some descriptions use this term chassé here.

4-5-6: Each do the other's steps.

The timing is a clear 1-2-3, 4-5-6, two measures of waltz music. Not a dotted rhythm.

Then it can be noted that this version of the valse à deux temps can be seen as exactly the same as Wilson's French Slow Waltz, phase-shifted by one count. That is, the third step of the gent's chassé in the valse à deux temps, as he comes around in front of his partner ready to pivot, is actually the first step of Wilson's Pirouette, the side step L before crossing R tightly behind. And the last step of the lady's pirouette in the valse à deux temps, as she chases forward R, is actually the first step of Wilson's Pas de Bourée.

With this interpretation, if you watched two couples, side-by-side, each doing one of these in silence (so that you couldn't tell which step was "count 1"), then you wouldn't be able to see much of a difference between the two. The difference is that all three of the "inside lane" steps travel forward with a Pas de Bourée with Wilson's French waltz, while they step-close-step with a chassé in the valse à deux temps.

### G)

This version is especially interesting, leading to speculation that it may have led to the accidental creation of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century "New Waltz," which is today's "Viennese waltz."

It is requisite to make a step to every beat—that is, to glissade with one foot, and to chasser with the other. Differing in this from the *valse à trois temps*, which describes a circle, the *valse à deux temps* is danced squarely, and turns only upon the glissade. It is essential to note this difference of movement, in order to appreciate the character of the two dances.  
In this waltz two steps are executed to three beats of the

This is from *The Young Lady's Book*, London, 1859. If you are familiar with period dance manuals, you

may recognize this as taken from the English translation of Cellarius in *The Drawing Room Dances*, London. However, it contains a significant mistranslation.

Cellarius' original was:

**Il faut sur chaque mesure faire un pas,**

Which was correctly translated in the *Fashionable Dancing* translation:

**A step must be made to each measure;**

And mistranslated in the *Drawing Room Dances* translation:

**It is requisite to make a step to every beat—**

Taking a step to every beat, instead of to every measure, is a major change.

No doubt many dance masters attempted to dance the description they found in their dance manuals (several books reprinted this translation), and surprisingly, it not only works, but this functions even *better* than the old Valse à Trois Temps because it can be reversed. And it can be danced at moderate tempos, 136-172 bpm, instead of requiring Cellarius' 264 bpm waltz music.

If one dances Cellarius' description with one step per beat, instead of one step per measure, here is the result:

- 1: The gent turns 90° clockwise, bringing his left foot around in front of his partner (glissade), across LOD, and ends up giving weight onto the left foot by stepping back onto it. The lady turns to her right and steps right foot straight forward, slightly between his feet, along LOD. At the end of count 1, the gent is backing, like a protective shield, in front of her.
- 2: The lady takes a somewhat large side step L toward LOD as the gent takes a somewhat smaller side step R toward LOD.
- 3: The gent closes his L to his R, as the lady closes her R to her L, taking weight. Thus the second and third steps are a chassé.
- 4-6: The gent does exactly what the lady did, and vice-versa.

If you compare this to page 3 of this paper, you see that counts 1, 2 and 3 are exactly the same as counts 1, 4 and 6 of Cellarius' original. i.e., taking one step per beat. Agreeing with the description, it is indeed "danced squarely," later called a "turning box step." And like Cellarius' original, it is easily reversed.

The New Waltz, Modern Waltz, Plain Waltz, New Plain Waltz, and Glide Waltz were various names given to this step beginning in the 1870s. It effectively replaced the old Valse à Trois Temps, and remains the most common version of the waltz danced since then. Today, many ballroom studios call it the "Viennese waltz." Is it possible that today's waltz was accidentally discovered by trying to comprehend a mistranslation?