

Will the music *really* tell me what to do?

Dance teachers sometimes enjoy saying that ‘the music will tell you what to do’. Well, um, not really. (Experienced dancers need read no further; nothing that follows will be new to you.)

What we do originates with the deviser of the dance. We learn *what* to do by working through the dance in class, studying the dance crib, watching a good dance video, looking up fine details in the Dictionary, home practice or more, using whatever learning style works for us.

Although the music cannot tell us *what* to do, it can definitely tell us *when* to do it. When (for example) we dance a reel of three, the music tells us when we should arrive at the midpoint or the next endpoint of the reel. When we dance a reel of four, the music helps us to judge how quickly or slowly we must move in order to arrive on time at the $\frac{1}{4}$ mark or $\frac{3}{4}$ mark – i.e. at the midpoint of the middle loop - rather than arrive early, or late, at a crossing point.

It's time to dive into the details. A bar of music takes a defined amount of time to play. A bar of jig or reel music, played at a typical dance speed, takes just over 1 second to play. The bar contains two strong beats, and these are the beats you dance to. The first beat comes at the beginning of the bar and the second comes *half way* through the bar. *The bar is not over at the second beat. It continues until the next bar of music starts.* That's important information. Suppose you are dancing towards the sideline near the end of an 8-bar figure. Then a new figure begins. Smooth, elegant dancing requires you to keep dancing that figure right to the very end of the 8th bar – certainly not just to the first beat of that bar. Your job is to keep dancing that figure *until the beginning of bar 9*, when the new figure starts. And so on with other figures. Ideally, you will transition from one figure to the next exactly when you reach the sideline, center line, or other destination point for the figure. That's a counsel of perfection, but it is often what your teacher is getting at when you hear an instruction like ‘don't rush; use up all the music’.

It's a journey. I apologize to those dance teachers who have had the misfortune of attempting to teach me how to dance for the many times I have transgressed. It took me a surprisingly long time to realize what they were getting at. And even armed with that knowledge I still routinely mess up. Yes, it's easier said than done. But good dancing teamwork requires dancers to try.

By the way, when and if you practice a dance at home, do try to practice it with appropriate music running in the background, perhaps a video you found on YouTube. Slow it down if you must. Using recorded music (or a metronome, if you have one) is important, because it will provide you with a rigidly steady beat to dance to. The metronome in your head will let you down. It will happily help you cheat. The recorded music will not.

The next time a teacher says that the music will tell you what to do, please smile sweetly and nod your head in acknowledgement of this sage advice. Then, dance to the music, letting the music guide you carefully as to the *when*, not the *what*, of your dancing.

Happy dancing!

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