

Tips on Becoming a Better Intermediate-Level Dancer

by Laura Brodian Freas Beraha

English country dance and the modern interpretation of English Regency dance are stylistically different. English Regency is not folk dance, but rather is interpreted as a form of early 19th-century aristocratic ballroom dance. Even so, some constants apply to both styles.

I offer you my perspective as a teacher of country dance as it would have been practiced in the ballrooms of the great houses and assembly rooms in the time of Jane Austen. When I teach at my English Regency ‘drums’ (‘drum’ is the Regency word for ‘party’, as in some event that one “drummed” up) I must necessarily address the needs of everyone present. There are, all in the same room and all at the same time, all levels of experience from absolute beginners to long-time seasoned dancers.

Admittedly, I have a patient penchant for beginners. I strive to give newcomers a sense of comfort and ease, and to impart to them the rudiments and period style of the dances so that they can be confident of, participate in, and enjoy the dance.

That said, at the same time I must not ignore the needs of the more experienced dancers. I observe that seasoned (i.e., advanced) dancers, for the most part, are already familiar with style points; they effortlessly and gracefully move in synchronization with the phrasing of the music. They also are efficient helpers to the lesser experienced dancers. Their “feet on the floor” makes the teaching go all the more smoothly.

We now come to those who have stagnated somewhere between beginner and advanced. There are, indeed, some people who suffer from a syndrome I like to call “*Intermediate-itis*”. This condition manifests itself when dancers, having mastered the figures of a dance, believe they are done with learning and growing. They are impatient to just get on with the dance, and do not realize that their job is just beginning. They do, in point of fact, have a lot to learn if they want to experience the flavor of Regency dancing and become truly good dancers.

1. Posture: Early 19th-century ballroom dancers probably did not slouch, stoop, or make unnecessarily florid gestures. Relaxed, erect postures with hands at sides was the call of the day.

2. Marrying the dance to the music: Dance figures have starting and ending points and are tied to musical phrases. Experienced dancers do not start figures early, nor do they rush through them.
3. Figures have places: “Go to some specific place — not just anywhere.” When you exchange places with a partner or with a diagonal, go to the exact place from whence that person came.
4. Starting and ending a figure: Engage in start and stop figure points rather than morphing from one figure to another.
5. If an instruction is unclear, ask for a clarification.
6. Remember that Regency dances were social mixers: Be aware of your surroundings.
 - a. If the longways set develops a large gap, move to close that gap.
 - b. If there’s a circle of couples be aware of uneven spacing between couples and pace yourselves to even it out. Angle in to shorten a space.
 - c. In a longways set if you’re an inactive couple (aka a “second couple”, or “B” couple] you should always be doing something, such as looking down the set to prevent “set creep.”
7. Lead with your eyes: Guide inexperienced dancers by tethering their attention with your smile and gaze.
8. Gentlemen: When the ladies exchange places by the right hand (aka “Ladies Chain” in other dance forms) they are moving on a diagonal; do not make them late by forcing the oncoming ladies to take extra counts by going over to you with their left hand extended. Move to the right into the vacated lady’s position to take the oncoming lady’s left hand as you put your right hand at the back of her waist to escort her around to face the other couple.
9. “Sloppy” Circling: Get out of the habit of circling in an unnecessarily laborious fashion. Circling does not mean “stand still, reach out, take hands, hands pointing down, and then start walking”. Doing so only makes dancers so late that they have to rush (not very elegant) to get all the way around by the end of the phrase. On the very first beat of the phrase start walking, angling in to keep the circle small, taking hands as you go, with hands up and elbows down, and giving weight.
10. Get off the bench and onto the dance floor: The teacher cannot be everywhere at once