

Waltz was fairly new to the world when Lowell was founded. The earliest of the English dance manuals on the subject had only appeared a few years earlier and the waltz was still widely considered shocking and sinful, especially in Puritan-based New England.

The origins of waltz are murky but its name is clearly from the German word, Wälzen (see box below). It is believed that the dance is based on earlier European folk dances, such as the Austrian Ländler.

One theory holds that the French Revolution triggered the appearance of waltz in Europe's ballrooms. When the monarchy fell, being too close to the aristocracy might mean the guillotine. As a result, French dancing masters combined the ballet-like court dances that they had long taught with the twirling, closed-hold dancing of the peasants. This left both their jobs and their heads intact.

The Correct Method of Waltzing by Thomas Wilson is among the first—if not *the* first—of the English language waltz manuals. Published in 1816, its full title is absurdly long; Sylvanus Urban wryly called it “ample” in his 1817 review before expressing his opinion of the book itself.

“The volume is splendidly printed; and will be a curious morsel for some Bibliomaniac of the next Century. Disapproving in toto of the art of Waltzing, we cannot say more of the mode of teaching it.”²

Disparaging descriptions of the vigorous and unseemly waltz were quoted in New England newspapers.

“The rude grasp during such dances, do they become the modest nature...?” “...the attitudes, now violent, and now languishing, of a dance better suited for a Bacchanal...”³



Above: When court dances like the minuet, a couple dance in 3/4 time, fell from grace, European trend-setters turned to the dances of the common people for inspiration (below).

Opposite page: Frontispiece and title page (recreated for legibility) from Wilson's waltz manual. Figures 1 & 2 show the opening March Steps of the Slow French Waltz; 3 & 4 are the French Waltz itself. Figures 5–7 are of the Sauteuse Waltz; 8 is of the Jetté Waltz; and 9 is the German Waltz. Frontispiece image courtesy of John Drury Rare Books.



A little digging through my 1906 German dictionary not only finds “Wälzen” defined as to roll or revolve; it also finds a number of industrial references: “Wälzen-apparat is a rolling frame; Wälzen-brechmaschine is a flax-dressing machine.

And, on another note, “Wälzen sich vor Lachen” would probably be expressed nowadays as ROFL.

—Author