

GAMMAL POLSKA (OLD POLSKA) - TRADITIONAL SWEDISH COUPLE DANCE

Presented by Ingvar Sodal at North Country Folk Dance Camp, Duluth, Minn.

This uncomplicated dance is in a sense the archetype of the couple-turning dance form in Scandinavia. In 3/4 time but differing from and much older than the waltz, the polska is the most distinctive of all Nordic rhythms. (It is of course not to be confused with the relatively recent polka, in 2/4 time). The triple count of the polska constitutes the rhythmic framework for most of the folk song, instrumental, and dance melodies in Sweden, and also in Norway where it is called pols. American folkdancers are best acquainted with this rhythm in the Hambo and Snurrbocken, but there are countless other dances based upon the same distinct meter.

Both as a musical and rhythmical form, the polska has been known in Scandinavia since the Middle Ages, and indeed reigned supreme as Sweden's "national dance" for over two centuries, up to the middle 1800s, when the waltz first made its appearance. Today, however, except for the Hambo which still survives as an oldtime dance, and a few specialized folk-dances preserved by the societies, the traditional polska is virtually gone as a popular dance form in Sweden. Only the country fiddlers have retained a significant part of the incredibly rich treasure of polska music. Fortunately, during the past few years - thanks to a number of devoted fiddlers and other folklore-oriented persons - a number of all-but-forgotten variations of polska dances have been brought to light thru field research among old folks. These remnants of a once rich "polska culture" have provided invaluable insight into the historical development of this intriguing dance form.

The old polska described here is based upon this research as well as personal observation and field work in both Sweden and Norway, in 1950-51, 1955, 1960-61, and 1963. The dance contains the most fundamental of the polska steps as used in a partner turn. In effect this turn is but an extension of a fwd-moving promenade or polonaise-type step done in trebl (polska) time, with two movements to a count of three. The open step with its "one, ---, three; one, ---, three" weight-shift pattern is merely adapted to a closed turn, easy and naturally, without ever losing the basic rhythm.

As in the case in all couple polskas (in fact, nearly all Swedish dancing) the man is the master of the dance, and he must lead it firmly, thoroughly, and unerringly. The woman in effect gets a "free ride" --- same as in the Hambo. If the man knows his steps well, the woman need only "let him drive". Gammal polska is surely not a complex dance, but like the Viennese Waltz, it is something that craves patience and practice. Once mastered, it can be one of the most relaxing yet satisfying of couple dances, and the conscientious dancer will be amply rewarded for his time.

GAMMAL POLSKA

Pronunciation: GAHM-ahl POHL-ska.

Translation: Old Polska.

Land: Sweden.

Region: General.

Category: Traditional couple dance.

Skill level: Elementary-intermediate.

Record: 1) Aqua VIKING V 830 a.

Tune title: 1) Polska from Bings¹².
2) Malungsleken.

Music: 2) Sveriges Radio RAEP 2.
3/4.

Intro: 1) 2 meas.
2) none.

Formation: Any nr of cpls in circle, LOD CCW.

Positions: Open shldr-wst, free hands hanging loosely at sides (not on hips!); Closed Swedish folkdance hold (Polska posn), as described below.

Footwork: As described: open polska step, closed polska step.

Character: Relaxed, with flowing motion yet firm and powerful.

The following are not figures in the regular sense, but merely two dance posns which are alternated at will, with no fixed number of meas. for either:

A. Open polska fwd:

In open shldr-wst posn, free hands loosely at sides, bgng on outside ft, any number of open polska steps (as described below) fwd in LOD.

B. Closed polska turn:

Taking closed posn (as described below), cpl turns CW with any number of polska turning steps (also described below), making one full revolution for ea meas of music, and progressing fwd in LOD.

The turn is continued indefinitely, using the alternate open steps only when desired.

OPEN POLSKA STEP, AS USED IN GAMMAL POLSKA:

This is in essence a promenade in which the dancers move fwd in LOD in open posn. It serves as a "rest step" between turning. There are but two foot movements during the three cnts of ea meas; these occur on the 1st and 3rd beats, the 2nd beat being a "hold".

M's step: Cnt 1 = st L;
Cnt 2 = hold posn (L ft in front of R ft);
Cnt 3 = st R.

W's step: Cnt 1 = st R;
Cnt 2 = hold posn (R ft in front of L);
Cnt 3 = st L.

The steps on Cnts 3 and 1 thus come in immediate succession, whereas there is a pause between Cnts 1 and 3.

Throughout, the movement must be smooth and flowing, not in any way jerky nor "military" in character. These steps resemble a natural, ordinary walking step, the heel making contact with the floor before the rest of the foot, rather than slides or a ballroom "dance-walk".

CLOSED POLSKA STEP, AS USED IN GAMMAL POLSKA:

Simply put, the turn on this dance is but the open step done in closed posn while turning CW so as to make a full revolution arnd on each meas of 3 counts.

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It is thus a form of the L-ft polska (referring to the M's step), closely related to the turning step in Snurrbocken (Sweden), Norsk masurka and Røros pols (Norway) and Sønderhøning (Denmark). As danced in Gammal polska, however, the step is considerably smoother and even, and does not accentuate each beat of the music.

M's step: Cnt 1 - pivot on L, leading around CW;
Cnt 2 - continue pivot on L while keeping R ft close by so that it trails or "lags" around in slight contact with the floor (= "both");
Cnt 3 - step fwd in LOD with R ft, to complete full revolution around CW.

W's step: W retains same rhythmic pattern of foot movement on the turn as she does in the open step. Inasmuch as the M controls the turn with a firm lead throughout, the W need only follow.

Though this turn is extremely smooth, with neither "dip" (as in Hambo) nor "bounce" (as in Snurrbocken), it should in no way become lifeless or stilted! There is still a certain "lilt" which is essential to the polska's distinctive rhythm.

SWEDISH FOLKDANCE HOLD (POLSKA POSN): As in Common Closed (Waltz) Posn except that W's R arm is straight, her R hand holding M's L upper-arm, and M's L arm is bent at right angle, his L hand holding her R upper-arm.

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