

Syrtaki

(Greece)

Most Greeks call this dance “syrtaki.” (It can also be spelled “sirtaki.”) It can also be called Hassapikos, or, to distinguish it from a fast Hassapikos (Hassaposervikos) it could also be called a Varys (“Heavy”) Hassapikos. It was sometimes also called Naftikos. I will not go into the long and complicated history of the development of this dance here, as it is well documented elsewhere and my primary concern here is with improvisation within this well-known dance form.

Pronunciation:

Music: Any syrtaki (or varys hassapikos) melody 4/4 meter

Formation: Solo or short lines. Arms held outstretched at shoulder height (solo) or T-pos for short lines.

Style: Individual.

Meas Pattern

BASIC FIGURE

- 1 “Fwd:” Facing ctr and moving fwd twd ctr, step fwd on L (ct. 1); tap R toe on floor behind L (ct 2); brush R ft fwd (ct 3); kick R ft fwd (ct 4).
- 2 “Back:” Facing ctr and moving bkwd away from ctr, step bkwd on R (ct 1); kick L ft fwd (ct 2); step bkwd on L (ct 3); bring R ft to a position in front of L ankle (ct 4).
- 3+ “Side:” Facing ctr and moving slightly to the R, step on R to R (ct 1); step on L across in front of R ft (ct 2); step back on R in place (ct 3); begin to bring L ft twd R ft (ct 4); touch L heel fwd (ct 5); lift R heel (ct 6). *(Note that this 3rd movement uses 2 beats of the next measure and thus the dance figure does not coincide with the music.)*

VARIATIONS ON THE BASIC STEP

1. Lengthen the “Side” motif to 8 cts by more slowly bringing the L ft twd the R on cts 4, 5 and 6, then doing the heel touch on cts 7 and 8.
2. Shorten the “Side” motif to 4 cts by eliminating the heel touch.

LEADER IMPROVISATION

Basically, the soloist or the leader (the person on the R of the short line) has great freedom to break away from the Basic step and to string together typical motifs, hopefully in a manner which is easy to follow, before returning to the Basic step. One easy way to do this is to “break away” after the “Forward” section of the Basic step, do some crossing variations, then use a typical “break” to get back to where you left off: the “Back” section of the Basic step.

SOME COMMON MOTIFS (Can be started after meas 1, when the R ft is free.)

“Cross in front:”

Cross one ft in front of the other (as in a Hungarian “Rida” step) any number of times (more than 3 is unusual). Usually done symmetrically, first to the L with the R ft crossed in front, then to the R with the L ft crossed in front. Can also be patterned, for example: 3 to the L, 3 to the R, then 2 to the L, 2 to the R, 1 to the L, 1 to the R.

“Grapevine:”

Crossing one ft first in front of then behind the other. (Again, more than 3 crosses would be unusual.) Usually more or less symmetric: that is, it could be fwd-and-back-and-forward then change direction and ftwk, or fwd-and-back-change-back-and-fwd.

Tip: It helps to “warn” the other dancers that you are about to deviate from the Basic step by raising the R ft in front and doing a small lift on the L ft instead of a “kick” or a “cut” with the R ft as would usually be done at the end of meas 1 (“Fwd”) or 2 (“Back”).

(Note: These steps could also be started after meas 2, when the R ft is also free. The return to the Basic step would be the same.)

RETURNING TO BASIC STEP

Regardless of what motifs the leader does when he goes away from the Basic step, he has to return to the Basic step in a seamless manner. For example by:

“Wander forward 4 crossing steps:”

When R ft is free: Step fwd on R ft crossed in front of L (cts 1-2); L in front of R (cts 3-4); R in front of L (cts 5-6), leap fwd onto L and lean fwd (ct 7); touch R toe to floor behind (ct 8). Then return to 2nd meas of Basic step, that is, the “back” step (“back-kick-back-cut”).

“Crossing L in front and waiting:”

When L ft is free: Step fwd on L ft and lean fwd, then wait one ct (or touch R toe to floor on that ct) before returning to 2nd meas of Basic step, that is, the “back” step (“back-kick-back-cut”).

“Kneel on R knee:”

When L ft is free and about to cross in front, take a large step fwd on L ft, dropping to R knee (cts 1-2); rise (with wt on L) to a standing position with R ft tucked behind L knee and lean slightly back (cts 3-4); then return to 2nd meas of Basic step, that is, the “back” step (“back-kick-back-cut”).

OTHER TYPICAL MOTIFS TO USE BETWEEN COMPLETE BASIC STEPS:“Swaying from side to side:”

Transfer wt from one ft to the other using either 4 or (more dramatically) 8 cts on each sway. Used often at beginning of dance, but can also be used as a “pause step” in the middle of the dance.

“Heel and toe:”

Any (slow, so others can follow you!) combination of heel-and-toeing, in which heels are moved while wt is on toes and toes are moved while wt is on heels.

Many other leader variations (and combinations of leader variations) are possible. These particular variations are presented only as examples.

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