

Merengue Clinic Notes



Peg & John Kincaid

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There are two stories about the origination of merengue. The most popular version relates to a great hero of the revolution, General Maringie, who had been crippled in one leg during the war. It is said that he loved to dance, but after the injury, when he danced he could only step with one leg and drag the other. Not wishing to offend the great hero, the other dancers did the same thing. Wherever the name comes from, it remains an energetic and exciting dance rhythm.

Merengue is probably the easiest dance to learn because of its timing. Merengue is written in 4/4 time (4 beats to a bar of music, and four dance steps to a bar of music). The main characteristic of the basic step is described as stepping side and dragging the other leg to close. It is also known as a "lame duck" motion. Walking steps and side steps make up the basic components of Merengue. The main focus is in the legs, keeping the upper body erect and as still as possible. There is no intentional hip movement in any of the Latin dances, and Merengue is no different. The hip action comes from changing weight from one foot to the other. In Latin dancing whenever one leg is straight, the other should be bent. Walking backwards is a good demonstration of this action. The foot action in Merengue is described as a "foot roll". It is accomplished by stepping onto the inside ball of the foot where the big toe is and rolling the foot over to the little toe, and then lowering the heel as if you were squashing a grape. Then place the foot flatly onto the floor straightening the leg. It sounds a little like patting your head and rubbing your stomach at the same time, but it looks great once it has been mastered. Merengue can be danced in closed position, double hand-hold or butterfly position, or open position with lead hands joined. The basic step moves to the man's left and is accomplished by taking a small side step onto the lead foot, close the right foot to the left foot, side left, close the right. The lady moves with the man using the opposite foot. The comparative simplicity of the Merengue dance steps makes it an attractive alternative to salsa, which has many more twists and turns and is more difficult to learn.

For the purposes of introducing Merengue to phase II/III dancers, we selected steps that they should already be familiar with from other rhythms. We use Merengue music and incorporate these steps into a routine. Some slight modifications may be necessary to fit the music, or to fit the timing, but the basic steps remain the same. It is often introduced as a marching dance. When you are comfortable doing the steps to Merengue music, you can add some styling tips.

We have listed some of the more familiar phase II and phase III steps that can be used to introduce Merengue.

Side close
 Chasse
 Twrl to tamara, wheel, & unwrap
 Stair steps
 Underarm trn to lariat
 Side two step
 Bk away and together
 Wheel
 Twirl
 Vines
 Hip rks

“For the purposes of introducing Merengue to phase I danciers, we selected steps that they should already be familiar with from other rhythms.”

Side close is a familiar 2 step figure. A Merengue basic is two side closes.

Side 2 step (sd cl sd tch) in both directions is a good introduction to the Conga alks left and right. Vines can also be used to teach Conga walks left and right (sd beh sd tch). By modifying the vine action to cross in front instead of behind, you accomplish the actual footwork of the Conga walks (sd XIF sd tch).

Back away 3 touch. and together 3 touch is a combination found in many 2 step dances. Dance this combination to Merengue music. Then you can have the lady put her hands on the man's shoulders and perform the same foot action while sliding her hands down the Man's arms as they back away from each other. (arm slide). A different modification can result in conga walks forward and back-the man goes forward when the lady goes back, and when the man goes back the lady goes forward. You can add a shoulder shake or two for styling and fun. Twirl is a familiar step in several rhythms. For use in Merengue it needs to be a twirl 2 with a side close (4 beats of music) or twirl 4. The twirl 2 with a side close is easier for the dancers.

"Twirl to Tamara; Wheel & Unwrap;" is a familiar Rumba combination. It fits very well into Merengue with a 4 count twirl, an 8 count wheel, and a 4 count unwrap.

Some of the more complicated figures include rotating basic, open break, wrap around, side separation, and snake. We hope to hit on most of these figures in our clinic, with definite exposure to some of them in our phase 5 dance teach.

Merengue is an exciting rhythm and the music is infectious. We hope you enjoy your exposure to a fun and exciting rhythm.

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