Mini-Picture Figures

by Harold & Meredith Sears

Sometimes, we see a division in our dancing between regular figures and "picture" figures. Most dance figures are composed of steps, and we use them to move around the floor. Picture figures have no or few steps and instead ask us to pose and create little works of art. A Foxtrot Three-Step is a regular figure. We're taking steps and progressing. But when we step forward to a Promenade Sway, that is a picture figure. We've stopped. We're not dancing so much with our feet. We're dancing with all the rest of our body.

Another way to view dance figures is to recognize the picture figures and then to think of most of our other dance figures as mini-picture figures. We might think that every figure has at least a mini-picture in it, and our dancing will be more graceful, more attractive, and even more comfortable if we also try to dance these mini-pictures that are found in otherwise ordinary dance figures.

Regular Figures	Picture Figures
Aida	Chair
Cross Point	Contra Check
Cucaracha	Corte
Drag Hesitation	Develope
Fence Line	Explosion
Fishtail	Hinge
Hesitation Change	Jete Point
Hockey Stick	Oversway
Hover	Promenade Sway
New Yorker	Right Lunge
Ripple or Tipple Chassé	Same Foot Lunge
Stalking Walks	Sit Line
Telespin	Sunburst
Time Step	Throwaway Oversway
Whisk	Whiplash

What do you think? When you compare the two lists above, do you see two fundamentally different categories — regular figures and picture figures? Or do you see some kind of picture in every one of them?

Pictures —

Again, a Promenade Sway is clearly a picture figure. "Promenade" means semi-closed position and "Sway" means inclination of the body — in this case to the left. So a Promenade Sway is left sway in semi-

closed position. We step side and forward on our lead feet blending to semi-closed position. We stretch up and look up and over our extended lead wrists. During a second beat, we relax the lead knee just a bit and so emphasize the sway. We keep the unweighted legs straight and strong. It is typical in creating a body line or in dancing a picture figure that we have one soft knee (the weighted leg) and one straight leg (the unweighted), not two bent or two straight legs.

The Promenade Sway is a beautiful picture all by itself, but it is even better when we have the time to do the Promenade Sway and then slowly change the sway to an Oversway by stretching the left side, rotating the hips a little to the left, and dropping the right hip, keeping the shoulders up and level. Rotating the woman in this way puts her into closed position, so we are changing from a semi-closed sway line to a closed sway line and a left sway to a right sway. Let your topline grow as you turn. You can really extend this picture — draw it out — at the end of a dance as the music fades.

Mini-Pictures —

In contrast, consider a Drag Hesitation to a Back and Back, Lock, Back. These aren't typical picture figures. There are lots of steps and definite progress down line, for instance in the waltz *Laurann* by the Preskitts, but there are two opportunities for mini-pictures within the sequence.

The Drag Hesitation begins in closed position facing diagonal line and center. The man steps forward on his left foot turning left face. He steps side right continuing to turn and then draws left to right ending in contra banjo position facing reverse line of dance and then dances Back and Back, Lock, Back, ending in contra banjo position still facing reverse. We could dance this figure as a simple forward, side, draw; back, back/lock, back; but the Drag especially gives us an opportunity to create a mini-picture. As we turn and take the second step, we can use left sway and a strong left leg to create a good looking and good feeling body line. The woman will have right sway and a strong right leg. Her head will be open, although our bodies will remain in closed position. The whole thing has a "ripple" feel to it (think Ripple Chassé). We only have one beat of music or a little more, but the line is a graceful curve. Furthermore, we are using body sway at the same time that we are turning left. The left sway complements the left turn. Then lose your sway as you step back to the lock, sway a bit right with right side back during the lock, and you have a second mini-picture with quite a rolling, breaking-wave feeling in between.

Or consider the Ripple Chassé itself. In semi-closed position, we step through with our trail feet (man's right, woman's left) blending to contra banjo position. The chassé begins with a side and forward left, a closing step right with left side stretch and looking right (woman left) ("closed heads") on the "&" count. This stretch is the "ripple": tipping the upper body in the

direction away from that of progression. Finally, we step side and forward with the lead feet, blending back to semi-closed position again. Really, a Ripple Chassé is simply a Thru and Side Chassé with a mini-picture added in the middle.

In the Latin rhythms, a Cucaracha might be danced as a straightforward side, recover, close. But Cucaracha is Spanish for "cockroach." Shouldn't we create a little picture here? Step to the side with the lead foot, press with the ball of the foot, but don't lower the heel and don't raise the heel of the supporting foot (don't completely change weight). Rotate the pressed foot a little to squish the bug. Then recover and close. The Cucaracha is really a two-measure figure, so we squash a roach to the left (look down there to be sure you do it right), and then squash one to the right.

The Fence Line is really a "Fencing" Line, a bit of stylized sword fight. In butterfly position, both dancers cross in front and lunge with a soft knee, recover, and step side to face, but again, let's use the whole body. As you lunge, extend your arms on that side as in a thrust with a fencing foil and raise the other arms for balance. *En garde*!

The Aida is not as melodramatic as a sword thrust, but the figure does put us into an attractive line. In Slow Two-Step, that position is even called an Aida Line. In butterfly position, perhaps facing the wall, we might step thru with the trail feet toward line and begin to turn right face (woman left face). We step side and continue to turn and then step back to a V-position, back-to-back, looking reverse, lead hands joined. Whether we sweep the trail arms through and then back or not, we want to make that Aida ending position something of a picture — strong lead legs, proud torso maybe with a somewhat arched back, trail arms back and up and *matching the line of your partner*. If you're not thinking, "mini-picture," you'll end up soft and droopy, just standing there, and your trail arm will probably be flung out there any old way. Dancing is not just walking down the sidewalk, and the body lines that we assume are not just two people hanging out on the street corner.

The above description is that of a standard Aida. A little different look is produced by taking two forward steps, sharply turning in on the second step, and stepping *back* into the Aida line on the third step. Instead of a rounded look, we have a crisper, more proud, more deliberate look. In *Beautiful Maria* by the Moores, they offer us Three Aidas, and they ask for this sharper look. In butterfly position facing the wall, trail feet free, we step thru to line, forward and turn sharply toward partner, and then back to the Aida line. In the second measure, step forward with the lead feet, forward turning sharply in and joining trail hands, and then back to our V-position looking toward line. Finally, we step forward with the trail feet and repeat the first measure. The figure allows us to present a series of mini-pictures — step, step, pose; step, step, pose; step, step, pose.

Milking the Beat —

In general, we create mini-pictures by thinking about more than our feet and the steps they are taking. We form dance pictures by being aware of our entire body — legs, torso, head, arms, left and right sides, even hands and fingers. We use a toned frame to stay together as partners. We use sway to create a graceful body line, a strong free leg and even pointing the toes to extend that line, arms up and a balanced head, and an extended free arm to continue the line upward. We use side lead and contra-body motion to facilitate and complement body turn. In short, we go beyond simply standing up straight. We shape our bodies in ways that look and feel good.

A second thing that we can do to create dance pictures is to depart sometimes from the basic tempo of the music — borrow a part of a beat from one step and use it to prolong the next step, giving us time to create and to display our mini-picture.

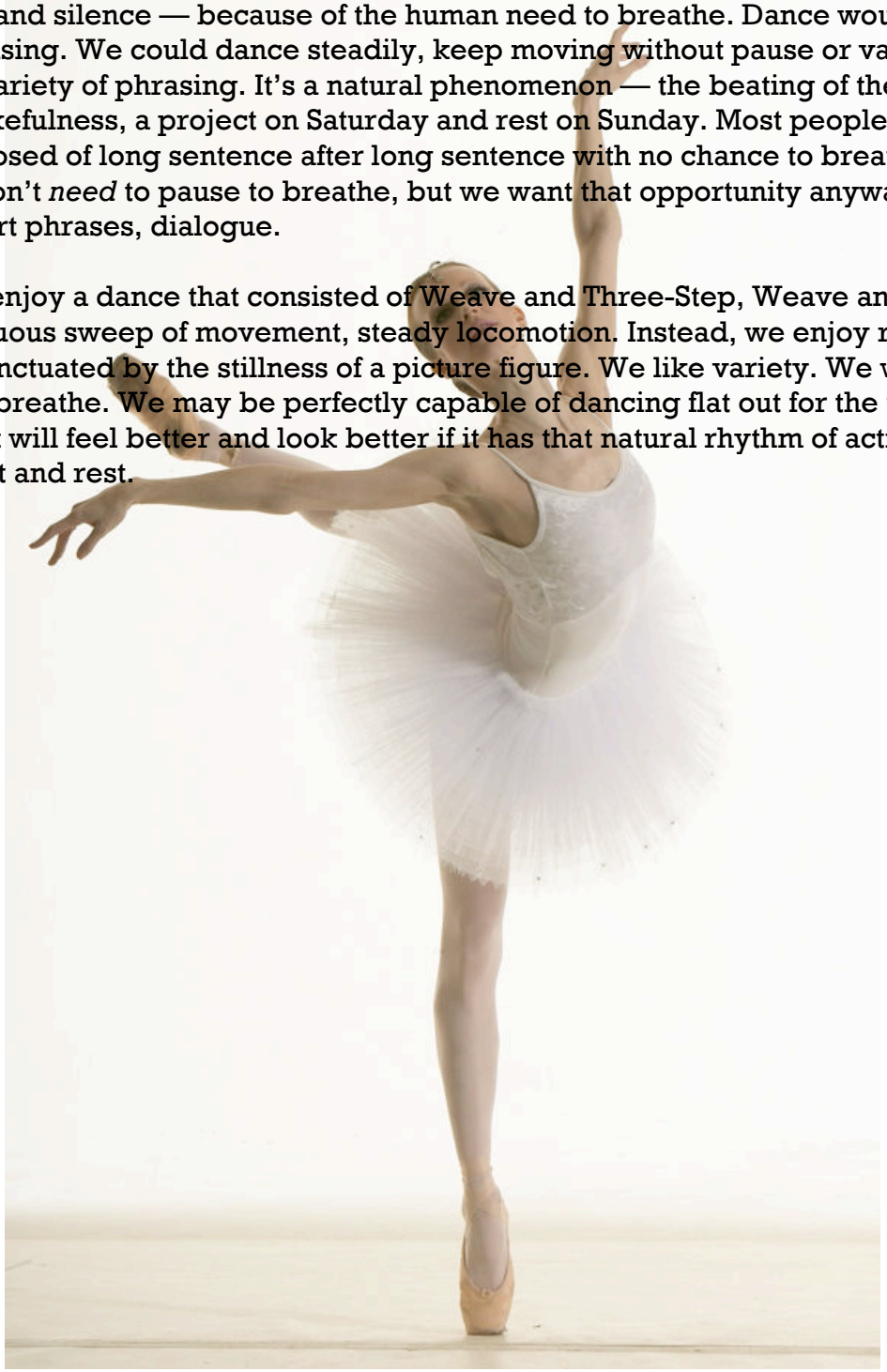
We thought about the Ripple Chasse above. We could dance this figure with 12&3 timing, in which case the mini-picture occurs on the & of count 2. An alternative is to prolong that half beat by holding on count 3 and delaying the last step until the & of 3. We are "milking" beat 2 and in the process doubling the amount of time devoted to the Ripple, the mini-picture that we would like to display.

Or consider an Open Natural Preparation to a Same Foot Lunge. We are no longer among mini-picture figures but have come back to a recognized picture figure. But imagine yourself in semi-closed position. In this sequence, you step thru with the trail feet. The man turns right face, steps side left across line of dance continuing to turn (the woman steps side right), and he blends to closed position facing reverse and center with a touch. Since this is a "same-foot" figure, we have to do a transition, and the "preparation" is the man's touch and a slight rise and right face rotation causing the woman to rise to her toes and change weight to her left foot. She has rotated just a little RF but is still in closed position. Her right knee is tucked just behind her left knee, and her left hipbone nestles just inside his right hipbone. Both now have right feet free. Now, lower into the left leg, push, and step side and slightly forward on the right with right-side stretch and looking right. Give her your right side and relax your sway — that will close her head (the woman steps back on her right foot turning left face and looking well left — very like a Contra Check step for the woman). The man's left leg will be extended to the side, straight and strong. The woman's left leg will be crossed in front of her right and extended on the same diagonal as the man's. Keep your hips well in to your partner.

In Waltz, the standard timing is 123 for the Open Natural Preparation, and then 123 for the "lower reach and lunge." As an alternative, to create a little more time for the picture, try speeding up the beginning: 1&2 for the Open Natural Preparation, 3 for the lower and reach, and then you have a whole measure for the actual lunge. You can extend it and even change your sway, making much

more of your picture figure — in essence, stealing from the less exciting entry into the picture and using the time gained to develop and display the picture itself.

Why Pictures? —

What do we gain from thinking a little more about our pictures and mini-pictures? One benefit is variety in our movement. Song (vocal music) has always had a natural rhythmicity to it — sound and silence — because of the human need to breathe. Dance wouldn't have to have this phrasing. We could dance steadily, keep moving without pause or variation, but we want the variety of phrasing. It's a natural phenomenon — the beating of the heart, sleep and wakefulness, a project on Saturday and rest on Sunday. Most people don't enjoy a novel composed of long sentence after long sentence with no chance to breathe. Reading silently, we don't *need* to pause to breathe, but we want that opportunity anyway. We want variety — short phrases, dialogue.

We wouldn't enjoy a dance that consisted of Weave and Three-Step, Weave and Three-Step, a continuous sweep of movement, steady locomotion. Instead, we enjoy rushing movement punctuated by the stillness of a picture figure. We like variety. We want our movement to breathe. We may be perfectly capable of dancing flat out for the three minutes, but it will feel better and look better if it has that natural rhythm of activity and stillness, effort and rest.