



~Julie Fitzgerald~

Online Step Dance Lessons

Everything You Need to Know **About Ottawa-Valley Step Dancing!**

What is Ottawa Valley Step Dancing?

This is a Canadian dance form that is found predominantly in Ontario, Canada. Many decades ago, lumberjacks would finish their work with a night of music and dancing. Since many of these workers were immigrants from Europe, they brought with them their traditional dance styles. These styles are mixed with French-Canadian and tap dancing to create a unique style now known as Ottawa Valley Step Dance. For those who have never heard of or seen this style of dance, it is best described as a mix of Irish and tap dancing. It is an entertaining, aggressive dance style where your feet lift quite high off the floor, and your arms are not restricted to only being at the side. Most commonly, steps are danced to a clog, jig, or reel. However, you can step dance to almost any song you want!

Please see the article <https://www.pembroke.ca/tourism/fiddling-and-step-dancing/brief-history/> for a more detailed history of Ottawa Valley Step Dancing.

What are the different dances within Ottawa-Valley step dancing?

The most common dances are the Waltz Clog, the Clog, the Jig, and the Reel. The waltz clog is in $\frac{3}{4}$ time; the clog in $\frac{4}{4}$ time; the jig in $\frac{6}{8}$ time; and the reel in $\frac{4}{4}$ time. Generally a full dance routine combines several of these dances together, starting with the slowest speed, and gradually increasing in tempo. Therefore, a full routine would start with a clog or a waltz clog, then a jig, and ends with a reel. The reel is the fastest and longest dance of the 4 mentioned. It is also the most physically demanding dance due to its speed, intricacies, and length.

What music do you dance to?

Old time, French Canadian, and Canadian Celtic music are the styles that you would traditionally step dance to. It is traditionally danced to a lead instrumentalist (fiddler), and accompanied by either piano or guitar. When you attend a step dance competition, you are accompanied by a fiddler and a pianist. However you can dance to any style of music or instrumentation that you want! As long as it has the correct 8-count, the music is danceable!

How long is a step?

Generally a step, whether it is a clog, jig, or reel, is 8 bars long (16 beats). In more advanced routines, you can sometimes have a double step in your routine, which is 16 bars (32 beats) long.

How many steps make up a routine?

The standard length of a routine is based on the length required for competitive dancing. A clog is made up of 4 steps (32 bars); a jig has 6 steps (48 bars), and a reel has 12 steps (96 bars).

When the music is playing, how do you know when to start dancing?

Step dancing is traditionally danced along to fiddle music. Canadian fiddle music generally repeats in 8 bar segments ... which perfectly fits the 8 bar dance step! Sometimes the lead instrumentalist (fiddler) will play a 4-count (2 bars) pick-up phrase leading into the start of the tune. This is referred to as “4 potatoes”. If there is no pick-up played, then you must be familiar with the tune and recognize when the 8 bar musical pattern begins again. Once you hear the pattern, you start dancing your step at any repeat of the 8-bar pattern.

When you are dancing along with my step dance videos, you will hear that the music being played starts with a fiddle intro. This is your cue to get ready to dance. Other times I count you in so you get an idea of when to start dancing.

How old can you be to start?

It is never too early or too late to start step dancing! Children as young as 3 and 4 years old learn how to step dance. At step dance competitions there are different age categories, starting at “8 years and under” class, all the way up to “65 and over” class. It is never too late to start!

What type of shoes do you wear?

Step dance shoes are the same shoe as a tap dance shoe. There are many styles to choose from. I recommend Capezio, Bloch, and Ben & Miller tap shoes. The shoes will generally come with a solid single tap. Traditionally in step dancing, the dancers would wear a double tap (Selva Staccato or Bell taps). This gives the dancing its unique sound.

What type of dance surface do you use?

Masonite or G1S plywood are inexpensive dance surfaces to purchase. Puckboard is also has a good sound. You don't need a large surface to dance on, especially when first starting out. I would recommend getting a 4x4 piece of board that is 1/4 inch thick. You can get this from a local hardware store. Carpeting, carpet underlay or any shock-absorbent type material would be good to put under the board if you are dancing on a hard surface that has little or no give (ie cement floor).

Where do these steps come from?

Many of the beginner level steps taught on my web site are ones that I learned as a student, or variations of those steps. Depending on the geographical location of dance teachers, the beginner and intermediate routines vary slightly, but at the same time, cover all of the basic techniques a student needs to learn to progress to higher levels. The advanced routines taught on my website are steps that I made up. In general, advanced routines are more representative of individual dancers' creative styles, which result in a diverse variety of steps.