

3 Technique

GENERAL

Sometimes it is asked, "Does the survival of Scottish National Dancing depend more on technique than on formation?" This is a difficult question to answer, but, on the whole, the technique is the more important. As has been said earlier, many of the formations are similar to those found in all British dances, and it is in the music, technique and spirit that the real Scottish tradition lies. Then, too, formation can be clearly described in books with appropriate diagrams, but technique requires personal knowledge and much practice to get the correct feeling for the steps as well as for the timing and shape. Only by a performance correct in technique can the true appearance of the dance be obtained. The whole performance of Scottish Country or Ballroom Dancing shows markedly the influence of the French Court, and its technique is closely allied to that of the Ballet, so popular then and always in France.

A careful study of the positions of the feet is necessary for good, correct Scottish steps. Pas de Basque, which is one of the oldest of all steps, and which is found in practically all forms of dancing, was possibly the step used at one time for all figures of Scottish Country Dancing. The Skip Change of Step now used for all steps of progression is more modern, but it, the "Kemsoole" or forward step (Gaelic *Ceum Siubhal*—to go on with rapidity), claims a long usage. All Scottish steps require strength, agility and endurance, with the addition of much grace and poise.

All good Scottish Country Dance classes begin with step practice, and first of all a careful study of the foot positions should be made.



Note carefully the placing of both feet in all four positions. When done on the toes the positions are slightly different. In (3) the heel of the left foot comes slightly over the instep of the right. When dancers are standing in the set, feet should be in first position.

There are two main types of steps in Scottish Country Dancing.

1.—Steps of Progression

In Reel and Jig time:—Skip Change of Step, Slipping, and Running.

In Strathspey time:—Change of Step and Hop.

2.—Setting Steps

In Reel and Jig time:—Pas de Basque.

In Strathspey time:—Common Schottische, Highland Schottische, and various Foursome Reel steps.

Now to take each step and study its form in detail.

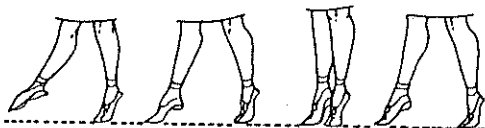
REEL AND JIG

Skip Change of Step

Everyone knows what is meant by "change of step"—step forward on the right foot, bring the left foot up behind the right so that the instep of the left foot is pressed to the heel of the right (making a T); now take another step forward with the right. Repeat this with left foot leading. Now get the step rhythmic—"right, together, right—left, together, left," and so on. Now repeat on the toes, being careful that the left foot is brought up close to the right heel, not under. When this is done easily and rhythmically, add the skip with which the step begins. Teach this skip as a lift with knee and ankle quickly extended. The step now becomes—lift—step—together—step, or lift, 1, 2, 3. Now add a

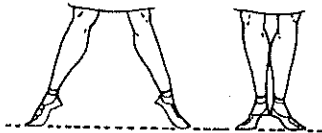
little hop as you extend the front leg and the step is complete. In the lift, the foot should be raised just an inch or two from the ground, ankle well extended and knee straight and well turned out. Be careful to close up properly on 2, for if a gap is left the step is shortened and the flow greatly lost. This step is used in movements of progression as down the middle and up again—cast off—right and left—four hands across—advance and retire, etc., etc., and whenever one hand is given in turning.

“Kemsoole or Forward Step is the common step for promenade or figure of the reel.” *Practice of Dancing* by Francis Peacock, Aberdeen, 1805.



Slipping

This step is used in reel and jig time for all circles. It is also found in such dances as “La Tempête,” when partners joining both hands slip up or down or across the dance. The correct method of performing this step is (1) take a step sideways on the left foot—heels raised, toes turned out—(2) bring the right foot up to the left, with heels meeting and toes still turned out. Dance this eight times, then do the same thing to the right. The movement should be light and easy, and is smooth, not jumpy. Control is needed to slow up on the eighth step to begin the steps to the right without adding any accessory movements, such as the little jump so often done. The step then becomes step, together-step, together. Note that all circles begin to the left, therefore this is an



exception to the rule that all steps begin with the right foot. This goes back to the days of sun worship, when all good and correct movements went with the sun. To start a circle to the right is the witches' way called “widdershins.”

Running Step

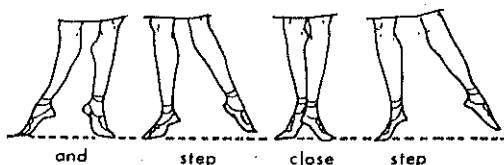
In some dances such as “Haymakers,” “Strip the Willow” and “Foula Reel,” the whole dance is done with a running step. This step, without being rigid, must be controlled and neat, with the weight well above the carrying foot. There is a good deal of ankle movement in this step and the actual progression made on each step must not be too great. The foot must be placed neatly on the ground and the lifted foot kept rather close to the carrying foot and not too high.



Pas de Basque Step

Although the skip change of step is perhaps the more difficult step to achieve perfectly, the pas de basque presents much more difficulty at its first approach. This is because of the rhythm, which is not so straightforward as that of the change of step. At first it is better to teach it as if it consisted of three beats, a long beat and two short ones, as a dactyl in prosody. Begin the step then as “step, mark time,” making the first step a fairly long one. When this goes rhythmically, do it with a jump—jump, mark time. Repeat now on the toes till the actual rhythm has been mastered. Now go back to the positions of the feet to get the correct shape of the step. Step with right foot in second position, bring left foot to third position in front of right and put the weight on it, then step back with the weight on right

foot again. When this form of the step has been practised as "step, beat, beat," do it on the toes remembering to emphasise the first beat and clear change of weight on second and third. Now add the jeté or quick extension of knee and ankle which the left foot must execute as the weight goes back on to the right foot. This is done in the direction in which the toe is pointed, *i.e.*, into the intermediate fourth position. From this position the foot is carried round to repeat the step on the left foot. This carry round should be done so that the whole step is danced on the spot, not from side to side as was allowed while the rhythm was being taught. So now the step has become—and 1 2 3.



This step takes one bar of music and is used for setting, or for movements where little progression is required, and when two hands are given in turning. Throughout the movement the knees must be well turned out, the body kept facing straight forward and erect. No accessory body movements should be allowed although the posture should be easy without stiffness and again a soft give of the ankles.

STRATHSPEY STEPS

Strathspey Travelling Step

The difference between reel and strathspey travelling step lies in the rhythm, which in reel time asks for the hop to be done quickly at the beginning, while in strathspey time it demands a long slow hop at the end of the step. As in reel time, the step consists of (1) a step forward on the right foot, (2) a close up with the left foot instep pressed to the heel of the right. This, however, is done much more slowly and should not be done high on the

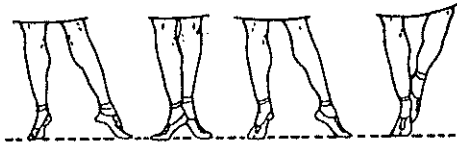
toes. A soft give of the ankle joint is essential for this step, which must be flowing and elegant. (3) The right foot now takes a step forward and (4) the left foot, which is extended behind on the toe, is brought through slowly, knee well turned out. The left leg is gradually straightened until it is fully extended in front. Just before it is placed on the ground to begin the next step, the right knee gives slightly so that the left foot gets a further impulse forward. The step begins now with this little extra push forward (all the weight still on the right foot) and the weight is transferred to the



left foot to repeat the step. A little hop is taken on the carrying foot as the back foot is brought through on the fourth beat. This step takes one bar of music and is used for all movements of progression, and also in all circles in strathspey time. It must be full of forward urge, but must be smooth and flowing, the hop being soft and the foot raised just slightly from the ground laying especial stress on the full extension behind and slow pull through.

Common Schottische

Common schottische is the step used for setting in strathspey time, where pas de basque is used in reel time. (1) A step is taken to the right, (2) left foot is brought up behind right into third position, *i.e.*, left instep pressed to right heel. (3) Now the right foot takes another step to the right and on (4) a hop is made on the right foot, while left foot is brought up behind right leg so that the side of the left foot is pressed to the right leg, toe just above right heel. The step is now done to the left. This step is very similar to the travelling strathspey step, consisting as it does of an urge to the side on the first step—a close up behind into third position—a step to the side again and then a slow elegant drawing up of the foot with the hop.



This step takes one bar of music. It might be noted here that the word "set" is used to mean the step done to right and to left, be it in reel or strathspey. When "set twice" appears in a dance, you may do common schottische setting twice, *i.e.*, right, left, right, left, but it is also allowable to do Highland schottische. This step takes two bars, so for a double setting it must be done just once, right and left. Unless the dance states that the step to be used is Highland schottische, it is better to do the double setting with common schottische, as it is smoother and more graceful.

Highland Schottische

The first four beats are done on the spot. Hopping on the left foot four times, the right foot on (1) is stretched to the side, the toe pointed in second position. Then on (2) lifted behind left foot, edge of foot against back of left leg, toe just above the heel. On (3) pointed again into second position, and on (4) is lifted slightly in front of the left leg, toe just above the ankle. The step now becomes the common schottische—(1) step to the right into second position, (2) bring left behind into third, (3) step again with right into second and hop as before. Repeat with left foot. Rhythmically the step becomes—side, behind, side, in front, step, close, step and hop.

Various Strathspey Setting Steps

In "Glasgow Highlanders," although this is a longwise country dance, definite setting steps, as in the Foursome Reel, have to be used. Eight bars of music are given for this setting, and it would be very tiresome and dull to do eight common schottische steps. Highland schottische steps may be used, but it adds greatly to the appearance of the dance, as well as to the

interest of the dancers, if a variety of reel steps are used. It is interesting for men and women to do different steps, *e.g.*, if the men do "Rocking Steps" the women can do "Glasgow Highlanders Step," or some similar step. If the men do Highland schottische step, then the women must not do "Glasgow Highlanders Step," as this would mean that they would all move in the same direction instead of—as is correct—moving to alternate sides.

"Glasgow Highlanders Step"

The name "Glasgow Highlanders Step" has been adopted for the step given originally as an example of the type of step to be used, and as it has become so definitely regarded as the correct step, here is the description of how it should be done.

Step forward on the right foot lifting left foot behind, edge of foot pressed to back of right leg—step back on to left, lifting right foot in hopping position in front, toe stretched to ground—carry right leg round behind left and stand on it—take a short step to left with left foot—bring right foot in front of left and stand on it, bring left foot round in front to hopping position. Now do all this, hopping on the second, fourth and eighth beats. Repeat going to left. This step takes two bars, so must be done four times. In rhythm it becomes—forward, hop, backwards, hop, behind, step sideways, in front, hop.