

The Story of Traditional Step Dancing

The story of traditional step dancing begins with the Celtic people of Western Europe. They shared a common language, Gaelic, which is still studied and celebrated in many Scottish settlements throughout North America today. These early descendants lived in parts of France, northern Spain and the British Isles, spreading into Ireland and later into North America as early settlers and missionaries. Today Step Dancing in Canada is most predominant in the Eastern provinces, western Quebec and eastern Ontario.

Music and dance are an intricate part of the Gaelic culture celebrated by the lively combination of traditional step dancing and the French, Irish and Scottish fiddle. Much of today's Canadian step dancing has grown from the blended influences of early European settlers.

Step dancing has been passed down through the generations. Traditionally, step dancing teachers hold a repertoire of dance steps passed to them by their dance directors and then build on them - choreographing new dance steps over time. Though traditional, this form of dance continues to evolve as innovative dancers add new movements such as rocking, swinging the leg from the knee and clicking one's heels in the air. Their creativity is prodded by the lively beats of Celtic music. Arm and feet movements become atypical of different areas, such as, the straight arms by an Irish step dancer's side or the loose and relaxed style of an Ottawa Valley dancer in Canada or the swinging leg of a Tennessee dancer in the United States. Even in Canada itself, you can see the different styles of step dancing varying from the "close to the floor" steps of Newfoundland or Quebec to the high stepping performances of eastern Ontario. It's been suggested that at one time, step dancers did use their arms more liberally for example, by putting them on their hips as many Canadian step dancers do today. At intermitted times throughout history the churches condemned dancing. It is said that leaders of the church were more open to the use of controlled stiff arms in traditional step dancing. This is probably most evident in the development of Irish step dancing.

Another atypical characteristic of Canadian step dancing is the tendency to dance within a small area with little travel. This also goes back to the early years where step dancing was done on small table tops or the confined space of pioneer kitchens.

While step dancing was traditionally performed in soft shoes, today's Canadian step dancers often attach metal taps to their shoes making the drumming rhythms of the step dancers beat more audible to the audience. Tap dancers will recognize some of the same basic movements with which the rhythmic sounds are produced.

A young step dancer usually begins by learning a basic clog dance done to a slow 4/4 or 2/2 set time. Step dance can be introduced at an early age. As the dancer progresses the steps become increasingly more intricate. Increased speed enhances their presentation. It's lively and quick rhythms done to the lilting fiddle tunes make step dancing exhilarating to both the dancer and the onlooker.

Today, step dance competitions are held in areas of eastern Ontario and the eastern provinces of Canada. Typically, a dancer performs a Clog, Jig and Reel. They are judged on timing, difficulty of steps, general presentation and stage presence.

Dance companies have also developed, presenting step dancing in large group productions, bringing it to high levels of precision and unison. The MacCulloch Dancers celebrate and preserve the culture of traditional step dancing representing Canada at international festivals throughout the world. Their style of step dancing holds its roots the Scottish settlement of Glengarry County, Ontario, Canada. As with much of Canadian step dancing, it is influenced by the dance of early Scottish, Irish and French settlers.



Note: This story is still developing. If you have any stories or additional information on the history of Traditional Step Dance in Canada, particularly those from the loggers of the Ottawa Valley or Step Dancing on the east coast, please contact us at heather@maccullochdancers.ca.