

A Discussion of CBM and CBMP

By Richard E. Lamberty

One of the most fundamental, and most mis-understood, concepts in the ballroom dances is Contrary Body Movement (CBM). And as it would happen, this topic has come up in my teaching and in some discussion groups several times in the past few months.

CBM is actually a really simple, and very natural, thing. Imagine taking a jolly stroll down the street. Bright sunny day. Warm breeze. Good company. It is very natural for the arms to swing along with the body as you walk. You don't even think about the fact that as you step forward on your left leg your right arm and side swing forward to counterbalance your own movement. And on the next step, with your right foot, your left arm and side swing forward.

To understand how fundamental this really is, try taking a few steps where you swing the same arm and side forward with the leg that is stepping. I call this a Frankenstein Walk. There are very few times in real life where we move in this manner.

But the opposite side swinging is something that happens all the time.

And it is this opposite side swinging with the stepping foot that in the dance world we call Contrary Body Movement.

Sounds so simple.... I should probably quit while I'm ahead.

Unfortunately, that is NOT what we actually do in dancing. Generally, we swing one side through an entire (three step) figure. That means, for most basic figures, that the second step is taken such that the SAME foot and side are swinging. In other words, with a Frankenstein walk action.

Let's take a simple example: (from the leader's point of view) Standing in CP facing DW, a Manuver in Waltz: (Forward R (between partner's feet) commence RF turn, side L, close R to L to end in CP facing RLOD;)

In the ballroom technique book this figure is given as having CBM on step 1. And it is easy to feel that the man's left side should swing forward as he takes that forward step on his right foot.

But the swing of the left side does not end after the first step. It continues all the way through the figure. Clearly this continuation of swing is NOT CBM, but it started as CBM and needs to continue without disruption in order for the movement to feel flowing and easy.

Again, not a hard thing to imagine, and even feel under the right circumstances.

The problems start to arise when we 'manufacture' this contrary body movement instead of allowing it to occur as a natural consequence of our movement.

The most common problem is the force of the swinging side causing the moving foot to go off track. Rather than being a true forward (or backward) step, the foot either drifts in the direction of the swing, or worse (and more commonly) moves opposite to the swing causing the stepping leg to cut across the center line of the body. The feeling is one of being twisted up.

CMB should never cause the stepping foot to go off its path. Never.

Again, take a few strolling steps and see if your natural CBM causes your feet to flail around making you walk like a drunken sailor (no offense to our men and women in the Navy.) And then force that swinging action and feel the reaction of your legs as you walk. Flail is not such a bad word.

CBM in our dancing should not cause this flailing effect. The legs should always have a clear path of movement.

Another problem with CBM is WHEN it occurs. When we just walk, a nice gentle CBM occurs naturally as the step is taken. In our dancing we must apply CBM when it will aid the overall movement of the figure.

For reverse (left) turning actions, CBM should generally be applied AFTER the initiating step has been taken. First direct the step, then swing the opposite side as a continuation of the directed forward (or backward) movement. And by releasing that swinging side fully, you can easily generate the second step of the figure with a natural flowing feeling.

For natural (right) turning actions, CBM should generally be initiated BEFORE the initiating step has been taken. The feeling of CBM will increase as the first step of the figure is taken. And the continuation of the swing of that side will enhance the second step of the figure.

WARNING WILL ROBINSON! DANGER! DANGER! DANGER! It is very easy to allow this early swinging of the side to cause the stepping foot to go off track. Great care must be taken to ensure that the initiating step remains clearly directed.

Now, the obvious question to raise is why this difference between natural and reverse turns? And the obvious answer PHYSICS. The partner stands on the right side, not directly in front of you. Your hips align to partners hips in a particular way. That alignment makes the left side feel more open than the right side.

If you applied CBM early when stepping forward into a reverse turning action, you are essentially directing partner into your own path, thus cutting off movement. In natural turns, partner is already partially blocking your path. By applying CBM early you help to clear the path so that a freer step is possible.

Once you start having a clear feeling of CBM in your dancing, a new problem can arise. Like so many things in life, we might decide that if a little is good, then a lot must be better. And like an awful lot of the really fun things in life, a little IS good, and a lot, simply too much.

Remember, CBM is a naturally occurring phenomenon. Manufacturing it throws off the natural balance.

Rules. Rules. Rules. Do this. Don't do that. Early here. Late there.

I guess you could say that it is all true, and all false. It is possible to dance with no CBM at all. And it is equally possible to dance with all the CBM your body can generate. Late CBM on reverse turns. Early on natural turns. Of course there are exceptions. But generalities help us to think about and understand the concepts.

Now, there is that thing called CBMP. Contrary Body Movement Position. Sometimes we are already in a position where the opposite side of the body is turned towards the leg. It happens in Semi Closed and Reverse Semi Closed Positions. It happens in Contra-Banjo and Contra-Sidecar positions.

In fact, it happens in any dance position which is not Closed Position. (Before you ask, we are only dealing with positions where our partner is in our arms, and only with the International Standard Style of ballroom.)

In the International Standard system of Ballroom Dancing there are a limited number of positions which are used in the execution of all of the figures in the syllabus. The positions are:

1. Closed Position
2. Promenade Position
3. Outside Partner
4. Left Outside Partner
5. Counter Promenade Position

Fallaway Position is often mentioned in the literature, but Fallaway is defined as moving backwards in a Promenade Position. It is not actually different in any way from a Promenade Position. Only the direction of movement differs. In our discussions of technique, we will consider Fallaway the act of moving backwards in a Promenade Position rather than as a separate position.

In addition to the five fundamental dance positions, we also encounter two additional fundamental positions which create our relationship to partner. These are:

6. Closed Position while on Inside of Turn
7. Closed Position while on Outside of Turn

All seven of the possible dance positions, or relationships to partner, are given by FIVE possible foot positions. Those five foot positions are:

1. Both feet pointed directly forward, neither turned away from nor in towards your own center
2. Both feet pointed away from your own center
3. Both feet pointed towards your own center
4. Left foot pointed away from your own center, right foot pointed towards your own center
5. Left foot pointed towards your own center, right foot pointed away from your own center

Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words....

In following simple diagrams, the character '^' represents the center of your body. The characters 'l', '\', and '/' represent a foot and the direction it is pointing.

1. | ^ | = Closed Position
2. \ ^ / = Inside Of Turn
3. / ^ \ = Outside Of Turn
4. \ ^ \ = Outside Partner (Semi Closed for Man, Reverse Semi Closed for Lady)
5. / ^ / = Left Outside Partner (Semi Closed for Lady, Reverse Semi Closed for Man)

At any time the feet are not pointed directly forward, both feet must be pointed either away from or towards your own center (the different combinations making for the different possible positions) and must be turned in equal amounts.

You would not have the left foot turned out at 45 degrees and the right foot turned either in or out any other amount than 45 degrees, for example. The actual amount of turn in or out can vary. It simply must be equal on each side of the body.

Additionally, the amount of turn in the feet that one person makes should match the amount of turn in the feet that partner makes. (If you must know, I believe (but would not bet my house on) that there is an exception to this last statement. But I'm not going to tell you what it is.)

Now, why is all this important?

Because of CBMP. Clearly if 6/7 of our dance positions do not have the feet pointed directly forward then a lot of our dancing is occurring in other than simple Closed Position.

Actually, Inside of turn and Outside Of Turn are really both variants of Closed Position. And when one person is standing in Inside Of Turn, the other must be standing in Outside Of Turn. (No exceptions.)

But that still leaves us with 4/7 of the positions having the feet turned in relationship to our own centers. And surprise, surprise, surprise. That is what Contrary Body Movement Position is. Standing with the opposite side of the body turned towards the leg.

If you are standing with your feet in position 4 as listed above with the weight on your left foot, and step forward with your right foot, you will be stepping in Contrary Body Movement Position (CBMP.)

Likewise standing on your right foot and stepping backwards on your left foot, that step is in CBMP.

Standing in position 5 with weight on the left foot, and step back on the right would be in CBMP. And with weight on the right, a step forward on the left is taken in CBMP.

Steps in CBMP occur all the time in our dancing. Stepping thru in Promenade or Counter Promenade Position. The second quick of any feathering action. In fact any step outside partner is taken in CBMP.

Just as in dealing with Contrary Body Movement, steps taken in CBMP have a host of problems which commonly arise. The foremost of these is the temptation to step across the center line of the body.

At any point when you step across the center line of your own body one of two things will occur. Either you will CHECK your forward or backward movement. OR. (and here is the problem) your spine must shift sideways to accommodate that crossing action and return to a point of balance which can be shared with partner.

The simple rule is: the left foot belongs on the left side of the body; the right foot belongs on the right side of the body. Exceptions? Plenty. But they are all checking actions where direction of movement will be halted or reversed. (Which includes lock steps.)

The most important thing to remember is that the International Standard style of Ballroom dancing, which is the primary source of all higher lever Round Dance figures, is based on a very clear, and fundamentally natural, usage of the human body. If you find yourself doing things which feel profoundly unnatural, then it is appropriate to question what is happening and look for a more natural feeling way to dance.

CBM is a fundamentally natural thing. CBMP is also fundamentally natural given the relationship between the two partners in the couple.

On the other hand, no one said it was easy...