

Off the floor

Choreography - What Dancers Want !

What are the first things we say after we learn a new dance? Whose dance is it? Do you like the music? Do you like the choreography? While opinions can be subjective, we often agree on whether the choreography is good.

But why is it that some of our really good dances don't even get entered in choreography competitions? And why do some winning dances never even get taught?

We decided to ask the dancers their opinions on what makes good choreography. And then asked one of our most successful choreographers, Michael Vera-Lobos, to comment on the results.

He also tells us what is important to him when he choreographs a new dance.



Michael Vera-Lobos

The Survey

The survey was based on feedback from 50 dancers who attend 15 different classes from 10 Sydney clubs. They include long term and newer dancers who enjoy easy intermediate to advanced dances.

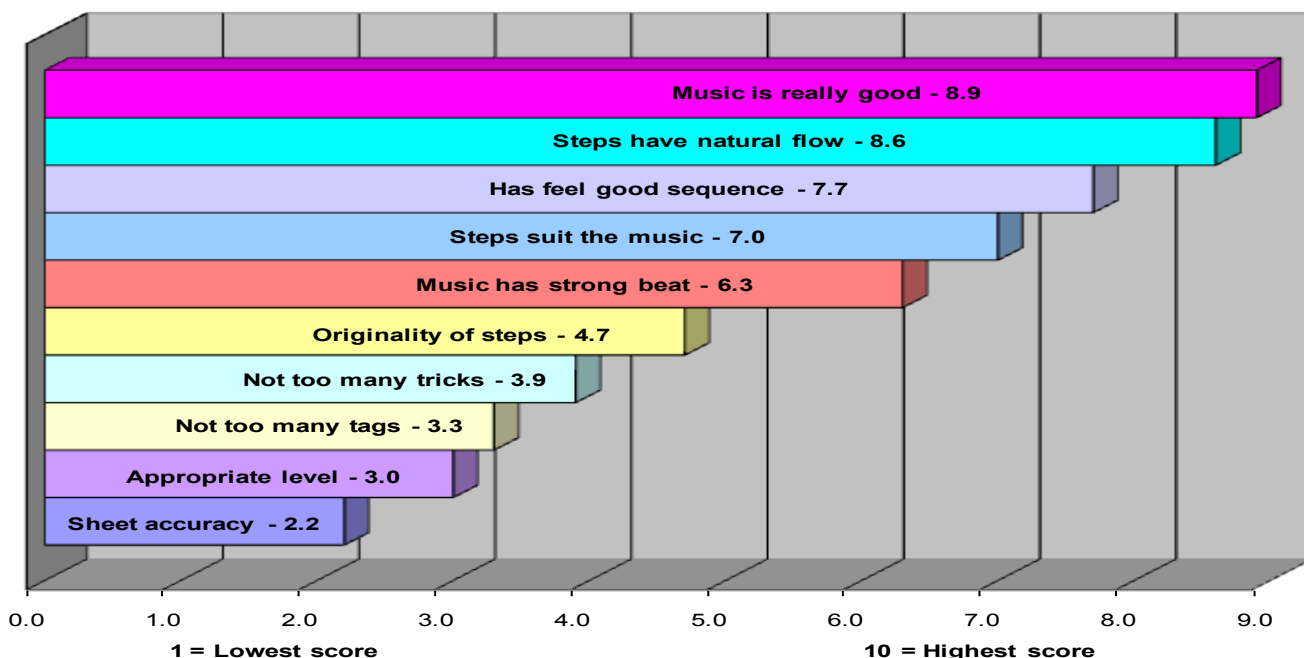
The results are shown below. Really good music is the most important issue to us, followed by steps that have a natural flow. The accuracy of the dance sheet is of least importance to dancers.

Some dancers also included a variety of general comments and a selection of these are included at the end.

“Good music is all around us. Every emotion you can possibly feel has been covered by a song. And everything you could possibly want in life has been covered by a song.”

Michael

Line Dance Choreography Survey Aug/Sept 2010



“The best choreography competitions are those where actual choreographer/instructors and accomplished instructors are judging,” said Michael.

“Generally, the judging criteria are a good baseline. But it is important that each judge can actually read sheets, teach dances from Beginner to Advanced and hear the actual counts in the music.

“These days a lot has changed and it is often likely for the judges’ favourites to win rather than a dance that actually deserves it. I think choreography competitions are not as well run as they used to be because the standard of judging is not as high.”

Why do some of our most popular local dances not win places in choreography competitions?

Michael believes there are several reasons for this.

“It is important that the judges can actually merit a dance for originality, flow and suitability to the music. Otherwise, the results are restricted by the judges’ lack of experience and expertise.”

Michael said a dance should also be judged from both a teacher’s and a dancer’s perspective. “That is why judges should only judge those sections which they can personally dance and teach. So many times you see judges that can only teach, or choose to teach, basic dances, judging in the Upper Intermediate to Advanced categories.

“They don’t have the necessary understanding or experience of what is good choreography at that level and this becomes quite evident in their commentary and scoring.

“I believe this is why there has been a decline in entries over the past few years.

“And of course, while we don’t like to admit it, there is often a bit of politics.

“Some of the winning dances fail to catch on because, unfortunately, a good dance is only as popular as the number of instructors who are willing to teach it,” said Michael.

“There are some instructors who take the easy way out and teach easy dances or won’t do the research to challenge their students.

“But there are also a lot of students who simply prefer to stay in their safety zone and do not want the challenge of more advanced dances. And then there are those who don’t want to be continually learning new dances.

“Another reason is that a lot of instructors don’t have the time or opportunity to go to workshops and competitions.

“So it is important for students to tell their teachers when they see something great they want to learn. Most instructors would love to hear what their students want, but of course they then have to follow through and teach some of them!



Michael, Reba McEntire and Noel Bradey

*“Everything
I choreograph these days
I do for a reason.
Or due to something that
is stated in the song.”*

Michael

“The most common mistake choreographers make is to try and write a dance that will be picked up by everyone.

“They will look at sequences and combinations, jam them together and think that it will work. It never does. There are a few choreographers who do this and I automatically place their dances in the ‘never to be taught’ pile. They are usually short lived and not worth placing the effort into in the first place.”

How easy is it to judge a dance without actually dancing it yourself?

“For a good instructor it isn’t that hard. They should be able to see how a dance flows, how it suits the music and to determine how it would be to dance without dancing it,” said Michael.

The survey results suggest that we prefer dances with a particular sequence that feels really good to dance over originality.

Michael said he believes both are important. “Dances are always great when they have a trick in them. And everybody enjoys a sequence that feels really good to dance. Either one is a winner, but if you are able to combine both it becomes a masterpiece.”

We often hear choreographers say how difficult it is to find good music, but Michael disagrees.

“No, it’s not difficult at all. Good music is all around us. Every emotion you can possibly feel has been covered by a song. And everything you could possibly want in life has been covered by a song. That’s the great thing about music - *creativity* and *diversity*.”

He believes part of the problem is no one wants to buy music any more.

“Gone are the days when every month you could go to a country music cd sale and buy up big. Sure there were some dud tracks, but you could always find the gems.

“These days, if they can’t download it or burn it, they are not interested.

“It’s sad when you think about it, because these people (and there are many instructors and students) are not doing linedance any favours.

“As long as people are prepared to put in the effort, look for tracks on iTunes, purchase them, etc. there will always be good music around we can dance to.”

From a personal perspective, Michael’s top three priorities are:

- 1. The Music**
- 2. The Words**
- 3. The Count—How long, how many tags if any, holds etc**

Once he has selected the music and finished the choreography, Michael crosses his fingers that his students will like it as much as he enjoyed creating it.

“It is difficult to say how my own style has changed over the years. It’s hard to come up with a cult classic these days e.g. Someone like You, Patient Heart, Somebody. When it happens it is just great. But when it doesn’t - I guess you just sit back and enjoy it for as long as it gets requested.

“But my choice in music has definitely changed. It is a bit more on the serious side these days. Maybe it’s just a part of getting older and wiser! Everything I choreograph these days I do for a reason. Or due to something that is stated in the song. I know the students won’t know why something is chosen, but it is significant to me. And watching a floor full of people dancing to one of my dances is just great.”

“I wish the teachers would overlap more. It is becoming difficult to go to any socials other than your own club’s.”

“I have been dancing for 16 years and this is the first time anyone has bothered to ask us what we think. Thank you!”

“I’d like to see a NSW Line Dance Association formed with both teachers and dancers on the committee. This could be used to encourage teachers to work together, teach core dances by region and locally, promote and provide general information on linedancing.”

“People’s Choice Awards don’t work as the voting is rigged by multiple votes. Or ignored by those rising above the process.”

“I prefer dances that you actually dance to, not a series of steps to rush through.”

**“The teachers are running a business and we are their customers.
If we like their products and service we become loyal customers. If we don’t, we shop elsewhere.”**

“Both judges and teachers have biases, whether it is country v modern music, for or against different choreographers. We just want to dance!”

“A dance is like telling a story. It needs to flow but have interesting ‘turns’ too. You want to keep on reading (dancing).”

**“Some teachers put on old dances even though nobody asks for them or can remember them.
There is a reason. Some of them weren’t that great even though they were popular at the time.
But that doesn’t make them a classic!”**

“I wish the instructors would ask the students what they would like to learn more often.”

“Music is a big part of line dancing—that is what goes into my head and heart.”

**“What is this dance called? Half of us can’t remember. We can’t recall the name or can’t link the name with the steps. Based on studies of human memory, if students were more aware of the name during the teach, they would more easily recall it and the steps later on.
I would like to suggest the name of the dance be stated at least twice at the start (given that some of us will be talking!) and again during the teach. And later prompt recall by asking students ‘and the name of this dance is...?’”**

“The variety of music is great, but please don’t totally give up country music!”

“I wish teachers would maintain a (fairly) short list of the best dances, and the classics, and ensure students have sufficient revision to enable them to do those dances at socials.”