Steve asked me to write an article on Hungarian dance, a task I hardly feel qualified for. I can, however, give a little of *my* perspective on dance in general with Hungarian dance as the centerpiece. Please take anything I say with a healthy grain of salt. At a certain point in life you feel like time has shifted into reverse and is going backwards. I feel like I’m in the youth of my old age, a dangerous time when old fools think like teenagers and where strong opinion can easily substitute for fact!

First, I note that traditional ethnic music and dance reflect the culture from which they evolve. Even before I was into dance I always felt an affinity for things Hungarian. As just one example take Hungarian mathematicians. Relative to its population (~10 million) Hungary has produced not just an impressive number of mathematicians, but original thinkers who made contributions that influenced the direction of mathematical thought, geniuses like John (Janos) von Neumann, Paul Erdos, and Janos Bolyai. Men like this, and Hungarian scientists in general, which Hungary produces in abundance, seem to me to reflect something clean and honest, even exotic, about the national character. In fairness I might add that there is something special about all of eastern Europe, from the Balkans northward to the Scandinavian countries, including Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden and Norway. It is no accident, I believe, that in international folk dance circles (as it were) these countries’ dances are inordinately represented in--indeed dominate--a typical evening’s program of international folk dance. But even in this company I believe Hungary excels.

Why should this be? If there’s any truth to the saying “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”, then perhaps this is a clue, a factor in the evolution of what it means to be Hungarian. Magyar tribes, according to some sources, consolidated their control of the Carpathian Basin establishing an early Hungarian state in the 9th and early 10th centuries. In the millennia preceding, if the distribution of spoken language is any indication, pre-Hungarian tribes migrated some three thousand miles—about twice the distance pioneers had to travel going from Missouri to California. From a large expanse in central Russia just south of the arctic circle and east of the Urals, they arrived in the region of what is Hungary today. My theory is that they were simply tired of freezing their tushes in the Western Siberian winters, but regardless of why they came, certainly only the very strongest and fit could attempt, much less survive, such a journey. But having arrived, it still must have been no picnic. Eastern Europe, being at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, and in the path of every invading army from east, west, south, or north, has for centuries been the proving ground for cultures with true grit. Geographically Hungary is at the epicenter. To survive and even flourish people there would indeed have to be something beyond the ordinary.

In nature, beauty is often the unlikely coincidence of many factors. Life itself on the planet earth is an example; you don’t see that many sister planet earths spinning around out there. A natural diamond is formed only under unique circumstances involving extremely high pressure and temperature approximately a hundred miles beneath earth’s surface. This process requires *billions* of years, and then the diamond is only brought near the surface by volcanic activity. A diamond is a rarity born of extreme conditions. In the universe of ethnic dance, Hungarian dance and culture is the diamond. I realize I’m preaching to the choir here, but I’ll say it anyhow: Hungary is indeed special *and its depth, variety, and sophistication of music and dance reflect that*. Not only does each region have *its own unique set of dances* evolved over hundreds of years, in many instances *so does each village*! While every country in the world is, or at least should be, passionate about its folk traditions, only a handful in of countries are in my opinion even in the same league as Hungary. To explain and justify that statement I need to talk a bit about dance itself.

An *improvisational* dance is one that you make up as you go along, in the moment. Generally it is not without some structure; you could just mindlessly flail your body aimlessly about, but usually you don’t, any more than when you speak you simply make random sounds. Usually there are a few rules, called *syntax*, and vocabulary, called *figures* and *steps*. And then of course there is the music that you *dance to*, and (in the case of couple dances) your partner *with whom you dance (lead and follow).* You might even ask *why am I dancing,* or *what, if anything, am I trying to say* in this dance. Each of these factors introduces another layer, another dimension or level of complexity, of sophistication. In this sense, an improvisational couple dance is a little like a language or an extemporaneous conversation. By contrast, a *choreographed dance*, couple or line (almost all line dances tend to be choreographed), is like a scripted speech or scripted conversation. In high school chorus I remember singing a lot of words in Latin. We generally had little idea of the meaning of those words, we were just mouthing them phonetically. And certainly we were not picking or choosing which words to sing; we merely sang in sequence what was written in front of us. Now while this is not evil, it can in fact be quite beautiful, it is a few notches down on the evolutionary scale from actually *knowing* a language and, further, *conversing meaningfully* in it. It is like comparing a *picture* of a scene taken from real life *with* *real life*, or like comparing a rock with a living organism. Certainly there are some very pretty rocks out there, but their possibilities are limited when compared with something that thinks, breathes, and moves around on its own.

Not surprisingly there are other countries that have wonderful dances. Bulgaria and Macedonia have evolved, in both their beauty and diversity, incredible line dances. There is something special, absolutely precious, in virtually every country’s folk dance tradition, so much so that it is impossible to compare them to claim superiority of one country’s dances over another. Nor would you even want to. Argentina has produced what may be the world’s premier urban folk couple dance in the Argentine tango. A main reason for being passionate about international folk dancing is this amazing diversity.

But the point I want to make here is that *improvisational* couple dancing demands a sophistication an order of magnitude greater than that of line dancing (there, I said it, and damn the torpedoes of the line dancers) or that of *choreographed* couple dances (as in “Dancing With the Stars”). Each of the factors listed above (syntax, vocabulary, music, partner, purpose, etc.) play a role, and as well they are synergistic. I don’t have time or space to go into great detail (another article), but just for example if you are a leader in a couple dance, the demands on you to know precisely what your partner is doing—where her center of balance is, which foot she’s on, is she moving laterally, rotating, and so on—is exponentially greater than in a choreographed dance where he does his shtick, she does hers. Even then knowing where your partner is and what she’s doing is helpful, but not nearly as crucial as in a lead-and-follow improvisational dance, dances like true Argentine tango, or Mezosegi (or Kalotaszegi, Szatmari, Szekely, . . .) Csardas. In these dances it is a different world; the *focus* is on the follower: he focuses on her; she focuses on him focusing on her. But ultimately it’s about two people dancing as one—two bodies, two brains, but one mind: empathy. It’s what gives true improvisational couple dancing a level of complexity, of magic, even spirituality, over dancing line or choreographed couple dances.

Finally, there is purpose. People dance for different reasons: to impress a girl, to gain attention, to be “the best”, to be social, to relax, for exercise, etc. There are a few dancers however who get beyond this. They look for *their* dance; they try to dance “from the inside out”, to dance *who they truly are*, and not *merely to mimic the moves or style of someone else*. Looking at dance as a language, it changes the focus from *how* you say something to *what* it is you are trying to say, from merely *looking* good to actually *being* good. There’s a difference. Thus leading a partner in an improvisational couple dance is like being in a different universe. And as a catalyst to get from one to the other, Hungarian improvisational dance forms are unsurpassed. I had a friend who passed away recently, an amazing dancer who was original, not flashy, who simply danced who he was, but to see him dance was to have goose bumps. His two favorite dances were Kalotaszegi Legenyes and Mezosegi Csardas.

Improvisational folk couple dances are a rarity. There are very few cultures that have evolved to produce them, examples being Hungary with its many versions of the czardas and Argentina with its tango. But no country has produced the mind boggling depth, diversity, and sheer number of different improvisational dance forms as has Hungary. For myself they are on a very short list of the most challenging, most interesting, most *honest,* dances on earth.