

Vergnügungszug (Pleasure Train) Polka

By Johann Strauss II

During the 1850s in Vienna, both the refined *Polka française* and the livelier *Schnell-Polka* developed. By the late 19th century, polkas had become very popular and were often performed by military bands the world over, thanks to the distribution of sheet music. An 1847 French dictionary of dance terminology defined the polka as having a 104 beats per minute with an emphasis on the second beat of the measure. It typically employed a ternary (ABA) format, with eight-measure subsections, sometimes with an introduction and a coda.

Strauss' *Vergnügungszug*, Op. 281, published in 1864, is a Schnell-Polka, which was influenced by the "galop", a fast and simple dance in 2/4 meter. The title, loosely translated as "Pleasure Train," is a reference to the polkas derived from galops, which were dances for couples. Participants formed a line, or "train," that moved through the dance hall. *Vergnügungszug* is related to the traditional polka form inherited from Bohemia to the extent that some of the melodies accent the second beat of the measure, particularly in section A. That said, the general composition of the main sections is nonetheless unconventional. The first melody in section A is eight measures, but its repeat is extended by four measures. The 20-measure total could understandably confuse some dancers. Strauss made up for the discrepancy with a four-measure interlude between the two melodies of the second half of A, creating a total divisible by eight. In another departure from the norm, the second part of A is entirely repeated before progressing to the B section, itself featuring a crashing, eight-measure interlude between its two, 16-measure melodies. The A section then appears again, but without repeating its second half. Strauss' rambunctious melodies were delightfully in step with the gleeful abandon that Schnell-Polka participants brought to the dance hall, while the trumpet and snare drum presence in section A points to the polka's military associations.

Tom Wachunas