



## Introduction to Bellydance in the SCA


Middle Eastern dance, commonly called bellydance, is a very beautiful and old art form. We, as Middle Eastern dancers in the SCA, do need to be conscious of the fact that often our dance is not entirely documentable. Dance certainly occurred in period, in both social and performance context, but there is not a great deal of material to show us exactly what it looked like, what music or costuming was used and how much it differs from the form we know today.

Do you love this dance form? Do you want to dance at SCA haflas or around the bonfires at evening events? Please do so and enjoy yourself! I have always felt that bellydance within the scope of the SCA is first and foremost a social dance and it is something in which everyone can partake.

Please remember also that different people will want to explore dance at different levels (just as with anything in the SCA). Some people will be perfectly content to take an occasional Pennsic class and shimmy around the fire, while others are studying weekly outside of SCA events and working on performing at mundane events. It is all ok! There is a place within the SCA for all types of dancers. Let's remember that it should be fun before all else!

Let's assume you have sampled the dance at different events, but now you want to do more than take some Pennsic classes and dance around the fire. What do you do next? I encourage you to do some research, read, take classes outside of the SCA, watch other dancers and learn more. Look at period art and try to envision the art come to life and imagine how a figure's pose might depict a specific dance move. Read everything you can, but also keep in mind that there are so many myths about our art form. Be aware that there are a lot of things assumed to be fact that are quite untrue. There is an element of fantasy that surrounds the dance that must be peeled away if one really wants to get a better understanding what is is we do, as well as the cultures from which it originates.

And don't forget to practice! Work on what you have already learned, take classes, work with DVDs and try to get out and see other dancers perform. And most importantly, never stop having fun with dance!





## Music

Dance is a visual interpretation of music. With cultural dance, this is very important to remember. It's only by learning and understanding the music linked with the dance that we can truly begin to understand and master our art.

This is difficult sometimes for members of the SCA because there are so few documentable period songs. From my studies, I have heard that Lamma Bada Yatathana and Mevlana both fall within our time period, but I can think of no others at this time. Many of the rhythms are old as well, but I can not put a start date on those either. There are some other songs, such formal music from the Ottoman court that can be dated to our timeframe, but these pieces are not intended for dance and would not make great choices for open/social dance or for performances.

Given this lack of documentable music, we are often left to our own devices to determine what is at least "SCA-Appropriate" when it comes time to host haflas or perform our art. Please consider using music that fits the feel of the event. Think about the time and effort that the hosts have put into providing a lovely period atmosphere for the event, or the time and effort the populace has put into gathering appropriate garb and costuming. It's our job to choose music that reflects these ideals. Many classic bellydance songs are fun to use at events even though they are not documentable, by making the best choices in which version of those songs to choose, we can add to the event's atmosphere.


If you do not have access to live music, acoustic music (on CD) are always a welcome choice for a typical SCA event. It is also good to have a selection of tempos, rhythms and styles of music within each set. It will keep both the dancers and the audience from getting bored.

I strongly recommend that those wishing to learn this dance also study the "classics" when it comes to music. These are songs that are commonly used in the bellydance world but some might not be suitable for use as canned music at events because the orchestration is wrong or because the changes within the music are too complex for newer dancers. Despite this, learning this music – and how to react to it – is important. If you understand the rhythms and where they originate, and what moves are associated with those cultures, you will not find yourself getting 'stuck' and wondering what to do next. Understanding the instruments used in classic bellydance music (many of these are used in the SCA as well) will also give you keys as to which types of movements work best with a portion of the song.

It's a very large puzzle to piece together, but in the end it will make you a better dancer because you will come to a point where you can just move to the music when you hear it and that's when the true magic happens!

My final note about music selection is to make sure your song selection it is appropriate for dance. If it is a common bellydance song, it's generally ok. If it is something you find elsewhere, look into its origins or try to find the lyrics for the song if it has any. There are many pieces of Middle Eastern music that are not intended for dance, including religious pieces that occasionally dancers mistakenly use.

On the next page I have included lists of music that I feel is SCA appropriate and also classics that you can listen to and start learning. I also highly recommend that you search for videos online of dancers performing to the classics!





## Music

Elf's Choices for SCA Appropriate Music (not every song by the artists below may fit the formula for a good hafla, but use your own best judgment and find things you love that you want to share with others):

Turku  
Andelus Ensemble  
Brothers of the Baladi  
John Bilezikjian  
Scott Wilson  
Middle Earth Ensemble  
Upper Egypt Ensemble  
Turkish Band Camp All Stars  
Jalilah Raks Series (some of these)  
DragonSong  
Helm  
Children of Paradise  
Emuziki


Classic songs all dancers should know (this is just a starter list, there are SO many more):

Alf Layla Wah Layla  
Ana Fi Intizarak  
Aziza  
Betwannes Beek  
Enta Omri  
Leylet Hob  
Miserlou  
Rompi Rompi  
Shik Shak Shok  
Tamr Henna  
Zeina

Good CDs full of classics or classic style music you can start with are:

Cairo Orchestra - Belly Dance Classics CD  
Masters of Bellydance Music  
10 Songs Every Bellydancer Should Know  
Beata and Horacio's Oriental Fantasy Series  
Jalilah's Raks Sharki Series

There are also some great CDs produced by a local dancer and teacher, Yasmin. They can be found at [Serpentine.org](http://Serpentine.org) and are fantastic!





## Music

If you are familiar with live music events within the SCA, you will notice that some songs are used frequently. Below is a list of the top songs you hear played often at SCA events:

Aziza  
Enta Omri  
Fire Dance  
Garoon Garoon  
Hadouni Hadouni  
Hicaz Oyun Havasi  
Istemem Babacim  
Lamma Bada  
Laylet Hob  
Leyla  
Mevlana  
Misirlou  
Nihavent Longa  
Nihavent Oriental  
Nubar Nubar  
Rompi Rompi  
Rumeli Karsilama  
Shaskin  
Shisheler  
Sulukule  
Uskudara  
Yeshilem  
Zeina






## Movement

There is a large movement vocabulary available to bellydancers. There are moves for every tempo and for every feeling you could have in a piece of music – from fast to slow to percussive to ooey-goey. But please don't feel overwhelmed, you don't need to learn them all immediately! There are some mesmerizing dancers out there who don't have a massive dance vocabulary. The moves they do use, they use well, **and** they perform with such class and charisma that they really reach their audiences. Fifi Abdo is an example of one such dancer. If you don't know who she is I highly recommend looking up her videos on YouTube!

Practice the moves you do know, get them deep into your muscles. Eventually, you will know them so well that you don't have to think about *how* to do them, instead, they will come naturally to you when you *hear* them in the music. Work with those moves, try them with different types of music, try them fast or slow, or with a pause or pose. Master your moves and don't forget to keep working with those when you start learning other things. How do they all work together?

When we start out as dancers we often get flustered trying to figure out what to do next. The first step to eliminating that internal question is to really have those moves locked in. Internalize the moves and really, *really* learn the music so well that it too becomes internalized. At this point you will have such a feel for it that things just start to flow together when you are on the dance floor!

How can you improve your dance?

- Take classes! Take classes from multiple teachers if possible.
  - Practice in front of a mirror
  - Practice often
  - Practice to songs you love, but also start to expand your music collection as you expand your movement vocabulary
  - Get feedback on your work. There is nothing better than having a teacher help you figure out what you are doing right and what corrections you need to make to improve your dance.
  - Research – spend time finding new music or watching videos of other dancers online
  - Attend local dance events, both in and out of the SCA. It's a wonderful opportunity to see what else is out there and to meet other dancers.
  - Learn the culture behind the dance. Learn the lyrics to the songs. Learn the folkdances (Saidi, Khaleegi, Nubian, Romany, etc.) that helped to form the modern stage version of the dance. Note that many of these folk dances are also a great way to showcase an old-world ethnic piece within an SCA event.
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## When/Where/Why


In the SCA, we have many outlets for dance. There are hafla events that are based largely around music, dance, food and other Middle Eastern arts. Often these events will have live music and an open dance floor, with perhaps a few time slots set aside for individual performances. If there is open dance feel free to get up at anytime!

Another popular outlet for dance in the SCA is dancing around bonfires. This typically occurs in the evenings at camping events. Again, these are often considered open dance and you can happily join in as you like.

The third common type of venue would be a staged show. This might happen as part of an A&S event, entertainment during feast, or as a formal production like the Cure Salee or Middle Eastern Dance Expo at Pennsic.

Each type of outlet comes with its own set of “rules”. Of course, these will differ for each event and you should always conform to the expectations of the hosts when making your music, costume and performance choices.


For Social Dance at Haflas and Fire Circles:


- Keep in mind that this is the time and place for everyone to enjoy themselves. If it is very crowded, it is ok to step back for a bit and enjoy just watching the other dancers.
  - You can certainly go into “performance mode” at one of these events, if space allows it, but be mindful of props that take up space (veils) or dangerous props (fire and swords). If there are other dancers it might not be time to start showing off your latest veil tricks unless you have a lot of space to yourself. Space for props like these is a luxury at events, and you should not assume that others will clear the floor for you to use them. The same goes for floorwork, it can be very dangerous for both you and others if you opt to do floorwork in a crowded space. Large choreographies or troupework also don’t often mesh well in social dance spaces.
  - Do not expect the audience to have their attention focused solely on you. If they want to watch, that is wonderful! If they don’t, don’t take it personally, as some people prefer to go to events to socialize. If someone is watching, and seems to be very into the activity, it is perfectly fine to interact with them as dancer.
  - The word hafla means party in Arabic. It’s a social event where people come to spend time with friends and have fun in their way. Many SCA haflas are just that, a party with a dance floor. It is also good to know that a hafla, when held by the local dance community, is usually a staged show (often with a short time set aside for open dance), and it is not considered appropriate to come in costume. If you plan to attend such an event for the first time, contact the host or regular attendees to learn how their events work.
  - Sometimes its nice to help a newer dancer get out there and start moving. Often experienced dancers enjoy others looking to them for help on the dance floor. Remember too that sometimes this is a dancers only chance to just let loose and not teach or perform, and it should never be taken personally if they just seem to want to do their own thing.
  - A drink or two might take the edge away from the performance jitters, but beware of consuming too much at events, especially at a fire circle. You do not want to stumble into the fire. DO drink lots of water. Dancing on a warm day or near a hot fire can cause dehydration.
  - If you are at a fire circle, you would be wise to wear only natural fibres. There are so many lovely dance things made of polyester or nylon, but these fibres burn or melt quickly and can be a hazard if you happen to get too close to flame.
  - If you don’t play zills/sagat well, don’t play them at all in public.
  - Some events are more lenient about “period” than others, please comply with your hosts’ expectations regarding this.
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## When/Where/Why

For SCA-Based Staged Performances:

- Remember that not all shows are meant for all dancers. The Pennsic Middle Eastern Dance Expo is open to everyone, but other shows there, like the Cure Salee, are comprised of hand-picked dancers. Some shows encourage all levels and all types of performance while other organizers are looking for specific things. Don't take it personally if you are not invited to be in a show, or if you offer and are declined. There are other shows and other times to perform!
  - Remember also that many shows have dancers of varying levels. Often an SCA event is the first place a new dancer will publically perform. Encourage everyone and enjoy their efforts!
  - If you are performing at an event, you should tailor your performance to fit the event. If the hosts strive for authenticity, it would be rude for a dancer to show up to perform in a modern costume with blatantly modern music. The organizers work hard to make their event live up to their vision and as guests, we should strive to add to the atmosphere and make it memorable for all. A performance you might use at a wild Pennsic party in the swamp is likely not appropriate for an event recreating the Ottoman Court in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
  - Find out how long you are expected to perform. If you are not a professional level dancer, ask yourself if its reasonable to dance for that amount of time. It is perfectly ok to ask the hosts if you can do a shorter piece if that is more comfortable for you. If you are given a time limit, don't exceed it!
  - If the performance is at an event where the dancers are selected beforehand, it would be wonderful to find out what the other performers are doing in advance. A bellydance show is typically comprised of different parts (dramatic intro, sweeping airy veil work, energetic audience engagement, slinky sword work, percussive drum solo) that will have enough variety to hold the audience's attention. If you can find out ahead of time what other elements will be in the show, you can choose to contrast those to create that type of journey for the audience. (Its not always practical to have this happen, but when it is, take advantage of it!)
  - Be prepared and on time for your portion of the show. Know your dance and music well and be ready and in costume when the time comes to perform.
  - In the mundane dance world, you are required to wear a cover-up over your costume when you are not performing. This is not always the case with SCA events, because often we perform in the garb we wear all day. Consider a cover-up though, if you change into a performance-specific costume for the show, this allows a bit of surprise for the audience when they see your costume when you first step on stage.
  - If you are dancing to a CD, have your music for that performance ONLY on the CD and have your name on the label as well.
  - If the event has live music you are LUCKY! If you get to select your music in advance, listen to as many versions of the song as possible because Middle Eastern music is traditionally improvised and musicians often do not play a piece the same way twice. If you will be working with a live band, be prepared to improvise your dance! The improvised "playing" between musician and dancer is often a part of the magic both for the performers and for the audience. Also, do not forget to acknowledge the band and feel free to interact with them. They are your allies to making a great show for everyone. THANK THEM when you are finished.
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## When/Where/Why

Some SCA-Friendly Performance ideas:

- If you are doing a short, single-song piece for an SCA performance, you could choose pretty much anything you know well. If you choose a prop, make sure it is appropriate for the venue and that you will have space to use it, and most of all, make sure you really, really know how to dance with it well.
- In addition to traditional bellydance performance concepts (intros, veil, sword, etc.) a bellydance show might also include a folkloric piece. A Turkish Romany or a Saidi cane dance could add interest to a show. One could also look further and find an ethnic dance form less often represented in the bellydance world such as debke or Andalusian dance. It's even better if you have a chance to educate the audience about your piece and its origins!
- Something that very much fits in with the atmosphere of the SCA, but that I rarely see performed, are folk tableaux. This style of piece is often used in staged bellydance shows and can portray a certain culture at a certain period in time and often tell a story. Examples:
  - I once saw dancers depicting what they think a formal dance would have looked like in the Ottoman courts.
  - At another event, I saw a dancer do a sword dance where she pretended to sneak into her husband's room and secretly picked up his sword and then danced with the weapon. Given that sword dance is a modern invention, especially for a female dancer, this made for a great way to incorporate the use of it with a more period feel.
  - One of the best dances I have seen like this was a troupe called the Crusaders' Wives. They wore medieval cotehardies with jewelry and other accents that came from the Middle East. Their performance combined medieval European dance with Middle Eastern dance in a way that allowed the viewer believe this interpretation of how women caught between two cultures might have entertained themselves. Documentable? No, but certainly plausible, entertaining and a great fit for an SCA event!
  - Other ideas might be a tableau depicting women dancing to entertain each other in an Ottoman harem, or one showing the trip of a young woman walking to a village market, or perhaps village women going to the river to wash their clothes. Research different times and places and see what story you want to see recreated as a dance!

