

Viennese Waltz Ballgown Basics

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I have spent hours trying on dresses in various shops and looking at the web in search of what to buy for a Viennese ball. What a frustrating task! David's Bridal and other bridal/formal shops seem like good resources, but as I discovered, they miss the mark. Their fabrics are usually too stiff and the dresses are either not full enough or they are full, but do not move with you so that you dance like a head sticking out of a cupcake. On the other end are the prom dresses that are slinky and too narrow for dancing. Ebay and other websites have competition gowns for sale, and tips on competition gowns, but a Viennese ball is not a competition. What looks good in competition can look somewhat vulgar at a Viennese Ball. Somewhere between David's Bridal and *Dancing With the Stars* lies the dress that works. However, if I gave Santa Claus a list of my wishes in a dress, I'm not sure even he could fill the request. After all, where do you find a dress that is comfortable for active dancing, cool when you work up a sweat, pretty without being bridesmaid cute, and fits so that you look like you dance every day instead of once a week or so? It took me several attempts to learn what works with fabric, style, and underpinnings. What follows is a description of what didn't work for me, traditional Viennese ballgowns, and then, the tips for what did work for me. I hope that my experience will be helpful to you.



For my first ball, I found a beautiful empire waist gown in silk charmeuse from a formal wear shop. Perfect, I thought! Well, it had great lines for hiding flaws and I loved the color, but it just didn't say, "Viennese". Mostly, the dress needed to have more fullness. So, not perfect after all. Thus, began my quest and education into the world of ball gowns you can really dance in.

Most skirts for a Viennese ball are quite full, sit at the waist, and white is the quintessential Viennese color. A traditional ball begins with a cotillion of young debutant-age women dressed in white carrying a small bouquet. Of course, you do not need to be 17 to wear white and the gown to the right is an example of an elegant and traditional Viennese waltz gown. To add to the fullness, a tulle slip from your local bridal store works well. These



slips typically have a spandex type girdle built into the midriff portion of the skirt which I personally find uncomfortable and too warm so it's a matter of personal choice.



After seeing the beautiful white gowns at Viennese balls, I decided to sew a skirt out of white fabric and a bodice in a different color for my next dress. This seemed like a great mix-and-match plan that would allow me to extend my limited ball wardrobe. It can work, but be careful of the fabrics you choose. If the skirt is made of heavy fabric like many of the separates at bridal shops, it will not flow when you dance. As I discovered with my outfit, a close fitting satin bodice is TOO HOT! It is also difficult to really match a top with a different skirt and the top must be long enough or you will show skin during an underarm turn. I wound up trying three different skirt/top combinations and none were that flattering for me, but you may have better luck.

If you have a slim figure like the woman to the right, the traditional skirt gathered at the waist will flow elegantly when you waltz. If your figure isn't perfect, that extra fabric will not be a good thing. A great alternative is a circle skirt, a godet skirt, or gore skirt. The circle skirt is two halves of a circle sewed together—what could be easier! The advantage of a circle skirt is that it puts minimal fabric at your waist and tons of flowing fabric at your feet, all cut on the bias. A gore or godet skirt adds wedges of fabric to a princess or A-line construction so that you get that great fullness without having it at your waist. Any of the above three styles put a slightly modern twist on a traditional ballgown.



Circle, gore, and godet skirts are commonly known to dancers, but they are not easily found in retail stores and formal wear patterns are typically based on an A-line type fit. If you sew, there are only a couple of patterns out there that are ready right out of the package. Yet, many patterns do lend themselves to something very danceable once you add godets or attach a circle skirt.



For my last ballgown I used the full circle skirt portion of a Burda pattern (shown to the near left in red/orange) and combined it with the bodice of another dress that had princess lines and a more attractive back (shown to the far left in black). One could sew the Burda pattern "as is", I just preferred the other pattern's

top, minus a strap alteration for the back. The Burda pattern is also designed for competition, using a one-piece construction that is similar to a bathing suit with a skirt attached. The combination I chose had the flowing effect that I didn't get with the previous A-line skirts without requiring the Lycra of a competition dress. (The Burda pattern calls for Lycra and my old machine does not sew it well.) The dress needs some additional fitting through the back, but I am not a professional seamstress and more importantly, I ran out of time. The pictures of the dress below are taken from the Salt Lake Vienna Ball where Michael and I had a wonderful symphony dance to ourselves, thanks to Michael winning the bid on a dedication waltz. (The high school aged couple who appear in one photo didn't understand the dance was exclusive.) I splurged on sequin trim and embroidery appliqué for this dress, but otherwise the dress was very reasonable and excluding trim, cost about \$85.00 for me to make.



If you prefer, a circle skirt can be placed at the waistline, but for my figure, it is more flattering placed at hip level. One of the things I liked about dancing in this dress is that the fabric is a fine gage knit that breathes, making dancing much cooler even though the bodice is tightly fitted. It also did not require a too-hot slip because the fullness comes from the bias cut circle of fabric. By doubling the bodice fabric I could forgo a bra as well. Fabric stores sell bra cups that can easily be sewn directly into the bodice if you prefer more support or shaping than the bodice provides. Other options are incorporating horsehair trim or wire into the hem if you want more flip to the hem itself and/or combining layers of circle skirts for added drama.



Back Detail



Front Detail

If the swing of a circle skirt is more than you want, try a gore or godet skirt. By sewing in wedges of fabric, the sky is the limit with the different effects you can try. Chiffon is always a perfect fabric to use, but don't overlook fine gage double knits. Knits are usually inexpensive and the fabric's weight keeps the skirt from flying up to your waist when you spin. The double knit's built-in give also makes it very forgiving for fitting and it doesn't fray. If you do not sew much, but wish to avoid the expense of having a gown made for you, the circle skirt combined with a ready made top from a bridal store could work. Currently, the catalog company, Newport News, has several possible tops as well as some dresses with full skirts.

These are my early experiences in ballgowns. I'm sure in five or ten years I'll have much better advice to put on the website. In the meantime, if you have experiences and tips that you would like to add, please let us know. We would love to hear from you!