

SECTION 7: THE MUSIC OF THE MORRIS

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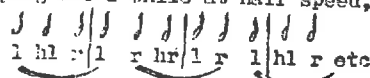
PLAYING FOR THE MORRIS

The Tunes

The collected "traditional" tunes did not necessarily come from musical people, or from a good memory or recorded simultaneously with dancing. This explains poor variants of the tunes rather than the unusual ones, which experience suggests are likely to be authentic. Better variants can be used to improve the presentation of the Morris but special versions can only be used with caution because of the false impression that can be given, especially if the tune is well known to the public like "Brighton Camp". Important in considering variants is the instrument originally used such as a fiddle, as at Bamton or Fieldtown, a pipe and tabor, as at Brackley or Bucknell or a melodian as at Abingdon. The instrument puts a character onto the tune to reflect its strengths and weaknesses. It affects the intervals and range of the tune rather than the rhythm as the rhythm is dictated by the dance. Harry Thomas of Abingdon was an example of adaption of tunes to suit a one row melodian from the singing of older Abingdon dancers who remembered tunes played on a fiddle. The old village sides were often short of musicians and good players did the rounds of local sides and anyone who could play a few tunes was pressed into service. In a period when people prized individuality the old players expected to have and to play their own versions of the common tunes where ever they were and they sometimes gave collectors the way other musicians "turned" the tunes.



One has to consider whether some dances are really wedded to their tunes or the tunes are just easy to dance. There are some 20 tunes that can be considered universal through the Cotswolds. As the known village styles are all different obviously the tunes are adjusted to suit and this is a justification for calling the collected tune the "correct" version. The aim is however to know why the tune is played that way as good playing needs the understanding of the dance. Each Cotswold ^{side} had a few, and only a few, tunes unique to itself. These often turn up as alternative tunes for common dances. The character of a dance is somewhat dependent on the tune. The most extreme example is the Heel and Toe dance around Stow on the Wold which was danced to "General Monk's March", a hornpipe, "Oh Sussanah", a polka, and "We went go home till morning", a jig. More common is the multiple tunes for the handkerchief or sidestop-&-half-hey dance as at Bamton where variation in speed is used as well as rhythm to provide contrast. Consciously dancing to the tune makes each a different experience. Old sides may well have had to make do with what ever the musician could play. In some villages there was no direct relationship between the stick tapping and the tune, the foreman varying it at whim to suit the rhythm offered.

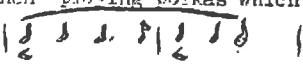
As a general rule there should be a note for every step in the dance. It is not true conversely that every note has a step. Carried to extreme this produced at Abingdon for "Maid of the Mill", a jig with 6 notes to a bar, playing for a while at half speed, in $\frac{3}{4}$ so that the 1 hop 2 3 went across the bars thus


1 hl r | 1 r hr | 1 r 1 hl r etc



Rhythm

It does not mean that jigs are all played as single jigs.


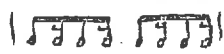
ie.  rather than  although this is an acceptable simplification when desired.

Care must be taken to emphasise the proper phrasing when playing polkas which were originally written and played in 2 bar phrases. 

First there is the normal emphasis on the first beat of each bar. It is a strong beat for the dancer when the main effort is made. If the music over emphasises it it can drive the dancer into the floor producing noise rather than lift. The effect is similar to "on-beat" drumming. Second the final beat of the bar and hence the step is deemphasised or even suppressed. The danger is that it might lose the body "lift" at that point. The 2nd and 4th beats in a bar are the "weak" or "off-beats" but are significant because they are where the lift or elevation of the dancer occurs, particularly the last in a morris double step.

Most morris tunes are in 4/4 or common time and use the hornpipe rhythm. 
The bars are usually thought of as divided into 3's, 

but they are played "broken". Musical notation normally indicates this as

 but it is seldom played as broken as that, except at Chipping Campden, the better representation being a half-way form in 12/16 
ie. without the dots. It produces the good "jaunty" playing of Kimber or Wells.

A good musician allows one to dance comfortably, that is fits the natural rhythms of the movement rather than forcing it. Even the above implies too great a regularity because the 4 beats in the bar are not evenly distributed, not only are the weak beats retarded towards a jiggy rhythm but the amount depends on the strength of the dancer's preceding movement. Thus it is impractical to write it down exactly because it would be too complex to follow. It is better to examine the mechanism of the body motion.

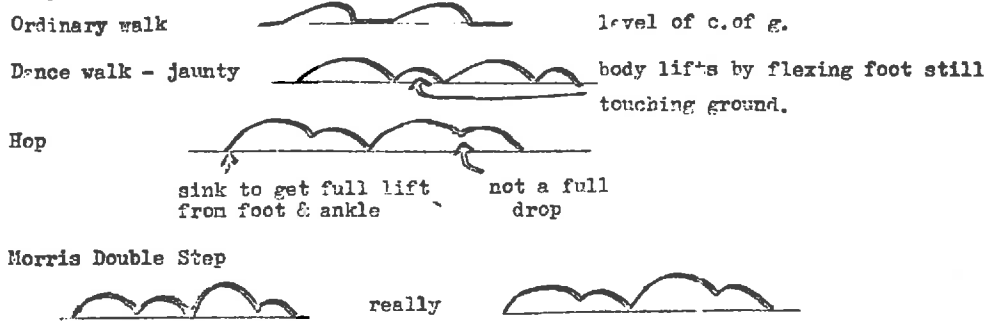
Bounce

Body movement is not even within a bar because it is continually starting and stopping from the reversals of vertical motion at contacts with the ground. It takes longer to rise up off the ground than to fall back. This is why jigs are more exciting than reels for Country Dancing because of the better fit to natural movement. The degree of brokenness is related to the effort being put into the dancing or to the effort being demanded by the playing.

Start by considering the simplest basic movement, 2 spring jaunty dance-walk steps per bar with weight on the balls of the feet - no heel touch. Judges of jig dancing competitions sometimes placed their hands under competitors heels to be sure they were properly off the ground. Increasing the effort makes the movement into "capers", plain capers at 2/bar. Alternatively accenting the off-beat with a body lift or a hop produces the hop-step or "cingle" step.

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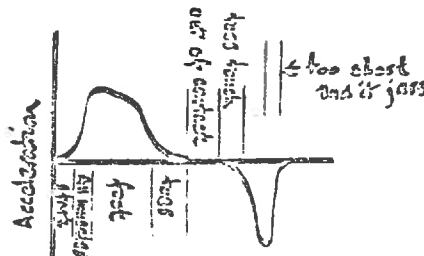
Try dancing in a room in front of a window with cross pieces at eye level and observe the bar movement against distant objects as a measure of vertical movement of the head and hence body centre of gravity. It is difficult and unnatural to move so that the eyes remain steady. Comfortable dancing makes full use of flexing the instep.



The exhilaration is in the peak of the movement in the air. Movement is determined by contacts with the ground. Newton's laws of motion apply. The higher one goes the longer it takes. The converse is that the slower one plays the higher one should go, not the longer one stays in contact with the floor. The stopping of the downward motion, the reversal of direction and the acceleration up off the ground is done primarily by the spring in the foot and ankle. The energy absorbing, motion stopping can be quite faster than the acceleration where one has to produce a force and do work. The thigh and knee contribute more to the larger, longer capers.

The conventional static position is with body upright, heels together and toes turned out and weight distributed so that heels are just touching the ground. The basic dance position is on the balls of the feet with the heels off the ground and the body leaning forward a little, shoulders back and head horizontal.

Some traditions allowed a sink down on the first strong beat of a bar till the heel almost touches the ground. The knee also bends a little, but rotation of the knee or thigh joint by its nature does not produce much up and down movement. The drop allows a "stronger" lift. Fieldtown and Sherborne are often danced this way. The techniques used to teach at Ilmington and Longborough and the style expected aimed at making the first 2 steps of a double very similar and the drive on the first strong beat was indicated by concentrating the forward movement of the travel on this beat. Single stepping essentially allows more lift than double stepping and the music tends to be slower and the halves of bars similarly played.



Playing 4.

Some village traditions had their own characteristic basic step, each needing its own rhythmic subtlety. The essential differences in the single steps (1 h 2 h) are

Brackley, Hinton, Headington - stiffish leg

Bidford - on hop foot drawn back and lifted so "back-peddalling"

Dampton, Chipping Campden - raise free foot up on the step and kick it forward on hop.

All differ on the degree of hesitation on the weak beat and thus the brokenness in playing.

A few traditions consist of long sequences of basic step, perhaps with a break of 3 or 4 strong beats, but most consist of strings of different movements. The finishing action of a figure, called a break after the term in step dancing, may be in the same speed and rhythm as the basic step as at Brackley or Eynsham. If it is a simple jump or a very emphatic pause and jump as in some Abingdon and Chipping Campden dances the movement takes longer and the musician has to allow the dancer "air". The stretching to fit the movements ensures that it is not useful to practice following a metronome because the musician should fall behind in discrete bits.

The most common dance phrase is 2 double steps, 2 back steps, a step and jump, ie.

1 r 1 hl / r 1 r hr / 1 hl r hr / 1 Ω ft. tog. - //

The rhythm of the double is not quite that of the single steps. The single is in this case a back step, which normally contrasts in style, energy, hand movements etc to the normal basic step. With the jump in the 4th bar there must be small variations in pace throughout. More complex is,

1 r 1 hl / ft. tog Ω j (r) / 1 - hl hl / ft. tog Ω j - //

the springs in bars 2 & 4 and the rhythm of the galley in bar 3 depend on the tradition. At Longborough and Fieldtown the movement of the galley goes through smoothly and the beats are very regular even if the tune is written in 6/8. At Sherborne the galley is a step forward and then a turn on the hops so that there is spring through the weak beat and the hops are emphatic. Note that there may be a de-emphasised step of hop on the final weak beat of a bar preparatory to the next movement, especially if it is a particularly strong one. As it is small it needs to be delayed ie late. This shows in series of half capers. Despite the name these are single capers, one to a bar, thus, / 1 Ω r - / 1 Ω r - /. Often they include a preparatory hop or change step, hr / 1 Ω r hr / 1 Ω r - / or / 1 Ω r 1 / r Ω 1 r / 1 Ω r - / noting that the last of the series only has the preparatory hop or change step if there is something immediately following. The height and rhythm of the half caper depends on the tradition and is related to the associated arm movements. A tradition like Fieldtown makes a great deal of these preparatory movements throughout the dances. Others like to be "clean" and unfussy. A caper is a high spring onto a foot while the free foot does something. A subtlety with 4 plain capers at the end of a movement is whether they are really 4 ie 1 r 1 Ω / R Ω L Ω / R Ω L // or 3 ie 1 r 1 hl / r Ω L Ω / etc. and play accordingly.

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These small differences which help the dancer through are not reflected in musical notations. For example in the crossings in Trunkles the playing depends upon whether it is morris step, sidestep or half capers. Even if the fine differences escape the musician the music can be played like / d d d d / for the morris step, / d d d / for the sidestep and / d d d / for the half capers.

Slow Capers

Each sequence of movements takes 2 bars worth of time. The music is usually the normal tune played at half speed. How much slowing down depends on the tradition and the caper. Each caper has a preparatory movement and a high spring. As this spring is higher than others in the morris it needs longer. It is necessary to follow the dancers in this. It is not a problem as normally only one or two dancers are doing them together. When a side does a dance like the Rose where they all do them together it must be expected that they rehearse to actually be together with a standardised timing.

Jigs

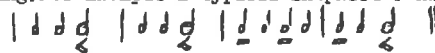
Although these are essentially a display of the dancer's skill, the musician has a key role. There needs to be an understanding before the jig starts on who is leading who because the musician and the dancer can not both follow - this is unstable! Normally the musician should expect the dancer to follow except on the slow capers. Some dancers learn dances by rote, responding to the specific tune. They can have trouble with an unfamiliar musician. Many dancers like to cover a fair bit of ground in a jig and the music needs to be slower to allow this otherwise it will degenerate into a run around.

Stick Dances

There are two problems generated by the dancers which ought to be removed at practice but often are not.

1. Speeding up during the tapping

The dancers need to develop larger arm movements to fill up the music. If the musician follows the dancers they will gallop away with the dance. Sometimes the dancers can not hear the music because of the noise, concentration, fun. The musician must be prepared to say something and to play holding them back by emphasising key beats and hesitating. For Example a typical Shepherd's Hey,



2. Moving off

As the tapping is usually either stationary or stepping on the spot the dancers need time to accelerate into the next movement. It is necessary to hold off the music a little.

Otherwise the rhythm of playing follows the size of movement called for by the chorus.

Speed

The normal speed for a Morris is 96 beats per minute, 48 bars or a 4 bar phrase in 5 seconds which is easy to follow on a clock or watch with a second hand. This speed has been found all round the Cotswolds. Slightly higher speeds have been observed at Hampton, eg "Brighton Camp" seems to be played faster. Some dances have been collected somewhat slower, down to 80 beats per minute or 4 bars in 6 seconds. It is possible to

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dance as slow as 72 beats per minute given a "large", energetic step, usually a single step, as done for example by the "Shropshire Bedlams". To dance slower requires control and it is desirable to practice so to produce large emphatic movements and develop style but this is not necessarily the best for public performance. As control is being developed the optimum effect may be produced at higher speeds where the appearance of faults are minimised and the speed of the music is itself exciting.

Music is a physical thing. It has immediate effects on blood pressure and pulse rates, pumps up the adrenalin levels and makes breathing quicker and more irregular: without doing anything. Tempo it self can be used to excite or tranquillise. For most people a tempo of 75-80 beats a minute is moderate or neutral. If faster than 80 it becomes stimulating, if slower than 75 it is saddening. This "normal" tempo is obviously connected with a whole group of body clocks that control such operations as heartbeat at about 75-80 beats. The body clocks of young people tick faster than those of adults and they will remember things as being "slower" when they were younger when they were not. An exciting speed is when the heartbeat etc from the exertion match the speed of the music. Experience means both better control and less over all exertion, conversely beginners are not and over exert and hence react again better to higher speeds.

We all know that music is used in ordinary life to produce effects on us and to provide Pavlovian triggers to elicit right movements and right attitudes. We also know that there are tricks with melodies to produce emotions. Thought should be given to why some tunes are so satisfying to dance to and why there are not that many Morris tunes anyhow. It is a common experience that recalling the tune is the best way to remember the movements, although the opposite is more difficult. It must be conditioning because in different villages quite different movements are fitted to nominally similar tunes.

Where the dance is basically dance walk the music is naturally faster for the same effect: Country Dance music, jigs and reels, aims at 120 beats per minute. Rapper is faster, long sword at Loftus is faster still, but these are only 2 movements to a bar not the 4 of Cotswold Morris.

Bands

Tempo is not the only way of controlling excitement. Volume and quality of the sound is also effective. Playing for the Morris is traditionally a solo activity in the Cotswolds but not in the Border Counties or the North West. With a percussion or a brass band the instruments provide different interlocking musical parts or rhythms and as long as the volumes are balanced there are few problems. Care is needed when more than one melody instrument is played together. First perceived volume is logarithmic in effect so doubling the sound or energy increases the effect 40% only. Balance is still important. A good player can be allowed to dominate but a poor one just annoys the dancers and irritates the audience. The major problem that is often not recognised is the blurring effect of instruments together. Some players try to exert their presence by extending the notes and even running them together. This is a negation of playing to the dancing. Even with care different musicians do not play exactly the same and to produce the same

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overall effect each much play more staccato. As this normally allows one more punch on each note the volume level benefits as well.

Clarity is needed for the dancing, the music being an adjunct. In a group the tunes will normally be played in simpler versions and the rhythmic subtleties already described will be submerged. Is it worth it? With "boxes" basses should be simpler as well.

Great care is needed in playing with someone from another side, especially when it is not your side dancing as the nuances will be different, being a different group of dancers, and one musician has to lead. Do not assume that another musician plays either the collected tune or your version for the dance. Always ask or be asked to play together. Do not expect to play at a dance instructional as the arranged musician is probably fully occupied making the effort to provide exactly what the instructor is doing or demanding and is providing for the ease of the dancers all the fine detail of rhythm and emphasis which the person learning the tune has not started to be aware exists. An inexperienced or differently experienced musician just clogs up the air.

Learning

The first step is getting to know the melody. One should not play from written music for dancing except in the very early days of a side practicing; a new dance and even then poor playing will kill the side's enthusiasm for the particular dance by making it uninteresting or difficult to dance. Knowing the melody means being able to whistle it or sing it without being committed to a final rhythmic interpretation and not wedded to a bit of paper. Choose an easy key for the instrument. Most people play in G. Most collected tunes are written down in G regardless of how they were actually found. A few are usually played in D where it is necessary to keep within a restricted instrument range.

Style

Melody is not really the important factor - instruments are played for the rhythm. It is difficult to extract the tune from a pipe and tabor sound. Traditionally the pipe provides the rhythm and the tabor or dub is "rolled" or "tattooed" for the excitement. To do this players would use a short two headed stick.

Sharpness is most easily provided with a fiddle by the nature of the action of the bow although classical techniques have to be unlearned. A box is played with the bellows. Accordionists like to play "interesting" runs on the basses, probably because they are otherwise embarrassed by the proliferation of buttons. It usually distracts. The melodian with its very restricted basses is effective for morris and accordionists should be encouraged to emulate.