

ON PLAYING FOR THE COTSWOLD MORRIS

INTRODUCTION

Many years ago Michael Gorman, a well known Irish fiddler based in London, was asked about how to play the fiddle. He demonstrated the finger positions for the notes. The problem here is the same, where to start and what to assume is already known. Thoughtful players have many insights, some of which can be difficult to communicate, and others for lesser musicians to understand. Unfortunately it is a golden rule that one can only learn what one almost knows. Most morris musicians have little formal tutoring so I shall assume that we can start discussing some of the simple basics. The morris musician has to develop a sympathy for the movements to which they are playing. Fitting the music to the dance requires some analysis of what the morris movements are about.

BASIC RHYTHMS

Let us accept that tunes are divided into bars, and have key signatures. Now let us consider what morris tunes are and separate them from what they are not.

Morris tunes are usually either in 4/4 or 6/8. Detailed tune classifications usually depend on the playing speed and the number of notes in a bar, leading to such titles as, Reels, Rants, Polkas, Hornpipes, Step Dances, Cake Walks, Schottiches, Measures, Marches, or to Single, Double and Triple Jigs. There is no universally agreed nomenclature system.

(diagram)

Probably the decline of the morris in the 19th century saved it from keeping up with social dance musical fashions. There are polkas used, that can be thought of as improved hornpipes, but very few waltzes outside of Adderbury where singing was a significant factor in defining the repertoire, thus there are no dance equivalents to the Mediterranean Jota or the Northern European Ländler or Dompah type. The morris has never lent itself to rhythmic complexities like some of the dances of the Basques or eastern european countries, and possibly the Midland Bedlam Morris. But it does have echoes of the distant past in particular dances, like the galliard (eg "God Save the Queen") and the 6/4 hornpipe in the various "Sherborne Jigs" or the "Shepherd's Heel and Toe" at Headington, and the 9/8 (slip jig in Ireland) tune for "Beaux (Rose) of London City".

(tune)

(tune)

There is little in common with other English folk dance traditions such as solo step and clog dancing, except in the use of elementary phrase endings or breaks, and the simplest of heel and toe stepping for a special version of

one typical dance. It did not acquire complex choreography. However I feel that it is a pity that English folk dance never caught onto rhythm types that the Old Time world reaped like the slow saunters, or walking dances, which could be very useful for providing contrasts in modern shows.

Most morris tunes are in 4/4 or common time and use the hornpipe rhythm,

(diagram)

The bars are usually thought of as divided into 8's,

(diagram)

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

(diagram)

but it is not played as broken as that, except at Chipping Campden, the more accurate representation being a half way form in 12/16, ie without the dots,

(diagram)

This matches the good "jaunty" playing exhibited by Kimber and Wells,

Step dancers use hornpipes also but differently and they break the bars into sub-units based on the percussive rhythm of the steps. As the basis is a "tap" rather than a weight change step dancers need to recognise finer divisions of the bar. Thus a bar of 4 crochets can be danced as 8 quavers

(1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &) called a "duple time hornpipe", or in triplets

(1 & a 2 & a 3 & a 4 & a) called a "triple time hornpipe", or semi-quavers

(1 an & e 2 an & e 3 an & e 4 an & e) for complex steps.

Thus there is no allowance for body movement and a requirement for very even playing, not the morris idiom at all! But the concept of duplet and triplet division of bars is in fact the inherent difference between common and jig time tunes.

To preserve the feel of a "polka", if following English country music principles, care must be taken to emphasise the proper phrasing when playing them as they were originally written and played in 2 bar phrases. But I think that this also is taking the music outside of the morris idiom.

It would be expected that military marches were familiar to countrymen when many of the local volunteers had bands and every settlement had to ballot to determine who served in the militia. "Brighton Camp" was very common, as in the form "Girl I Left Behind Me" it has become the traditional tune for a regiment leaving a posting, but few other regimental marches seem to have made it into the repertoires, other than "Warwickshire Lads" at Ilmington, the Cheshire Rgt "March Past" at Eynsham and "Jockey to the Fair" from the Yorkshire Rgts.

(tune)

(tune)

Marches are properly in 2/4 or 6/8 (Sousa). An example of the later is "Liberty Bell", the Monty Python signature tune, which is not typical of jigs for morris, but excellent for clog, as the Cotswold morris does not have skipping or high knee lift stepping. Whitehall reorganised the Army regiments on a territorial basis in the late 19th century and from about 1880 required them to have a march with a local flavour, possibly too late to influence the tradition.

If a morris tune is not in common time it is a jig in 6/8! It has an underlying asymmetric pulse,

It does not mean that jigs are all played as single jigs, ie,

(diagram)

rather than

(diagram)

although this is an acceptable simplification when desired,

(diagram)

A good musician allows one to dance comfortably, but energetically not slackly, to fit the natural rhythm of the movement rather than forcing it. Too rigid a four-square rhythm muzzles expression in the morris. Even the above discussion implies too great a regularity because the 4 beats in the bar are actually 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 find "rules" for massaging the rhythm from an examination of the dancer's body motion.

DANCERS BOUNCE

The reality of natural movement is that it is not even and it has to be constrained to make it smooth.

Whether in 4/4 or 6/8, the dancer recognises 4 pulses in a bar regardless of the number of notes actually played. The morris step reflects that there are two stresses called "strong beats" or "on-beats" a bar and that the other two are "weak" or "off-beats". The following discussion assumes that dancers are skilled enough for the topics to matter.

First, there is the normal emphasis on the first beat of each bar. It is a strong beat for the dancer where the main effort or "drive" is made. But if the music over emphasises it, it can drive the dancer into the floor producing noise rather than lift. The effect is then similar to having "on-beat" drumming.

Second, the final beat of the bar and sometimes its 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

they are significant because they are where important lift or elevation of the dancer occurs, particularly on the last beat of a morris double.

Body movement is not even across a note or a bar because there is the continual starting and stopping from the reversals of vertical motion at the contacts with the ground. It takes longer to rise up off the ground than to fall back, unless special care is taken, and the total time allowed depends on the emphasis being given to the particular step. Think of skip steps. This natural asymmetry partially explains why jigs are more exciting than reels for Country Dancing because of their better fit to a natural bouncy movement. The degree of brokenness is related to the effort being put into the dancing or to the effort being demanded by the playing.

To understand something of the realities of movement the musician should perform some basic exercises.

Start by considering the simplest basic movement, 2 springy, jaunty dance-walk steps per bar with the weight on the balls of the feet, and 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 for height develops the movement into "capers", producing "plain capers" at 2 a bar. Alternatively, accenting the off-beat with a body lift or inserting a hop produces the hop-step or "single" step.

(diagram)

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

Ordinary walk (diagram) level of c of g

Dance walk (diagram) body lifts by flexing foot still touching ground

Hop (diagram)

Sink to get full lift not a full drop
from foot and ankle

Morris Double Step (diagram)

really (diagram)

Movement is determined by contacts with the ground, and Newton's laws of motion apply. The higher one goes the longer it takes. The converse should be that the slower one plays the higher one should go, not the longer one stays in contact with the floor. Normally dancers "cheat" by sinking, bending their knees, to extend the range of movement without necessarily increasing the time out of touch with the ground. 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 at stopping can be done 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, when dancers bend at the knees.

There is a natural egocentric view which has movement spreading from the body. Although helpful for forming good images, the realities of the mechanics of movement have to be taken first.

A larger than normal movement requires either more time or more effort to keep it within the normal time bounds. Either way the note is accented as a memory jogger. As a general rule there should be a note for every step in the dance, and probably for each hand movement. It is not true conversely that every note has a step. Carried to the extreme was the Abingdon "Maid of the Mill", properly a jig with 6 notes to a bar, it was played for a while at half speed in 3/4 so that the "1 hop 2 3" went across the normal bars thus,

(tune)

The 20th century fashions in social dance have emphasised the off beat, in the morris this occurs at the kick of the free foot on the hop. There is an strong element of this in the single stepping traditions that have lasted into this century. Their dances can be done to ragtime and later popular rhythms.

One has to try and get an underlying pulse going in the playing.

BASIC PLAYING

Jig, 6/8 time, is normally written, (diagram)

The "weak" beat as defined above is the last of the triplet.

To produce a "pulse" it is played with the middle of the triplet unstressed, (diagram) ie, played "in passing".

Poor morris dance music often comes from over emphasising this extra note. Of course the opposite is true for other dance idioms such as step or Irish dancing, where the feet not the body movement dominates the requirement.

To fit natural body lift it should be nearer to, (diagram)

However one does not play phrases endlessly without variation. A typical change is to shift emphasis during a phrase, for example to show the switch in stress between a double step and a back step by playing one,

(diagram) and the other (diagram)

Because public performance is rehearsed not spontaneous interpretation of the music, the musician establishes manners of playing that act as mnemonics for the dancers.

There are tricks to develop drive and excitement in the music. For example Ravel's "Bolero", used by the ice-dance champions Torvill and Dean, builds up tension without accelerating. The adjustment is in how it is being played. It uses more broken rhythm, more staccato or "snap" and more volume (but not just as noise). One can wallow in the sound from a 40 piece brass band but be shattered by a rock group at the same decibel level.

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

Brackley, Hinton, Headington - a stiffish leg,

Bidford - on hop foot drawn back and lifted - giving "back-pedalling",

Bampton, Chipping Campden - raise free foot up on the step and kick it forward on hop - giving "bicycling",

All differ on the degree of hesitation on the weak beat and thus the brokenness needed in playing the tunes. It is difficult to comment on double steps as there is less traditional evidence. Cecil Sharp considered that there was a classical older version which he described, but, from the little surviving knowledge of the manner of performance, there must have been small differences. The imposing of a standard interpretation of how to play morris tunes is a major cause of clubs failing to make the differences between traditions appear in their dancing.

6/8s in 4/4 - Occasionally collected tunes such as "Constant Billy" (Minster Lovell), "Gallant Hussar" (Bledington) and "Old Woman Tossed Up" (Sherborne) are supporting evidence of how tunes were played in a very broken rhythm elsewhere when the informant gives it thus,

(tune)

(tune)

(tune)

PHRASING THE DANCE

The dances are usually constructed of 4 bar phrases of movement which shape the dance, and this basic unit of music has to be reflected in the playing. There is not the regularity in the playing of the tunes that might be expected. The music must "stretch" at jumps, changes of direction and driving off.

A few traditions consist of long sequences of a basic step, perhaps ending with a break of 3 or 4 strong beats. The finishing action of a figure, here 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 out of particular notes to fit the movements ensures that it is not useful to practice following a metronome, because the musician should fall behind in discrete bits.

But nearly all figures consist of strings of different movements. The most common dance phrase is 2 double steps (1 bar each), 2 backsteps (a step and a hop each, 1/2 bar each), a step and a jump to land with the feet together, ie

l, r, l, hl/r, l, r, hr/l, hl, r, hr/l, 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, and hand movements to the normal basic step. Along with the jump in the 4th bar there must be small variations in pace throughout the phrase. A more complex set is,

l, r, l, hl/ft tog, Ω, j, (r)/l, -, hl, hl/ft tog, Ω, j, -//

The springs, Ω, in bars 2 and 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 a spring through the weak beat and the hops are emphatic. Note that there may be a deemphasised step or 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 be late. This shows in a series of "spring capers". These are single capers, one to a bar, thus,

/l, Ω, r, - /l, Ω, r, -/

In practice they often include a preparatory hop ("half capers") or a change step ("furies"),

hr/l, Ω, r, hr/l, Ω, r, -/ or /l, Ω, r, l/r, Ω, l, r/l, Ω, r, l/r, Ω, l, -/

noting that the last of a 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 its quality is related to the associated arm movements.

Spring capers can be timed as *(diagram)* or *(diagram)* depending on the tradition or the club.

A tradition like Fieldtown makes a great deal of these preparatory movements throughout the dances. Others liked to be "clean" and unfussy.

Extra bounces can be used keeping the vertical motion going rather than limiting them.

(diagram)

It is essential that the musician finds out the club preferences. A caper is a high spring onto a foot, while the free foot does something. "r, Ω," can be written as "R, Ω," to emphasise the effort. A subtlety with 4 plain capers at the end of a movement is whether they really are 4,

/1, r, l, R/R, R, L, R/R, R, L, -//, or 3, l, r, l, h1/r, R, L, R/R, R, L, -//
and play it accordingly.

About the one thing that is certain is that the morris is never, never played quite as written!

A problem of the professional dance is that it aims for continuous variety and this encourages dancers to move gracefully from one pose to another, and there is little that the conductor can do working with an orchestra to follow the dancer. The contrast with the morris idiom needs more exploration. The revived Greek dance is worse in that the poses are derived from classical but static illustrations.

SPEED

The normal speed for a Morris used to be 96 "strong" beats a 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 by the older collectors. Slightly higher speeds have been observed, eg at Bampton, "Brighton Camp" seemed to be played faster. Some dances have been collected somewhat slower, down to 80 beats a minute or 4 bars in 6 seconds. This is more in line with modern practice where all the team have dance skills. The tradition thought itself lucky when it had 3 good dancers so its performance was conditioned by the numbers of inexperienced men. It is possible to dance as slow as 72 beats a minute given a "large", energetic step, usually a single step, as done for example by the "Shropshire Bedlams". To dance slower requires control and its desirable to practice so as to produce large emphatic movements and to develop a style, but the product is not necessarily the best for appealing to the public during its performance. While 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 having to do anything. Tempo itself can be used to excite or tranquilise. For most people a tempo of 75-80 beats a minute is neutral. If faster than 80 it becomes stimulating, if slower than 75 it is saddening. This "neutral" tempo is obviously connected with a whole group of body clocks, all normally at about 75-80 beats a minute, that control such activities as heartbeat. The body clocks of young people tick faster than those of adults and they will remember things as having been "slower" when they were younger when actually they were not! An exciting speed is when the heartbeat and so on from the exertion match the speed of the music. Experience gives dancers both better control and less over all exertion, however beginners over exert, and hence react better to higher speeds. Excitement is a balance between effort and speed and rhythmic playing.

We all know that music is used in ordinary life to promote 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 induce emotions. Thought should be given to why some tunes are so satisfying to dance to and also why there are not that many Morris tunes. A good tune has to fit the

morris step with a rhythm that provides both the stress and lift when it is needed, the antithesis of the modern off beat rhythms, and it also needs good phrasing, the opposite of the rumbling along of most country dance tunes. It is a common experience that recalling the tune is an easy way to remember a lost dance's movements, although the opposite is more difficult. It must be conditioning because over various villages quite different movements are fitted to nominally similar tunes.

Where a dance uses what is basically a Country Dance dance-walk, the music is naturally played faster to achieve the same overall level of excitement. Country Dance music, jigs and reels as used by the various national folk dance societies, aim at 100-120 beats per minutes. Rapper is faster and the long sword at Loftus is faster still, but these are only 2 walking movements to a bar not the 4 of Cotswold Morris. There are two Rapper styles of different speeds recognised, the "steady" and the "crash-bang-wallop", but the basic stationary stepping or "shuffles" can be performed at a great pace if desired. From experience, at about as fast as I can play!

STICK DANCES

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

First, 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 clatter of the sticks, their concentration on the movements, or because they are having fun. The musician must be prepared to say something, especially at the club practices but also to the foreman when out, if it is very bad, and to play to hold them back by emphasising key beats and hesitating. For example a typical "Shepherd's Hay" should be played as,

(tune)

Second, Moving Off

As the tapping sequence is usually done when either stationary or stepping on the spot, the dancers need time to accelerate into the next movement. Dancers should be encouraged to rise onto their toes in preparation for the move off and not to stay fixed with weight on their heels. It is necessary to hold off the music a little, and it is best done off of a last emphatic stick tap. To achieve this it requires consistency in playing to keep the team together. The time needed depends on the height of the jump and the distance that has to be reached, ie on the set spacing.

I think that the Bedlam Morris, whose territory overlapped with the northern extent of the Cotswold Morris, was a fantastically dressed tradition which relied on sticks and stepping to compensate for an absence of music other than drums.