

Bacca pipes jigs workshop

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Workshop notes by Simon Pipe

It would be helpful if dancers could read the introduction before the workshop; the rest of these notes are intended to serve as an aide memoire, and to expand on the workshop.

Introduction

This workshop is one of a series of four exploring ways of making the most of the Cotswold Morris repertoire. The teaching pace will be demanding and participants should be experienced dancers, though not necessarily with experience of Cotswold Morris.

All four workshops are also designed to seek new ways of performing the morris, giving it a modern dimension with greater appeal to more-sophisticated audiences, whilst keeping faith with tradition.

The name "bacca pipes" refers to clay (tobacco) pipes, in this case in the long-stemmed churchwarden style. Two churchwardens are placed on the ground in a cross formation, and the dancer executes a series of steps over them. Though there are obvious similarities with the Scottish sword dance, the character of the bacca pipes jig is very different.

At present, bacca pipes is seldom performed, despite presenting an opportunity to introduce diversity into a team's repertoire. Six bacca pipes jigs are noted in Bacon's Handbook - none of them will be taught here. Instead, the intention is to show dancers how to create new bacca pipes jigs using traditional and newly-invented moves. It's expected the workshop will use only one basic step, with possible variations.

The workshop will be structured so that patterns on the pipes start easy and become more complex. A considerable time will be spent consolidating the step, which may seem difficult at first. Dancers who find it easy are asked to be patient. Once most dancers have the step solid, the intention is to work at a rapid pace. Novice dancers are unlikely to keep up.

It is also the intention to teach as many moves as possible during the workshop: this will rule out any prospect of teaching an entire dance. The view is that participants should tackle the challenge of creating their own dances after the workshop. It's felt that doing this is an important part of developing a dancer's insight and skill.

Workshop structure

basic step

rounds, move right only

repeat, two dancers on same pipes ("doubles")

side-across, move right only

repeat, doubles

side-across, move right only - dancer A only (4 bars), B only (4 bars, from N), then both dancers (8 bars)

side-across, moving every bar (ie on to right and on to left)

(note: if dancing side-across doubles, moving every bar, one dancer must use left-foot lead).

past-present-future

reinforce: side-across right only, rounds right only, ppf - all doubles.

inward turns

rounds, move every bar (repeat as doubles)

side-across every, inward turns

side-across every, reverse half-way (demonstrate only)

step variations:

heel-toe-step-kick

halves (tap every other beat: tap right, kick (and step), tap left, kick)

heel-toe halves (as halves, but tap right heel, tap right toe (and step), tap left heel, tap left toe)

quarters (tap every beat: tap right (and step), tap left (step), tap right, tap left etc)

heel-toe-heel

heel-toe-heel, rounds (can also be done side-across)

wide turns

back turns

tap-behind

walkovers

setting

hopscotch

General notes

The following notes all refer to the style and approach taught in the workshop. They will not necessarily be true of traditional dances.

The basic step is: tap right, kick right, step on to right, kick left;

and repeated left: tap left, kick left, step on to left, kick right.

The supporting foot leaves the ground in a hop or step between every beat; so in a four-bar phrase (ie half a figure), the supporting foot is:

l l r r | r r l l | l l r r | r r l l |

..... in other words, hop, hop, step, hop; hop, hop, step, hop, hop, etc

The dancer will always be positioned at the beginning of each bar in one of the segments, named for the points of the compass - NSE or W. Generally, it's easiest to assume the free foot is tapped in place (ie, tap N if the dancer is positioned in N), unless specified otherwise (as in past-present-future). The supporting foot should be about 18/24 inches from the centre of the pipes; the tapping foot as close to the crux as can be managed without hindering the flow of the stepping.

The dancer will usually be facing approximately towards the centre of the pipes on the first beat of each bar, though some variation may make the dance more interesting.

Each phrase, or figure, should always start and usually finish at the dancer's "home" position. For solo jigs, this is South (the musician notionally being position-d North, but standing away from the pipes). Where two dancers share the same set of pipes, home positions may vary according to need.

A right-foot lead is used here, except, possibly, when two dancers are on the same set of pipes. "Right foot lead" means the right foot is tapped at the beginning of the phrase. It's up to the individual whether to tap the heel or the toe, but for some figures one may feel more suitable than the other. For variety, a dance should probably use both heel and toe.

It may be helpful to remember that there are really only two basic patterns of movement possible on the pipes: "rounds" (moving one place to the left every step, say), and "side-across" (or "across-side"). It's also possible to perform a variety of steps while remaining in one place. The interest in the dance is created by using variations in the stepping and changing the frequency of movements, having more than one dancer on the pipes, and by introducing special steps, such as country-dance "setting" or hopscotch, and by doing some stepping away from the pipes.

Bacon's Handbook of Morris Dances says there are no arm movements in traditional bacca pipes jigs. However, arm movements make the jig more flamboyant. It's suggested that they should be out to the side, in a shoulder-high balance, rather than forward-and-down as in, say, Fieldtown morris. Different patterns and steps should suggest different arm movements - it's a matter for experiment and personal taste. Arm movements need not be used throughout the dance.

The bacca pipes jig can easily be allowed to look like a low-energy dance. It is most impressive if the stepping is crisp, well-defined, and energetic, with kicks moderately high. Otherwise it can be lacklustre. There is a reason for the decline of the bacca pipes jig! Again, bold arm movements can create an impression of energy.

For novelty's sake, the dancer can "slap" the free foot with his hand. The easiest way to do this is to draw up the free foot on beat two, after the tap, and slap the heel with the opposite hand (right foot, left hand), slapping in front of the weight-bearing leg; then step on to the foot that has just been slapped, as normal. However, it is possible to work in three slaps without changing the basic step (ie tap, kick, step, kick). In beat one, tap the ground; in beat two, left hand slaps right foot as already described; in beat three, the dancer steps on to the right foot, and the left foot is slapped by the right hand, behind the body; in beat four, the left foot is slapped by the left hand, still behind the body. From beat five, the whole thing is repeated, except with the left foot tapped and then slapped by the right, etc.

It's obviously easiest to create interest with more than one dancer. Two dancers can either share one pair of pipes, or dance side-by-side - very effective, especially in complex moves that may appear random and improvised in a solo dance, but it's important neither dancer makes a mistake! Two dancers on separate pipes could either work in parallel, or facing in opposite directions, or even in mirror-image. Or maybe all three

The patterns taught in this workshop all involve stepping directly over the pipes; for added interest, performers should aim to include figures in which they step away from the pipes, perhaps in large circles or in a figure-of-eight. Such figures give an opportunity to make eye-contact with the audience, which is difficult (but not impossible) in more intricate patterns.

Speed: faster probably means more impressive, as long as it is not so fast that the definition in the stepping is lost. For performances under pressure, slow it down!

A good finish is desirable. One possibility is to dance four bars of "rounds" (say S, E, N, W) followed by four bars of side-across (S, W, E, S), stepping to N on the final or penultimate beat, into a finishing "pose", facing away from the pipes. Or simply finish at S, kicking out boldly on the final beat.

Music: most of the 19th century dances appear to have used Greensleeves (not the ice cream van version). Any tune in 4/4 time, with two distinct phrases of eight bars (or four bars repeated) ought to be suitable. Note that in many morris tunes, the second halves of the A and B music are virtually identical, which is not ideal for bacca pipes.

The dance need not be performed over pipes, but any alternative objects that rest more than an inch off the ground (say, two brooms or morris sticks) will restrict the speed and range of stepping possible. Roy Dommatt recalls seeing a gardener performing a similar jig over crossed parsnips (I think it was parsnips); the Seven Champions Molly Dancers famously performed over the spread-eagled legs of two men from the audience, sitting back-to-back on the ground. Another possibility would be to dance barefoot over two crossed roses, with the thorns intact. And on the Morris Dance Discussion List (on the Internet), the following question was recently asked: "Has anyone ever done it with a banana skin"?

Equipment: genuine clay churchwarden pipes are expensive - roughly ten pounds each. And they break! There is a maker who can supply them for dancing, with a metal rod down the stem. Lenny Leggett of Frome Valley Morris has made excellent "fake" metal pipes, which bear all but the closest scrutiny and can be bent to sit well on uneven surfaces. The advantage of fake pipes is that the stems can be made longer than was traditional, which can be more effective. Parsnips can be obtained from specialist suppliers (greengrocers).