

Playing for Contras: The Basics

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Contra dance music is a very diverse style. There is a wide range of music that will work for contra dancing. Numerous musicians and bands, including amateurs and professionals, and people of all ages, are inventing new sounds and exploring old forms all the time. You can spend a lifetime learning about this music; it is also possible to get started as a contra dance musician very easily.

HERE ARE SOME BASICS:

In order to contra dance you need music with a steady beat (generally at a tempo of 108 to 130 beats per minute) in a 32 bar form (with two beats per bar). Within those parameters almost anything will work, but the most common types of music are traditional fiddle tunes from New England, Ireland, Quebec, Scotland, England, or Appalachia. Reels and jigs are the most common types of tunes; reels are in 2/4 or 4/4, and jigs are in 6/8 time. Marches or polkas (like reels with fewer notes) are also quite effective. Some bands play jazz and swing tunes, Balkan tunes, Klezmer tunes, pop songs, improvised riffs or rhythmic motifs, or other material. Some people even dance contras to recorded techno or dance club music. We suggest developing a solid foundation in traditional repertoire before branching out to these other forms.

Most contra tunes are in the AABB form. It is also fine to play tunes with three or four parts, as long as the total overall length of the tune is still 32 bars. For example, you could play a tune that went AABC (such as Galopede) or ABCB (such as Chorus Jig) or even ABCD. You wouldn't want to go ABC (24 bars) unless the caller specifically requests a tune of an unusual length for a particular dance. Most contra dance musicians create medleys of tunes, putting two, three, or more tunes together into a set that they play together. This can help alleviate boredom when the dance runs on and on, and create a sense of musical development through the course of a dance, but it isn't required.

There are a million tunes in the world. You can learn them from recordings or tune books, from other musicians, from video or audio on the Web, or write them yourself. As you learn to play more and more tunes, you'll discover ways that they differ from each other, and start to figure out how specific tunes fit or don't fit with specific dances. You'll learn how to create sets of tunes that go well together. You'll figure out how to really support the dancers with your music, and how to shape your sound to create really exciting dance moments. There are countless skills of playing for dancing, so consider attending a workshop, a camp course, or observing experienced musicians at work whenever you go to a dance.

The information below on the basics of contra dance form will also be helpful.

Good luck!

THE BASICS OF CONTRA DANCE FORM

It is important for beginning callers, musicians and organizers to understand how the choreography of contra dancing fits with the music. Here is a good place to start.

OVERVIEW

Contra Dances are generally done to tunes that are 32 musical bars (64 beats) long. The tunes usually have an A part and a B part, each of which is 8 bars (16 beats) of distinct music. The A and B parts are each repeated, to make a form that is described as AABB, with a total of 32 bars (64 beats). The dances are made up of sets of figures (such as forward and back, allemande, do-si-do) that are mostly 4, 8, or 16 beats long, strung together in a pattern that results in 32 bars (64 beats) of dancing. Once through the tune equals once through the dance.

The dancers dance the figures once through with their partners and neighboring couples, and then move on (progress) to a new couple and do the pattern all over again. We usually repeat the dance 10 or 15 or 20 times through. The caller prompts the figures for as long as is necessary until the dancers can do it on their own. The band plays the music in this form (ideally without dropping any parts or adding any extra beats) until the caller decides to end the dance.

Let's break that down a bit and look at a specific dance and tune. At this point don't worry about trying to figure out the specific dance - it's just an example.

SAMPLE DANCE AND TUNE

Here's the simple contra dance "Broken Sixpence" by Don Armstrong.

BROKEN SIXPENCE, BY DON ARMSTRONG; FROM REBECCA LAY

longways; duple improper

A1: Neighbor do si do (8)

two gents do si do (8)

A2: two ladies do si do (8)

Ones swing, end facing down (8)

B1: go down the hall, 4 in line, turn alone (8)

up the hall, bend the line into a ring (8)

B2: Circle Left 1x

star Left 1x

The numbers in parentheses represent the number of musical beats that each figure should take. For example, the A1 has a neighbor do-si-do for 8 beats, and then a gents do-si-do for 8 beats. "Longways" indicates that the dance is done in long lines of couples, with each person standing across from their partner and next to their neighbor. "Improper" means the number two couples in each group of four cross over, so that the long lines are gent - lady, gent- lady, etc.

Now, here's the simple Irish reel "Silver Spear," a common contra dance tune (click the image to see a larger version).

The image shows the musical notation for the Irish reel "Silver Spear" in D major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It is labeled "traditional Irish". The notation is divided into two parts, A and B, both of which are repeated as written. Part A consists of two staves of music. The first staff has a red dot above the first beat of each measure, indicating it is one beat. A green bracket under the first measure is labeled "one bar". The second staff has a blue arrow pointing to the chord symbols D, G, A, D, G, A. Part B also consists of two staves of music. The first staff has red dots above the first beat of each measure. The second staff has chord symbols D, G, A, G, D, A. A legend at the top left states "• = one beat".

You can see the relationship between beats (red dots) and bars (the horizontal lines that divide the music), as well as the structure of the A and B parts. [Note to musicians: this concept of "beats" may be different than what the time signature says about beats per measure, depending on how the music is written out. It reflects the way dancers hear the beats - and callers match the figures to the music - when the tune is played at dance tempo. Don't think too much about the time signature.] The musical notes are the melody of the tune, while the chord letters give information to the rhythm musicians about how to accompany the tune.

If you were dancing Broken Sixpence to the Silver Spear, the neighbor do-si-do would take up the first line of music (8 beats, 4 bars), then the gents do-si-do takes up the second line, and that is the end of the A1. The band will repeat the A part; this time the ladies do-si-do takes up the first line, and the ones swing takes up the second line, and that's the end of the A2. For the B1 dancers go down the hall while the band plays the third line, and back up the hall for the 4th line. Repeat! B2: Circle = 3rd line, star = 4th line. Then we have reached the end of once through the dance and once through the tune. The dancers have progressed to face new couples; the band repeats the tune from the beginning, and the caller starts at the beginning of the figures for the second time through.

Presto! A contra dance!