

Playing for English Country Dance: The Basics

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This overview provides basic information about playing for English country dancing (ECD), based on practices that are common at contemporary dances in the United States. The goal of this article is to give you basic information about what you can expect - and what is expected of you - when playing for an English dance.

As you gain more experience you can experiment with different approaches and find a style that works for you. There is no single correct way to play English country dance music, but it is important to emphasize that the music must be danceable, and some of the musical elements that contribute to danceability are discussed below. It is also important that as a musician you have fun playing this music, as your sense of joy and creativity provides inspiration for the excitement that other people experience on the dance floor. So, read through this tutorial and enjoy exploring the wonderfully varied repertoire that is English country dance music.

Note for rhythm players / accompanists: *This article does not directly explore accompaniment styles for ECD. The Barnes Book of English Dance Tunes (Volume 1) contains an excellent tutorial about accompanying English dance tunes, with suggestions about different accompaniment styles for each of the most common meters encountered in the repertoire.*

THE BASICS

One of the unique characteristics of ECD is that the figures for any given dance have been choreographed to closely match the phrasing and feel of a particular piece of music. This means that ECD musicians are expected to play the title tune that matches the dance being called. It also means that callers and dancers will be paying a great deal of attention to the phrasing and structure of the music, more so than in many other traditional dance styles. In some cases bands do play alternate tunes or switch partway through the dance into a different tune, but to get started your best bet is to stick with the standard music.

You will most likely be playing music that appears in one of Peter Barnes' two books: English Country Dance Tunes, Volumes 1 and 2. In these books you will find written music sorted alphabetically by title, where the title of the tune (fairly often) matches the title of the dance (where this is not the case, look for alternate titles in the indices of both volumes). You will see the melody of the tune, which (usually) includes an A part and a B part, often repeated. Some tunes have additional parts or unusual repeats, but AABB is the most common form. The written music also includes suggested chords, which rhythm players will use to create an accompaniment, and which melody players can use to make up harmony and counterpoint lines when not playing the melody. A caller who plans to teach a dance for which music does not appear in the Barnes books should provide sheet music to you ahead of time if you request it. ECD callers also generally provide some sort of list of the dances they intend to call in an evening so you can prepare ahead of time.

AT THE DANCE

Here is what to expect, and what you should plan to do, when you play for a dance. The caller will let you know which dance he or she is teaching next, and the name of the tune (if it is different from the name of the dance). He or she may ask you to play a section of the tune before beginning the teaching in order for the dancers to get a feel for the music. At this point it's a good idea to check in about the tempo of the tune. Different callers and dance communities have different expectations about the tempo for a given dance, so it's helpful to get on the same page about the tempo from the beginning. The caller may also ask you to adjust the tempo during the dance if the dancers are struggling or if it doesn't match their feeling of the dance.

TEACHING AND DOODLING

As the caller teaches the dance he or she may ask you to play snippets of the tune ("doodle" the tune) along with the teaching so the dancers can learn to associate certain moves with certain musical phrases. Different callers have different preferences about doodling; it's a good idea to check in with the caller about it beforehand to figure out what will work for everyone. If you are not confident doodling the tune, it's probably better not to do so, since it can cause extra confusion for the caller and the dancers if it doesn't match well with the teaching. If you are not doodling it is best to keep chatting and noodling on your instrument to a minimum so that dancers can concentrate on the caller's teaching.

STARTING THE DANCE

Once the caller has taught the dance, he or she will signal that the dancers are ready to go. It's common for the band to provide some sort of introduction that establishes the tempo and lets the dancers know when to start the first figure. Expectations about intros vary in different communities, but it is fairly standard (and will almost always work for the dancers) to give a two note introduction, where each note is equivalent to the tempo of one step in the dance. Other possibilities include a one note introduction, a chord (as in Scottish country dancing), or playing the final two or four bars of the tune before beginning from the top.

DURING THE DANCE

Once the dance has begun, your responsibility is to play the tune at a steady tempo (barring adjustments requested by the caller) with all of the prescribed parts and repeats until the caller lets you know it's time to stop. For most dances once through the tune is equivalent to once through the dance, in which case you will repeat the tune as many times as the caller feels is appropriate. If one round of the dance requires more than one time through the tune, or if the dance fits with a specific number of repetitions, the caller will let you know.

PLAYING THE TUNE

When you are just learning to play for ECD, it's fine to simply play the melody of the tune as written. See if you can notice how the phrases of the music fit with the phrases of the dance, and learn to adjust your emphasis and styling to match the dance. For example, where the dance includes figures like setting or skipping (figures that require vertical motion), the music needs to provide lift to the dancers; you might play that section with a more staccato or bouncy style. Where the dance includes flowing figures such as casting or circling, and the dancers' motion is primarily horizontal, you might play with a smooth, lyrical style. See if you can shape the energy of the dance over the course of several times through by varying the volume and intensity of your playing. If your eyes are glued to the page such that you can't even see the dancers, you should consider spending some time on the dance floor so you can learn about ECD from the perspective of a dancer.

ENSEMBLE DYNAMICS AND ARRANGEMENTS

English dance music provides ample opportunities for musical interaction with other members of your band. It is common for melody players (and rhythm players who also feel comfortable playing the melody) to trade off the lead melodic role each time through the tune (or each time through the dance). This helps to provide variety and gives a natural shape to the music and dancing as different instruments and musicians are featured. It also gives a clear musical signal to the dancers at the point where they need to begin the figures of the dance again from the beginning. It's helpful to communicate ahead of time with the members of your ensemble about 1) the order in which you will rotate the responsibility for playing melody, if at all; 2) which members are comfortable playing melody, and if they are comfortable doing so on their own; 3) what kinds of accompaniment, harmonization, and improvisation members are comfortable with playing themselves and having other band-mates play (more on that below). You might also discuss whether one person is in charge of starting (intros) and making sure everyone knows when to stop, or if everyone is going to be aware of that.

When you are not playing the melody, there are numerous options available to you musically. Here are a few ideas:

1. Don't play. This is the simplest option, and sometimes your most powerful musical tool. Transitions between the full sound of several instruments and the sparse sound of one or two (and back again) can be very exciting, and by sitting out one or two times through you give other musicians the opportunity to shine (hopefully they will return the favor!). Many experienced musicians invent brilliant harmonies and improvisations but forget the importance of choosing not to play every so often.
2. Make up a harmony or counter melody. This can seem daunting, but is worth working on. One way to learn to harmonize is to develop an understanding of chords, i.e. learn which notes are in the chords that are written in the music, and practice playing a line that features those notes and runs parallel to the melody. Another approach is to train your ear to identify which notes fit with the melodic and harmonic structure of a given tune, and not worry about the theoretical concepts. Either approach requires practice. If you are familiar with these concepts by all means go for it; if not don't feel like you have to do this in order to play danceable music.

3. Do something rhythmic. Any instrument is capable of playing repetitive notes or riffs that add to the rhythmic pulse of the ensemble. This is a good way to practice learning about the chords that are written into the music. Start by playing the root of the chord (i.e. if a G chord is written, play a G note) in some consistent rhythm that echoes the pulse of the rhythmic accompaniment, and work up to more complex approaches from there. As you try different rhythmic ideas you'll learn what works best on your instrument and for your skill level. In general, off-beat emphasis adds to the lift, drive, and danceability of the music, while a heavy down beat can drag the energy down and make the music feel heavy.
4. Trade melodic phrases. This is particularly appropriate for tunes that are very repetitive or have discreet two- or four-bar phrases in the melody. It can be helpful to communicate about this ahead of time by saying something like "next time let's trade off every two bars." Plan who is involved in trading, and in what order.

IMPROVISATION

You don't need to play the melody exactly as written (or even vaguely as written) every single time. However, be aware that dancers often respond to cues from a familiar melody in order to identify where they are in the dance and determine what to do next. Improvisation can be very exciting; it can also be distracting and confusing to the dancers. Use this musical tool sparingly, at least as you are getting started playing for English dancing. The simplest way to begin improvising is to play variations on the melody. Try leaving out some of the written notes to create a sparser melody that is still reminiscent of the original. Or, you can add extra notes to the original melody, filling in long notes or rests, arpeggiating chords, or creating passages of running eighth or sixteenth notes. Another option is to start a phrase or section playing the melody, then depart from it, and return to the original melody at the beginning of the next phrase or section. These approaches allow you to have fun and put your own stamp on the tune, while playing something that is reminiscent enough of the original melody to help dancers keep track of their place. Try to be aware of the level of experience of the dancers on the floor; if you are playing for a lot of beginners it's probably a good idea to stick fairly closely to the melody of the tune.

ENGLISH MUSIC IS NOT WIMPY

Just because English country dancing has the reputation of being elegant and lovely doesn't mean you have to play like a wimp. It's still dance music, and it needs to have drive, force, passion and intensity. ECD is sometimes elegant, and sometimes danced to quiet, stately music. It is also sometimes rowdy, goofy, flirtatious, and a whole lot of other things. One of the great joys of playing for English dance is the opportunity to explore a wide range of musical moods, textures, and styles. But the music must always have the rhythmic insistence that makes it danceable. So dig in, play out loud, and have fun!