

Online Dancing in Toronto and Beyond

By Cathy Campbell, Toronto English Country Dance Assembly

Like most of the world, our dance group was caught flat-footed (so to speak!) by the rapid changes of living in a pandemic world. We went from nervous jokes about hand washing at our last in-person dance to a complete shutdown with no hope of continuing in the near future.

Our group usually meets twice a week in two different locations. We have an average of 16 to 20 people per dance. When we cancelled the weekly dances, our public health authorities were banning groups bigger than 50, but we thought it was too risky to continue.

We decided that we would experiment and see if an online dance was possible. We figured that even if it didn't work as a dance experience, we could at least hang out and chat. After exploring some video chat platforms, the techies in our group said Zoom would work. Many of us were already using Zoom for other activities and found it easy to learn.

The first dance on Zoom was a bit of a disaster. Everyone vanished from my screen at the 40-minute mark despite a Zoom offer of a free two-hour session. We lost a good portion of the crowd after that, despite creating another session and sending a link out by email. I was calling the dances live and playing recorded music from my computer. I didn't know how to manage the sound and onboard microphone from my laptop to balance them, so people could only see a looming eye on my video as I tried to shout into the inadequate mic.

Our next online dance worked much better, as all hands rallied to improve the experience. One of our dancers had a professional Zoom account that she wasn't using and offered it to us for free. She also quickly ordered a USB mic for me from the group.

We worked on balancing the sound of the calling and the music. Everyone figured out how to clear their living or other room for dancing. Some dancers put the Zoom window on their TVs for an immersive experience.



The repertoire of one- or two-person dances has been expanding during the pandemic. The Carolina English Country Dancers group has been collecting some of these dances on their website. (Find these at carolinaenglishcountrydance.com/dance-pandemic-list-links.) I've used a number of these in our dances, as well as some unpublished adaptations. It can be challenging for dancers to dance without the usual cues of other dancers to move with—more time is required for the caller to get everyone oriented to their own individual dance halls.

We have had dancers from outside Toronto—elsewhere in Canada, the United States, and Australia—which has provided lots of interesting conversation. It's wonderful to see everyone dancing at the same time.

I hope that by the time this is published we are back to regular activities, and this article will be a historical curiosity. If not, join us online; we are on the list of CDSS online events! (Find the list at cdss.org/onlineevents.)

Cathy Campbell is a caller and musician in Toronto, Canada. Visit the Toronto English Country Dance Assembly online at tecda.ca.

ABOVE: Community members enjoy participating in one of Toronto English Country Dance Assembly's weekly online dances.