

The Contra Connection: Notating Contra Dances

by Ted Sannella, Dan Pearl, and Larry Jennings

"What is the best way to notate contra dances?"

TED SANNELLA: Whether the purpose of notating a dance is for later reference by the notator, for transmission to another person, or for a formal compilation of dances (i.e. a book, syllabus, etc.) the main consideration is that the dance be clearly intended by the notator. As with any type of communication, notation that is unclear, jumbled, or ambiguous is of questionable value to the reader.

It is possible to describe a dance, as called, by listing the actual calls in sequence but this method is seldom seen since such notations could be quite wordy and might preclude the use of alternative wording of the calls. Most commonly, the *actions* are described rather than the *calls* and some system is used to indicate where in the music the action takes place.

Let's examine a simple contra dance and two common notation methods (see examples below):

This dance is fairly easy to reconstruct from either method of notation. Although #1 is more wordy, it conveys the same information as #2. In #1, the description ties in with some of the actual calls that could be used and the numbers in parenthesis indicate the number of beats (or steps) used by the dancers to complete each figure. In #2, just the bare essentials are given and the A1, A2, etc. refer to the four main parts of any standard contra tune. Neither method of

Example #1
Glossary Contra by Ted Sannella (4/14/91)
for 1991 NEFFA Festival

alternates active and crossed over

With your neighbor, do-si-do (8)
Swing with the same (9)
Circle four to the left (8)
The other way back, circle right (8)

Those two ladies chain, over and back (16)
Same four, star by the right (8)
Left hand star, the other way back (8)

Notes: Ted uses this, first as a sicilian circle then as a contra, to teach beginners the contra concept.

notation is better than the other. I advise callers to find the notation system with which they are most comfortable and then to use that style to document all of their dances.

I recommend that some effort be made to find out and record the correct title and author when possible. Also the date of composition and other historical information may be of interest to the notator or to someone else to whom the dance is later transferred. I frequently find, to my chagrin, that many callers are very lax in obtaining these facts. After enjoying a dance that is new to me, I often learn that the caller has no idea what it is called, who wrote it, and where he learned it.

Often, greater clarity can be achieved by using modifiers and explanatory clauses. For example: "*just the actives, do-si-do*;" "*across the set, pass through*;" "*gents cross over, pass by the right, and swing your neighbor*." If using method #1, it may be desirable to bunch together some of the "counts" when the timing of a sequence is not critical. For example, "actives balance, do-si-do, allemande left with the one below (16)." Likewise, the "counts" may be inserted in method #2 notation when precise timing is important, as in "A1 Star left below 1/2 (4), balance neighbor (4), allemande right the same 1-1/2 (8)."

It is helpful to make note of any pointers that will improve the performance of a dance. Perhaps the neutral couples at the ends need to be alert for an

Example #2
GLOSSARY CONTRA by Ted Sannella
on 4/14/91

duple improper

A1 Do-si-do below
Swing with the same
A2 Circle left
Circle right

B1 Ladies chain over and back
B2 Star right
Star left

Note: Written for use in a beginner workshop at the 1991 NEFFA Festival - done as a sicilian circle, then as a contra.

unexpected transition involving them, or the inactives must be reminded to move up during a progression to avoid having the set drift downward.

All of my dances are neatly typed on 3" x 5" cards. I make a special effort to be clear and consistent so that no further explanation will be necessary when I hand the card to some caller who says "Can I see your notes on the dance that you just did?" This is how good dances are accurately spread around. If nobody asks to see your notes, it is possible that you don't use good dances, but perhaps it may be that everyone knows that your notes are incomprehensible.

New contra dances are being written all the time. Some will become very popular because they are fun to dance and some will fall by the wayside. Unfortunately, a few potential hits could be lost due to poor notation which prohibits their reconstruction. It needn't happen!

DAN PEARL: The problem of what notation to use is not a new one, and not restricted to contra dances. Entire week-long classes at Pinewoods and other dance camps are devoted to desperate deciphering of garbled notations in old country dance manuscripts (whose authors were evidently more concerned about the quality of their penmanship than the understandability of their thoughts). This activity is known as "reconstruction". Nowadays, dance composers prefer that their dances be danced instead of serving as fodder for reconstruction classes.

Of course any notation you are comfortable with is fine for your private collection. For instance, here is how I might notate on my dance card the modern classic "Shadrack's Delight" by Tony Parkes:

A1. Dsd N 1-1/4 to wave, bal 4, almd R N 1/2
A2. Bal 4, M almd L 1/2, sw pt
B1. Down 4, TC, rtn, face acc
B2. 1/2 R&L, 1/2 W ch

I also use * for star and O for circle. You get the idea; I want to see the dance at a glance without having to wade through piles of prose. Any special teaching hints, notes about effects, special choreography for ending the dance, music preferences, and alternate versions also go on the card.

You face a bigger challenge when you choose a notation for publishing or just passing along a dance. Remember the following points:

Innovate with Caution. If you like the style of notation in an existing publication, why reinvent the wheel? -- Use it! If you decide to invent a term, then be real sure that it is better than the old term. The term "neighbor", for example, was introduced in *Zesty Contras* by Larry Jennings. It has largely displaced the previous term "the one below" because 1) it is shorter,

2) it relates to *all* the dancers (not just the actives), 3) people respond intuitively to it, and 4) it makes sense even when "the one below" is not "below" at the moment. On the other hand, "below" rhymes better than "neighbor", so in the calling I might say "With the next below, do-si-do."

Consider Conciseness. Conciseness is desirable. The more verbose a description is, the more opportunities for misunderstanding there are. But don't go overboard: Remember that old joke where a group of old friends shouted numbers at each other, resulting in gales of laughter? It seems that they assigned numbers to familiar stories, and saved storytelling time by simply calling the number.

A concise notation may be perfectly unambiguous, but it could be daunting to the casual reader. Attempt to strike a balance; keep it short, consistent, and intuitively understandable (so you don't need to use a key).

Tell People What They Need to Know. For example, in the sequence "Circle left; half hey for four" you *must* designate the dancers who start the hey. An astute reader could figure out which dancers would flow well into the hey, and which shoulder is passed, but why take chances? I'd recommend being explicit to eliminate misinterpretation as in "Circle left; 1/2 hey, women start left shoulder".

Or consider "Actives allemande left; swing neighbors". How fast is the allemande? Is it a leisurely 8 counts, an energetic 4 counts, or somewhere in between? Specifying the number of counts for adjustable-speed figures is absolutely required for others to capture the feel that you intended for the dance.

Don't Tell People What They Don't Need to Know. In the following example, extraneous information is italicized:

A1. Balance (4) and swing neighbors (12), *end facing down with the women on the right*
A2. Down *the center* four in line (6), turn as couples (2), return (6), bend the line (2)
B1. Women *give right hands and chain over* (8), *same four circle left 3/4* (6), pass through along the line (*actives down, inactives up*) (2)
B2. Do-si-do next neighbor (8), with that new couple: circle left (8)

It is important to say who does the circle in B2, lest the dancers return to the original couple (an improbable, but possible misinterpretation). You might argue that the "bend the line" in A2 is extraneous, given that people know more exciting transitions into a women's chain -- I'd probably agree! You'll notice that I italicized all the timings; if any of the moves were of a non-standard length (like "Circle left 3/4 (8)") it must be specified.

(continued)

Be Consistent. Whatever you do in your notation, be consistent. People who decipher dance descriptions really do distinguish between "hands across" and "star", for example. Using the various terms to represent the same concept might be fine in the walk-thru and calling, but it is a notation no-no.

Be Practical. A notation that depends on symbols may be hard to represent on a typewriter.

If you think that the issue of notation is not especially important, consider the experience of the CDSS editorial staff with the 75th Anniversary Dance Contest Collection. The first draft of this book consisted of dance transcriptions as submitted by the entrants. But there was a problem: reading the book was a jarring experience, with notations changing on every page. This was simply not acceptable. Several editors attempted to unify the notation. When the new transcriptions were dance-tested, it was discovered that some of the dances just didn't work because the original notations had been misunderstood! (Further checking has been done to insure that the new transcriptions accurately represent the ideas of the choreographer, but this problem accounts for the delay in the release of the collection.)

This problem with notation translation is reminiscent of the children's game "Telephone", where a message is whispered from person to person (with funny changes introduced each time). Put yourself in a naive reader's shoes to see if your message is unambiguous and clear the first time.

LARRY JENNINGS: The notator's job at first seems simple indeed: State who does an action, what the action is, how that action fits the music (the phrasing), and, perhaps as a safety measure, where the dancers are at the conclusion of the action. Describing an unusual action depends on the ingenuity of the notator, and most any scheme for indicating the phrasing works if conscientiously applied. I will, therefore, focus my discussion on "with whom do you dance?"

First I indicate some of the problems I have seen. Often the notator, faced with the lack of an agreed nomenclature, will simply say, "It's obvious who you dance with." Well, it may be obvious to him but maybe not to the reader. He may also use "you" inconsistently, sometimes to refer to the men, sometimes to refer to an active dancer or couple, and sometimes to refer to anybody. Finally, he may have preconceived notions of the definition of terms such as "corner" or "opposite" which differ from those of his reader. (I advocate avoiding these two terms completely.)

Let me contrive an example illustrating some facets of my preferred notation. "Becket formation: 1. Long lines: fwd & bk 2. Dsd shadow 3. Orig foursomes: star R 3/4 4. Almd L next N x2 5. Dsd orig N 6. Cir L with next cpl (of ph 4) 7. Sw pt in cntr & face that next cpl 8. Cir L 3/4." (Not much of a dance, but

perfectly workable.)

The abbreviations are mostly obvious or have been introduced by Dan. The most unconventional aspect is the designation of eight 8-count phrases (abbreviated "ph") rather than four 16-count phrases. The primary reason for this is that the notator can conveniently refer to a specific piece of the dance, almost a necessity in complex situations, as illustrated in the example.

If you figure how the dance works (with real people, Dixie cups, or diagrams) you will probably come out shaking your head, but I'd bet you reconstruct what I intended. To see why this is, let us examine a bit of the theory of duple minor contras.

Since all the minor sets are doing the same thing (except near the ends of the set), there is someone from an adjacent minor set tracing the same pattern as you are but displaced by about six feet (less under crowded conditions) above or below you. We might say that you and these others are the same "kind" of dancer. There can only be four kinds of dancer and I find it most useful to specify them as follows:

Your own kind. Thus I consider "you" to be any dancer. Since the closest dancers of your own kind should be separated from you by that six feet (or so), they do not enter into the choreography and thus do not need a conventional name. However, if the adjacent dancer of your own kind (always the same person) consistently dawdles, you may have a name for him based on four-letter words. More politely, "same-sex-shadow" might be appropriate.

Your partner's kind. You interact with each of these dancers in the same way change after change so it is appropriate to refer to any of them (except your partner) as a "shadow". Thus your shadows trace the same pattern as your partner, but displaced by six-foot intervals.

The kind who are of the opposite sex from you and are a different dancer in each change. I refer to any of these as "a neighbor". In your original foursome (the group which takes "hands four"), you have your "(original) neighbor". Other neighbors may be given names such as "next neighbor", "new neighbor", "second neighbor", and so on.

The kind who might be called your "same-sex-neighbor". These are the partners of your neighbors, come and go as do your neighbors, and are the only kind of dancer of your sex with whom you can actually dance. They are often invoked by convention or implication as in "Cir L", but other actions require being explicit as in "M almd L 1-1/2" or "W dsd".

When you take hands four, you are "dancing with" one of each of the other three kinds of dancer. In general, you either continue "dancing with" those same three or you leave one of a given kind for another of

(continued on page 18)

- Jun 25-29** FAC Session at [redacted]
New England, 617-354-1340.
- Jun 29-Jul 2** FAC Session at [redacted]
New England, 617-354-1340. *
- Jul 2-6** 4th of July Weekend at Pinewoods. CDS
Boston Centre, 617-354-1340. *
- Jul 4-11** CDSS Family Week at Buffalo Gap. Capon
Bridge, WV. ++
- Jul 5-11** Rocky Mountain Dance Roundup. La Floret,
near Colorado Springs, CO. Lloyd Shaw
Foundation, Diane Ortner, 419 NW 47th St, Kansas
City, MO 64116.
- Jul 6-10** English-Scottish Session at Pinewoods.
RSCDS Boston Branch & CDS Boston Centre,
617-354-1340. *
- Jul 11-18** CDSS English & American Week at Buffalo
Gap. Capon Bridge, WV. ++
- Jul 12-18** Lake Cumberland Leaders Lab. KHI, PO Box
4128, Frankfort, KY 40604; T. Auxier, 502-695-
5218, or Don Coffey, 502-227-4466. *
- Jul 18-25** CDSS Early Music Week at Pinewoods.
Plymouth, MA. ++
- Jul 23-Aug 2** Folkmoot USA. Waynesville, NC. 704-452-2997.
- Jul 25-Aug 1** CDSS Folk Music Week at Pinewoods.
Plymouth, MA. ++
- Jul 25-Aug 1** BACDS Family Week at Camp Gualala. Bay
Area CDS, Emily Flouton & Jerry Allen, 3372
Victor Ave, Oakland, CA 94602; 510-531-7476. *
- Aug 1-8** CDSS Family Week at Pinewoods. Plymouth,
MA. ++
- Aug 8-15** CDSS American Dance Week at Pinewoods.
Plymouth, MA. ++
- Aug 15-22** CDSS English Dance Week at Pinewoods.
Plymouth, MA. ++
- Aug 16-22** Lady of the Lake Family Week. Coeur d'Alene,
ID. Penn Fix & Debra Schultz, W 703 Shoshone,
Spokane, WA 99203; 509-838-2160.
- Aug 22-29** CDSS English & American Dance Week at
Pinewoods. Plymouth, MA. ++
- Aug 29-Sep 5** CDSS Campers Week at Pinewoods. Plymouth,
MA. ++
- Sep 5-8** Labor Day Weekend at Pinewoods. CDS Boston
Centre, 617-354-1340. *
- Sep 11-13** Swing Dance Weekend. Folk Arts Center of New
England, 617-491-6083.

* A CDSS Group Affiliate

++ Sponsored by the Country Dance & Song Society, 17 New South
Street, Northampton, MA 01060; 413-584-9913. Registration forms
will be available in March.

(Arkansas CDS, continued from p. 12)

I teach English country dancing. In 1984 members of
ACDS formed the Arkansas Scottish CDS. Arkansas
CDS is on the program for most of the major festivals in
the area, including Riverfest, International Fest,
Memphis in May, and for the Rackensack concerts each
June. We have had both a rapper and a morris team
and now have a garland team, led by Janie. David
continues to direct our clogging team, I teach clogging to
all levels on Saturdays and J.L. Woodruff teaches it at
the Ozark Folk Center in Mountain View.

*This story of the Arkansas CDS is one of several group histories given
to CDSS during our anniversary celebrations in 1990.*

(Contra Connection, continued from p. 10)

that kind. For example, in the illustrative dance above,
you have your partner next to you in ph 1. There is only
one possible shadow for ph 2, the dancer on the other
side of you. You might expect to stay with that shadow
for ph 3, but (in these days of pirouetting do-si-dos) it is
equally easy to return to partner for ph 3, as specified.
Similarly, at the end of ph 3, there is only one "next
neighbor" at all accessible to you. And so on. Thus we
see that a caller (or notator) need only indicate whether
you stay with a given dancer of each kind or switch to a
new one of that kind. If a caller is unskilled at
conveying this information, it becomes immediately
obvious during the walk-thru; the dancers know
something is wrong when five dancers try to get into a
star or when a dancer can't find three others to do a hey
with. If a notator is similarly unskilled, it may take
longer for the problem to reveal itself.

An alternative view of this result is to note that,
at most, only one dancer of each of the other kinds is
available for you to dance with at any one moment
(because someone else is dancing with the adjacent
dancer of that kind). Thus a foursome dancing together
must contain exactly one dancer of each kind, a rule that
may be helpful to a caller or even to a dancer. Note,
however, the special case when you are exactly midway
between two dancers of the same kind, as in long lines
or long waves. It is then not clear which dancer you are
"dancing with", but it does not matter. As soon as you
dance the next action, you must choose between those
two dancers.

This brief glimpse at the theory of duple minor
contras may offer some insight into the "jarring
experience" mentioned by Dan. So long as the caller or
the notator somehow indicates whether you dance with
the same or a different dancer, no matter how
inconsistent or poorly chosen are the words, the
description is likely to work. Of course, consistent, well-
chosen words work better. A more complete
development of the theory may give additional insight
into ways to teach and notate contras, addressing such
topics as end effects, when it is necessary to be explicit
about the dancer of "same-sex" kind, how a caller can
recognize mispositioning of the dancers, when it is
necessary to distinguish actives from inactives, etc.

*Callers Ted Sannella, Dan Pearl, and Larry Jennings live in
New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles to help
organizers and beginning callers. "Notating Contra Dances" is the
thirteenth article in the series. Reprints of earlier articles are available
at \$1 each (plus shipping & handling).*