

The Contra Connection: Programming for Experienced Dancers

by Ted Sannella, Larry Jennings, and Dan Pearl

What do you consider when planning a program for (mostly) experienced dancers?

Ted Sannella: I have learned that, in an active contra dance area, any public dance will have a wide spectrum of "experienced dancers" in attendance ranging from the incorrigible perpetual beginner to the highly skilled veteran. Since the skill level of dancers cannot be assessed in terms of their dancing longevity, I do not equate dancing experience with expertise when planning a program.

If I am told that the expected crowd is of average skill, I may expect fewer raw recruits and more advanced dancers than at the usual open dance but my program will be geared toward the intermediate dancers who, most likely, will be in the majority. Of course, for the first few dances I will choose material that will bring in the beginners and give them confidence while, at the same time, give the more experienced dancers something new and/or interesting. Dances of this genre were discussed (with examples) in an earlier Contra Connection article.¹

I usually plan on one dance set per fifteen minutes of total time. For example, I will select twelve dance sets for a three hour dance and fourteen dance sets for a dance of 3-1/2 hours duration. No dance will take as long as fifteen minutes but this formula allows for a ten to fifteen minute intermission, a final waltz, and one or two other couple dances as well. In my formula, a dance set is defined as either one contra, two squares, one triplet, or a circle mixer. If a short (two hour or less) evening without an intermission or couple dances is planned, I will add one more dance set to my formula.

Follow me as I plan a three hour program. First I make an outline. On a piece of paper I number from one to twelve leaving ample space for cross-outs and changes. Now we fill in at the numbers. I want to begin with a contra so that latecomers can join in at the end and participate as soon as they arrive. Next to #1 I mark two parallel horizontal lines as my symbol for a contra dance. Number two may be another contra or a circle mixer. A mixer is designated by a circle on my paper. If I know that the crowd is usually tardy, I will put off the mixer to the #3 slot so that the optimum number will be on hand for that dance. When I know

that the crowd likes my squares, I plan three sets by drawing a square next to the numbers 4, 7, and 10. Alternatively, with groups that have a strong preference for contras I may only plan squares in the #5 and #10 slots. For further variety, I decide to do one triplet. I find that this dance form works best late in the program so that a triangle goes next to the number 9. All the remaining slots will be contras so that the contra symbol is put next to those numbers. The word "intermission" (in caps) is written between #7 and #8 and the word "waltz" is added at the very end. So now we have the outline of a program that contains seven or eight contras, two or three sets of squares, one triplet, one mixer, and a final waltz.

Here comes the fun part. To fill in the blanks after each symbol, I dig into my card box and bring out an assortment of dances in each of several categories. Most of these are ones in my current repertoire but two or three are dances that I haven't done for a while — they'll probably be new to the crowd and will provide a refreshing change (and challenge) to me. From this "straight forward but interesting" category I select the first two contras and the first square. For the first contra I want one with a partner swing and for the second contra I look for one with good neighbor interaction. One or both of the dances in the first square set can be of the partner change variety but the first should be easier than the second. For the third contra I look for one with a twist, perhaps a double progression, a circle to a pass through, a gypsy, or a shadow interaction. I search the "contras with a hey" category for one with a full hey for four that is appropriate as the fourth or fifth contra of the evening. Another with a half hey for four may be selected for a spot after intermission.

I probably want to use a dance in Becket formation and a classic dance which may be either one of the chestnuts or one of those in the "near chestnut" category. The next to last spot on the program (#11 in this case) is my favorite place for a classic dance. I plan the dance just before intermission to be one of the high energy variety with both partner and neighbor interaction. For the final dance of the evening, I schedule a no-fail popular dance, possibly one without a walk-through so that the dancers can leave in high spirits. The spot just after intermission is where I like a feature dance, one with a special challenge. This could be the Becket formation dance or the one with the

half hey for four.

For the remaining squares I choose dances with varied and interesting sequences, preferably ones in which all the dancers participate equally. In each set the second dance is more energetic than the first. The mixer and triplet are chosen to complement the rest of the program. The mixer can serve to familiarize the dancers with a sequence to follow in another dance (ex. a series of rapid allemandes, a grand right and left, etc.) and the triplet can be used to reinforce a figure or sequence introduced in an earlier dance.

In planning my programs I take all this one step further and designate a tune or type of tune for each dance. By carefully sprinkling three or four jigs, a march or two-step, and a hornpipe in amongst the reels and choosing reels of different styles, I am able to add great musical variety to an already varied program. My musicians are encouraged to play tunes of their own choosing but asked to select tunes similar in style to my examples.

I refer to previous programs when planning a dance for a group that has hired me in the past. By noting which dances I used in my most recent appearances, I can refresh my memory in regard to their success and the abilities of the dancers on those occasions.

Although my system of programming may appear rigid, it is far from that. I remain flexible through alternate choices that I select for many of the slots. With my experience I find that I am able to judge on the spot which of two dances in a given category is most appropriate for the moment. If necessary, I can abandon both and quickly find another from my repertoire. Also I find that on occasion I may need to revise a program by switching the order of the dances or omitting a slot entirely.

There will always be unexpected variables which can foil a contra dance program. The caller must be prepared to respond to these challenges. The true mettle of a caller will show when he or she is put to the test, especially with experienced dancers having high expectations. I believe that advance program preparation with attention to variety and flexibility will help ensure a successful dance.

Larry Jennings: First I get all the information I can from the proprietors of the series: their vision, the expectations of the dancers, sample well-received programs, content of publicity flyers, etc. Then, assuming he or she is willing, I talk to the booking coordinator mentioning my view of the skills and biases that I propose to share with the dancers. For example, I might suggest that my expertise lies with contras and my bias is to reduce the time taken getting dancers into various formations by having an intensive evening of contras. If the organizers want a few dances in other formations, I would accommodate. If they wanted a lot of such dances, though, I would suggest they get instead

a caller with suitable expertise. I will say a word later about a achieving a desired energy level.

Then I gather together, say, 25 cards containing only dances that I myself would like to see in a program. (There is no sense trying to fool people with a dance you don't like.) These would include a few contemporary glossary dances, such as The Nice Combination; a few dances with a well-known distinctive figure in a simple setting, such as Chorus Jig; perhaps one or two with such a figure in a complex setting, such as Dancing Sailors; and mostly dances with some distinctive, but unnamed, feature. Dances in this latter category will distinguish your program from another. For example, you might include a pair backing under their joined hands to form a cozy line as in Symmetrical Force. Or you might have the women lead a shift to a new couple as in Lucy's Dance. Or you might have a California twirl followed by a circle left with your shadow as in Snow Dance.²

How many swings to include, and especially partner swings, should be decided in the context of the producer's remarks. The same holds true for the use of traditional dances. However, I must offer a word of warning about the common traditional dances: they are "easy" for the dancers who know them and the producer may therefore suggest that they be included in your program. However, for a beginner, Petronella, Lamplighter's Hornpipe, or even Chorus Jig, are very difficult. If you and the producer want to make it easy for beginners, standards such as Shadrack's Delight are much more likely to succeed.

Having drawn up such a program, are you done? Not in my opinion. You have to search out cases of the "overused semi-distinctive feature". For example, most contemporary dances are used to everyone moving the same amount: an equal dance. They will generally accept an occasional unequal dance, but two such dances in a row may receive a Bronx cheer. Here is a partial list of semi-distinctive features to keep your eye on: down four in line; gypsy, especially if followed by a swing; hey, or partial hey; half figure eight; shift to progress; twirl to swap; circle left 3/4 and pass thru; circle and swing corner; men (or women) allemande 1-1/2 and swing opposite.

You might also check on the standard figures like allemande, balance, star, promenade, etc. Most of these will take care of themselves, except, perhaps, for ladies chain. If the choreography calls for a partner swing on the side of the set, as do most contemporary choreographies, a ladies chain is the easiest way to get back to duple and improper. So you might want to keep a lookout for an overuse of ladies chain.

Add to all these checks a few obvious considerations such as a lot of neighbor interaction early in the evening, a crowd-pleaser with partner and neighbor interaction just before intermission and as the final dance, etc. and you will have a near perfect program.

You must be prepared, of course, to amend your program at the dance. It is surprising, though, how

rarely this is necessary. (It is often enough to replace your most difficult planned dance with a simple one; that makes a lot of difference.) To make sure I don't run dances too long, I list ending times for each dance as part of my prepared program.

Finally, in my opinion, the energy level of each dance, as well as of the entire evening, is determined by how the musicians and dancers feed off each other. You can, of course, influence this, but more through instructions to the musicians than to choice of material in your program.

Dan Pearl: Program planning can be an intimidating chore for a dance leader. The blank sheet of paper on which you will inscribe your evening's program offers no help. Where do you begin?

A good start when planning programs is to look at the past. A glance at programs that you have previously done for a group tells you the level of the group. Knowing this allows you to disqualify a large amount of material, and that simplifies your job.

When a dance producer tells you of particular goals (fun, education, training, and so on) than you must take those goals into account. (See our previous Contra Connection on Caller/Producer Dialogue.) In the absence of any explicitly-stated goal, I attempt to provide a fun evening that provides occasional challenges to the dancers to improve their dancing skills.

Given all that, what do you do now? You might try scanning your collection to identify those dances that interest you. From that selection, you craft your program. This is the part of programming that is interesting, challenging, and fun.

The three most important principles of good programming are Variety, Variety, and Variety — the three Vs. This means that the program should feature a mixture of dance movements, tempos, activity, partner/neighbor interaction, etc.

An important factor when selecting dances is the shape of the hall. A hall with long sets calls for more "equal" or double progression dances. A hall with short sets just cries out for "unequal" dances. When confronted with long sets, some callers ill-advisedly run the dances longer. This promotes fatigue or boredom, and kills the enthusiasm in the applause when the dance finally ends. But remember: An unequal dance, if not run too long, may be just the ticket for giving dancers a rest during the latter stages of an evening.

They might really welcome that rest, depending on how you've structured the energy demands of the evening. A tried-and-true technique is to have the program start at a fairly low energy level, increase gradually to peak at the dance just before the break, and then decrease gradually after the break. This is popular because it builds excitement, allows dancers to recover during the break, and gives them a rest after

the break when they are beginning to run out of energy. (I want the dancers to comfortably dance the entire evening.) Of course, if it is hot and humid, then you might want to lessen the physical demands of the whole evening.

Similar to the curve of physical demands is the curve of mental demands. In general, people are best able to cope with mental demands after they are warmed up a bit, but before they begin to get fatigued. I like to put the mental demand peak of the evening fairly close to the break.

Given these broad parameters, it might be best to look at the "boundary cases" in your program. Find a good first dance (which should be bulletproof, in case you've overestimated the skills of the group). Next, find the dance you want to do just before the break (perhaps energetic with partner interaction). How about the last dance of the evening? Will it be a mellow traditional dance, or a energetic modern dance? Pick it to match your concept of the evening.

Continue filling in the program. It's good to have an idea of how many dances you're going to do. I budget about twelve minutes per contra slot, thirteen minutes for a set of New England squares, five minutes for a couple dance, and ten minutes for a circle mixer. Get to know how long you like to run dances.

When you think you've got a program, dance it in your mind, from beginning to end, and look for timely introduction of figures, the shape of the physical and mental demand curves, a variety of figures, and an appropriate amount of partner and neighbor interaction. Be alert for things that might be frustrating, dull, belabored, etc.

Larry is certainly on the mark when he says that certain dance movements wear out their welcome if overused. A few years ago, a visiting caller called a series of dances that featured a diagonal hey for four. The first time, it was challenging and interesting. The second time it was a curious coincidence. The third time it became a joke shared by the dancers (but not the caller). By the fourth appearance of the figure, the caller lost all credibility. Everyone was wondering what was on the mind of this caller.

Perhaps he had a hidden agenda. It's fine to have one. (Some examples: "I want to increase my repertoire by calling dances that are new to me", "I want to premiere my brand-new dance", "I want to impress these dancers so that I'm invited back again", or "I want to train these dancers in doing all sorts of heys".) It is important to realize when you have a hidden agenda, not be a slave to it, and do what's best for the situation.

There are lots of factors that you should consider when creating a program (even more than I have listed here). Consider physical things like set shape, dancer capabilities, and the weather. Also consider intangibles like the need for social interaction. Above all, remember the three Vs.

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(Home-Schooled, continued from p. 8)

ly every month during the school year. Sometimes, children would describe in their own words how to do dances we'd learned. Here are two of their descriptions:

Shrewsbury Lasses by Daniel (age 8): "We'd all stand in lines of six. In the first couple, first the boy would go up and bow then do another step and bow then go back and then he'd go up and circle with the girl. Then he'd go back and the girl would go up and curtsy, then curtsy again, then she'd go back and circle with the boy. And then the boy and the girl would cast down and circle with the bottom couple. Then they'd skip around and go into the middle, turn, and go down. And then the couple that was on the top casts down and circles and skips around. And now the bottom couple is at the top and he bows and they do the same thing over again."

The Black Nag by Lucy (age 10): "The Black Nag is a dance where there is a pair right here and another pair and another pair and they're all lined up. The boys are on one side and the girls are on the other side. The first pair and the second and third, they all take one step up and then another one and then two step backs and then you do that again. And then one pair goes up and the next pair and then the last pair and then the last pair goes back and then the second one goes back and then the third one goes back. Then the corner ones change sides back to back, then the other corner ones do, then the middle ones do. Then the boys do a figure eight and then the girls do a figure eight and that's it."

(For more information on the L.P.H. Resource Center, write to Rick Kephart, 1 High Street, Malvern, MA 01935.)

(Contra Connection, continued from p. 11)

¹Contra Connection #2: Planing for Mixed-Level Dances, *CDSS News* #82, May/June 1988.

²The exemplary dances are taken from Larry's book Zesty Contras and from Gene Hubert's Dizzy Dances.

Callers Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl, and Ted Sannella live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles to help organizers and beginning callers; "Programming for Experienced Dancers" is the 18th article in the series. Reprints of this and earlier articles are available for \$1.00 each (plus shipping and handling).

(England, continued from p. 7)



Bare Necessities' Earl Gaddis, warming up to play the fiddle? Nope, he's playing skittles. Photo by Neil Kelley.

to find out that Huntington's Maggot, which we dance at our Twelfth Night Ball in Little Rock, is done quite often there. I thought we were the only group in the world which danced that dance. Vanity!

On our evenings off, we had a pub night, with skittles, and a swimming party, with impromptu Scottish country dancing, and leisure time to walk in gardens or visit nearby villages. On the next-to-last day of our trip, several of us took a train into London to Cecil Sharp House, home of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, to visit the Ralph Vaughan Williams Memorial Library and to have a morning dance session with Colin Hume. Bernie Chalk, another English caller, was there and danced with us as well. Colin taught us a few humdinger dances.

We returned home full of good music, good dancing, and great memories.

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