

The Contra Connection

1: Choosing Appropriate Music

by Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl, and Ted Sannella

"How do you choose appropriate music for a specific contra dance?"

Ted Sannella: My preference for tunes that are suitable for contras includes many of the 32-bar reels and jigs from the Irish, Scottish, English, and French-Canadian repertoire. In addition, I like a lot of the American tunes that have a similar flavor, such as many of those written by Bob McQuillen, Jay Ungar, and others close to the contra dance scene.

In general, most of these tunes are interchangeable. The same tune can be used for many different contras and, conversely, a specific contra can be danced to many different tunes. In planning a program, I use music as one important way to add variety. I pick out three or four jigs, scatter them throughout, and use reels for the rest. Some of the tunes will be livelier than others, some will be more stately than others, possibly one or two will feature minor keys, different tempos will be used and perhaps a two-step, march, or polka style tune may appear. If the program includes squares, I may select jigs or reels that have a quadrille flavor for those dances and choose contra flavor jigs and reels for the contra dances.

The specific tune choice depends on the musicians and their repertoire. I will choose from their tune list if they have one, but I try to give them a lot of leeway. I may say, "Play Drowsy Maggie and/or something similar" or "Play a lively reel, like Woodchopper's" or "How about a Scottish jig like Cock O' The North?" With an unknown band or without a tune list, I will request

the above tunes by flavor - a contra flavor driving reel, a strongly phrased bouncy reel, and a stately sounding jig. With phono records, I will be limited to the discs on hand, but I make it a point to carry a wide variety of records on these gigs. Here, I can use different instrumentation as well to add variety. In most every case, the type of tune selected will depend on where in the program the dance in question fits into the overall scheme of things. With a different program, another type of tune may be more appropriate the next time I use a specific dance. Exceptions, of course, are the classic contra dances (Chorus Jig, Hull's Victory, etc.).

Dan Pearl: A famous person once said that "variety is the spice of life" --- this maxim also applies to the dance floor. If you are having a good time, and the band is having a good time, it's likely that the dancers are, too. Musical variety, as well as dance variety, are the ingredients to a successful dance event.

So, my preference for a particular dance within an evening of dancing depends on what has been done so far and what I expect to do, subject to whim and fancy!

I never thought about it until now, but when I think about music to go with a dance, I feel like a film director. I have an idea about the kind of feeling that I want to achieve at that point in the evening and I use all the tools available to me to accomplish it. Music is a very important tool and, with carefully selected words, I share my ideas with the musical director.

When selecting those words, I consider meter, genre, and features

of the sequence. You might find your influences amongst the other items in "Minilecture 9" of Larry's *Zesty Contras*.*

Meter: In terms of energy level, I'd rank marches lowest, jigs in the middle, and reels highest. Look at the energy of the pieces of the dances, and get an idea of what tempo you want, and this will give you guidance about suitable meters.

Genre: I like to choose tunes that fit a dance's personality. If the dance has a Southern flavor, I'll go with it in my choice of music. English and Scottish-feel dances can also be complemented with appropriate music. (But beware of using tunes that "belong" to other dances!)

Features: Does the sequence have a figure that can be complemented by an appropriate event in the music? I especially consider where the balances are and make a point to tell the musicians about distinguishing features of the dance to aid their selection.

Notice I said "their selection" --- film directors don't compose the score, do they? Most musicians I work with come up with appropriate tunes after I tell them my carefully selected words that describe the mood I'm trying to achieve. Skilled musicians keep their eyes on the dancers during the walk-through and during the dance; this helps them in their choice of tunes as well as guidance on how to play the tune to complement the dance.

Don't rely on our experience -- develop your own. Experimentation will show you what works for you and suits your style in your locale.

Larry Jennings: I think the most important consideration by far is good understanding between the musicians and the caller. If the musicians understand what the caller is trying to do, and if the caller allows the musicians the opportunity to express themselves through the varied program discussed by Dan and Ted, then the dancers will think the music is the best.

With such basic understandings as a foundation, the caller will find that showing public appreciation for the musicians will be a more constructive use of the available time than a lengthy discussion of the next tune. You can also use your energy for the important matter of getting the dancers, the musicians, and yourself off to a smart start at the same time.

Callers Larry Jennings, Ted Sannella, and Dan Pearl live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles written to help beginning and practicing callers and dance organizers. "Choosing Appropriate Music," the first article in the series, was published in the CDSS News, issue 80, January/February 1988.

* *The CDSS Bookstore carries Larry's book, Zesty Contras (NEFFA, 1983), and Ted's book, Balance & Swing (CDSS, 1982).*

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2 pp.