

The Contra Connection

2: Planning Dances for Mixed-Level Groups

by Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl, and Ted Sannella

"When planning for a mixed-level group of dancers, what do you look for when deciding which contras to use early in the program?"

Dan Pearl: I try to anticipate what kind of group will be attending the dance. By talking with the dance producer, I can get information about experience mix, age range, gender balance, etc.

The next stage of selection begins at the dance when people begin arriving. Were my assumptions about the crowd correct? I scan the crowd and look for telltale signs. Are there lots of people "practicing" by skipping around with linked elbows? Are people socializing, or are they tense and glued to seats? Do people know what I mean when I say "line up for a contra dance"?

Of course, during the first dance, I can get a real good idea of what the dancers can do. Do the dancers get into formation smoothly? Do they react appropriately to the instructions? After the walk-through, is there normal social buzzing, or are there murmurs of unconfidence rippling across the floor? During the dance, are they moving in time and in phrase with the music? Do they have a sense of the entire set? Are the figures executed smoothly?

In many programs, the first dance is a contra, and because I must choose a dance before seeing the dancers in action, I'll want a dance that practically everyone can do without any trouble. This "low-risk" dance will: a) have low "piece counts,"* b) feature symmetry, c) avoid "weird" figures (heys, contra corners), d) keep people connected,

and e) have a good story line.

I was in the audience when a caller started the evening with Dancing Sailors! Now this is a fine dance, but as #1 on the program for a multi-level crowd, it was a dismal failure. Remember the goals of the first few dances: a) to warm up the band, caller, and dancers; b) to fine-tune the sound system; c) to teach a little; and d) **to give confidence to the new dancers.** When newcomers overcome their fears, they are much more receptive to all things around them.

Larry Jennings: All dances should be chosen to further the objectives of the series and fall within its traditions. Furthermore, you should take your own skills into account. Let us consider objectives, traditions, and skills.

Your primary objective early in the evening is to set the stage for having the experienced dancers carry the beginners along without anyone actually realizing that's what is happening. Thus you need to develop an atmosphere of cooperation: choose dances which involve everyone working together -- stars and allemandes are good. Swings are easy to call, but are hard for beginners and don't do much for cooperation. You can also encourage interaction by making a point of not explaining things in needless detail.

Among the traditions that are important are smooth transitions and realistic phrasing. The caller should check her dances for hidden, unusual features: flagrant things like ending a swing with the woman on the left or a full eight counts for a pass through, or more subtle things like starting a swing from a

left-shoulders-adjacent position.

Of all the calling skills we might discuss, I focus on only one right now: the choice of words for the walk-through and calls. You must review the words you will use with your proposed dances and verify that they will be succinct and appropriate for your mixed-level group. For example, in some local traditions, "opposite" is used to denote the person of the opposite sex in your minor set, even if he or she is next to you. Can the beginners cope with such terminology, should you choose a dance which doesn't pose the problem, or can you devise other words?

In summary, consider appropriate objectives, mix in the traditions that you and the regular dancers share, and temper your own experience and strengths.

Ted Sannella: My biggest concern when programming for a mixed-level group is that the dances I choose must be simple enough for the beginners and yet not boring for the more experienced dancers. This is less of a problem as the evening progresses because the beginners become more knowledgeable and gain confidence. However, early in the program, I make it a point to select dances that: use a minimum number of basic figures, are easy to remember, keep hands joined as much as possible, have predictable non-awkward transitions, and are very forgiving (i.e., allow time for errors). In other words, I program primarily for the beginner.

If chosen wisely, these same dances will be enjoyable for more experienced dancers as well. Perhaps they will be new dances or

old dances that seem new because they are less frequently used. They may have the excitement of multiple swings or at least a partner swing. I may use a dance with an unusual (simple) figure that will hold the interest of the experienced dancers, such as a sashay or a figure with an arch. For each dance, the walk-throughs should be as short as possible and yet clear enough for newcomers to catch on. The more experienced dancers don't want to stand around any longer than necessary.

* The "piece count" mentioned in Dan's answer is an "estimate of the number of dance fragments which an average dancer must keep in mind to visualize the entire sequence... (and) serves as some measure of the difficulty." (From *Zesty Contras* by Larry Jennings, published 1983.)

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 dance and organizers. "Planning Dances for Mixed-Level Groups," the second article in the series, was published in the CDSS News, issue 82, May/June 1988.

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A question in **The Contra Connection** series (CDSS News, May-June 1988) dealt with the selection of contra dances for use early in a program for a mixed-level group of dancers. Here is a representative list of titles for such dances that appear in four well-known books, *Balance and Swing*, *Dizzy Dances II*, *Shadrack's Delight*, and *Zesty Contrás*, and made reference also to *The Caller/Teacher Manual for Contrás*.* By no means is this intended to be THE definitive list for this purpose. Surely, there are many other dances, published and unpublished, that are just as useful. This is a starter sample which callers can add to or subtract from to suit their own needs.

From **Balance and Swing** by Ted Sannella: (All ZC)

Anne's a Bride Tonight	Holiday Jig	Three to Get Ready
Butterfly Reel	Patriots' Jig	Two for the Show
The Caller's Wife	Reading Reel	Yankee Reel
Four, Let's Go	Scout House Reel	

From **Dizzy Dances** by Gene Hubert:

Dabney Hall Contra	Martha's Choice	Shades of Shadrack
Dancing Raindrops	The New Flow	
The Flowers of April	The Nice Combination	

From **Shadrack's Delight** by Tony Parkes:

Betty Mac's Reel	Orono Special	Wood's Hole Jig
Inflation Reel (ZC, CTM)	Shadrack's Delight (ZC, CTM)	
On the Spot	Spring Fever	

From **Zesty Contrás** by Larry Jennings:

Beaux of Oak Hill (CTM)	Halloween	The Nova Scotian (CTM)
Becket Reel	Jed's Reel	Rutger's Promenade
Chain the Ladies	Joy's of Quebec (Castner)	Sally on the Mountain
Chili Pepper #4	Judge's Jig (CTM)	Settlement Swing
Festival Jig	Malden Reel (ZC #816)	Summit Reel
Fit as a Fiddle	Marshes of Mallow	Terry's Birthday
Forest de Bondi (CTM)	Mrs. Reilly's Daughter	The Tourist
Glover's Reel (CTM)	NEFFA on Sunday	Verona's Favorite (CTM)
Green's Reel	The Non-Tour	Who's in the Middle?

* All of these books are available through the CDSS Sales Department

ZC Appears also in *Zesty Contrás*

CTM Appears also in Don Armstrong's *The Caller/Teacher Manual for Contrás*

Here are transcriptions for four dances that are also suitable for early in a program for a mixed-level group of dancers.

The Lighted Sconce by *Glen Morningstar* Duple Improper

- A1. Two women allemande R, all swing partners (end actives facing inactives)
- A2. Circle L until all home (8), inactives arch, actives go through and separate, inactives turning under arch to a line of four facing up
- B1. Up the set four in line, turn alone, return, bend the line
- B2. Ladies chain over and back

Candle in the Corner by *Rich Castner* Duple Improper

- A1. Actives do-si-do, actives swing
- A2. Circle L, star R
- B1. Men allemande L a little less than once (4), all swing neighbors
- B2. Promenade across, right and left thru

The New Fiddle by *Eric Rounds* Duple proper

- A1. Actives down the outside and turn alone (8), return to place and cross over
- A2. Balance and swing neighbors
- B1. Ladies chain over and back
- B2. Long lines: all forward and back, actives swing in the middle (end facing up)

Note: This is Eric's variant. The original had:
 B1. Line of four down the hall, couples turn, return, bend the line

Aw Shucks by *Carol Kopp* Duple Improper

- A1. Actives sashay down the center (8), return, ending between couple below
- A2. Actives clap hands: own hands together, partner's R with R, own together, partner's L with L (4), actives face neighbor and repeat clapping with neighbor (4), swing neighbors
- B1. Down the set four in line, turn as couple, return, bend the line
- B2. Ladies chain over and back