

## The Contra Connection

*The Contra Connection is an occasional feature of the CDSS News and is written by Boston area callers Dan Pearl, Larry Jennings, and Ted Sannella. The authors are interested in hearing your comments and ideas on the articles, and they welcome suggestions for future discussions. Please write The Contra Connection, c o CDSS News, 17 New South St., Northampton, MA 01060.*

### "WHY ARE TRIPLE MINOR CONTRAS SELDOM SEEN AND WHEN SHOULD THEY BE DONE?"

**Ted Sannella:** Historically, triple minor contras were the precursors of the duple minor contras which are so common in today's contra dance scene. They tended to be dances in which the active couples dominated the action and the inactives, though supportive and important, played a much more passive role. Some of them were spacious dances with either a circle six once around or a hey for three to be danced in 16 counts, movements that fitted the music best when danced in a stately manner. In the development of contra dancing, many of the triple minor dances were modified into a duple minor form to better suit the taste of the modern contra dancer who seems to thrive on busy and sometimes hectic sequences. Some of the better known contras that were changed from triple to duple minor include: Chorus Jig, Rory O'More, Lamplighter's Hornpipe, and Beaux of Albany.

There are several reasons why triple minor dances are seldom seen. First and foremost is the fact that most of today's callers are uncomfortable with them. Explaining the triple minor concept requires a little more time, teaching skill, and patience than some callers are willing or able to devote to a dance.

The perception that today's contra dancers will not enjoy triple minor contras could be another reason that they are so rare. It is believed by some callers that all triple minor dances are dull and boring. This may be because, as dancers, they have had no exposure to these dances or only bad experiences. Likewise, dancers and administrators who have been subjected to certain boring "resurrected" triple minor dances or some that have been poorly taught, may urge their callers to avoid this type of dance at all costs. The fact of the matter is that some of the older dances of this genre are dull and boring by modern standards and they have no place on current programs except in workshops as examples of historical development. However, there are a number of very usable triple minor dances that are very

appropriate for today's high spirited contra scene.

Dances such as British Sorrow, Market Lass, Sacketts Harbor, The Young Widow, and Contravention are excellent choices to add variety to a hectic program. When done to appropriate music, these dances cry out for elegance and a more stately body carriage than is the norm nowadays. These are truly enjoyable dances which merit occasional use as a change of pace and another source of fun.

Some modern contra dance choreographers, most notably Al Olson, have discovered that considerable challenge can be added to a program through the use of newly-contrived "busy" triple minor contras. Dances such as Worth Naming, Reel in C Sharp, Reverse Curves, Chicago Challenge, and Kernan's Contra are perfect vehicles to perk up a group of complacent experienced dancers. Intermediate dancers will enjoy them as well.

There is something to be said for the theory that good dancers should have knowledge of all that is available in their chosen medium. In other words, a little education shouldn't hurt any dancer. So, since triple minor contras are truly a part of our contra dance heritage as well as fun to do, they deserve at least a bit of consideration in a caller's programming deliberation.

In summary, I feel that triple minor contras are worthy of inclusion in modern dance programs as a source of variety, challenge, and/or education. However, callers must make the effort to understand them before using them and be prepared to teach them carefully, efficiently, and with enthusiasm. If they can do this, their dancers will thank them for widening their horizons with these "new" fun dances.

**Dan Pearl:** Triple minor dances just aren't part of the casual dancer's vocabulary anymore. This might vary from group to group, but more and more you see triple minors less and less. Is this change a cause  
(continued on next page)



for concern by callers, or is it simply an evolving style of dancing and programming that should be acknowledged but not "corrected"?

I think that triple minors have a lot to offer:

Choreographic variety: To some dancers, triple minors may prove to be a new experience. Any dance program needs a change of pace, and a triple minor dance might prove to be the right dance at the right time.

Historical perspective: Not too long ago, most contras were triple minors. I get a special feeling when I dance a sequence that is hundreds of years old to a tune that is equally old. It's as though we are being watched by all those who have danced that sequence before. While many dancers realize that they are part of an activity with a past, the better dancers realize that it's an activity with a future and that they are the agents of change.

The biggest objection to programming triple minors is that "they take too long to teach!" This is a self-fulfilling prophesy. Obviously, as the dancers get trained to triple minor dances, the easier they will become. Have patience with the dancers; they might be learning how to dance them, but you are also learning how to teach them! Have faith--rewards await!

Larry Jennings: My guess on the first part of the question: as with any fad, mostly a matter of chance. But once the fad has chanced on one direction (duple minor), other possibilities get squeezed out. Maybe triple minors will be the fad of 1990.

I myself am fond of triple minors. I presented 51 of them in Zesty Contras and devoted an hour session at a New England Folk Festival to them. Why do I favor them?

Most traditional triples, and some contemporary ones, are "tame." These are appropriate any time the caller and/or musicians want a change of pace; they often dance well to a march. They tend to be trouble-free, but it takes a long time for everyone to become active and "inactive" is especially well-named. Many dancers enjoy such a dance occasionally, but few would want a preponderance of them.

On the other hand, about half of those 51 are fully zesty by any standard: lots of action for everyone and interesting flow. If you and

the dancers are satisfied with the variety available in duple minors, you have no need to introduce complications by using these. But, if the dancers have become blasé and you are feeling in a rut, some zesty triple minors may perk things up. Maybe you can even double your enthusiasm by composing one or two triple minor dances yourself.

Let me address a few potential questions you might have about using or composing such zesty triple minors:

Will they take a long time to teach? Not if you use well-chosen words. A couple of hundred dancers did at least 15 changes each of five zesty dances at that one hour NEFF session.

Are end effects a problem? Yes, but no more so than those in many single progression, Becket formation dances that are the current craze. In either case the caller must prepare herself thoroughly.

Are they inevitably complex? No. Try the dances Easy Living or Good Times.

Is a real challenge available? Yes. Try using or composing a triple-progression as in Witches Three or a double-progression with an inversion of couples #2 and #3 as in Witches' Paradise. Better yet, achieve this latter result using the formation introduced by Bob Marr: the active couple is improper, the inactives stand facing as in Becket formation. This arrangement makes it easy to achieve a partner swing for everyone without too much crowding in the center.

