

The Contra Connection: Making the Most of Your Music

by Dan Pearl, Ted Sannella, and Larry Jennings

The "connectors" have each chosen a topic that explores some facet of their experience with music. Ted will be sharing his hints on using recorded music; Dan and Larry will address working with live musicians.

"What are some of the things a caller should know when dealing with recorded music at a contra dance?"

Ted Sannella: Most importantly, a caller who uses records must be comfortable with the sound equipment on hand. When using a band, the P.A. equipment can be controlled by any knowledgeable person and a remote location for the "control board" is possible and sometimes even desirable. However, when using records to provide music, the caller must have sole control of the sound equipment. The turntable and appropriate knobs, levers, and switches need to be within easy reach and the capabilities of the equipment must be understood by the caller. So much depends on proper use of the playback equipment that most callers will prefer to use a marginal P.A. system which is familiar rather than work with a more powerful system which is an unknown quantity. It is important to place the turntable on a level surface that will not be affected by the floor vibrations produced by movements of the dancers. When setting up, find the spot that is most apt to minimize vibrations and be prepared to support the turntable on foam pads if necessary. A small carpenter's level is a handy tool and its use may prevent the destruction of your favorite record.

A solid familiarity with the records on hand is necessary. Although there is a wide variety of available recorded dance music, only a fraction of it is suitable for contra dance use. You should select your records carefully, at home -- before the dance -- and be aware of their characteristics. Be certain that the chosen

selections are appropriate in style, in musical phrase construction (AABB), and in length. Make notes, right on the label or on the record jacket, of any important points that will be helpful later (Ex. "4-count intro," "needs more bass," "slow down a bit," "banjo solo last time through," etc.) Since recordings are made at varying volume levels, you'd be wise to make note of any that require an increase or decrease in gain. Failing that precaution, it is better to start with a low volume and a gradual increase as needed, then to begin with an ear-splitting blast.

If you mix an assortment of 45 rpm, 33 rpm, and 78 rpm records, get in the habit of checking your speed control lever and cartridge before each record is played. It can be embarrassing to play a 78 rpm record at 45 rpm or vice versa and harmful to your records if you forget to flip the needle from standard to LP.

With a predetermined program, you can plan your record choices ahead and have them arranged in order in your case. A plastic record rack is handy for holding disks upright and in order before and after use. However, even though you may have picked your records in advance, you should remain flexible with your final record choices. This flexibility is the one advantage you have with records that is not so easily met with live music. You have at your fingertips a number of different bands, each having its own distinct sound. If you sense a down mood, find an exciting rendition to pick up the crowd. If the dancers are tiring, a smooth lilting tune may be in order. Make use of the great variety available. You can use a string band for one dance and follow it with a brassy sound for the next or vary the back-up from a McQuillenese piano to a Scots-band snare drum.

Using records for contras means either that your dances will run shorter than the dancers expect or that you will need to repeat the record. With experience, you can become rather adept at lifting the needle at the end of a record and setting it down again at the beginning. However, since it is impossible to make this transition unnoticed, you would do well to tell the dancers in advance: "This record

runs only six times through the tune. So that more of you can get active, we'll play it twice." Alternatively, say nothing in advance, but after once through the record you can say: "You're doing too well to stop now. Let's do it again." If you are using a long-play record with multiple bands, it is sometimes possible to keep the record running from one band into the next. Be sure (in advance) that this is an appropriate choice and let the dancers know what you are doing: "Hold your places. Let's continue with a different tune coming right up."

When you are ready to begin a dance, it is best to select the appropriate record and have it on the turntable ready to go, before starting the walk-through so that you can concentrate on the needs of the dancers. Teaching the dance and then searching for a record is a definite no-no for you will lose the attention of the dancers for sure. As with a live band, it is not a good idea to stop the music once the dance is underway. However, with records, this is an easy alternative if necessary.

As indicated above, there are factors to consider and problems to be overcome when using records for contra dancing. With practice, a caller can become quite adept at doing this and every caller should try it at least once, if only to better appreciate his or her live musicians.

Dan adds: Consider using cassette tapes rather than disks. Tapes are lighter, don't skip when people balance, don't melt in the sun, are expendable, and you can leave the irreplaceable records home. They are available in short lengths and leaderless versions to make tape handling efficient.

I have made contra-length versions of several tunes by doing edits when I record the tapes from the source medium. By using the pause control, I can turn a tune that previously went 7 times through into one that goes 14 or more times through. Other corrections that can be made when you record are volume, equalization, and speed.

Disks have an advantage of providing a visual clue as to how far you have left in the cut. For tapes, I have found it necessary to note on the label of the tape some musical cue that will let me know when the last time is approaching.

(Ted has lots of experience using records, but assures us that he prefers to use live music whenever possible. - Ed.)

"What can a caller do to get a dance off to a smooth start?"

Dan Pearl: Recently, I saw a caller taken by surprise when the music started for a contra dance. "Have you started?" he asked the musicians in a panic. When the musicians said yes, the caller started rattling off the calls, compressing the time allocation for each one, until he was finally synchronized with the music by the time B2 came 'round. The experience made me appreciate the importance of getting off to a smooth start.

As a caller, you can increase the likelihood of smooth starts by getting into a ritual with the band. For instance, when you finish the walk-through, you can tell the band "we're ready!" and then give them a tempo; the band can take that as permission to proceed. Or, the band can ask you if you are ready, and a nod of the head will allow them to begin. I find *watching* the band as they prepare and begin playing prevents surprises.

What can you do if something goes wrong despite what you thought was good communication? It depends on the figure and what the crowd does. If you find that everyone is waiting around for a call, then simply tell the band to play an extra "A," and start the calling at the last four beats of the introductory "A". Some folks (likely advanced, but sometimes beginners!) will not even wait for a call before they charge into the figure. If most everyone is dancing, just pick up the calling at the normal pace.

But if only half are dancing, you've got a split second decision to make. If the figures of the dance are relative innocuous like "circle left, circle right," you can just pick up the calling at the right place. But a sequence like "women allemande left halfway to a 3/4 hey for four" will cause havoc if only some are dancing; it might be best (in this case only) to stop the music and bring everyone back home for "take two".

In case you haven't guessed by now, I don't recommend doing what the caller in the first paragraph did. The first few rounds of calling are the critical period when the dancers are programming their bodies with how the dance feels and relates to the music. By distorting the timing, or leaving out figures in the middle to catch up, a caller will not allow proper learning to occur. He'll have to call the dance longer to make up for his lapse, and the dancers will be confused or frustrated.

Beware: Miscues can be sources of tension, but I have seen a band effectively defuse the tension by doing a great imitation of a slowing-down tape recorded when the caller signalled "cut!" Terrific! Whatever happens, just recover, relax, and have fun with it.

"And how do you communicate with the musicians?"

Larry Jennings: Basic rule: Keep it simple. Not only will you (the caller) avoid making things worse through misunderstanding, but you will also put the musicians in their best light by not distracting them. Remember that, as custodian of the voice microphone and of the program, it is your job to take responsibility for anything that goes wrong. Let me apply the basic rule to a few situations.

Before the dance: Give the musicians your anticipated program with samples of how you specify music; they can then ask for any required explanations of your specifications. I sometimes also share my biases with the musicians: tempos restricted to 116 to 124 metronome, tunes always distinctly phrased, and four-beat shuffle used as an introduction.

Between slots: Note any change from the program you have given. Come to an understanding of how long you expect the dance to go on and how many tunes the musicians anticipate incorporating in a medley. Avoid trying to correct any shortcomings you have perceived; the musicians will be doing their best unless you make them up-tight.

During a slot: Insofar as possible, let the musicians communicate directly with the dancers. If you can't tell which tune they are playing, ask them whether they are on their last planned tune; it is also appropriate for you to urge them to switch tunes if they are playing one too long. Hand signals may work for increasing or decreasing tempo if really necessary, though they are best accompanied by an oral "slower" or "faster". I have found it always works to display one, two, or three fingers to indicate how many more times you'd like the tune repeated before ending, so long as the display comes just at the end of a change.

If something goes wrong: Avoid stopping the music if at all possible (though that may be necessary to correct an erroneous walk-

through); the musicians should be providing a solid rock for you to stand on and you want not to disturb that solidity. This is especially so if you are coping with confused dancers.

Dan has discussed above some options if you have a mind lapse, or are impelled to add a small but vital remark, just as the music starts. In such cases, if you lack the experience to choose among options, I suggest letting the dancers (and you) listen to the tune once through. You can then make your small remark or, better, take the opportunity to introduce the band as they play, obviating having to do that later.

Sometime the musicians lose track of whether they should be playing A or B; if they look to you quizzically, you may be able to help; otherwise it is best for you to adapt to them.

In summary, all the above advice is directed toward communicating this message: you appreciate that music is more basic to dancing than is calling, and that you are thankful to the musicians for furnishing that basis, on which you must rely.

Dan adds: It is ESSENTIAL to get the band on track as soon as possible if you sense that they have left out or included an extra phrase. Whether they know it or not, the dancers are using musical cues to tell them what figures to do next. An out-of-sync tune can only cause confusion on stage and on the floor.

Callers Ted Sannella, Dan Pearl, and Larry Jennings live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles written to help practicing callers and those otherwise interested. "Making the Most of Your Music" is the seventh article in the series. Reprints of other articles are available from CDSS; please write for details.

Questions?

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