

# The Contra Connection

by Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl, and Ted Sannella

## "How long should a caller let a contra run?"

**Larry Jennings:** The obvious answer, "not too," glosses over completely the pregnant implications of this apparently simple question. Why is that?

One of the few things that a caller has real control over is how long a dance goes on. Thus she can take advantage of this control to influence the tenor of the dance.

- Want to encourage individualism? Run a dance a long time. (The dancers will tire of doing it straight and engage in improvisation.)

- Want to encourage taking lots of partners? Run it a short time.

- Want to discourage a long center set? Run an unequal dance a short time. (Of course, you alert the dancers to your intention.)

- Want to lose your credibility? Make a fuss about short sets yet run the dance a long time.

- Want to be in contact with the dancers? Stop the dance when the dancers get so punchy that they make lots of mistakes.

Perhaps some of your desires are in conflict with each other if the sets are as long as the dancers tend to make them. There are two ploys you can consider to shorten the sets.

- Splitting the sets in the middle of the hall.

- Forming a new set near the center of the hall. (Dancers will rarely leave a central set to join one near the wall, but it is relatively easy to persuade them to join a new set in the center.)

In any case, let the musicians know your plans in advance. You will probably want to run at least 15 changes (8 minutes), in which case a medley of either two or three tunes will work. I would advise hardly ever running more than 22 changes (12 minutes), in which case a medley of three tunes will work.

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**Ted Sannella:** I hear this question often during my travels, either during a workshop for callers or at a discussion session with dancers. It usually comes with the implication that there must be a magic formula that has yet to reach their ears.

If such a formula exists, I have been unable to find it. As a dancer, I have, on occasion, been forced to endure an interminable number of repeats, but I recall other instances in which I felt that the circumstances (the dance, the music, my partner) were such that I would have been happy to continue much longer than we actually did.

The best answer is to leave the dancers "wanting more." However, this statement is much too simplistic. At any given time, the dancers' wants will vary greatly. There is no way that a caller can expect to please everybody. He can merely aspire to satisfy the greatest number possible.

To do this, he must provide dances that are "suitable" for the majority in attendance. For example, all factors being equal, an interesting or unusual dance that is appealing to all can be run longer than a run-of-the-mill glossary dance that may be less attractive to some. Likewise, a physically

exhausting dance is best stopped sooner than one which is less hectic.

An examination of my program planning may be helpful. With the usual mix of dancers found in a regular series, I usually plan to do twelve "set dances" (contras, sets of two squares, or mixers) in a three hour period. This allows for a ten minute intermission and a final waltz. (I may substitute a triplet and a couple dance for one of the contras or sets of squares.) A quick calculation shows this to average out to slightly less than 14 minutes for each of these twelve segments. However, I know for sure that I will run some dances longer than others.

I usually begin the program with a contra so that late-comers can join on the end of one of the sets and begin dancing shortly after they arrive. If I see a large number of these folks joining in, I tend to run this dance slightly longer than usual so that they can be assimilated. This is not a reward for lateness, but a welcoming favor for all. The length of subsequent dances in the early part of the program is sometimes determined by how many I want to get in before intermission and this number may be influenced by the number of new dancers on hand. If there is a large number of newcomers, I will strive to give them the opportunity for as many different partners as possible to increase their chances for social interaction. Hence, more dances of a shorter length. After intermission, the size of the crowd sometimes diminishes and the number of dances (and the subsequent length of each) may be influenced by the perceived ability of the dancers remaining. Less teaching may be possible and by using a well-known chestnut or a dance that can be done without a walk-thru some time may be saved that can be used to lengthen a dance or squeeze in an extra one.

In general, contra dances that I run the shortest time include those with a double progression, those in which actives and inactives are equally "busy", and those that are wearisome. Longer dances on my programs usually are those that are unequal in action, triple minor dances, and those of above average difficulty.

Dancers often measure the length of a dance by the number of time they meet the same person. If the shape of the hall requires that the sets be short, the dancers may pass one another three or four time during the course of each dance and may *perceive* that dances with an average number of repeats are running longer than usual. These dancers will be satisfied with dances having fewer repeats. Conversely, if the sets are overly long the dancers are more apt to be pleased with dances that run longer than usual.

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**Dan Pearl:** Larry, in *Zesty Contras*, gives these words of wisdom: "The dance should run long enough to satisfy, but not so long as to bore or tire the dancers or to prevent you from having enough dances within the allotted time." This is quite  
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true, but I observe wide differences in how long callers run dances. There must be more to this issue than meets the eye. There are lots of factors that affect how long I run contras. I will run a contra longer if the lines are long and the dance is unequal for the actives and inactives. (Of course, you could always re-orient or split sets to make them shorter.) I may run a dance longer if the sequence is more complex than average because I want to let people get comfortable with it before we move onto the next figure. Of course, exhausting sequences or blistering tempos may require shorter running times.

A key, but more subjective, concern is  pacing . Running dances for a very short amount of time gives the evening a more frenetic feel. On the other hand, running dances longer will slow the pace, but it will also mean fewer partner changes. As a caller, you need to keep your finger on the pulse of the evening and decide where you want it to go. Also, keep aware of the social needs of the dancers.

Towards the latter part of an evening, I examine my tentative program and scrutinize how well the material fits in the time allotted to me. The idea is to avoid the problem of not having enough time to run "n+1" dances, buy too much time to run "n" dances. So at around 10:15 of 8 to 11 dance, I start figuring. By selecting unequal dances, I can stretch the material to fill a space. Of course, sneaking in a couple dance is perfectly fine, too. I budget around 13 minutes for an equal contra, 14 minutes for an unequal contra or a set of squares, and 5 minutes for a couple dance. These times  include  set formation and walk-through. You may want to log your programs as you do them to calibrate your own contra-clock. There are other considerations which cause me to abandon anticipated running times. If the band has just changed tunes, for example, I will be reluctant to end the dance until they have played the tune at least 3 or 4 times (since it is a shame to "waste" a tune by playing it only once or twice).

You can avoid awkwardness by 1) telling the band how long you are going to run the dance (for example, "longer than average"), 2) finding out how many tunes will comprise the medley, 3) informing the band of the dance progress (for example, "We're halfway there", or "Just about time for the last tune"), and 4) by giving them plenty of warning when there are  three  more time. (By the way: I think "plenty of warning" is at the  beginning  of the B2 part of the tune.) There are pits that I fall into occasionally. One of these is the distraction trap. My attention may be diverted if I am revamping my program, or if I am concentrating on helping confused dancers. In any case, when I focus on a problem, it seems to dull my time sense, and I will unintentionally run the dance longer. Other callers might be distracted when they pick up an instrument and start playing along, or when they join the dance.

A sign that the dance has run too long, for instance, is unenthusiastic applause when the dance is finished; the dancers are too tired to clap! If you don't run it long enough, you might hear an "awwwwwwww" (but it's not so bad to leave 'em wanting more!). Always be prepared to recalibrate your clock on the basis of what you see or hear.

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*Callers Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl, and Ted Sannella live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles written to help practicing callers and those otherwise interested. "How long should...a contra run?" is the eighth article in the series. Reprints of previous articles are available from CDSS; please write for details.*

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