

Working and Communicating with the Band

by Nan Evans and Fred Nussbaum, with lots of input from the Portland English country dance musicians' community

☞ **The musicians are one of the most important elements of a good dance evening! Recognize and thank the band members by name occasionally throughout the evening!**

1. What do musicians need to know from a caller before a dance evening?

- The tune list should be communicated two to three weeks in advance of the dance.
- The tune list should be annotated with which tunes are NOT in Barnes '95 and copies of non-Barnes tunes provided by the caller/teacher.
- The tune list needs to note when the dance name and the tune name are not the same (musicians generally, though not always, relate to the tune name).

2. What do musicians expect regarding a dance program?

- Includes a variety of meter, tempo, keys and feel and, for dancer satisfaction, a variety of figures and figure sequencing.
- Shows an understanding of the abilities of the particular dance community involved.
- Is realistic and likely to be successful given the caller's own dance experience and teaching ability.
- Reflects knowledge and understanding of the band's experience and abilities.
- Considers external factors, such as the season (e.g., temperature and humidity).
- Has enough flexibility to adjust to unexpected situations (e.g., a class of exchange students decides to come to see what English county dancing is like).

3. On the evening of the dance and before the dance evening actually starts, what do musicians want to know? What does the caller need to find out from the musicians?

- A welcome greeting from the caller that sets a friendly, welcoming tone for the evening.
- Clear identification of which musician the caller should communicate directly with during a dance (it is important that this musician be able to then communicate with the others).
- Agreement on signals to be used (e.g., faster, slower, stop, emergency stop).
- Agreement on how the caller will signal the end of the dance (e.g., how many more times through the tune and where in the tune will the signal come).
- Determine whether the caller wants the musicians to "doodle the tune" during the teaching sessions. On the subject of doodling, the caller and the musicians should agree on what "doodling" means—how many instruments should doodle at the same time (usually only one instrument should doodle so that the dancers can clearly hear and respond to the caller), whether it is important to the caller if it is rhythm and/or melody doodling, and whether the band continue doodling if the caller is singing or doodling the tune.
- Any special information about the evening or any particular tunes.

4. Before each individual dance, what do musicians want and need to know? What are the most effective ways to communicate tempo? The "feel" of the dance? Special information about the dance?

- Communication by movement, singing and words of the tempo and feel of the dance.

(If the caller makes adjustments during the teaching that affect, for example, the tempo the dance will be danced, reconfirm tempo and feel with the band before beginning.)

- Agreement on the nature of the intro (2-bar, 2-note, etc.).
- Agreement on doodling.
- For set or unusual dances, confirm that musicians know:
 - The dance music pattern, especially if not standard AABB.
 - Which version of the dance is being taught if different versions of the dance exist (e.g., Portsmouth).
 - The number of times through the tune for each sequence and also, if appropriate, the number of times through the tune to complete the dance for the whole set (e.g., Fandango, Smithy Hill).
 - For dances where music is played more than once for each sequence, confirm whether the end signal will be for number of dance sequences or number of times through the tune.
 - Anticipated number of times of set completions.

5. During a dance tune, what are the most effective ways to adjust tempo?

- Caller should be positioned to be in the sight lines of as many of the musicians as possible, and definitely in the line of sight of the band member responsible for communication within the band.
- Make frequent eye contact, in case adjustments are needed (and to ease general communication).
- Should generally be initiated by the caller using the agreed upon signals. (An experienced band leader, especially one who also dances, may occasionally make adjustments if (s)he notices major distress on the floor. If this occurs, have a quick discussion at the end of the dance, not during the dance.)
- Adjustments should be signaled at least eight bars or equivalent before the top of the tune (i.e., usually at the beginning of the last B section), so the change can be communicated to all band members and the change can be implemented at or by the top of the tune (to avoid throwing dancers off in the middle of a sequence).
- After receiving a tempo change signal from a caller, many bands will gradually “ramp up” the tempo. Callers need to be aware that changes are happening and to communicate when an appropriate tempo has been reached.

6. What is the best way for a caller to communicate with the band about when to end a tune?

- Remember the goal is to have all couples at the top of the hall dancing the last time through the dance.
- Most bands prefer “two more times” indicated by two fingers at the beginning of the last B. Most bands like to do special things during the last two times through the tune. But always confirm this with the band at the beginning of the evening.
- Callers should try to communicate with all of the musicians and to make sure all or most of the band sees the signal. The musician responsible for communicating with the rest of the band members needs to be able to communicate the ending warning to the others.
- For most experienced bands after the “two more times” signal, a “one more time” signal is not necessary and possibly distracting, but a confirming glance to the leader and other musicians at the beginning of the last B is highly recommended. This allows the band to concentrate on arranging the final time through the tune, while assuring agreement on when to stop.

7. At the end of a dance evening, what kinds of communication and information would the band like from the caller?

- Thanks for the evening of music!
- General feedback from caller on:
 - Musical performance and how it worked with the dances.
 - Tempo and feel issues, if there were general tendencies that need attention.
- Thanks and recognition!
- Feedback is also appreciated throughout the evening. The break is a good time to discuss any general observations, especially if the caller would like to band to change something. If the caller is perfectly happy, this is great information to be communicating to the musicians throughout the evening.
- Thanks and recognition! (Don't forget to thank others who helped make the evening a success—door people, folks who provided refreshments, sound people, etc.)
- Anything else that affected the success of the evening that the band could improve.
- Opportunity for the band to provide feedback to the caller on:
 - Overall program.
 - Order of the tunes/dances.
 - Opportunities for improved caller–band communications.
 - Observations on teaching, calling or general hosting that the caller could improve on.

8. From the stage the musicians have a unique viewpoint on the evening. What do they observe about calling styles and techniques that work really well?

- A caller whose calling persona exudes confidence and a sincere interest in maximizing everyone's enjoyment.
- A caller who is genuine.
- A caller who sufficiently prepared to teach the evening's dances without mistakes (yes, without mistakes!).
- A caller who has a positive attitude and it shows in everything the caller does.
- A caller who never blames the dancers.
- A caller who can graciously work through difficulties.
- A caller who communicates well with the musicians.
- A caller who communicates well with dancers of all learning styles.
- A caller who knows the repertoire, knows how to teach, and knows how to be effective and efficient.
- A caller who has a good sense of each tune and how it fits with its dance.
- A caller who teaches with the expectation that the dancers are capable, and that dancing is easy and fun.

9. From a musician's perspective what makes a dance evening good? Musically, what are the elements of a good evening dance program?

- Variety of dance tempo, feel and keys, creatively programmed.
- Good caller–band communication.
- Good ensemble playing in the band, with a variety of dynamics, orchestration and texture and a connection to each dance and the dancers.
- Good intra-band communications: coordinated starts, stops, tempo or feel adjustments, etc.
- Teaching is well-prepared, organized, empowering and well-received by the dancers. *There is nothing more frustrating to a musician than to sit through a long, poorly-delivered teaching session or playing for a disgruntled, confused group of dancers due to poor teaching.*
- Sense that the dancers were sufficiently challenged, but not overtaxed by the program, and that there was a feeling of enjoyment and accomplishment on the floor.
- Positive energy coming back to the band from the dancers, because the music propelled them appropriately for each dance.
- Synergy of the band, the callers and the dancers giving energy to each other.

The above notes are based on a workshop with English country dance teachers and musicians in the Portland, Oregon, dance and music community, and they appeared in the CDSS News, issue #182, January/February 2005.

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