

Dance Calling: Selecting Dances

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Dancers want to have fun, and one of our responsibilities as callers is to help them do so, as efficiently and effectively as we can. There are, of course, many things that go into that process... One such factor is dance selection.

*My guiding principle: The dancers, the musicians, and I are all there to have fun.
I want to do what I can to facilitate that.*

Given my guiding principle, selecting dances becomes a matter of figuring out what the dancers will enjoy. In general, I expect them to enjoy doing a variety of dances successfully, without too much work/teaching. The dances should flow well, for all of the dancers (not just for the men, or the women, or the actives...). In most communities in the U.S. (though not abroad, nor everywhere in the U.S.), dancers also expect to swing their partner in every dance, and not to spend too much time standing around.

Getting the dancers to succeed

So... Let's start with choosing dances at which the dancers will succeed, without excessive teaching. This, of course, depends on the dancers' prior experience with traditional contra/square dancing. I figure that I can teach the dancers one, or at most two, new things during a walk-through. So I want to pick dances that are made primarily of figures that almost everyone on the dance floor already knows. If the crowd is very experienced, that is not very limiting. If the crowd is very inexperienced, then it requires careful attention. To work up to some more complicated sequences might take most of an evening. (Start easy; add one or two new figures with each dance.)

How do you figure out how experienced the crowd is? If you teach the beginners' session before the dance, just watch to see how many dancers there are new. At the end of that session, too, you will know exactly which figures they know, and how well. Suppose there is no beginners' session, or that you don't get to teach it. In these circumstances, most callers I know start with a diagnostic dance. It's always a very simple dance, made up entirely of standard figures. Then they watch the first walk-through to see how many people look like they are trying to figure out what's going on.

With inexperienced dancers, an additional consideration (beyond whether they know the figures) is how complicated the sequence is. A dance made up of longer figures (neighbors balance and swing) is easier to remember than one made of many very short figures (balance, allemande left half, allemande right 3/4, allemande left half). In addition, "full" figures (ladies chain over and back, right and left through over and back, whole hey) or symmetrical figures (circle left, then right) are easier to remember than "half" figures.

Finally, with any level of dancers, think ahead to how you will teach the parts of the dance that are new or unusual. When dancers can't understand your explanations, they become frustrated, and

they stop having fun. To keep the dancers successful, your teaching must be exceedingly clear. In the words of the late Ted Sannella, if the dancers are having trouble, "the nut that holds the microphone is loose."

Variety

Variety need not be synonymous with "increasing complexity." In fact, there is a great deal more variety in the dances that I call at weddings and similar events than I would ever call at a typical contra dance - but every one of my "wedding" dances can be learned quickly by a 5-year-old who is barely paying attention. What makes for variety is variety. Difference. Change.

Some things you can change throughout the evening:

- Formations: besides improper contra dances, you might want to call proper contras, contras in Becket formation, squares, triplets, circle mixers, Sicilian circles, four-face-fours, scatter promenades.... The possibilities are really wide open. For most communities in the U.S., a little bit of this kind of variety goes a long ways. (In Denmark, they crave this kind of variety.)
- Figures. Don't call three dances in a row with the same notable figures, sequences, or features (hey for four, down the hall, wavy line balances, or whatever). You can find totally simple dances with different figures in them. Or, you can find very complicated dances with different figures in them. Whatever is appropriate for the crowd that evening.
- If the band plays a variety of music, capitalize on it! It will make you look good.

Flow

I always look for dances with figures that flow smoothly into one another, because I find them most enjoyable to dance, myself. Evaluating flow can be a bit tricky: a smooth transition for you may be awkward for your partner. If you don't already dance both gender roles, at least occasionally, I encourage you to start.

When you're trying to pick dances from a book, you will want to find a way to evaluate whether the sequence flows. Some people can just imagine themselves in each of the four different roles (both genders, active and inactive) and "feel" whether the dance flows or not. Others find they have to get three friends together to walk - and then dance - through the sequence. Do whatever works for you, but don't neglect this test, and don't forget to check the transition from the end of the dance to the beginning of the next repetition. Dances that don't flow are not much fun to dance.

Connecting to tradition

There's one last consideration that goes into my dance selection process. I want to have fun, too. For that, I need to feel that I am somehow connecting with the rich history of traditional dance in America. Sometimes that means calling "traditional" dances, like Chorus Jig, Petronella, Hull's Victory, Rory O'More, La Bastringue, etc. - dances that have been around for a couple of centuries. Sometimes it means calling dances by Ralph Page, or Ted Sannella, or Tony Parkes - some of the great callers of the 20th century, who helped build the contra and square dance community that exists today. Sometimes it just means calling an occasional dance where people do stand around a bit - a square where only one couple is active at a time, or a contra where the inactives are mostly inactive, because that's the way it used to be. I encourage you to learn about our dance history, because as a caller, you can help pass it on. And if you don't, who will?