

Dance Calling: Programming an Evening  
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*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, programming an evening becomes a matter of figuring out what everyone will enjoy. Choosing individual dances is a big part of that. In general, I expect dancers 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...). I expect musicians to enjoy playing to their strengths - tunes they know well, in styles with which they are comfortable. Of course, I want to have fun, too, so I only call dances I like, and I always include some dances other than contras (squares, circles, triplets, four face fours,...). I often include a chestnut, but not if the band is unfamiliar with those tunes. For more about all of this, see my handout on dance selection.

For now, let's suppose that you are comfortable with the process of picking out dances that will work well in a particular situation, and move on to the topic of how to arrange them into a coherent program. There are a few elements that I like to consider: scaffolding, variety, and what I think of as the shape of the evening. If I'm calling for the same dance community on a regular basis, I may also have some overarching long-term goals to take into account.

### **Scaffolding**

Scaffolding is a term from the construction industry that has been borrowed by educational researchers. In the field of education, it refers to the process of building new skills on top of an existing framework. The key to effective scaffolding is to make sure that everyone has a solid framework on which to build. So, start with the basics, and build on them throughout the evening, introducing only one or two new skills with each dance. Also, if a skill is essential, introduce it early and think about how to reinforce it throughout the evening.

### **Variety**

As a dancer, I very much enjoy doing a variety of dances during an evening, so as a caller I always try to incorporate variety into my dance selection. There are many levels of variety; the three I find most useful to think about in programming are different kinds of formations (contras, squares, Sicilian circles, etc.), musical variety, and variations in energy level. While I try not to be too rigid about it, I don't like to call more than three contras or two squares in a row, and I don't usually use any other formation more than once in an evening (except for family dances, where I call lots of longways whole set dances).

At the same time, I do like to call squares in pairs. I think that has to do with scaffolding; once you've learned the formation, using it again immediately reinforces the basic figures. I like to start and end each half of a dance with a formation that is all-inclusive (that is, where dancers can add in as they come in the hall, and nobody is left out at the end of the evening) - so a contra, a four-face-four dance, or a circle mixer, for example.

Musical variety.... Here's where it really helps to talk to your band, early and often. I like to ask them (usually a melody player) to describe the style(s) of tunes they play, their approach to the music, and what kind of information they want from me before each dance. Then I try to use the musicians' own words to describe what would work well, musically, for each dance. And I try to ask for different kinds of tunes throughout the evening, paying attention to meter, mood, energy level, and other kinds of variation available.

The energy level of the dancers naturally changes over the course of an evening dance, and I try to be aware of this as I arrange my program. In general, I don't want to wear the dancers out too early in the evening, but neither do I want them to get bored.... So, after a particularly energetic dance, I might do a more restful one, but not two or three restful dances in a row. (And the music makes a huge contribution to the energy level of each dance!) While the energy level goes up and down throughout the evening, I don't have some formula for what it should look like - just a sense that it should have that variation.

### **The "Shape" of the Evening**

I find it hard to articulate what I mean by this.... I want to "build" throughout the first half of the evening, step back a bit as the second half begins, build again, briefly, in the second half, and then taper off toward the end of the evening. This is partly about energy level, partly about complexity, and partly about introducing new ideas/moves. This is not a rigid formula - sometimes ending the evening with a bang feels just right. But in general, I find it helpful to think about having the more complex, higher energy dances toward the middle of the evening, but not right after the break.

### **Overarching Long-term Goals**

If you have the pleasure and privilege of calling for a particular community on a regular basis, you have the opportunity (and perhaps responsibility) to shape that community's personality. Encourage them to continue doing what they're doing well, and think about how you might improve the things that you wish were different.... But tread lightly, here. You call at the dancers' pleasure. If you want them to make changes, you'll have to find ways to motivate them to want to make those changes, too. And you'll have to do this without alienating them. People don't like to be told that they're doing something wrong, or badly. They like to be praised and to feel successful. My only real advice here is to build a relationship of trust and respect with the dancers, so that they'll be more receptive to your ideas.