

Programming an evening

By Seth Tepfer

The caller is an MC and sets the tone of the evening, by choosing the pacing and flow of the dances. The caller can help dancers experience the music, or have them frustrated working out a complex dance. The caller guides the dancers through the evening.

Assume a dance takes 15 minutes from walk-through to walk-through. For a 3 hour contra dance, that is 12 dances. Each dance should take less, but when you account for break, waltz, socializing between dances for a few minutes, it works as a nice rule of thumb. Actual dance will be about 7 minutes, walk-through 3-4 minutes. If your walk-throughs are tending to take longer, you need to choose less challenging dances for you to teach, or cut back on your walk-through!

Rules of Programming:

- Dancers are here to dance. Their priority is dancing to live music, not doing challenging contras.
- Be flexible – if the dancers are at a different level than your program, then change your program. Not changing your program will frustrate you and the dancers.
- Bracketing – for each slot, plan 2 or 3 different dances: one easy, one more challenging

General flow of an evening

As shown in (the only graph in) Tony Parkes' book *Contra Dance Calling: A Basic Text*¹, the energy of an evening should grow and peak at the last dance. The complexity of dances (or how much the dancers have to think) should peak a little after the middle of the evening. This means the first or second dance after the break is probably the most challenging of the entire evening. After that the dances get somewhat easier. Don't baby the dancers – take advantage of their knowledge and skill set, but don't push them either. They are getting tired physically and mentally, and want to be rewarded for the earlier challenges.

Sometimes issues crop up: a line breaks down; the caller mis-calls a sequence; a long walk-through occurs; there is a sudden influx of inexperience; the dancers are not dancing at the level you programmed for; or some other situation happens. Any of these issues break the momentum of the evening. Dancers might start losing trust in you, or maybe just the flow of the evening is interrupted.

Immediately for the next dance, gear down the program. Take it easier, throw in a 'slam-dunk' dance – a dance you know cold, and the dancers can get quickly (a one or no walk-thru). Something to regain the momentum you had before. Dancers can build trust in you again, and the evening will flow again.

Assume a 3 hour dance, 12 dances with a 15 minute break. How do you program an evening?

¹ Published 1992 by Hands Four books and recordings, Check out website: <http://www.hands4.com/books.html> or email him: hands4@world.std.com.

#	What you are accomplishing	Specific formation or figure
1	Warm up and teaching dances. Cover the basics: DSD, balance and swing, chain, right and left through	Glossary or basic contra Circle dance – bring the community together
2	Often, I will introduce a hey 3 rd or 4 th dance	Hey, or another figure used in a more complex dance later in the evening
3	Exciting, challenging dances. End the 1 st	Square (or two)
4	$\frac{1}{2}$ on a high note: satisfying dance with	8 th or 9 th dance: Square, four face four, sicilian, strange / novelty figure or formation
5	balances in waves or partner B&S or something similar. Make certain it is a successful dance!	Satisfying, surefire dances. Perhaps a no-walk through dance. Good end-of-the-evening dances like Cherokee
6	No thinking allowed!	Shuffle, Hey in Barn,
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		