

Programming an evening, part 2

By Seth Tepfer

When calling for a dance, whether at a local Saturday night dance, a modern urban dance weekend, a house party or a wedding certain principles hold true.

- The dance is always a heterogeneous crowd
- Dancers want to succeed
- Dancers want comfort and challenge
- Dancers want an efficient walk-thru

The dance is always a heterogeneous crowd

Any dance will be a mix of skill levels. Your average ‘rarefied urban contra dance weekend’ contains 75% hard-core contra dancers, 20% dancers of opportunity, and 5% people who have been dancing 3 months or less. A dance for a group of ministers who have never danced before commonly has one couple who are regular Modern Western Square dancers. In most crowds, you can be certain there will be a wide spectrum – someone in the crowd has been dancing longer than you; someone in the crowd has never danced before.

What do you do? Hope for the best, plan for the worst! Sit down prior to the evening, and think about your program. *Bracket* your program. That is, for each slot of the evening, have prepared an easy and a hard dance. Let’s say, in a contra evening, you are planning a dance with a hey for the 3rd dance. Hmm, well, you could do *Roll in the Hey*, by Roger Diggle or you could do *Hey There*, by Tom Hinds:

<p><i>Roll in the Hey</i>, by Roger Diggle, improper A1: (8) Circle Left; (8) swing neighbor A2: (8) circle left $\frac{3}{4}$; (8) swing partner B1: (8) forward and back; (8) ladies chain B2: (16) hey for four, ladies pass right shoulders</p>	<p><i>Hey There</i>, by Tom Hinds, Improper A1: (8) neighbor allemande left 1.5; (8) $\frac{1}{2}$ hey for four, ladies pass right A2: (16) neighbor balance and swing B1: (6) down hall four in line, (2) face neighbor; (8) $\frac{1}{2}$ hey passing right shoulder with neighbor, face up B2: (6) up the hall, (2) face across; (8) right hand star</p>
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Both dances have a hey; both dances are fairly straightforward for early in the evening; both dances have lots of connection time (except for the hey). *Roll in the Hey* has a lot more recovery time, and is a great dance for the first time to dance a hey; *Hey There* is more playful, using the hey and other moves in ways dancers don't usually experience.

By bracketing each slot in your program, your program will be flexible and you will be prepared to react for whatever comes.

At any given moment, you want to be calling somewhere around the median level of the floor. You have room to play – sometimes you want harder, sometimes easier. But always shoot for the level of dance where most people will succeed.

The art comes in judging the experience level of the crowd by sight. Experienced dancers look relaxed, perhaps eager, perhaps slightly jaded, comfortable, and are wearing dance appropriate clothing. New dancers are wearing clothing that is often fancy (for a night on the town, or to bolster confidence), will cling to a partner, not make eye contact with others outside their group, and be hesitant, nervous, stand-offish.

I highly suggest you take this bracket concept one step further: have a set of dances ready to go that are foolproof for any crowd. A common example many callers have faced: First dance after the break, dancers are lined up, eager for what might be the most challenging dance of the evening. In walks a *busload* of teenagers who have never danced before, and they all jump in, giggly, eager, nervous, energetic, excited. What dance do you call?

You call the dance that will succeed with the majority of the room. And when that busload skews the majority, you roll with it. Find that dance now. Pick out that dance now.¹ Study this dance. Memorize this dance. Have it always ready. When that busload walks in, you will be able to switch your program on a dime. And everyone will be happy.

Dancers want to succeed

Your charge is to lead the people in the room through an enjoyable evening of dances. A secondary charge is to entice the dancers to return.

¹ Go to your calling box or notebook right now, and choose one. Stop reading. What are you waiting for. Go!

A common mistake inexperienced callers make is challenging the dancers with sequences that are inventive, innovative, beyond the ability (of the room or the caller to teach). Success is not measured by dance sequences that are difficult. Success is measured by the ease the crowd dances.

After the new dancers workshop, all the caller's teaching, the demos, and all the walk-thru's, how do the new dancers learn? By dancing with experienced dancers. The only way people learn to dance is by dancing. This means the experienced dancers in the crowd are the true leaders – they are the examples and the models that the new dancers will be watching.

Use this to your advantage. Spread out the experience as much as possible. Early in the evening feature dances that have neighbor swings. Use circle mixers and squares that change partners. When you do a demo, have experienced dancers (rather than you) be the ones in the demo.²

One of the most challenging figures for new contra dancers is the courtesy turn out of a right and left through and a ladies chain. In one dance, have the courtesy turn done with neighbor, in the next, have it done with the partner.

You will find certain dancers will be of considerable assistance with the new dancers. These people are dance angels. The angels exhibit many behaviors with the new dancers: the angels introduce themselves, dance with new dancers, welcome the new dancers to the dance, assist them with challenging figures, and in general make them feel welcome. Encourage dance angels with everything you've got – the angels are the people who are ensuring the longevity of your dance.

For example – due to set management, you shift a center set over to make room for a new set in the middle. When the caller claps for those dancers that leave the safety of their set for the new set, other dancers will clap as well. They are subtly praising and encouraging people to balance the sets!

Dancers want comfort and challenge

Experienced dancers may tell you that they want 'harder' dances. Really, what they want is something new that they can succeed at. Some dance that challenges them, if for only a moment, but then fits back into their normal paradigm of dance. Dancers want variety.

Variety comes by alternating the comfortable and safe with the new and challenging. Variety can occur at the dance on any of four different axis, one of which is greatly determined by the music.

² Choose these dancers carefully, perhaps even before the dance.

For dancers to do a particular dance, they need to know three things: **Formation, Figure, and Sequence.**

- They need to know the **formation** the dance (circle, square, Beckett, Mescolanza, Sicilian)
- They need to know all the **figures** in that dance (swing, ½ hey, mad robin, contra corners).
- They need to know the **sequence** the figures happen (the named dance, a la *A Nice Combination*)

When programming the evening, ensure that each slot requires teaching of only **one** of the concepts. Introduce new figures in familiar formations. Teach new formations using comfortable figures. If the sequence is tricky, make certain all the figures have been taught individually earlier in the evening.

Example for wedding dance:

- Dance #1: Longways set, stick with safe and comfortable partner in ‘strange’ dance activity
- Dance #2: Circle mixer, introduces other dancers, spread out experience
- Dance #3: visiting couple square – perhaps a challenging figure
- Dance #4: longways set dance – comfortable formation, new figures
- Dance #5: strange formation, comfortable figures

Example for standard urban contra dance:

- Dance #1: Circle mixer, introduces allemande & swing
- Dance #2: Duple improper, introduces formation, uses allemande & swing
- Dance #3: Duple improper, introduces right and left thru; familiar with improper
- Dance #4: Square, introduces formation, uses right and left thru
- Dance #5: duple improper, introduces challenging figure to be used later in evening

A fourth axis of the comfort / challenge spectrum is **energy**. How energetic is the dance sequence? What does the dance *feel* like? What is the dance’s mood? Generally, dances with a generous smattering of balances are energetic whereas smooth or flowing dance sequences are relaxed. However, the mood of dance is only theoretical until you define it with music. The music determines how energetic the dance will feel. This is very tangible; watch the crowd the next time the band plays a medley of jigs to reels.

Work with the band in choosing music that changes mood from dance to dance. Encourage the band to vary from reels to jigs, marches, rags, polkas, breakdowns, etc.

Often times, I will end an evening something like this:

- Next4Last Dance: high energy, challenging dance using figure taught earlier (in dance #5?)
- Next3Last Dance: calm down, uncommon formation
- Next2Last Dance: Smooth, sexy, perhaps English-y, lots of building tension
- Last Dance: No walk thru, all familiar figures, high energy – tension release!

Balance all four axes: figure, formation, sequence, and energy. All four levels will be changing each slot in the program.

Dancers want an efficient walk-thru

People come to the dance for a number of reasons. Some to socialize, some to dance, some to hear live music, some to show off, some to have a Friday night romance. None come to listen to the caller talk.

Dancers have a generous amount of patience – if you respect them. If you are efficient with your words, and each word is important, dancers will listen to all of them. If you spend a long time talking about irrelevancies, dancers will tune you out and not hear the important points.

Practice your walk-thrus at home, whittle them down until you are saying exactly what needs to be said, and no more. Aim for one walk-thru. Only do a second if the dance really warrants it OR you were not clear the first time. Make the second walk-thru mostly at dance tempo speed.

If you give the background of the dance, make it the concise, seven word version, not the history.

The more efficient the teaching is, the more the dancers will listen and respect you. The more the dancers listen, the more they learn. The more they learn, the more efficient your teaching can be. A wonderful feedback loop!

Conclusion

Certain truths remain across all dance styles and crowds. The dance crowd will always be spread across the spectrum of dance experience. Take advantage of that fact and let your experienced dancers teach the newer dancers. Use a mix of comfort and challenge (across the four axes) to create variety and promote learning. Keep your teaching efficient. Program the evening to encourage the dancers to succeed. When the dancers succeed, you succeed, everyone wins!