

So You Wanna Play Dance Music?

by Laura Lengnick

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING: Always remember you are playing for dancing! This means that, unlike musicians who are playing music for listening, you have a specific job to do and you do this job in cooperation with the caller. The caller and band work together as a team to support each other, each striving to give the other what they need to do the best job they can. To play the best dance music that you can, here are some things to keep in mind:

The Beat. At its most basic, the band's job is to provide a beat for the dancers to walk to. You can dance to rhythmic counting or to someone keeping time by clapping their hands. What's the point of having melody? Most importantly, melody provides phrasing—helping the dancers start and end figures in unison and on time. Melody also provides variety, dynamic interest, and emotion to the movement of the dancers. I've always loved the tip that a very accomplished dance musician gave me: "The job of the melody is to make the dancers want to lift up their feet off the floor. The job of the backup is to get them to put their feet back down on the floor all at the same time." I think this just about says it all.

Tempo. Standard practice says 110 to 130. Outside of this range, it's hard for most contra dancers to dance with grace and good cheer. Within this range, tempo varies with the contra dance. Some figures are easy to do fast—generally anything that involves two people and no much across-the-floor movement such as swings and allemandes. Some figures are harder to do fast—stars, heys, circle four, four in line, lines forward and back. Keep this in mind when you're setting your tempo. Most importantly, WATCH THE DANCERS. Are they rushing to get to the next figure? Are they standing waiting for the next figure to begin? If necessary, adjust your tempo accordingly, but in general, don't change tempo over the course of a dance. Once the dancers settle into the dance at a particular tempo, it's unsettling for them to have the tempo change.

Tune Structure. Traditional New England contra dance tunes exist because they REALLY WORK FOR CONTRA DANCING! That's why they are still being played two hundred years later! If you look at these traditional tunes, generally what you find is that they are strongly-phrased, four-bar melodies, with distinctive A and B parts. If you think about this for a while, you begin to realize that this structure supports the dancers' best, because most contra dance figures are done in four bars (or eight counts at two counts per bar). Instinctively, dancers listen for eight counts as they move through the figures, finishing up as the eighth count nears and ready to start the new figure as the eighth count ends.

Distinctive A and B parts help the dancers remember where they are in the dance and get them ready to finish the dance and start again as the B part winds up. There are lots of tunes from other styles of traditional music that fit this pattern. Once you understand what a contra dance needs, then you can pick tunes from a variety of styles to play for contra dancing. One great way to start to understand how this all works is to study how a New England chestnut dance like Chorus Jig, Hull's Victory, or Petronella works when you dance it to the tune of the same name.

Musical Feeling. The music that I like best is full of emotion. How does the music make you want to move? How does the music make you feel? How does it encourage you to interact with other dancers? This is an important aspect of playing for dancing as it can really add to the dancers' enjoyment when the music sets a mood that fits the figures of the dance. The musicians have the opportunity to goose the dancers into laughing and feeling silly, to drive the dancers to thunderous primitive stomping, to melt the dancers into sensuous slinky figures, or to transport them to new ethereal heights of graceful melodic rhythm. Choosing what kind of mood to set with the music is guided primarily by the figures that make up the contra dance.

I think about dances as being primarily smooth or percussive. Smooth dances generally have figures that flow into one another without a lot of punctuation (for example, abrupt halts such as a balance). Dance figures that are smooth to me are things like a "hey for four to a gypsy meltdown" or a "star left to a star right with the ones below" or "pass through to a hey for four." These dances want smooth, slinky, or driving music—tunes that have long melodic phrases and lots of notes. Often Irish reels (for example, "Star of Munster," "Maid Behind the Bar") or jigs ("Irishman's Heart to the Ladies," "Morrison's") are good for this kind of dance because they are very notey, and each note has a consistent beat throughout the tune. Alternatively, New England reels ("Lady of the Lake," "Lampighter's Hornpipe") and well-phrased old-time tunes ("Shenandoah Falls," "Forked Deer") can work very well for these kinds of dances, again because of the insistent "pulse" that runs through the music.

A percussive dance feels very different from a smooth dance because there are lots of abrupt stops in the flow of movement. Figures that include balances are the best example of this: balance the ring, balance and swing, and allemande to a line and balance. "Forward and back" is also percussive—the dancers generally stomp on the way in and out. Dances with percussive figures are supported by music that is similar—melodies that have natural stops in them, for example, a tune with long notes (usually quarter notes) mixed in with the eighth notes ("Old Grey Cat," "Kitchen Girl"). Often bouncy jigs ("Kesh Jig," "Dusty Bob's") work well for these kinds of dances or tunes with short melodic phrases such as French-Canadian tunes ("Saut de Lapin"). It's especially nice if you can find tunes that allow you to "take a breath" in the melody at the point in the dance when the dancers are stomping the floor in the balance. When this works out just

right, all of a sudden EVERYBODY is part of the band and the whole room is making music. This is a beautiful experience to take part in!

Musical Drama. I like to think of each dance as a chapter in the “story” of the whole evening. Generally, callers think about the evening as a whole. They seek to provide variety in the dances and sometimes even think about the dance as building through the evening, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The band can do a lot to support the caller’s efforts to create an “enchanted evening” of dancing by thinking about how to vary the mood and pace the music over the whole evening, as well as the music for each dance. Providing variety in the music is not difficult. It’s as easy as making sure you use different kinds of tunes from one tradition, or tunes from a variety of traditional styles. If the caller has a well-developed program of dances, the band’s job is a lot easier because the dances themselves suggest music that will naturally provide a coherent flow throughout the evening.

Drama in a Single Dance. There is also the opportunity to create drama within each dance by using medleys (two or more tunes) and by improvising on a single tune. Typically, contra dance medleys contain three tunes, played about six times each. Over the years, contra dance players have developed some surefire tricks for inspiring dancers with medleys.

The easiest single way to create excitement in a dance is to change key in the medley of tunes that you play for the dance. A pattern generally works is to change key around a D, G, A, D pattern—meaning that if you start with a tune in D, follow it with a G tune and end up on an A tune; if you start in G, follow with tunes in A, then D, etc.

The second easiest way is to alternate major tunes with the same key minor tunes (D to Dm to D, for example). A more sophisticated version of this trick is to follow the D,G, A pattern, but substitute a relative minor key instead of a major key in the pattern. Relative minors are the minor key three steps below the major key (Bm for D, Em for G, F#m for A, for example).

The most dramatic technique (but not the easiest) is to change time signatures by increasing the number of emphasized beats in each measure. A good jig-to-reel set almost never fails to rouse the dancers. If you manage the change in time signature well, and the tunes fit the figures, this is a sure bet to inspire the dancing. (It usually wakes up the band, too!) More generally, the idea is to build excitement by increasing the sense of drive in the music. The jig to reel does this. It feels as if you are going from two beats to a bar (jigs are in 6/8 time) to four beats to a bar (reels are in 4/4 time). Marches to reels create this feel also, because marches are in 2/4 time and reels are in 4/4 time. One caveat: there is NO CHANGE in TEMPO, just a change in time signature.

Tips to Improve Your Dance Playing

DANCE, DANCE, DANCE! Dance as much as you can, to as many bands as you can. It is surprising how few musicians who play for contra dancing actually dance. But if you were to poll contra dance musicians across the country, I guarantee you'll find that all of the very best dance musicians also really enjoy dancing and dance as much as they can.

LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN! Make a point of attending dances being played by accomplished bands. Sit out some of the dances and really concentrate on how the musicians interact with each other and with the dancers. When you dance, notice how the tune changes make you feel and how the music fits the figures as you move through them.

PLAY, PLAY, PLAY! Of course, play as much as you can. Practicing alone or with a group is important, but getting a chance to play for live dancing is where you really get a chance to put everything together. Play the music that you love, the music that gets your blood stirring. Stay connected with the dance floor and never forget you are there for the dancers. Then just relax and have fun. It's contagious!

This essay was originally published in 2002 in the book [How The Friday Night Dance Came to Glen Echo Park](#) by Owen Kelly. More information about the book and how to purchase a copy is available at http://www.fridaynightdance.org/history_contra_park/book.html