

# Notes for a Caller Workshop

## Version 1.2

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### Getting Started

- Dance as much as possible. In order to be a good caller, you need to be a good dancer.
- Listen to other callers (possibly tape record them if you ask their permission). Think how you might call the dance and study their teaching and timing.
- Call (to yourself) while dancing.
- Consider what you, as a dancer, need from the caller.
- Practice calling by yourself to recorded music. CDs are good because it's easy to play a given cut repeatedly.
- Count out the timing, putting in the calls, so you can see how long they take and get used to fitting the calls to the music.
- Visualize yourself in the dance and make sure that you know what to do and that your calls give the needed information. Visualize how the dance works from all of the positions, not the active man (for instance).
- Practice teaching and calling with friends. Get their feedback.
- Try your hand calling at open-mic nights or other low-pressure public events.
- Start off with easy dances. Don't choose that very complex dance you have always wanted to do as one of your first dances to call. You'll have a lot on your mind, trying to keep track of everything going on and you won't be able to deal with a complex dance in addition to everything else. This is also true the first time you try out some new type of dance, such as a square. You will have a lot on your mind and new things to keep track of, so use a simple dance to start with.

### Understanding the Music

- The dance fits with the music. So you need to understand how the music is organized to know how the dances are organized.

- A typical contra dance tune has phrases with 8 measures (bars) and 2 beats per bar, making 16 beats per phrase.
- The tunes normally have 2 phrases (A and B) which are each played twice (AABB), making a total of 4 phrases or 32 bars or 64 beats. There are variations on this, but this is the most common type of tune.
- Clearly phrased tunes work best. This is especially true when you are starting out and you need to be able to hear the phrases clearly in order to know when to call the figures.
- Sometimes the 1/2 phrases (4 bars or 8 beats) are prominent and can be distinguished, sometimes they aren't.
- Types of tunes
  - Jigs - 6/8 time, bouncier rhythm
  - Marches - 4/4 time, longer phrases, good for dances with walking moves
  - Reels - 2/4 time, for dances with smooth, flowing moves, also for dances which need driving music (also hornpipes played as reels)
- Most 32 bar tunes will work fine with most dances.
- Typically the introduction to a tune will be what is commonly called “four potatoes”. This is a 4 beat introduction by the lead instrument to set the tempo for the rest of the band.

## Timing of Common Figures

Timing shown in beats:

- Allemande - 2-4 (halfway), 4-6 (3/4), 4-8 (once), 6-8 (1 1/2), 8-10 (twice)
- Balance - 4
- Balance and swing - 16
- California twirl - 4
- Cast off - 4
- Circle - 4 (half), 6-8 (3/4), 8 (full)
- Contra corners - 16
- Do-si-do - 6-8 (once), 8 (1 1/2)
- Down the hall (center, outside or in lines of 4) and back - 16
- Figure eight - 8 (half), 16 (full)
- Gypsy - 4-8 (once), 8 (1 1/2)
- Gypsy and swing - 16
- Half promenade - 8
- Hey for 4 - 8 (half), 16 (full)
- Ladies chain - 8 (half), 16 (full)
- Lines forward and back - 8
- Pass through - 2-4

- Right and left through - 8 (half), 16 (full)
- Square through - 16
- Stars - 8
- Swing - 8, 12 or 16

## Calling the Dance

- Your job is to prompt the dancers by telling them what to do just before they need to do it.
- Call at the end of the musical phrase (or half-phrase) so the dancers will move with the next phrase. Time it so you end your call just as they should start to move.
- Generally call on beats 7 and 8 (or 15 and 16) of the previous phrase or half-phrase. More complex calls may take longer so call them during more beats (i.e. 5-8 or 13-16). Emphasize the words that fall on the beats.
- Since there are some figures that take less than 8 beats there will be times when the calls need to come in odd places. For example in the figure "circle left  $\frac{3}{4}$  and pass through", the circle takes 6 beats and the pass through comes on beats 7 and 8 so if you were going to call these separately you would make the call "circle left  $\frac{3}{4}$ " at the end of the previous phrase and say "pass through" on beats 5 and 6 as they are finishing the circle.
- Understand the key words to which the dancers move and time them carefully.
- Accent or emphasize key words with your voice.
- Don't try to say everything you said in the walkthrough while calling. For example in the walkthrough you might say, "Put your right hands in the center of the set and take the wrist of the person in front of you. Turn this right hand star one time around." You would never be able to say all that while calling. However you might start out with "Put your right hand in for a right hand star." Then you can reduce it to "Star right."
- Call progressively less if you can. Reduce calling until you can stop, but be ready to come back in if needed. You'll get a feel for knowing whether you can stop or not.
- Sometimes after the dance has gone for a bit just one word is needed to remind the dancers what comes next. Here's a set of some much reduced calls for Broken Sixpence (see below). You might do this after you had been calling it for a while and just before you stopped calling.

- 1 – neighbors
- 2 – men (or gents)
- 3 – women (or ladies)
- 4 – actives (or 1's or just 'swing')
- 5-6 down the hall (they know to come back, so no need to mention it)
- 7 – circle
- 8 – star

- Vary the words you use to call a given figure. For example, “Allemande right”, “Right allemande”, “Right hand turn”, “Turn by the right” and “Right hands around” “Neighbor by the right” can all be used interchangeably. This will help keep the dancer’s attention, and also keep you from getting bored and losing your place.
- Know the timing of each move in the dance before calling it.
- Watch the dancers to see how their timing is.
- Signal the band “one more time” when there is a couple out at the top of the set so you don’t leave a couple out at the end of the dance.
- Knowing how long to let the dance run can be hard sometimes. You don’t want to run the dance so long that the dancers become tired. However if they are having a good time you don’t want to end the dance too soon. One rule of thumb is to run the dance for about 10 minutes. Thus with the walkthrough and time between dances you should be able to do four dances an hour. Run the dances a bit less at the beginning of the evening when the dancers are warming up, and at the end when they are getting tired, and maybe a bit longer in the middle of the evening.
- If the dance is unequal and the lines are short enough you can run the dance until the couple that was originally at the head of the set has returned to the top. Do this for the shortest line. That will encourage the dancers to make the lines equal length. If the lines are too long run the dance until the original top couple is about half-way back to the top.
- When ending the dance I like to come back in and call it again one last time. I think this lets the dancers know this is the last time. It also makes it easier to modify the last few figures if I want to end the dance with a partner swing. I would suggest that you don’t try to do this every time, but it can be nice to do so occasionally. If you do modify the last few figures say something to get the attention of the dancers so they will know that something different is coming. You might say something like, “Listen up!”

## Working with the Band

- Confer with the band at the start of dance. Establish which signals to use for faster, slower, 1 more time, etc. Find out who you need to signal.
- Most contra bands want one more time through the tune to end, some want 2, occasional groups may want more.
- Signal “one more time” to the band during the B part of the next to last time through the dance. This will mean, “Play to the end of this time through the tune and then play it again one more time.” Do this when there is a couple out at the top of the set so you don’t leave a couple out at the end. If the band wants to know two times through before the end, signal when there isn’t a couple out at the top.

- Set the tempo. This can be done by walking through some of the figures in the dance and seeing what tempo works well for you. A typical tempo for contra dance is around 120 bpm. You may want to vary the tempo during the course of the evening. Start out slower early on and also late in the evening. If a dance is challenging start it out slowly. It is easier to speed up once the dancers have it than it is to try to get the band to slow down.
- Check with the band to see what they will be playing for an introduction to the tunes. Most contra dance bands give “four potatoes”, but occasionally you will run into something different.
- Get the names of the band members so you can introduce them.
- While nearly all tunes will work with nearly all dances, some tunes go better with some dances than with others. When you find a tune that seems to go well with a dance, write the name of the tune on your dance card so you can request that tune in the future – even if a band doesn't know that particular tune, they might know one like it.
- Some dances have specific tunes that go with them. Most of these are chestnuts with traditional tunes, usually with the same name as the dance, such as Sackett’s Harbor and Chorus Jig, but there are also some modern dances that have been written to go with specific tunes. An example is Wizard’s Walk. Check with the band to see if they know the specific tune for the dance. If they do then that might be a good choice for the dance. Let them know at the beginning of the evening if you are planning on using a dance that has its own tune, so they don’t use that tune for some other dance and can save it for the particular dance you want to use it with.
- If the band wants to play a medley they may want you to signal when you are about half-way through the dance.
- Sometimes the band would like to play a crooked tune. This is one that doesn’t fit the 32 bar format. These generally don’t work well for typical contra dances. However they can be used with many square dances. So you may want to learn some squares so the band can play some of those crooked tunes they like.

## Teaching the Dances

- Teaching the dances and doing the walk-through is a separate skill unto itself. I would recommend that you spend as much time practicing doing the walk-through and what you are going to say to teach the dance as you do with calling.
- Tell the dancers “Who, What and Where (and Where Next)”. Tell them who they will be doing the figure with, then what the figure will be, then where the figure will take place (if it isn’t obvious) and then where they should be facing when they finish the figure. For example, “Actives swing in the middle of the set and end facing down the hall between the inactives.” This is also a good way to structure your calls, though of course less verbose.
- Most of the time two walk-throughs will be what is needed. The first one you can do slower and explain things as you go. Then do the second a bit more quickly. You can also use the second

walk-through to add in some tips or style pointers. Occasionally you may need a third walk-through. If the dancers are still having trouble after three times through you have probably chosen the wrong dance and should scrap this one and select another one that is super-simple, walk it through once and start the dance. Sometimes with experienced dancers and/or very easy dances you can do a single walk-through, or even no-walk-through.

- Remember that different people learn in different ways, so have a variety of ways to say the same thing. Also use demonstrations as needed. Some people can listen to your description of the dance and learn it that way. Others need to move through the figures or they will never get it. Some people need to see the figure before they can comprehend it.
- Be careful who you select to do a demonstration of a figure. You want to be sure they know how to do it, before you ask them to show everyone else.
- The kinesthetic flow of the dance is what makes contra dance what it is. The transitions between figures are as important, if not more so, than the figures themselves. The connection and coordination between dancers are very important. One way to help beginners (but perhaps not absolute beginners) to become better dancers is to teach them about the transitions. However you need to balance teaching with dancing. The dancers will tolerate, and even appreciate, a certain amount of teaching of style and fine points, but if you try to do too much they will become restless and resentful. When teaching style points and tips on the figures and transitions, do so on the second walk-through. Teach just the mechanics of the dance on the first walk-through. Make sure any style teaching you do doesn't bog down the evening.

## Planning a Program

- Vary the dances during the course of the evening. Plan on easy dances to start with to let the dancers warm up and to allow newcomers to get up to speed. Then more challenging dances near the middle when the dancers are warmed up. Return to less challenging dances again at the end. As the dancers get tired they will appreciate less complex dances.
- I like to put a mixer in near the beginning of the evening. At this point most of the dancers will have arrived and this is a good way to help them see who else is there that they might like to dance with. It also helps the new dancers who tend to dance with each other get some experience with dancing with others.
- Also try to vary the tempos, formations and figure combinations throughout the evening to keep things interesting.
- Keep in mind that you may need to alter your program at a moment's notice. If a bunch of new dancers arrive at the break you may need to put aside all of those challenging dances you were planning on and substitute some simple beginner dances.
- As a rule of thumb you should probably count on around 4 dances an hour at a typical contra dance. This means you should plan on around 12 dances at a 3 hour dance. Sometimes you will run out of time and have to cut a dance, but I like to have a dozen prepared.

## Collecting Dances

- Get them from books, records and tapes (see suggested resources), being a member of CDSS is useful
- Collect dances from other callers at dances, if you enjoy a dance then it will probably be enjoyable for people at a dance you call
- Always be sure to get the title and author of a dance and give credit when later calling it, it's the only return many dance writers will ever get
- Develop your own method of notating and organizing dances, many callers use various forms of abbreviation and short-hand notation. Every caller tends to develop their own method for transcribing dances.
- Some common methods of transcribing dances:
  - By phrase (A1, A2, B1, B2)
  - By measures (1 - 32)
  - By beats (1 - 64)
  - By half-phrase sections (1 - 8), since most figures are 8 beats or 4 bars, a 16 count figure would take two sections (i.e. 1-2 Balance and swing below)

I tend to use a combination of these methods. For contra dance I generally use the half-phrase method and then further note the number of bars for figures that take less than the full half-phrase. My method has varied over the years so now my cards aren't all totally consistent.

### **Centrifugal Hey**

Gene Hubert

duple improper; intermediate

1 - allemande right neighbor 3/4 to wavy line (1-2), balance (3-4)

2 - men allemande left 1 1/2, face partner

3-4 hey for 4, start by passing partner by the right shoulder

5-6 balance and swing partner

7 - right and left through across

8 - circle left 3/4 (1-3), pass through along the set (4)

For various reasons I use a slightly different method for ECD, using the phrase method, but still noting the number of bars for individual figures.

### **The Barley Mow**

3 couple longways

Thompson 1779

A1 1's circle 3 hands round with 2nd lady (1-4)

1's circle 3 hands round with 2nd gent (5-8)

- A2 1's cross, passing right shoulders, cast down around the 2's who move up (1-4),  
Lead down through the 3's and cast back to 2nd place (ending improper) (5-8)
- B Gent down, lady up, circle 3 hands round with end couples (1-4),  
Then hey for 3 with the same couples starting passing left shoulder with the opposite  
sex person, 1's end proper in middle place (5-8),  
Circle six hands round (9-14),  
1's lead to bottom, 3's cast to 2nd place and 2's turn single at the top (15-16)

## One Night Stands

- Try to use dances with only figures that are self-explanatory, or nearly so. I mostly stick to dances composed of circles, stars, lines (forward and back and down the hall), hand turns and do-si-dos.
- Have the progression be obvious and require no thought by the dancers. In whole set dances the top couple goes to the bottom of the set and everyone moves up one place. In contra dances use dances where each couple passes their neighbors by and automatically meets a new couple. You usually get a good reaction from the crowd the first time this happens and they realize what is going on.
- Whole-set longways dances, such as Galopede, are usually good. If things go extremely well you might try a contra dance, but don't assume that is what you are going to be doing.
- Consider using a Sicilian Circle formation rather than a longways contra dance. This way they never reach the end of the set and have to turn around and go the other way. This eliminates one potential area of difficulty.
- Also proper dances tend to work better than improper dances. This is especially true if there are kids in the audience. People can usually remember who their partners are and don't usually have much trouble with neighbors, but if they also have to remember to cross over at the ends, and if it makes a difference in whether the dance works or not, there will likely be trouble.
- If there are a lot of people dancing with same-sex partners, and this happens often with kids, you don't want to be worrying about which partner is the "Gent" or the "Lady". If they only have to deal with partners or neighbors they can usually handle that and things will work out much better.
- Remember it is more important that the people have a good time than that they become competent in contra dance. If they enjoy themselves they will come to some of the local dances. There they can learn the details of contra dancing.

## Composing New Dances

- Most new callers attempt to write some new dances at one time or another.



- This can be a good way to learn more about the structure of the dances and what makes a good dance.
- While there are plenty of dances out there, so there is no real need for you to write new ones, occasionally you will get an idea for something interesting.
- You may also end up modifying an existing dance. A small modification isn't really a new dance, but a big enough change could make it a new dance. Be sure to give credit to the original author in either case.

## Some Basic Dances

### **Broken Sixpence**

Don Armstrong

duple improper; beginner

- 1 - Neighbors do-si-do
- 2 - Men do-si-do in the center
- 3 - Women do-si-do in the center
- 4 - Actives swing in the center
- 5 - Down the hall 4 in line, actives in the middle, turn alone
- 6 - Come back to place, bend the line to a circle
- 7 - Circle left
- 8 - Star left back

### **The Nice Combination**

Gene Hubert

duple improper; beginner-intermediate

- 1-2 Neighbors balance and swing
- 3 - Down the hall 4 in line, turn as couples
- 4 - Return, bend the line to a circle
- 5 - Circle left 3/4
- 6 - Swing your partner on the side
- 7 - Ladies chain across
- 8 - Star left

### **Scout House Reel**

Ted Sannella

duple improper; beginner

- 1 - Down the hall 4 in line with the actives in the center, turn alone
- 2 - Return to place, bend the line to a circle
- 3 - Circle left
- 4 - Ladies chain over

- 5 - Ladies do-si-do 1 1/2
- 6 - Swing opposite gent
- 7 - Long lines forward and back
- 8 - Actives swing in the middle

### **Simplicity Swing**

by Becky Hill

duple improper

- 1-2 Neighbors balance and swing
- 3 - Circle left 3/4,
- 4 - Swing partner on men's original side
- 5 - Long lines forward and back,
- 6 - Ladies chain to neighbor
- 7 - Left hand star,
- 8 - Do-si-do new neighbor

### Resources

- There are many places to learn more about calling dances. Many dance weekends and camps include workshops for callers. Also there are a number of books available, some of which are listed below.
- One place to look for advice and information is the Traditional Dance Callers' email list. You can find out about it and subscribe at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/trad-dance-callers/>. Callers from all over the world subscribe to the list and it is a good place to learn from some of the best.
- Join one (or both) of the national organizations, the Country Dance and Song Society (CDSS) and the Lloyd Shaw Foundation. These groups publish newsletters with dances and advice for callers. They also sponsor dance camps which are great places to learn more and get chance to practice. The CDSS has a very comprehensive catalog of books and music for sale.

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