

CHOICE OF TUNES & SPEEDS

The task of the caller and band is to provide an environment within which the dancers, who will not be very experienced but have paid, can enjoy the occasion, without undue stress, and will pass on a good word for the genre.

The dancing is never better than the music. Good dance needs good music.

Fitting tunes to dances is not just matching the overall length. There may be some circumstances under which the choice of a particular tune is more important than the dance, eg anniversaries and other celebrations or because it is well known or it is appropriate to the occasion. There are some good dances which work because they have been choreographed around the nuances of a particular tune. In general there is no obvious link between tune and dance and there is apparently a wide choice available. However most times the use of an unstructured tune or the playing of a tune with its phrasing obscured is unjustified except when the dance itself has no clear structure. As with display dancing, finding a good tune for the dance can be hard.

The difference between the barn dance and other modern social dancing is that dancers have to cooperate and do things together and at the same time, for which there is no formal training nowadays. The quality and complexity of the sound produced by the band is not an end in itself for most of a dance evening, although it does have a place when an individual dance is going well, especially late in the event, or as interludes between dances, but otherwise it is a self indulgence which is probably counter productive to the caller's efforts. In our sort of event the music is primarily the servant of the dance.

The role of the tune is to help,

a. the dancers by providing an appropriate rhythm for body movement and for any stepping that would enhance the dance.

“bounce”

b. control the atmosphere of the occasion by enhancing or calming the natural excitement.

“drive”

c. the dancers by providing clear phrasing that fits the elemental structure of the dance.

“timing”

Good dancers anticipate, that is get ready for the next movement of a dance, relying on the musical phrasing, inexperienced dancers do not know how to phrase and should be given signals. The caller can draw attention to the existence of phrasing in a walk through or by singing as they show the movements. Often the problem for the dancers is generated by the caller emphasising where to go rather than how long to take over it.

Tunes should be classified by rhythm, this reflects on how they are played in each bar and probably determines the speed, key, as an element of contrast when switching tunes within a dance, and internal structure of the tune. Most standard figures, forward and back and cross over, star, circle, ladies chain etc are 2 x 4 bars and many tunes have either the A or the B section as two very similar 4 bar halves which will fit. Dependence on only having the rhythm part of the band provide the dance phrasing is not an acceptable alternative as they should be doing this anyhow. The total band has to be responsive to the actual dance requirements, eg a forward and back and cross over requires a phrasing in the playing of 2 + 2 + 4 regardless of how the tune is written.

The band should not switch from the tune to which the dance was learnt, which after all should be well chosen and not quickly boring, until it is going well and then only as an attempt to add something to the particular dance or the evening.

There are two types of rhythm, jigs and reels.

(1) The jigs fit natural movement in that it takes longer to lift the body than to come down again. They vary considerably in speed, through “single”, “double” to “slow”, and shade into waltzes as the faster Viennese is played with the same degree of swing, ie delay in the middle beat of the three. The band's rhythmic backing

should emphasise the off beat. Jigs encourage a springy movement, almost skips (these are not hops) and can be exciting and liberating. They are best used in building or maintaining atmosphere.

(2) The other rhythms are more four square, smoother and constraining to the dancer. They also vary considerably in speed, from fast few note reels, through reels, rants, measures, hornpipes, schottiches, and polkas to marches. Some tunes are used for more than one class, the speed and style of playing depending on the stepping desired. All can be done to a walk, from a fast “dance” walk to a slow “saunter”, but particular styles are played in such a manner and speed to suit their particular “steps”. The travelling reel step can be a skip-change ie 1 2 3 skip, the hornpipe is a more deliberate 1 2 3 hop, the schottiche a hop step, the march a swagger, and the rant and polka are more irregular. In the south, rant and polka “stepping” are confused but they do differ and only the polka is a free foot cross over step. In a dance round with a partner for a progression, the polka is actually danced as a rant, the true polka has the free leg kicked up behind on the hop!

Some country dance basics require certain types of tune. Gallops, baskets, slipsteps are irregular and are best fitted to jigs. So are movements which need to be done with bounce, such as going forward and back.

Changing the rhythm during a dance from 4/4 to 6/8 to lift the dance, as is sometimes done in Cumberland Square, is a cheap trick which gives the dancers less than they deserve, particularly when they are trying to get to grips with the dance.

Variety in speed is as important a feature in an evening as changing dance formations and using different basic figures. Slower dances lower the atmosphere unless they contain movements requiring concentration or some manipulative skill. A rest may be better achieved by some musical interlude or an entertainment spot.

Dances that are 24, or 40 or more bars long, need to be individually examined to establish the best manner of arranging the musical repeats. Similar movements should go to the same phrase otherwise dancers can lose their way. There are a number of three part tunes that can solve some problems.

As a rule of thumb, once through a 32 bar sequence is about ½ a minute. When classes were accustomed to records dances would last 6 or 7 repeats and then be encored. It takes most people 4 or 5 times through to be sure of what they are doing, unless they have been walked through to excess. It is better if dancers learn on the job so the dances should run 10 times or more, ie at least 5 minutes. It was the custom in the UK in the 19th century for longways sets to be relatively short, no more than 6 to 8 couples, and then to repeat the dance till back to starting places.