

ZEN AND THE ART OF BEING A DISPLAY DANCE MUSO

1) INSTRUMENTS

Is your Instrument suitable for the tradition you play for? - It is easy to play a "Four Stop One Row" for Border and Molly, a Flute, or Harp would present problems. It is possible to play Piano Accordions well for lively dances, but the inherent smoothness and weight of the instrument need to be considered. Will your style benefit by a change to an "older", more traditional type of instrument? If your costume and style suggest a particular period why not try out a matching instrument? Never be afraid to learn something else to play if it will benefit the dancers.

Do you need amplification? Fiddles are wonderful for Cotswold, but are not the loudest of instruments. How about using a small battery amp? (Taz, Redbournstoke). How many Morris bands have you seen where the stringed instruments are out of balance, or even inaudible? Many "Morris" musos also play in dance bands - would they accept the same imbalance of sound levels at a gig?

Do you need a band anyway? Its traditional for North West, and suits the style very well but can end up masking individual dancing styles where a solo player would be more flexible (Alan Wear, Windsor). Once you've got two musos together they will be a BAND and will be tempted to relegate the dancers to second place to the music.

Anyone with an instrument should be able to play it, and have a sense of rhythm. A band should practice and sound like one. Anyone put there just to be out of the way, or to be doing something, will detract from the overall effect if not up to standard.

The "Rake's progress" of percussion!
"What can Stan do? He's not good enough to dance out" - "I know, let's give him the bass drum to play."

Playing percussion should not be seen as the last chance, or the quickest path (most session Bhodran players) for an aspiring musician. Drums, etc. should be treated as instruments in their own right. For example, there are many other ways of playing the bass drum rather than resorting to the dreaded

"boom...boom.....boom-boom!"

of many North West sides. As always, keep trying alternatives to see what suits the dancing.

Encourage people at practice sessions, letting them loose on the punters only when they are competent. Some sides make very effective use of spare dancers (who can play!) by having them join in on other instruments, especially tambourines and triangles (Shropshire Bedlams and Martha Rhodens).

Avoid going for the "Ahhh" vote with children holding instruments they cannot play properly (unless you really are that desperate to draw attention away from your dancing). Of course children should be encouraged, but it does them no favours if there are no standards for them to aim for. **NEVER** let your little "treasures" play around with instruments (usually drums) during some other sides dance.

2) TUNES

Have you tried experimenting with alternative tunes? Instruments and styles have changed over the years so don't be afraid to find out if another tune would now be more suitable. A performance can be transformed if the musician / instrument / tune is/are changed, particularly useful if you need to repeat a dance! You could even alter the stepping and rhythm. It's also pretty important to train up a spare muso or two in case you manage to mislay, or break one along the way.

Try out "modern" tunes as well (all tunes were modern once!). Not only may you prefer the change, as above, but audiences like to hear something they can recognise - it helps them spot a difference between the "two Morris dances (the one with the sticks and the one with the hankies)".

Punctuation and decoration:- Do you want a "wash" of noise, or will the dance benefit from sharply cut off notes, or even breaks in the music?. Modern keyboards allow you to change the "envelope" of notes, altering how they start, diminish (or not) and end. We can put similar emphasis into our playing as well as adding grace notes, triplets etc. Always play the tune as a whole, not just the notes - think of the difference between a paint by numbers kit and the original painting. Conversely, don't decorate a tune beyond all recognition, or where it is inappropriate for the dance. Make the tune relevant and interesting - there should be a "symbiotic" relationship between dance and tune, where each adds to the other, and the whole is better than the sum of the parts.

If you've been playing or dancing for a side, or a tradition for a while try making up tunes, working out where the emphasis should be - it's a great way to understand the dances, and you may well end up with an improvement.

Are you always ready to play the right tune? It looks a lot better if you start into the (correct) tune as soon as the set is ready, rather than asking what the dance is, remembering what to play, then practising it a bit first.....

Be aware of common tunes in general use, Three North West sides at an Essex festival all, one after the other, marched on to "British Grenadiers" and off to "Brighton Camp". If you are after marches, for example, record a few army gigs (Trooping the Colour, etc.) and see if you can pinch anything a bit more unusual. By using a Light Infantry quick march you could get through all those boring processions in about half the time!

If you are sticking with well known tunes, at least have an alternative. Three different sides all used "Speed the Plough" at a recent event, an unfortunate duplication when there are so many good tunes out there currently unused, and since "Speed the plough" has been given such a plastering in recent years.

3) WHERE TO STAND

Don't block off your audience - A long line of musicians between the punters and the dancers is sadly quite a regular sight.

Can you point the "loud" end of your instrument at any handy buildings to "bounce" sound off ? There are enough competing noises out there anyway, so lets give ourselves as much help as possible.

Will the dancers line up on you as the top of the set? Have you missed any little technicalities such as manhole covers, etc that will cause grief and "tears before bedtime" later? Forming a set up in a public road then dancing for a quarter of an hour is bound to fray motorists tempers, and could even have serious consequences. Personally, I don't believe we have the legal or moral right to behave in this manner. Imagine your own reaction if running late for an important event only to be held up by some group mucking about outside a pub.

Make sure that you can clearly see the dancers, and either watch the feet of your most "solid" hooper, or else look to the side to pick up the general overall "feel". Always follow individuals in a jig, or solo part of a dance - they will all have different styles and interpretations to play for.

At Fêtes, Festivals and the like organisers sometimes want to put the muso half a mile away from the dancers, using the P.A.. It's very hard to play to the dancers feet because of the delay, so just give them a nice obvious intro and don't look at the dancers until the end of the dance! really!!

Even if the dancers are shuffling about and having a general natter refrain from joining in or "doodling" on your instrument. Wait quietly until they are ready to start - find out in advance if any unusual intros / stops / outros are required

4) WHAT TO WEAR

A quick survey we carried out once showed that both the public and other dancers don't like seeing musos in "normal" clothes. Sort out the same, or complementary "kit" to the rest of your side, or at least make the effort to dress up in some way - "Give them something to take photographs of" (Phil Martin, Busker).

5) OTHER TIMES TO BE USEFUL

If things look a bit slow at the start of a stand, or if there is the usual delay whilst one of the dancers is dragged kicking and screaming out of a pub, why not blat out a few tunes to draw an audience? It all adds to the overall performance. Most of us are happy enough to start up at the slightest excuse anyway (is the 'fridge door open? !)

6) "MERCENARY" MUSICIANS

Be very wary of using other musicians to play for you without proper practice. The most embarrassing example I've seen was a Cotswold musician asked to play for a group at the Derby "Dancing England" Festival, only to find out they were Molly Dancers. It wasn't the 7 Champions, but we did once ask a "Rapper" fiddler to play for a dance - a strong and vivid, if not happy, memory. We have not yet to date found any musician who can start *and hold* a slow enough speed for us to dance to comfortably without a full practice session first.

7) OTHER POINTS

Plan ahead for processions so that you don't get caught holding instrument cases, babies, etc. Either co-opt a few baggage slaves, or else dump stuff for later collection - preferably at where you're going to end up. Can you use a car as a dumping point? (Incidentally, anyone with a "Keep Music Live" sticker on their car has only themselves to blame if the musical contents are nicked).

NEVER EVER join in with the musician(s) of another group without asking first, *even then* listen out for any hint that they are just being polite and don't really want you to join in. Sides with recorder players probably don't want a mob of box players joining in (would anyone?).

DON'T FORGET - YOU ARE THERE FOR THE DANCERS, NOT VISA VERSA !

In general, be an integrated part of your side's performance, not just an accessory.

As in dancing, its much better to do something simple well than a complicated thing badly. Don't try complicated tunes or key changes if you can't quite manage them.

The writer claims to be nothing more than a "B" grade muso of the "keep it simple and bash it out" style of English country music. There are bound to be bits missed out in the above, exceptions, personal bias or parts you disagree with. Please pass on ANY comments or corrections for inclusion in any later revision.

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