

[revised May 2013]

## **Contra dance piano**

... this preliminary draft is offered for review and comment ...

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## **Preface**

Imagine you're dancing:

... long lines, go forward and back ...  
... ladies, chain across ...  
... circle left, all the way around ...  
... right hands in, keep on moving, there's your new neighbor and you ... balance!

If you don't feel at least a frisson of excitement at just reading these words, this booklet won't mean much to you. Go out and dance first. If you don't play an instrument, though, please do keep reading.

For the rest of us, that moment -- you're in the zone, and with excitement rising, you meet the new neighbor, and you ... balance! -- conveys the essence of contra dancing. It's a priceless combination of momentum, eye-contact, and swirling, punctuated by high points where you ... balance. (I can hear the feet stomping even now.) If you want to play music for these dances -- and how could you not? -- you want to understand how to underscore, accentuate, feed that rising excitement, and how to bring that wind-up to the dramatic conclusion, over and over.

This book will show you how.

The book is by turns part memoir, part technical manual, part screed. You get to decide which part is which, what aspects you agree with and want to adapt in your own playing. Time at the piano bench is precious; and you can only learn this art by doing it, not by practicing at home alone. My motivation in writing is to try to amplify my experience, so that when you sit down on those rare and precious occasions to play for dancers, you will have a better sense of what to look for. Think of this as a sort of travel guidebook to a marvelous corner of the world, maybe one you've visited before, where reading up on what other people have found there will help you enhance your own travel experience.

Have fun. Go make them dance.



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## Introduction

The gist of this book can be condensed into three short phrases:

Pound on the balances.  
Drive to the top.  
Lead with your closer.

Each of these ideas gets its own chapter, complete with anecdotes, screed, and some comments about technique. In a real sense my playing career, and this whole book, is an amplification of these three principles. In this section, I'd like to make the basic case for these principles, in the event you don't go on to read the rest of the book.

By 'pounding on the balances', I mean playing with both hands on the downbeat, in contrast to the standard 'boom-chuck' of fiddle tune piano accompaniment. When you pound your hands are mimicking the dancers' feet -- thump, Thwam! thump, THWAM! -- after which you can revert to your preferred accompaniment style. Doing this consistently accomplishes three goals at once: you signal to the dancers exactly when they're supposed to be stomping; you communicate to them that you are playing for them, playing for the dance, and not just playing music; and you get your own head out of the page in front of you and the tune around you, and out on the dance floor where it belongs. I believe that, even with nothing more, following this idea consistently will raise the level of your playing and of the excitement all around the floor. Pound! You've got a loud instrument -- pound!

By 'driving to the top' of the phrase, I mean always bearing in mind the fundamental momentum of contra dance -- each move leads into another, you don't stop-and-set, it's constant motion. The key point comes at the top (or first beat) of each eight-beat phrase, not at the end (or eighth beat) of the last one. Your job is to play as if each phrase leads into the next. The sense of 'rolling' or constant motion -- punctuated by those poundings! -- mimics and enhances the contra dancers' own sense of constant momentum, punctuated by their stompings. On a different level, the dance as a (thirty-two bar) whole has its own high points, its own emotional peaks and valleys, and it's exciting, thrilling, crucial for you to goose those emotions, that excitement -- it might be a build-up through the whole B part, culminating in that new-neighbor balance-and-swing at the top of A1. You want to really drive to the high point of the dance.

By 'leading with your closer', I mean putting your best foot forward first. You've announced with force that you've come here to make them dance. You'll spend the rest of the evening trying to live up to your own high standard. What we're doing here -- making people dance -- is a terribly important job, it takes energy and focus and a certain selflessness, and pouring your energy into it from the get-go is the best way to get there. What it doesn't take -- I'm living proof -- is deep musical technique or skill. No matter what your playing level, you can learn to watch the dancers and play along

with them to improve the dancing experience.

Enough of the exhortation (for now). As you'll see from the rest of these pages, I've got opinions on practically everything you'll encounter in the course of the dance.[fn] I'm not a musician; I learned to play after I learned to dance, and only because I loved dancing so much.[fn] All of these opinions come from experience -- mine most of all (that's natural) but also through advice from dancers and players all over. The takeaway point is that, whatever musical background you have or don't have, if you love to contra dance you can learn to play, and to play with the feeling that turns a plain fiddle tune into whoops and hollers. And soon you, too, will live and die for the whoops.

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[Footnote] The extent of my conventional piano skills (even now) are limited to reading whole notes in Music for Millions, volume 1. As a result, I try to avoid using standard classical music terminology or notation. Any references to the wider world of music that show up here should properly be read as prefaced by, 'As I understand it, ...' and perhaps also by, 'For the purposes of playing for contra dancers, ...' Including those disclaimers consistently would get tiresome; I beg the reader's indulgence in this regard. In particular, this style of playing is not necessarily or particularly appropriate in other contexts, such as jam sessions, or for other dance forms.

[Footnote] A note on the organization of the rest of the book, however, might be in order. I've tried to keep the chapters short, and each focused on a single topic. Rather than present a single indigestible mass of an index, though, I've divided the chapters into three basic sections: 'playing for dances', or basic principles; 'getting it right', or technique and style; and 'doing it', or stagecraft. I've added a fourth, more controversial, section of opinions on a range of topics, recognizing that the ideas in that section are rather less universally agreed.

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## Pound

If you were expecting the first chapter to 'begin at the beginning' [fn], no need to panic, there's a chapter in here somewhere later on about technique (and inspiration) for the complete newcomer to the piano. But -- you'll have to trust me on this -- the 'beginner' technique will take you an afternoon to learn (and maybe another few afternoons to practice). This book is not about technique.

But if you've never danced contras before, these first few chapters -- indeed the whole book[fn] -- might not mean much to you either. There's a chapter later on about 'contra dance basics', where I try to dissect the dance form in some detail. You might want to read that after you've been to a dance or two, and see where you agree and disagree. For these three chapters at least, we're not 'playing the piano' or even 'accompanying fiddle tunes', we're trying to make people dance. And specifically, we're trying to accentuate and punctuate the excitement in contra dancing. That excitement comes from the two essential (perhaps unique) features of contra dancing: the momentum of one move into the next; and the stomping at choreographed moments. The first two mantras address how to shape the piano playing to those two basic elements.

So cast your mind to Chorus Jig[fn]. The B1 part is contra corners, ending (as it almost always does) with the 'frantic couple' meeting in the center for a balance and swing. That B2 balance-and-swing takes four counts for the balance, and twelve more for the swing, taking up the entire B2, and leading to the top of the dance where the 1s separate and go down the outside again.

So what exactly happens on that (or any) balance? It's four beats: Thump, Thwam! Thump, THWAM! Your goal in this chapter is to learn to stop what you're doing (boom-chucks or whatever) and instead for four beats, pound on the keys the way your feet would pound on the floor. Thump, Thwam! Thump, THWAM! Pick out four chords that you want to play.[fn] Using both hands together, play bass-and-chord (that's left-hand and right-hand together) on the downbeat for the first chord, then on the next downbeat both hands again using the next chord, this time with a little more emphasis; then the third chord in both hands, without quite so much emphasis; then pound on the piano for the fourth chord just as strong as you can.

In notes this looks like this:

[insert needed]

So what does 'emphasize' mean, exactly? I'm playing instinctively these days, trying to match the feel of the dancers as they pound their feet. Breaking it down to 'piano technique', I think there are three aspects to emphasis: volume, accent, and note length. Though volume may be the most intuitive quality, I think I actually rely more on

note length -- the second and fourth beats are emphasized by holding them, the first and third by contrast played relatively short (not really 'staccato' though[fn]) -- to get the message across. Whatever message you need to send to your arms that something is happening that you want to punctuate, that's what you should try.

You might want to practice this idea a bit. Going from 'boom-chuck' to any kind of 'pound' and back again, without losing the beat, might not be easy the first time but will come readily enough with a little practice. Then you can try varying the emphasis of the four 'pounded' notes, and see what you like out of it. For practice, you might try playing the four counts evenly, distinguished only by volume, distinguished only by accent, distinguished only by length. [NB: Be nice to have musical samples here.] But the important thing is to play them the way you imagine the dancers' feet [musical example?].

And an exercise written out in musical notation, if you're into such things. Four potatoes, followed by (i) four counts of balance, then (ii) twelve counts of boom-chuck, and repeating (i)-(ii) ad infinitum.

On a technical note: Contra dance balances come in many forms: lines forward-and-back, balance-the-ring, balance the wave, balance and box-the-gnat -- each of these moves has a slightly different foot pattern, and thus could lead to a slightly different emphasis pattern for the piano chords. Me, I mostly don't make much distinction between the different types. (It's hard enough just keeping up with everything that's going on, including knowing where the balances are.) Forward-and-back is perhaps the most distinctively different form of balance -- you might go chop! chop! chop! THWAM!, bypassing the secondary thwam on beat two, since there's no obvious corresponding stomp from the dancers. That last THWAM, though, is something every dancer in the room will feel. Watch a dance with LLF&B someday -- the couple at the end, especially if they're partners, always slap hands on that fourth beat. Make your piano match that. Conveniently, of course, your band is often located at one end of the line!

As for other balance figures, I think it doesn't pay to be too analytical. The balance-the-ring leans more on the second count than the fourth, I'd think; the balance-the-wave is usually pretty even as between counts two and four; and the balance-and-box-the-gnat lands almost entirely on the second count. Except perhaps for the forward-and-back, these distinctions are really too fine to matter much: in all these cases, you get the point across by punching each of the four beats, or even just using thump-Thwam, thump-THWAM.[fn]

Lately, I've been experimenting -- successfully, I think, but I'm prejudiced -- with what I'd call 'heavy bass lines', finding a distinctive bass riff[fn], usually leaving out the fourth beat, and hammering away on it over and over. Take 'Kitchen Girl', for example: those three quarter notes at the top of the tune cry out for two-handed A, G, A chords respectively; and just follow it with silence on the fourth beat. With any luck, the stomping on that fourth beat will just get louder. Another example: Elzic's Farewell (we play two C parts for the second half of the dance), where you can play a four-count bass

figure like A (holding it for a beat and a half), C (half a beat), D on beat three (I usually chop this), then silence for the fourth (THWAM) beat. In dots, something like:

[insert musical notation]

Indeed, for these heavy-bass-note riffs, I'll often play just octaves (in both hands, why not?) and not chords. Gets the point across!

This kind of idea is especially effective for dances with *repeated balance figures*, such as Petronella turns or Rory O'More-style balance-and-spin. The idea is to build up an expectation in the dancers' minds of what they're going to hear (or not hear) on these balances, so that they pound ever harder in response. And if you're going to do something like this, I think you have to try to pound *only* on the balances. Take a dance like Balance to M'Lou (Becky Hill)[fn]: B1 is balance and Petronella turn, twice; B2 is balance and spin and find your partner and swing. You'd better do that heavy pound the first three times only! And, while we're on the subject, don't be tempted -- as I have, far too many times -- to do a cut ending the last time through after the third stomp. People want that last swing.[fn]

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So that was the 'how'; now for the 'why'. I can identify four[fn] good reasons to pound every chance you get. First, it's the most basic way to signal to the dancers that Now is the time.[fn] Making the dance easy for the dancers is a recurring theme of this work. It may seem sometimes (especially in a chaotic group of newcomers) that instead of indicating the balances you're instead telling them when they *should have* balanced, too late to be much good; but because the tune comes around again (and again and again), you'll find that hammering in those fenceposts becomes increasingly effective as the night goes on. And the feeling when the room comes together in a forward-and-back, and when you're *right there with them* -- well, nothing can compare. (Save maybe for the whoops, for more on which see the next chapter.) That balance point should become the moment you and they remember the most clearly.

Second, in a big open band it's a great way to rope in the entire rhythm section, a clear-cut and challenging cooperative dance-oriented goal. Every instrument can punch on the four beats of a balance. It's harder than it looks, actually, to follow along the moves of the dance as it's happening, and to time those four punches just right. So easy for dancers, so hard for dance musicians! If you can lead your rhythm section to do this together, counting in each upcoming balance, the players in the band immediately start to feel deeply involved in what's going on out on the floor, and are no longer simply playing along with some tunes.

Third, it really makes the dancers feel at a very basic level that you're playing the music for them. I strongly believe that anyone should be able to close their eyes and to tell from the music whether the dancers are in a balance or in a hey -- and if the musicians aren't following the dance, it just doesn't work. The simplest and most basic element of contra dance that you'll want to follow, to be an integral part of, to join the dancers in --

is the balance. Pound on it.

Finally -- and to my mind the most important point by far -- paying enough attention to the dance to figure out where the balances are and how to pound on them, gets your head up off the keyboard, out of the music (or chord charts, or whatever you're trying to 'play from'), and out on the dance floor \_where it belongs\_. I strongly believe that by finding the balances and pounding on them, you shift your entire focus from the music you're making to the dance they're doing -- and the effect is profound. Players (and dancers) will want to tell a struggling piano player to simplify your chords, to tighten up your rhythm, not to worry so much about playing 'correctly' -- but all these beneficial qualities happen much more instinctively when you focus on the dance. And, in truth, those injunctions stem directly from the demands of dance music -- which are, first of all, to pay attention to the dancers, playing with good timing and good rhythm. In contra dance piano, pounding on the balances is a straightforward and powerful way to play with and for the dancers. It works.

Now in fairness, there's a case to be made on the other side. You can reasonably decide that, once the dancers have got the dance and the timing figured out, they don't need your heavy-handed reminder. Some truth to this idea, certainly; and some sophisticated dancers have told me they prefer complex rhythms that they can contrast to their feet. But at the beginning of the tune set the pounding brings the dancers together; and it makes the dancing easier all the way through.

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Footnote: Pop culture reference:

The White Rabbit put on his spectacles. "Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?" he asked.

"Begin at the beginning," the King said gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

Footnote: Except the chapter called 'Synopsis', which is deliberately intended as a one-page 'cheat sheet' aimed at musicians that find themselves booked to play for a contra dance but who haven't seen one before. For musicians, that is, and for the callers who love them.

Footnote. If you haven't danced, or played, Chorus Jig, you surely will someday:

Proper formation

A1: Facing up, the 1s separate and walk down the outside, turn, and return (16)

A2: 1s down the center, turn alone and return; cast off with the new neighbor

(same gender)

B1: Contra corners

B2: 1s balance and swing, ending facing \*up\* with the ladies on the right

Footnote: In the case of Chorus Jig, the time-honored four chords for this balance are G, G, D, D. Sounds kind of unfinished -- that last D is obviously leading somewhere -- but there you have it. The pound is what matters.

Footnote: As noted ad nauseum, I'm trying to avoid musical notation and terminology as much as possible. The range of expressiveness we're looking for here should go directly from a feeling to a playing style, without pausing for translation into standard classical notation symbols (sforzando, staccato, etc.). Besides, I'm like as not going to mangle those classical definitions anyway. So 'Thwam', rather than sforzando.

Footnote: And -- this is a personal opinion only -- if they do Petronella turns, please don't encourage the development of bad dancer habits by trying to do something fancy and coordinated on those infernal claps. Let those dancers who will, have their own fun, and stay out of the way.

Footnote: The way I'm using the term 'riff', I simply mean a repeated figure, repeated pointedly enough for the dancers to catch on.

Footnote: Becky Hill. [Perhaps a 'glossary' of dances at the end?]

Footnote: More on this topic of tunes for Petronella turns in a section on matching tunes to dances. Saut de Lapin.

Footnote: Yes, I know I adverted to three reasons in the Introduction.

Footnote: One of my favorite callers says *<i>his</i>* pet peeve is callers who say 'balance ... now'. Of course the 'now' is (or should be) implied by the rhythm of the calling. And in any event the music is a much clearer way to signal exactly when these things should happen.



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## Drive

'Drive to the top.' This is the second of the three 'mantras' I think form the core of effective contra dance piano playing.

Contra dance, perhaps uniquely, combines constant momentum, or flow, with emotional rises and falls. You courtesy turn into a star, you circle around, there's your new neighbor -- and you balance. As a dance player, you want to convey this sense through your music. In the previous section, we focused on what happens on the balance. In this section, we address the way to build a sense of rising excitement.

The basic contra dance move -- a do-si-do, a circle, a chain -- takes place in eight counts. But it's not eight-counts-and-stop; each figure keeps the dancers moving and moving right through until the next figure begins, going on to count number nine, as it were. Another way to think of this concept is as fenceposts, driven in at the top of every phrase[fn]: ONE-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-ONE-two-three-four-...

The concept behind 'drive' is to anticipate the fenceposts by signaling their upcoming arrival. You can get the idea across using only your voice in many ways --

ONE-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eightANDONE-two-three-four-...  
ONE-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eighhhhhhhh-ONE-two-three-four-...  
ONE-two-three-four-Five!-Six!-Seven!-Eight!-ONE-two-three-four-...

but with the power of the piano your expressive range is vastly expanded:

- 1) After the downbeat of the eighth count, play the upbeat chord more sharply than usual.
- 2) Finish your phrase on the seventh count, and play the eighth as a downbeat-only, drawn out note. Think 'AND.... Now!' [fn]
- 3) Play the last four beats of the phrase as if they were potatoes. This can be as simple as four strongly accented identical downbeats (though, in practice, the last of the four is more strongly emphasized than the others).
- 4) Get louder! And finish with a boom on that 'count nine' (the first count of the following phrase).
- 5) Climb the scale, or descend along the scale. This approach is so effective, and so universal in application, that it gets its own chapter ('Turnarounds') later on. The unifying idea is that the dancers will instinctively anticipate the end of a scale -- for example, counting down 'sol ... fa ... mi ... re ... do!'

6) Speed up. NOT!! One way to really kill the building sense of excitement[fn] is to rush, even slightly, through the last few notes and get to the top of the phrase a little early. Far better is to err on the side of slowing down, just a scoche -- enough 'far better' that it's almost a technique in its own right. (More on time dilation in the 'Tempo' chapter.)

7) More motion (or less motion!). At the end of the phrase, add some rhythmic complexity -- perhaps a little syncopation in the last two counts -- or, just as effectively, leave out the offbeats in the last two or four counts. But remember not to make the rhythm too \_complicated\_ -- you're trying to build a sense of anticipation of that upcoming downbeat. [See chapter on 'monotony'.] The guitar can add an effect here that you can't, simply by strumming energetically (on every sixteenth note).

There are lots more pointers to tension-building ideas throughout the rest of the book. The important takeaway here is to constantly try to generate that sense of rolling along, rolling into the next dance figure.

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Footnote: The Seattle caller Joe Micheals uses this colorful analogy.

[Footnote: My first contra dance piano workshop in Seattle featured Laurie Andres, a great bear of a man and a brilliant accordion player, illustrating this principle of anticipation and release with his accordion: 'And' -- and he would draw his large arms wide, pulling apart the accordion -- '... NOW!' -- and he would squeeze his arms shut and the accordion would bellow. Hold that mental image and you won't go wrong.]

[Footnote: Rant omitted.]

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## Dance basics

This chapter explains the basics of contra dancing, for the benefit of musicians trying to figure out how their world of repeats and quarter notes and pickups corresponds to the dancers' world of do-si-do. The 'basics' of playing the piano for fiddle tunes -- boom-chuck and such -- gets its own chapter.

Here's the first contra dance I ever called[fn]:

Simplicity Swing, by Becky Hill  
Duple improper

- A1: Neighbor balance and swing (16)
- A2: Circle L 3/4 (6)
  - Partner swing (10)
- B1: Long lines F&B (8)
  - Ladies chain (8)
- B2: Left-hand star (8)
  - New neighbor do-si-do (8)

Notice first: the dance is specifically sixty-four counts long, or thirty-two 'bars'[fn], broken down into four parts (A1, A2, B1, B2). Because the tune you will play is also thirty-two bars long (and normally in AABB form), these parts of the dance correspond to parts of the tune you play. And more specifically: the same figures will continue to correspond to the same phrases of music each time through the dance. So your first obligation as a contra dance musician is to stay on track![fn] It's remarkable how quickly dancers intuitively associate phrases of the music with bits of the dance, and how quickly confusing it gets for them if you get misaligned.

The dance is written for four people, you and your partner, and two "neighbors". Typically the starting formation is 'boy-girl-boy-girl', hence 'improper'.[fn] You keep your partner throughout; but each time you complete the thirty-two-bar dance, you and your partner face a new neighbor (see the instruction to the do-si-do in B2 above). A couple "progresses" in this way along the line; at either end of the line, when you have no one left to dance with, you turn around and face back in, and after thirty seconds you'll see another couple coming at you. Therein lies the novelty.

Sixty-four counts at a tempo of 120 is thirty-two seconds, or about a half-minute. If a dance runs for eight to ten minutes, that's about sixteen to twenty times through, usually a reasonable length. The duration of the dance depends somewhat on the length of the line, though. A traditional caller rule of thumb is to watch the head couple go all the way down and partway back, thus facing each other couple once, and a few of them more than once. A dance quickly gets boring if you face the same people too often, so the caller will often run the dance somewhat shorter if the lines are short. Also, in a hot

room the dancers fade quickly; a caller will often shorten up the dances in that situation too.

Next, note that the figures mostly all require steps in groups of eight (8) -- while some might be longer (that neighbor balance-and-swing is really four for the balance and twelve for the swing; the circle followed by the swing is really a unified sixteen counts), the punctuation (stomping) happens specifically at the beginning of A1 and again at the beginning of B1, in each case at the start of an eight-count (or sixteen-count) figure. The correspondence of tune to dance noted above means that this punctuation happens *at the same place in the tune* each time through. In turn that means your job is to hit the top of the tune with definition (corresponding to that neighbor balance and swing), and that when you switch to the B part, there's a forward-and-back. Clear enough!

Another obvious-but-important point: the instructions are *complicated*. No one in the room (well, almost no one) is likely to give a start of recognition and say to themselves 'oh, Simplicity Swing, I know how that one goes'. The dancers expect to be prompted, at least until they catch on to this dance's succession of figures through repetition. This prompting is in sharp contrast to English or Scottish country dancing, where (at the more formal events, anyway) it's common to simply post a list of the dances on the wall, and the dancers are expected to know the figures by heart. Contra dance prompting is also unlike calling square dances, where the byplay with a creative caller is all part of the fun: instead, contra dances are carefully choreographed in advance, and they repeat unchanged throughout the ten-minute duration. So how do dancers 'learn' the dance as they go along? The repetition of the figures; the association with music that similarly repeats; a choreography that "flows" (in the above example, a ladies' chain flows naturally into a left-hand star, the motion of the courtesy turn continuing on to the single-file circle in the same direction), and a fair bit of experience (expecting to progress, for example, in the same direction each time) all contribute to the dancers' ability to stay on track. In a perfect world, the caller calls a brief walkthrough or two, then continues to call the dance for the first few times through the music; after that, the caller often progressively scales back the prompting in order to let the music take over. Inexperienced callers -- and I'm one, alas -- tend to keep on calling too far into the dance, out of nervousness or concern that the dance will fall apart if they don't keep saying something. (But it's easy enough to skip a call and see if the dancers just find it all by themselves.) Sometimes callers will continue to stick a word in here and there, if it looks like the dancers are having difficulties with the *timing* -- knowing exactly when to end the swing in A2 and to start the long lines in B1, for example. Two words ('long lines') on counts seven and eight will do the trick; but if the music is clearly phrased, that works even better.

[Rant omitted.]

As a technical point, note that contra dance callers prompt by calling ahead of the figure, rather than on the beat that starts the figure. All as if potatoes! This is distinct from most square dance calling, which traditionally takes place *on* the beat (though New England squares are often called ahead of the beat), and leads one caller

I know to say that 'contra dances aren't called, they're prompted' -- true enough, and it summarizes a significant difference in philosophy and emphasis between squares and contras. Squares are caller-centric; contras are definitely music-centric. As the caller drops out, it strongly behooves you to step up your music's cohesion in order to supply the dancers with those cues.

So how do you fix it if you do slip eight beats, or accidentally play an extra A, or one too few B parts, or whatever? [Is this properly a 'stagecraft' issue? As in, always try to remember what's A1 and what's the end of B2?] Rule one: Don't stop playing. Rule two: Fix it before you switch tunes. (If you're on the last tune and it's a hopeless mess, just go out when the caller signals you.) Rule three: Tell the fiddler, four or even eight counts or so early, what you want him to do: 'Repeat the B part!' 'Top of A1 coming up!' Here's where some practice calling really helps! Rule four: If you still haven't fixed it, tell the caller ('We're off!'). Once in my musical youth we managed to get back on track before the caller could come over and help: that impressed the caller no end ('I've never had a band do that before, fix it themselves!')[fn]. But usually you'll have to get the caller to tell you where you are -- 'are we in A1?' -- and then you can interpret for the band. In the terrible case (yes, I've been there too, at Folklife to boot) where the whole dance seems to break down and you have no clue what's going on, ask the caller to <i>start calling</i>. Then figure out how to match the music to what the caller's calling. If you keep the beat steady the dancers ought to recover.[fn]

To me -- at the risk of repeating myself -- the juxtaposition of flowing moves with momentum and pounding balances leads to a characterization of contra dancing as having \_emotional highs and lows\_ -- in many dances, then, your job is to identify the high point of the dance and find a way to signal it through your music.[fn] Usually that point is a balance; but sometimes the top of the tune and the meeting a new neighbor will do as well. Or a gypsy. Or a forward-and-back that orients the dancers to the beat of the music, coercing them into starting the next move at exactly the right time. Other dances seem not to have any particular punctuation -- sometimes these are best for the 'groove tunes', the ones that seem to go on and on. (More on matching tunes to dances in another chapter.)

Listen, if you can, to the String Beings' live recording on their Late for the Dance album, of an Asheville NC dance with Robert Cromartie calling. (You might just decide to move to Asheville. Those dancers were good!) On this recording you hear this progression from calling a lot (at the beginning) to not so much to, perhaps, not at all until the end; and you hear the band's music follow a corresponding trajectory: at the beginning, sparse instrumentation (so the caller can be heard), clearly-established fenceposts, simpler tunes, even perhaps a slower tempo; and then more melody, more complexity, more histrionics and drama as the dance goes along. I once had a theory that the band shouldn't consider switching tunes until the caller had largely dropped out from calling, based on the idea that if the dancers were still trying to 'get' the dance, and the caller still trying to get it across to them, switching tunes and playing different music would just confuse the matter. And besides, any dramatic impact of a tune shift would be lost anyway.[fn] While I can't be that dogmatic, I still believe the basic idea is right -- if the dancers seem confused, switching away from the first tune isn't a priority and could be a

mistake. Conversely, though, I also believe that if the dancers are having a hard time 'getting' the figures, it will always turn out that the music contributed to that confusion. More generally, in any dance that breaks down or is difficult, the music always plays a role, and something -- the choice of tune, the tempo, the phrasing -- needs to be changed. I've learned through painful experience always to blame the music first.[fn] In such a case switching to a clearer tune can help rather than hurt.

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Footnote: It was late one Saturday night at the Fiddle Tunes festival in Port Townsend, WA. The scheduled band left the stage at one-thirty am -- long before dawn, in other words -- leaving several of us dancers to pull our shoes back on, slowly and with evident disappointment. I turned to the dancer sitting next to me -- a fiddler I know much better now than I did then -- and said something like 'hell, let's just go up there and keep it going'. Tony Mates -- bless his heart in perpetuity -- had left a stack of calling cards by the microphone. I picked up the top card, leaned over into the mike and said 'hands four, dammit! we're dancing ... um ... Simplicity Swing, by Becky Hill!' Then I put the card on the piano and started to bang out potatoes. The music wasn't great -- I had a hard time keeping the beat and calling too -- but the two of us kept a dozen dancers going for another hour and a half. Just go make 'em dance! Later, I ran across Susan Petrick, who'd been dancing that night. 'Wait, you're a caller -- why didn't you rescue me?' She said, 'Because you were having too much fun.' I still think that was one of my finest hours. The takeaway idea, though: If you're used to using chord charts or dots to help you follow the tune, try someday putting a dance card on the piano instead. You may not remember what chords to play, but you will never be lost: because you can always just look up and see what people are doing. And then you might be tempted to learn to call, just a little bit -- and that's going to help your playing immensely.

Footnote: Terminology again. A 'bar' is two downbeats. Sometimes in the world of dots a bar will be displayed as two half-notes (4/4 time, or more properly cut time), sometimes as two quarter notes (2/4 time). Usually a 'bar' corresponds to a measure in the dots world; but sometimes -- take a look at Bonaparte Crossing the Rhine in the Fiddler's Fakebook -- each 'bar' takes up only <i>half</i> a measure. The dance musician says 'thirty-two bars' and means, precisely, the sixty-four downbeats that make up once through a standard-length contra dance.

Footnote: Actually not. Your first obligation is to play at a steady tempo not too far away from 118 beats per minute. If you won't or can't do that, the rest of this monograph won't help. It's surprising how many otherwise-capable players and bands fall apart when trying to pick a suitable tempo for dancing. There's a whole chapter on this topic, though.

Footnote: Improper, that is, at least compared to the old-fashioned approach ('proper formation') of lining up gents opposite ladies. One theory for the origins of the term 'contra' comes from these contrary lines of gents opposite ladies. Other theories exist.

Footnote: [Rant omitted.]

Footnote: Kathy Cheap, of the Tri-Cities (WA) area. R.I.P. Thank you for that encouragement!

Footnote: Hal Mueller, the Seattle caller, did that for me another time when we were falling apart, and just about to switch in the middle of the dance. He was listening enough to know a problem was brewing, and leaned in and started calling every move. It was duck soup<sup>[fn]</sup> after that for us to recover. Smooth as silk!

Footnote: Bill Matthiesen -- he of Spare Parts fame, and many other dance-related projects -- pointed out this fundamental truth to me long ago, again back before I really understood what he was talking about. Another comment he made in that same workshop has stuck with me: Make your stylings big and bold. The dancers aren't listening closely enough to catch subtleties. More on that point in the chapter on Monotony.

Footnote: Back in those days, I once tried to float this idea [about not switching until the calling stops] to our caller on the way to our gig. The caller in question shot back, 'You'll switch when I tell you to.' Ooof. Not everybody agrees, I guess.

Footnote: Once when the caller seemed to be barking orders, and the dance barely under control, I was convinced (and privately seething) that the caller was simply calling dances that were inappropriately difficult. And then, later, I listened to the tape. Wrong! I had been brutally forcing the tempo; and the caller and dancers were hard-pressed to keep up. Two lessons from that story: look first to what you yourself can fix; and on a more technical note, listen for signs of anxiety in the caller's voice, because it may signal a band tempo problem.

Second footnote: Another pop culture reference, i suppose.



[revised May 2013]

## Piano basics

This chapter starts from scratch, to talk about what to do on the piano to accompany fiddle tunes for dances.

Why the piano? Because it's got great dynamic (loud/soft) range, it can be percussive or flowy[fn], and its note range spans both low bass notes to chords in the midrange. In short, the piano does just fine as the only rhythm instrument in the entire band. And it's loud. Played forcefully, the piano can carry the entire sound -- from signaling the start of the dance through potatoes to taking the tune 'out' by signaling the end with a well-timed break. For contra dances, nothing beats the piano.

The one thing you *won't* want to do on the piano is play melodies, at least, not often and only as a special effect or 'trick'. This is good, because the technical facility required in the right hand to play melodies at dance speed pretty much forecloses any possibility of playing anything interesting in the left hand at the same time. This means that if you try it, you've just lost the rhythm section in your band, all for the sake of a flashy solo that never sounds as convincing as what the fiddle can already play. If you like the idea of playing melodies -- and if, unlike me, you're both right-handed and technically facile enough to carry it off -- I'd recommend trying the piano-accordion. You can have all the fun and power of dynamics, and a melody whenever you want, all on an instrument built for the limited range of modern fiddle tunes. Of course, then you'll have to practice all those tunes!

On the other hand, it's very useful to your contra dance piano development to *try* to play melodies, on the piano or on some other instrument.[fn] It gives you a sense of how challenging it is to play melodies rhythmically; it helps get the tune into your head and thus makes your playing more closely attuned to the melody players; and it improves your overall piano technique, which can't ever hurt (unless, as I say, you're tempted to go on and actually *play* these melodies at a dance). Finally, if you learn to read dots well enough to sort-of play a melody, you'll soon be able to read them well enough to *accompany* a melody with nothing in front of you but those dots. If you're going to insist on having sheets of paper in front of you, playing from melody-dots instead of from chord charts helps focus your attention on the tune, much like playing from a dance card focuses your attention on the dancers rather than your own music; both of these attitudes are worth developing. And someday you may find that skill at reading melodies comes in really handy when a fiddler puts dots in front of you for some new tune that doesn't have chords yet.[fn]

\* \* \* \* \*

So it's time to get to some piano basics. Play this line, over and over, until you're comfortable with the chord changes at something approximating dance speed:

Beat	one	two	three	four	five	six	seven	eight	one ... (etc)
Bass note	D	A	G	B	A	C#	D	A	D ....
Chord	D	D	G	G	A	A	D	A	D ....

In dots, this comes out as:

[insert abc]

So what's going on here? First, how can we translate the schematic diagram into specific notes to play? The left hand is playing octaves, on the downbeat, landing on the keyboard just as the dancers' feet are landing on the floor.[fn] The right hand is playing a chord on the "offbeat", roughly halfway between successive downbeats.[fn] Each of those chords is made up of three notes [a "triad", see theory chapter?], centered around middle C.

Let's start with the bass note. In the example, each note in the bass is a note taken from the corresponding chord. While this is "actually more of a guideline than a rule"[fn], it's a useful principle, in the sense that it's never wrong. You can sound like an old-time string bass player, for example, if you religiously play the "root" of the chord (the name of the chord in the above example, say a "D" in the case of a "D" chord) on the first beat where the chord is written, and the "fifth" of the chord (the note "A" in the case of a "D" chord) on the next beat. You can even sensibly alternate back and forth until the chord changes. It's generally more interesting to play different bass notes on successive beats. When the music changes (to a "G" chord in the example), you can switch to "G" and then "D", and so on. In the example, though, we play "G" and then "B". The "B" note is in the "G" chord (it's the 'middle' note if you're inclined to keep track that way), and so it sounds sonorous on its own; and by the time we're done with this set of chords we've mapped out a little melody in the bass, with its own sense of coherence and direction. This is desirable, and (to my ear) much more interesting than simple back-and-forth, one-and-five. Furthermore, this "little melody" approach leads naturally to the concept of 'aiming toward nine', the notion developed in the earlier chapter called 'Drive', of trying to convey the sense that the phrase ends on the first beat of the next move. These even-more-interesting things we can do with bass notes are described in the section called 'turnarounds'.

Now for the right hand. Asked to play a D chord, for example, the piano player must still choose where on the piano keyboard to play that chord. It has three notes, D, F# and A; but the piano itself has quite a few different Ds, and many F#s and As too. The music theorist would talk here about 'inversions'[fn], but we're not going to. Instead, the operative rule is to pick three notes D, F# and A, that are (i) close together and (ii) surround middle C, without insisting that any particular note be the highest or lowest note of the chord. This rule will automatically (i) keep your right hand away from the melody, which on the fiddle typically runs from about the A above middle C to the A above that, and also (ii) place successive chords close to each other, so that your hand doesn't have to move far to get from one chord to another. The jazz players make a religion of this concept, and claim that it's easier on the ear as well as the hand if the chords "move" as little as possible from one to the next.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now that we've established the basic notes that we're going to play, what can we do to make them danceable? The first point to note is that the left hand goes down with the foot, and the right hand goes down as the foot is coming up. That's why we call the left hand the downbeat and the right hand the upbeat! For that reason you'll typically play the left hand more emphatically than the right hand, which tends to be light and sharp and quick.

As we noted earlier (the chapter 'Pound'), 'emphasis' includes volume, accent, and note length. These are tools you can use to bring out or emphasize one note more than another. Here we'll talk about how to apply varying emphasis to each note within an eight-note phrase. Most important, the first note of every phrase leads off the next dance figure, and needs to be the strongest note. Drive those fenceposts into the ground! Other, secondary, natural rises and falls also happen over the eight notes that constitute a phrase. Traditional contra dance piano accompaniment tends to emphasize the odd-numbered beats -- one, of course, and five; and somewhat less pronouncedly three and seven. (This is in contrast to traditional old-time music accompaniment, which tends to be much more even.) The melody sometimes accentuates particular notes of a phrase; you can if you choose lend support to this in the accompaniment. And you'll want to be thinking about how you can build to the next phrase. The basic danceability of your music comes, I think, from this differentiation in emphasis over the course of a phrase.

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[Footnote] I would say 'legato', but that's one of those classical music terms that I'm probably misconstruing. And the term 'smooth' has grown to take on a somewhat different meaning from what I think as 'flowy'. I once heard the great bass player Ralph Gordon shake his head at a caller who asked for 'smooth reels', and mutter sotto voce that 'smooth' seemed to mean nothing more or less than 'moderate tempo'.

[Footnote] Dianne Penrose made this observation about the usefulness of playing melodies to me, long ago, long before I understood what she meant. (Alas, that's true of most of the wisdom others have tried to impart.)

[Footnote] Yes, this happened to me, and at my very first full-length dance too. We'd carefully rehearsed a whole night's worth of sets; but in the event the fiddler started off by saying 'I don't feel comfortable playing any of those just yet', and put the squirrely little Irish tune Connaughtman's Rambles in front of me. From Randy Miller's book, the earlier version with handwritten dots and that `_has no chords_`. That's when I learned a valuable lesson: *it's not about the piano player.*

[Footnote] Not everyone advocates playing octaves in the left hand. Bob Pasquarello, in his marvelous book 'Fingers Dancing', argues instead for playing a single note in the left hand. This approach more faithfully mimics the sound of a bass fiddle; but to my ear it tends to encourage players to play a more fluid and "busy" left hand than I think

the contra dance idiom requires. And Bob McQuillen plays octaves all the time, so it can't be wrong. You get to choose for yourself!

[Footnote] There's a lot of subtlety in this topic of the lengths of the individual notes -- I call them 'micro-beats', but that's not standard -- within a single downbeat. In principle, the fiddler plays with a pronounced rhythmic groove, a 'yucka-ducka, yucka-ducka' rhythm whose precise timing is both consistent throughout the tune and, often, individualistic and characteristic of the fiddler's music taken as a whole. In principle, the piano player should match that groove, landing the offbeat chord precisely on the 'd' of each 'ducka'. Normally, however, the fiddler's rhythmic groove hits that third note about halfway between successive downbeats, so playing the piano chord halfway between downbeats is always just about right. The timing of the second and fourth notes in each group is much more idiosyncratic. The irregular spacing of these notes forms the essential musical element of lilt, without which the music to me sounds lifeless and 'classical'. The piano player needs to concentrate much more carefully to match that groove; but that comes up only when playing a syncopated right-hand pattern. See the section on 'syncopation' for more on that topic.

[Footnote] The music theorists set great store by whether (for example) the "G" note in a "G" chord falls at the bottom (1st inversion), the top (3rd inversion), or the middle (2nd inversion). Thinking about this can be useful if you're trying to make a melody line, for example, out of the top notes of each chord. But we're not! The fiddler makes the melody, we just provide a rhythmic counterpart.

[Footnote] Another pop-culture reference.

[revised May 2013]

## **Synopsis (one-page summary)**

Your band gets a contra dance gig, and you have no idea what a contra dance is. Or, you're calling a dance somewhere, and they tell you you'll be working with a band that ... has no idea what a contra dance is. You get time to read one page of advice. So ... here it is.[fn]

### 0. Have fun.

Boisterous, confusing, cheerful, chaotic, energetic --  
The same goes for the dancers, of course.

### 1. Play at 118.

The tempo is the downbeat, and the downbeat has to stay between 116-120 bpm. Contra dance is a walking dance, and the pace the dancers walk is the tempo of your downbeat. They can't comfortably walk much faster or slower than that narrow range. To get a sense of the required pace, turn your metronome to 116 and hum along to the beat with some simple tune -- Angeline the Baker, for example, or Old Joe Clark. Now hum along to the beat with your favorite tune -- and see if 116bpm is way too fast (or way too slow) for your comfort. (You'll speed up a little, maybe 4bpm, with the onstage excitement.)

Be aware that few of us (and not I, for example) can play reels comfortably at that tempo. There are many fine simpler tunes (we call them marches) that work well for contra dances; choose a bunch of them for your set list, and you can enjoy the evening rather than struggle. What you mustn't do is play your favorite, really complex tunes at top speed, which might be only 104. Conversely, be aware that tunes from other traditions -- Irish jigs, square-dance hoedowns -- are often played much *faster* than people can comfortably walk. Use your metronome.

### 2. Play square tunes, with two As and two Bs.

The dance is 32 bars long, and the tunes you play must be ... 32 bars long (64 beats). No crooked tunes! The dancers rely on this. In contra dance, the dancers need simple clear cues from the music -- if you can add an emphasis every eighth downbeat, it is a tremendous help.

Be aware that some tunes in their traditional forms don't follow AABB. Ships are Sailing and Wind that Shakes the Barley are often played in sessions with one A only. Pick something else. The same goes for you old-time and Québécois players fond of inserting extra beats or measures. You'll throw everyone off. And if you're the piano player, before you launch, get in the habit of asking "are you sure it's square?"

Another reason for sticking with AABB: at some point you'll inevitably slip up, and play (or forget to play) an extra A or B. The caller, who thinks in As and Bs, has to be able to get you back on track by saying 'an extra A' or 'one B only', as the case may be, and you have to understand what this means.

### 3. Have two dozen tunes ready.

This doesn't mean a handful of tunes you really like, and a wish-list of seventy more. You're going to need two dozen tunes. You won't have time to discover that the tunes you've picked (or your fingers) don't really work at dance speed (116bpm, point one). Winnow your wish-list (or expand your really-like-list) to your favorite, most comfortable two dozen tunes, and \*write those down\*. If you have trouble filling out the list, pick marches: Mary's Wedding, Grandfather's Polka, Road to Boston. Repeating yourself isn't unforgivable, either.

### 4. Plan to play each tune at least eight times through.

A typical dance runs continuously for eight to ten minutes; thirty-two bars at 120 bpm works out to about half a minute per run-through; so you're talking sixteen to twenty times through. Note one: this is a \*lot\* of playing. Most fiddlers "rehearse" a tune by playing it twice through, or maybe three times, before getting bored and going on. Have you ever tried playing your favorite tunes at 120 bpm for eight minutes at a stretch? It takes stamina. Note two: At eight times through, you'll need to switch tunes during the dance. Group your tunes into sets ahead of time; and practice the transitions!

### 5. Launch with four clear potatoes.

It's easy, just play four sharp downbeats, then go into the tune. But -- watch the caller.

The caller precedes each dance with a "walk-through" of the moves, typically twice through, often with a stop-and-start for an explanation or two. When that's over, the caller and the dancers need a distinct cue that the music is beginning, and the caller uses the cue to tell the dancers to start dancing precisely at the top of your tune. (Different from square dancing!) Make that first downbeat as punchy and clear as you can. It's best done on the piano; avoid the fiddler's shuffle, which traditionally starts with a long, drawn-out first note.

In the middle of the dance, you'll likely be switching tunes (this is the band's decision, see point four). Tell the caller before you launch how many tunes you're intending to play. The caller might help you with signals, or he might leave it to you.

At the end of the dance, the caller will give you a sign, holding up two fingers for example. If in the B part, it means 'two more after this'. If you don't get the signal until the A part, interpret it as 'this and one more'.

### 6. Watch the caller.

It's her job to orchestrate the evening. She teaches, launches, and ends the dances; she sets the pace (but if you play at 118, it should be OK); and she may even offer advice -- with varying degrees of insistence -- on the type of music thought suitable.

Before you hit the first potato, \*make eye contact\* with the caller; timing here is critical. Please don't noodle during the walkthrough. The evening will break halfway through, and you'll usually end each half with a waltz. You can safely ask, 'how many more dances before the break?' so as to save your barn-burning closer for the right moment. And try to be on stage when the band is introduced!

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[Footnote:] If you have more time than this, well, read the rest of the book. Or better still: go to a dance.