

Putting on “Techno” Contra Dances

by Will Loving

Amherst, MA Techno Contra Dance: photo by Will Loving

The following is my response to questions on the Contra Dance FB page about how to plan/run/manage a techno contra dance.

Introduction

Over the last couple of years I've organized a number of dance events, including ContraEvolution, which often go by the name "techno" contra dance in the Northeast US but also are referred to as "crossover," "livetronica," "electro-acoustic," and, for fully pre-recorded music events, "electroflow" in other areas. (Thanks to Peter Clark for some of those terms.) When other contra dance organizers ask me about putting on one of these dances I try to start with giving them a sense of what dancers think of or expect and then follow up with the some important notes on logistics, safety and technical issues.

There are two main components that I think distinguish these dances from a more traditional contra dance: 1) music that includes one or more of the following: looping, beat mixes, sampling, remixing, unusual instrumentation, non-32-bar music, the use of nontraditional music or musical references, particularly in terms of samples; and 2) lowered lights and "club" or "theatrical" style lighting.

Music

In my experience, what is considered techno or crossover music runs the gamut from Perpetual e-Motion on one end of the spectrum, where the music is entirely live but there is extensive use of electronics to modify and loop the music, to what Jeremiah Phillip Seligman and Eileen Thorsos do, using fully pre-recorded music tracks. (Eileen, to my knowledge uses more traditional though still very modern music such as the Peatbog Fairies, while Jeremiah mostly works with Top 40 remixes. I believe Jeremiah also sometimes does some remixing on the spot.)

In between those two extremes are groups like Firecloud (Julie Vallimont's group) and Phase X (Christopher Jacoby's group) which use pre-mixed samples, beats loops but then play lives instruments such as keyboard, fiddle and guitar on top of that. Firecloud also recently added an effects artist DJ Nanocannon (Andrew Hylinsky) who is creating and adding electronic effects live and in coordination with the music and the dance.

I would say that the biggest considerations around music are the additional challenges for the caller and the loss of spontaneity that comes with a fully pre-recorded gig. Having an experienced caller is very important, especially if your music source

is still figuring out what they are doing. The music is frequently not 32-bar square and it sometimes drops down to just a beat loop, so for the caller and the dancers there is no clear A1 to start the dance again. Callers, including *very* experienced ones, have sometimes had to resort to counting, though the musicians sometimes have electronic ways of counting the beats and tracking the start of the dance. The lack of clear A1-A2-B1-B2, as with more traditional music, also means that the caller may need to call longer before dropping out, will need to be ready to jump back again if they see things starting to fall apart across a darkened room, and may in fact have to simply call all the way through on most dances (also see note below on higher proportion of inexperienced dancers).

The other major concern about some techno dances is the potential loss of that magical interplay between musicians, caller and dancers that happens with live music. With fully pre-recorded or DJed music, that ability for the band and caller to inspire and be inspired by the dancers is lost. It is a loss not just for the dancers but also for the caller who may wind up sitting by her or himself on the stage because the person doing music has joined the dance knowing that the recording will eventually end on its own. (This had a very dispiriting effect on at least one very experienced caller that I know.) This, of course, is only an issue with fully pre-recorded music and the positive side of the tradeoff is that dancers get to dance to current music that they know and often will sing along with, which is really fun.

For the Downtown Amherst series, we provide a mix of techno experiences including occasional fully recorded music events, but in terms of programming, our organizing committee leans toward music that includes live instruments in addition to electronic and or pre-recorded sources.

Club or Theatrical Lighting

For lighting, we learned early on to avoid bright flashes like strobes and fog. We also make sure to have background wash lighting along the walls and near the sitting area using torchieres and PAR cans turned toward the walls. Our lights are heavy on black lights (I highly recommend the Chauvet brand panels, available new or on eBay) and dot lasers that create swirling patterns on the ceiling and walls. Depending on who is managing the lighting we've also had various other kinds of lasers that make swirling colored patterns and beams. You can find someone locally who does this kind of things for a living; just be clear with them about things like fog and strobes. You will lose dancers if you have

either of those present.

The biggest issue about lights is that many techno dances are simply too dark. This is a problem for both the callers and the dancers. The callers cannot see well enough to be able to track what's going on, even during the walkthrough, and have expressly communicated that to me. And, the dancers cannot see each other well enough to dance safely. The safety issue is of particular concern because techno dances tend to attract a high proportion of new and novice dancers who often have a hard time maintaining position and knowing where to go even in a fully lit room.

Techno dances also attract a higher number of dancers who will try flourishes such as extravagant dips at inadvisable times and without good awareness of their fellow dancers. They will then be imitated by the very new and less experienced dancers who want to try that very cool move they just saw someone do. Mix all that together in a dark and crowded room and you will definitely have the potential for more, and more severe, injuries.

Having seen dancers seriously injured and knocked nearly unconscious in fully lit rooms, it's important to seek a balance between fun club lighting and enough light for both the callers and dancers to see each other well and stay oriented on the floor.

Black lights are really fun if you can get enough of them going. They light up people's clothing (you can include a mention of that in the publicity—"wear your best black light clothing") and teeth and make it easier to see. We have a stack of yellow highlighters near the door and on the stage for anyone who wants to write or draw on their skin (many do), and people also bring glow bracelets and necklaces. At our annual ContraEvolution event, we also had Eve Christoph doing body painting with UV-reactive paints which was really fun.

Other Considerations: Sound Equipment and Volume

For any techno event, you should have a good sub-woofer. If you don't normally use one for your dances you should get one for any techno dance you put on. Check with the musician(s) as they sometimes have their own and if they don't or can't bring it to your gig you should rent one. Having heart-thumping sub-bass is really part of the techno sound environment. For ContraEvolution 2012 at the Guiding Star Grange, Ed Howe (who does professional sound as well as being half of Perpetual e-Motion) actually setup two sub-woofers.



Having a sub-woofer or doing a techno contra dance does not however mean that the sound needs to be overly loud. Properly done sound can provide the thump of the bass line and the beauty of the live music without reaching a decibel level that leaves people's heads hurting. Badly done sound - electronic or traditional, even at a reduced volume can still feel too loud because it's not balanced properly. That means you need to have a knowledgeable sound person for your techno dance, someone who really knows what they are doing and how to fine-tune for your hall. Ed Howe, Bob Mills and Dan Richardson are masters of this, but there are many others who have the knowledge and experience to make it sound great at the lowest necessary level.

Be in communication with the performers about volume and your expectations and be aware that the musicians often have the ability to adjust gain before it hits the sound board. You may find it louder than intended even though the board settings haven't changed.

Legal Concerns/Copyright and Intellectual Property Issues

Most traditional contra dance music is in the public domain or under Creative Commons license and the music industry lawyers, to my knowledge, mostly come to the conclusion that there are no licensing fees to be pursued from live music contra and English country dances. However, when you start using copyrighted and pre-recorded music of other artists for dance events that you are charging money for, then, like any club, DJ, radio station or music source like Pandora or Spotify, you need to be paying licensing fees to the artists for using their music.

The main way that those license fees are collected in the US is through arrangements with ASCAP/BMI. You pay an annual fee based on a formula for the number of events you are doing and the amount of money you make on them. When I taught swing dance classes lone to three times a week using pre-recorded music, I paid \$80-100 a year. Lisa Greenleaf, who does "alternative music" contra dances with pre-recorded music, is one caller that I'm aware of who has ASCAP/BMI licensing for her usage of copyrighted material. I'm well aware that very little of that money makes it back to the actual artists, but if you are acting as DJ for a techno contra using recorded music, then you should be aware that you are liable for licensing fees and the ASCAP/BMI lawyers will probably find you eventually. DJs who regularly play in clubs can often rely on the club to pay the licensing fees, but for non-fixed locations, it comes back to the DJ.

Additional Thoughts and Comments

AGE—Is cross-over or "techno" contra only for younger dancers? I can answer that with an unequivocal "no." While marrying the words "techno" and "contra" and "dance" together is a definite draw for younger dancers, we have dancers of all ages and experience level coming to these dances. At last night's Downtown Amherst techno dance with Ed Howe and Julie Vallimont playing, we acknowledged and honored the eightieth birthday of John Leonard who has been a regular at our dance. And I know that we have at least one other octogenarian as well as plenty of people in their forties through seventies. They are welcomed and appreciated by our younger dancers.

ATTRACTING YOUNGER/NEWER DANCERS— This is really a much longer discussion, but I get asked this question a lot so I'll just put it out two questions for you to consider:

1) How many people under thirty or thirty-five do you have on your organizing committee? I think it really comes down to that. If you have young people who are involved and have a say and a stake in how the dances run then you will see more of them at your dances. The Downtown Amherst Organizing Committee has roughly eight members. I'm fifty-six and the rest are under thirty. Publicity is a good way to start. I know of one dance that started attracting many younger dancers after an under twenty-five year-old took over doing publicity.

2) Is your dance located where students can easily get to it and get home by walking or reliable bus access (especially late at night)? This is also key, especially as gas prices get higher. You may wish to consider finding another location closer to students and young people and either alternating the location or running a second dance each month in a more student/young people friendly location. Doing outreach to universities and colleges is also a good idea. Offer a discount if they bring a van load, go to the college and run an on-campus intro dance, get listed in the off-campus activities listings, and, most importantly, find someone on-campus who is willing to organize and promote and possibly learn to drive the van.

Appendix and Other References

This is a short list of the folks I know of who play or call for techno dances, all US-based so far. Please message me with additional performers that you consider to be techno-oriented and where they are based. The caller list is simply those that I know of who have done and enjoy techno dances (not all

callers do). Any experienced caller could do one, I'm sure, if they were interested.

MUSIC—DJ Improper (Jeremiah Phillip Seligman, DC area, DJ), Ed Howe & Julie Vallimont Duo (Boston/Maine), Erik Erhardt (New Mexico, DJ), Firecloud (Julie Vallimont, Andy Reiner, Andrew Hylinsky, Boston area), Jordy Williams (Asheville, NC), Julie Vallimont and Max Newman Duo (Boston area), Perpetual e-Motion (John Cote, Ed Howe, Maine), Phase X (Christopher Jacoby, NJ/NY area).

CALLERS—Brian Hamshar (VA), Bob Isaacs (PA), Clinton Ross (TN/NC), Diane Silver (NC), Donna Hunt (PA), Eric Black (CA), Erik Erhardt (NM), Janine Smith (MD area), Jesse Edgerton (NC/TN), Laura Winslow (NJ), Lissa Bengston (TX), Lisa Greenleaf (MA), Maggie Jo Saylor (NC), Noah Grunzweig (OR), Rick Mohr (PA), Ron Blechner (MA), Steve Zakon-Anderson (NH), Tina Fields (CO), Vicki Herndon (TN), Wendy Graham (CO), Will Mentor (NH).

What We Use for Lights

This is a list what we have acquired so far, new and used, mostly black lights and lasers. We seek to illuminate the walls, ceiling and floor rather than shine directly into the dancers. In a darkened room, the light rope and Christmas lights are good to define the walls, edges of the stage and speaker stands, all of which provide visual reference points for dancers and increase safety.

- 1 Chauvet SlimBANK LED UV blacklight panel (very strong; recommended)
- 4 Chauvet Shadow LED UV blacklight panels
- 2 Chauvet red and blue lasers
- 1 Chauvet Hemisphere five color laser
- 1 American DJ Waterfall 2 light (older non-LED version with fragile halogen bulb)
- 2 Chauvet 9' mounting tripods
- 100 feet of blue LED light rope
- white or colored wash lights (PAR cans) pointed at walls for backlighting
- clamps for mounting Shadow UV panels to speaker stands etc.

For an interesting history of the techno contra evolution, see Alex Krogh-Grabbe's CDSS blog post at <http://blog.cdss.org/2011/06/crossover-contra-dancing-a-recent-history/>. Also check out Ryan's Contrasycretist blog at <http://www.contrasyncretist.com>.

Thanks to Ron Blechner, Peter Clark and Alex Krogh-Grabbe for input and suggestions on this article.

Addendum—Sound People (mentioned in article)

- Ed Howe, Perpetual e-Motion/Sound of Perfection, 207-380.5538, groovatic1@hotmail.com
- Dan Richardson/NotTooLoud.com, 413-588-1656, dlr@nottooloud.com
- Bob Mills, <http://www.bobmills.org>

“Putting on Techno Contra Dances” was originally in response to a question on the Contra Dance Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/editnote.php?draft¬e_id=10151541411764182&id=839937191. Will revised and expanded it slightly for publication here.

Will Loving has been contra dancing since 1980 and is the founder of the Downtown Amherst (MA) contra dance series (<http://amherstcontra.org>) and the annual ContraEvolution event. He loves dancing and helping people discover the joy of community dance. His Caller's Companion software is widely used by callers around the world.



ASCAP/BMI Clarification (9/25/13)

I just read the article about techno contras (interesting! And very glad you mentioned about the dark lighting causing problems—the Portland techno dances have been too dark).

I have a comment about just one little part of this fine article. Will writes “most traditional contra dance music is in the public domain or under Creative Commons license, and the music industry lawyers...” This statement is misleading. It is true that trad music is PD, but most contra dance bands today play many, many tunes that are under copyright. In fact, it would be really hard to find a contra dance where only trad tunes were played. Quite a number of these copyrighted tunes are also registered with one of the licensing agencies (ASCAP, BMI, SOCAN, PRS and others), all of whom have reciprocity when it comes to collecting fees. I would venture a guess that it would also be hard to find a dance where a licensed tune was not played. Whether ASCAP chooses to go after the venue for a licensing fee is another matter. But in any case, I think that musicians should be aware that much of the music they are playing is probably under copyright and could be registered as well.

Sue Songer, Portland, OR