## Choosing Dances for Older Adults

an excerpt from Don't Stop Now by Judy Chaves

Don't Stop Now: A Guide to Leading English Country Dance Classes for Older Adults, by Judy Chaves (CDSS, 2011), offers practical advice on safety, set-up and equipment, programming, chosing and adapting dances, tempo, calling and teaching, all based on her experience with the Wake Robin retirement community in Vermont. It also includes adaptations of thirty-two classic English country dances, one of which we've included here. It is available through our store.

The best advice I was ever given by another dance instructor came when I was about to teach ECD for the first time to very young children and was wondering how I was going to get them to side gracefully. "Eliminate the siding," he said to me, "and replace it with something simpler, like a two-hand turn. In fact, you should feel free to mess with the dances as much as you need to."

This advice, to adapt—or "mess with"—dances to meet the needs of a group, is probably the single most important piece of advice in this booklet. If, by eliminating a step or two from a dance, or by substituting one figure for another, you can make a dance accessible and safe for the class, do it. Remember: enabling older adults (or young children, or whoever is in your class) to dance is the goal here, not maintaining choreographic or stylistic accuracy.

Recognizing dances that will work for the class is probably the biggest challenge of teaching this group. What might seem the perfect dance on paper can prove more confusing or trickier than you'd foreseen, on the actual dance floor. And sometimes a dance you're not sure the group will be able to do, will prove to be quite simple for them. No matter how much thought and planning you put into choosing dances, there will be surprises.

Music. Look for tunes that don't lose their melodic integrity and are still full of energy when they're slowed down. There's a good chance there will be classical music lovers in a class of older adults, so the dance Handel with Care, any tune by Purcell, or danceable music played by an early music group, like the Baltimore Consort, are always good choices. Waltzes tend to be favorites.

Level of challenge. It's important to remember that you're not looking for "easy" dances," but are applying a particular set of criteria to the selection process, based on older adults' physical and mental challenges, particularly dizziness, balance, and memory.

There shouldn't be too many turns in a dance, and turns shouldn't follow one right after another. By "turn," I mean any figure involving a relatively quick,

sharp change of direction: turning single, one- and two-hand turns, circling, half- and full-figure eights, Sharp siding, heys, gypsies, casting. We have long adopted a policy of substituting most turn singles with setting, replacing all Sharp siding with Shaw siding, and replacing every 1-1/2 two-hand turn with a slow and leisurely half-turn.

Try to avoid figures that cause crowding and might result in collisions. This is especially important if your dance space is limited. Such crowding can occur when both women lead simultaneously between the men (or vice versa) and cast back to place.

A dance should have a low potential for causing confusion, particularly in the early stages of the class. It should be relatively short in length; all its figures should be done within the minor set, rather than venturing into sets above or below; it should maintain one orientation for the set rather than have frequent changes in orientation; and there should be as much symmetry and consistency as possible to the figures. As the group gains experience, you can, of course, try introducing some of these "confusion factors" and see how things go.

The dance should be able to withstand a slower tempo without its figures becoming Tai-Chilike or dull.

When the class is ready for increased challenge, look for dances with intellectual challenge, rather than physical ones. For example, John Tallis's Canon has nothing physically challenging in it (once the turn single is removed), but has a great intellectual challenge in its being a canon. Newcastle, especially its final figure (minus the turn single), would also provide intellectual challenge. On the other hand, dances like Fandango and Prince William, i.e., dances with the physical challenge of contiguous turns in the heys and contrary corners, might not be appropriate.

Related story: Judy and co-instructor Val Medve's story on teaching the dance John Tallis's Canon at Wake Robin, "Cheers for the Canoneers!," CDSS News, Summer 2010, www.cdss.org/newsletterarchives.html.

## Dance Adaptation

from Don't Stop Now, by Judy Chaves

Adaptations in italics.

## The Queen's Jig (duple minor longways)

- A1 1-8 1st corners side (Sharp style); set and turn single.
- A2 1-8 2nd corners the same.
- B1 1-2 1st corners change places.
  - 3-4 2nd corners change places.
  - 5-8 Partners face, balance back, and change places.
- B2 1-6 All right hands across.
  - 7-8 All turn single.



## Adaptation

- A1 1-8 1st corners side-by-side right, side-by-side left.
- A2 1-8 2nd corners the same.
- B1 1-2 1st corners change places.
  - 3-4 2nd corners change places.
  - 5-8 Partners face (don't balance back) and change places.
- B2 1-8 All right hands across; left hands across.

Reasoning. The first change I made was to turn the Sharp siding, which involves rapid, tight turning, into Shaw siding. Since Shaw siding requires 16 beats in order to be symmetrical (and feels off-kilter when only half done), I filled the entire A music with siding. Since I was going to have to substitute the turn single of the original with something else anyway, this worked out nicely. Eliminating the balance back in B1 gives partners enough time to change places without rushing.

The final adaptation, to fill the B2 music with right and left hands across, came about when I realized that if I eliminated the final turn single (which I'd have to do because the group simply doesn't do turn singles), the right hands across would have to fill 16 beats (and this, to music that would be slowed down!). So instead of having the class do something painfully slow and uninteresting, I made the figure symmetrical, busier, and more fun.

**Historical Source**: The Dancing Master, 11th Ed. (Playford), 1701.

Modern Source: The Playford Ball, Kate Van Winkle Keller and Genevieve Shimer (CDSS), 1994. Music: David Douglas and Paul O'Dette Apollo's Banquet; Bare Necessities Vol. 12 A Playford Ball

(The motivation for using this dance was David Douglas and Paul O'Dette's recording of it on their CD, a fabulous early music rendition of the tune.)

To order the book: www.cdss.org/store, store@cdss.org, 413-203-5467 x 3.