Cheers for the Canoneers!

by Judy Chaves

Dedicated to Bill Osgood

Entering the fifth year of teaching a weekly English country dance class at Wake Robin, a retirement community in Shelburne, Vermont, I wondered if the class was ready for a major challenge: a dance that would take the group, instead of the usual twenty minutes to learn, several sessionsperhaps even the entire ten-week "semester." So I asked my co-teacher, Val Medve, what she thought of the idea, and she was game. The dance? John Tallis's Canon, a duple minor written by Pat Shaw in 1970 in which corners do the dance in canon, the first corners initiating the dance, and the second corners coming in-and remaining throughout-four beats behind. The dance itself is quite simple—forward and back, cross over, right and left hand turns—but the matter of coordinating the canon, particularly the progression, can prove enormously tricky. Never had we tried anything even remotely as complicated with this group. We suspected that it was either going to prove an immensely satisfying experience for all—or one of the craziest teaching ideas that the two of us had ever had.

Our standard repertoire for the class includes simple duple minors like The Duke of Kent's Waltz, Freeford Gardens, and Dover Pier; a few circle dances like I Care Not for These Ladies and Epping Forest; and an occasional three-couple set dance like Scotch Cap or Grimstock (using only one or two of the choruses that work best for the group). Recently we've upped the difficulty level with Handel with Care, Barbarini's Tambourine, and Jack's Maggot. It seemed to us that John Tallis's Canon, though of a much higher level of challenge than our standards, would offer a type of challenge of exactly the right sort. Difficult, but Wake Robin-friendly.

Exactly what qualifies as Wake Robin-friendly is something Val and I have gotten increasingly better at identifying, just as we've grown adept at writing adaptations to dances to make them Wake Robin-friendly (eliminating all turn singles, for example) and adjusting the speed on our MP3 players to do the same (sometimes down to eighty-five percent of recorded speed).

With most of the class being in their seventies eighties (one member just turned eightynine), speed, balance and dizziness are our biggest concerns. The Canon seemed perfect because, as I said, the dance itself is not difficult, and there are no fast parts, no repetitive turns, nothing to bring on dizziness. Its challenge lies more in the intellectual realm than physical. And whereas this group might have balance and knee and back issues, they are as sharp intellectually as any other English country dance group—which is to say very. They immediately grasped the concept of the canon (and, many of them, the reference to Thomas Tallis) with great appreciation and enormous anticipation of what they could see lay ahead. They were as excited as we were to take on the challenge.

At the first session in early October, we got off to a great start. The figures themselves were easy to teach, and for the first few weeks we had the group do the dance not as a canon, but as a "solo" for each set of corners, the first corners dancing while the seconds stood still, and vice versa. We also left out the progression. (Instead of veering right or left, you simply returned to place.) Once it was clear the class could do this repeatedly with confidence, we introduced the canon aspect, one figure at a time, still without any progression. Val would call for the first corners; I would call for the seconds. Doing the dance this way was clearly a challenge, but one the group finally mastered with such success that Val and I were tempted to call it quits right there. "We could just turn it into a two-couple set dance," I suggested. "No progression necessary!"

But the class knew there was a progression

and made it clear they would not be satisfied until they learned it. Val and I, unsure exactly how we were going to teach the progression, fearful of failure—both our own and the group's—kept putting the progression off. Yet the class kept asking for it. "How could anything be that hard?" they asked. How indeed. (I should mention here that when I asked caller David Millstone for tips on teaching the Canon's progression, he replied, "I haven't taught [the dance] in ages



precisely because of the difficulty of getting that progression across.") Oh great, I thought: expert confirmation that Val and I are indeed insane!

But I finally bit the bullet and taught the progression (thanks to page 31 of CDSS's Legacy: 50 Years of Dance and Song, plus several nights of tossing and turning). There followed a few weeks of exactly the sort of progression mayhem that Val and I had feared. First and second corners, forgetting who did what when, walked into each other; partners split apart and progressed in opposite directions; genders changed. Those who did successfully navigate the steps of the progression were unable to locate any next corner with whom to dance, and forget about anyone being able to enter the dance after waiting out at either end. Val had some success with a call-andresponse exercise: "First corners veer...?" "RIGHT!" came the answer. "Second corners veer....?" "LEFT!" But for the most part, the progression was a mess, and the insecurities caused by the progression started seeping into the rest of the dance, particularly the right and left hand turns which started deteriorating, second corners getting seduced into dancing the first corners' part. The hard work of the previous weeks seemed to have been for nothing. "Judy," one class member cried out after a particularly awful attempt with music, half a dozen participants collapsed in giggles, having abandoned the set entirely, "is there some reason why we HAVE to learn this dance?"

And though most of the class assured me that yes, there was a reason and they were determined to carry on, I was painfully aware that much of my own eagerness for the class to learn the dance was the satisfaction I'd get in having been able to teach it. So we carried on, devoting a good half hour each week to what was becoming known as "THE DANCE" (all other dances known as "NOT John Tallis's Canon").

Amazingly, the majority of the class grew only more determined. There were intense discussions

 $_{
m the}$ end of each session in which they'd evaluate what done, pinpointing areas of difficulty, suggesting possible teaching strategies. In a stroke of genius, Gloria and Bob McEwen suggested that second corners wear hats to make it easier to locate one another after the progression (an idea we took up with great success, making sure the hats were easy-on, easyoff for quick switching

at either end of the set, where corners change roles). Bill Osgood coined the verb, "to canoneer," for what we were doing. ("Will we be canoneering today?" Bill would ask at the start of a class.) And things were going on outside of class, as well. Thelma Osgood confided that she was lying in bed at night doing the dance mentally, as did Jessie Snyder: "I visualize it and rehearse it in my mind frequently, hoping to hold onto it until we can try it again." Several members held an informal practice session in one of the Wake Robin parking garages. "I have never," veteran dancer and class member Beal Hyde said to me at one point, "seen a group at Wake Robin this determined to get something."

But time was running out. With only one week remaining until the end of the semester, the group was still unable to do the dance more than two or three times through without total melt down. I decided to offer a special "John Tallis's Canon Only" session for those who were interested and willing to subject themselves to a full hour of THE DANCE, warning them that I would work them hard "and it will NOT be fun!" To my amazement, everyone came. Even those with conflicts came for the few minutes they could spare. We had to dance in a hallway, since our usual space was set up for a holiday concert. So with other residents and staff occasionally walking through (you can imagine their expressions), and the holiday decorations a visual reminder of our looming deadline, we drilled.

"Repeat, repeat, repeat," was David Millstone's advice to me. "Simply do the progression and just the progression. And then add in the chunk right before the progression and then do the progression." So we did the progression more times than should be legal, and then we did the right and left hand turns more times than I'd like to admit, with everyone taking turns at being first and second corners. My calls became so repetitive, the whole class was chanting them along

with me, especially during the right and left hand turns for which we'd all, in unison, mounting count in crescendo, "One, two, three, four, FIVE!..." emphasizing the beat upon which the second corners join in to make the two-person turn a person-person star. After forty-five minutes of such dilling, I put on the music. And for the full seven times through the Bare



(Canoneers, continued from page 17)

Necessities cut, the group did the dance. True, I had to run interference now and then, but the group did the dance. And then they did it again.

I have heard it said that the highs and lows of being a teacher are higher and lower than any others—and I have to say that this was a teaching high unlike any I'd ever experienced. I was elated. But class members, most of whom I think were in shock, were not so easily satisfied. They refused to admit that they'd really done it until the final class of the semester, when they did it again without me doing a thing except prompting for first corners only. Feeling on top of the world, we said goodbye for the holidays, with everyone agreeing that they'd done it.

And I was sure that they'd never want to do it again except, perhaps, on penalty of death.

But lo and behold, Bill Osgood soon sent me an email (from whose subject heading comes the title of this article) saying, "We look forward to more canoneering in 2010!" Others sent similar messages. And so here we are, a few sessions into the new semester and we continue to do John Tallis's Canon—hatless, and practically promptless. I would even go so far as to call it now one of our "standards." Val and I can take credit for some of it, to be sure. But I stand in awe of the group's energy, determination, and persistence. As class member Jini Hornung put it, "Our group may be 'over the hill,' but we are dancing all the way!"

Postscript—Bill Osgood died on May 8, 2010.



Judy Chaves teaches cello and English country dance in the Burlington, Vermont area. She's currently working on a guide for leading English country dance classes for seniors, to be published by CDSS.

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