

Calling Contras: The Basics

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Calling for contra dances is a fine art and a science, with subtle skills that can take a lifetime to master. It's also easy to get started; all you need is a collection of simple dances, an understanding of the basic figures, and a sense of how they fit together to match the timing of the music.

This article is aimed at anyone in your community who wants to learn to call contra dances. For the purposes of this tutorial we are assuming that you have experience dancing contra dances (i.e. you know the basic figures well enough to explain them to others), but that you are calling for and teaching a group of dancers that includes a sizable portion of beginners.

GET STARTED

As a caller your job is to teach the dance and the dance figures (usually without music as a walkthrough), and then prompt the figures while the music is playing so that the dancers continue to do the dance in sync with the music. For more discussion of the mechanics and techniques of this take a look at the books on calling. Before you try to teach and call a dance to a room full of dancers, put on a CD of contra dance music at home. Learn to recognize the different parts of the music (A1, A2, B1, B2) and how they fit with a given dance. Practice calling in time with the music. Make sure you prompt a figure BEFORE the dancers are supposed to start dancing it, so they know what's coming next a little ahead of time.

Below is some information on the basics of the contra dance form as well as a collection of dance repertoire to get you started.

Good luck! And remember, there are lots of people who are eager to help you, and lots of resources available online and in print to guide you. Be in touch with CDSS and we'll help you find what you need.

THE BASICS OF CONTRA DANCE FORM

It is important for beginning callers, musicians and organizers to understand how the choreography of contra dancing fits with the music. Here is a good place to start.

OVERVIEW

Contra Dances are generally done to tunes that are 32 musical bars (64 beats) long. The tunes usually have an A part and a B part, each of which is 8 bars (16 beats) of distinct music. The A and B parts are each repeated, to make a form that is described as AABB, with a total of 32 bars (64 beats). The dances are made up of sets of figures (such as forward and back, allemande, do-si-do) that are mostly 4, 8, or 16 beats long, strung together in a pattern that results in 32 bars (64 beats) of dancing. Once through the tune equals once through the dance.

The dancers dance the figures once through with their partners and neighboring couples, and then move on (progress) to a new couple and do the pattern all over again. We usually repeat the dance 10 or 15 or 20 times through. The caller prompts the figures for as long as is necessary until the dancers can do it on their own. The band plays the music in this form (ideally without dropping any parts or adding any extra beats) until the caller decides to end the dance.

Let's break that down a bit and look at a specific dance and tune. At this point don't worry about trying to figure out the specific dance - it's just an example.

SAMPLE DANCE AND TUNE

Here's the simple contra dance "Broken Sixpence" by Don Armstrong.

BROKEN SIXPENCE, BY DON ARMSTRONG; FROM REBECCA LAY

longways; duple improper

A1: Neighbor do si do (8)

two gents do si do (8)

A2: two ladies do si do (8)

Ones swing, end facing down (8)

B1: go down the hall, 4 in line, turn alone (8)

up the hall, bend the line into a ring (8)

B2: Circle Left 1x

star Left 1x

The numbers in parentheses represent the number of musical beats that each figure should take. For example, the A1 has a neighbor do-si-do for 8 beats, and then a gents do-si-do for 8 beats. "Longways" indicates that the dance is done in long lines of couples, with each person standing across from their partner and next to their neighbor. "Improper" means the number two couples in each group of four cross over, so that the long lines are gent - lady, gent- lady, etc.

Now, here's the simple Irish reel "Silver Spear," a common contra dance tune (click the image to see a larger version).

The image shows a musical score for the Irish reel "Silver Spear" in D major, 2/4 time. It is divided into two parts, A and B, each repeated as written. The A part consists of two lines of music, each 8 beats long. The B part also consists of two lines of music, each 8 beats long. Red dots above the notes indicate the beat structure. Chord letters (D, G, A) are placed below the notes to indicate the accompaniment. A blue arrow points to the chord letters with the label "chords". A green bracket under the first line of the A part is labeled "one bar". The title "Silver Spear" is centered at the top, and "traditional Irish" is written in the top right corner.

You can see the relationship between beats (red dots) and bars (the horizontal lines that divide the music), as well as the structure of the A and B parts. [Note to musicians: this concept of "beats" may be different than what the time signature says about beats per measure, depending on how the music is written out. It reflects the way dancers hear the beats - and callers match the figures to the music - when the tune is played at dance tempo. Don't think too much about the time signature.] The musical notes are the melody of the tune, while the chord letters give information to the rhythm musicians about how to accompany the tune.

If you were dancing Broken Sixpence to the Silver Spear, the neighbor do-si-do would take up the first line of music (8 beats, 4 bars), then the gents do-si-do takes up the second line, and that is the end of the A1. The band will repeat the A part; this time the ladies do-si-do takes up the first line, and the ones swing takes up the second line, and that's the end of the A2. For the B1 dancers go down the hall while the band plays the third line, and back up the hall for the 4th line. Repeat! B2: Circle = 3rd line, star = 4th line. Then we have reached the end of once through the dance and once through the tune. The dancers have progressed to face new couples; the band repeats the tune from the beginning, and the caller starts at the beginning of the figures for the second time through.

Presto! A contra dance!

CONTRA DANCE REPERTOIRE

Here are a few favorite simple dances to get you started as a caller or dancer.

OVERVIEW

There are two distinct situations in which you might be asked to call a dance:

1. **A party gig or a one-time event.** You are calling for a crowd made up almost entirely of beginners or people who have never encountered contra dancing. Perhaps the crowd has a wide range of ages (a school or family dance), maybe it's a celebration that includes some contra dancing (a wedding or graduation party), or a social event for an institution or school (college dance, corporate party, etc.) This sort of dance can generally be called a "Community dance;" a discussion of the dynamics of such events is beyond the scope of this article. There are excellent sources of dance repertoire and calling instruction for these situations available in print and online. Here are a few suggestions:
 - a. *New England Dancing Masters* books: the standard sources for simple dances for a community dance setting. Accompanying CDs are also available with recorded music for specific dances.
 - b. *Family and Community Dances* booklet: Includes some sample repertoire as well as information about teaching, calling and organizing community dances.
2. **A contra dance that is part of a regular series,** maybe a series that you are organizing. Probably there is more of a mix of beginners and people who have encountered contra dance before. In this situation you might choose repertoire that is simple and easy to teach while appealing to more experienced folks.

There is a lot more to the selection of repertoire and knowing your audience than we can get into here. Check out the Calling Books tab for some tips, or consider attending a calling workshop or camp course to gain a deeper understanding of these skills.

DANCE REPERTOIRE

In the dances below, the figures are divided up into A1, A2, B1, and B2 based on which part of the music they accompany, with numbers in parentheses that indicate the number of musical beats that a given figure should take. If any of the figures are unfamiliar, you can probably find descriptions of them by searching online. Or, take a look at the glossary in Ted Sanella's book "Balance and Swing." The sources and authors for the dances are listed, where known.

Summer Sunshine, Paul Balliet, 1994; from Sue Rosen

Longways, Duple Improper

Note from the Author: The only unique item for experienced dances is the unusual start position, which repeats near the end of B2. Take Neighbor's Right hand, women take Left hands to form wave.

A1: Balance the wave of 4 (4)

Neighbor swing (12)

A2: Ladies chain across and back (16)

B1: Circle left 3/4 (8)

Partner swing (8)

B2: Circle left 3/4 to wave of 4 (8)

Balance the wave, walk forward to new wave (8)

Jefferson's Reel, traditional (aka Jefferson & Liberty); from Carol Ormand

longways, duple proper

A1: circle L one time around (8)
circle R one time around (8)

A2: same 4, star R (8)
star L, end at home (8)

B1: actives separate from partner and go down the outside of the set (8)
actives turn around and walk back, returning to place (8)

B2: actives split the inactives to make a line of 4, go down the hall (6)
actives make an arch with their joined hands, pull inactives through the arch (2)
actives face new inactives in a line of 4 (actives still face DOWN, inactives face UP)
in a line of 4 walk UP the hall; make a new ring of 4 (8)

Unruly Reunion, by Robert Cromartie; from Carol Ormand

longways, duple improper

A1: Down the hall 4-in-line, 1's in the middle (8)
turn alone, return and fold the line. (8)

A2: Circle left (8)
Circle right (8)

B1: Dosido Neighbor (8)
Swing Neighbor (8)

B2: Long lines forward and back (8)
1's swing (8)

Family Contra, by Sherry Nevins; from Rebecca Lay

longways, duple proper or improper

Note from Rebecca: I love Family Contra...Most of the time, everyone is connected to someone else, which minimizes the opportunity for getting lost. It's also a longways dance that feels like a "real" contra, but it doesn't matter if people cross over at the ends.

A1: balance the ring 2x (8)
circle left 1x (8)

A2: balance the ring 2x (8)
circle right 1x (8)

B1: neighbor Do si do (8)
partner Do si do (8)

B2: face Neighbor, take inside hands w/partner, (8)
Do si do as a couple 1 1/2 to face new neighbors (8)

Broken Sixpence, by Don Armstrong; from Rebecca Lay

longways; duple improper

Note from Rebecca: If I'm asked to teach a pre-dance "Beginners Workshop" at a contra dance, I often teach participants Broken Sixpence at the end of the workshop, and then do it as the first dance of the evening.

A1: Neighbor do si do (8)
two gents do si do (8)

A2: two ladies do si do (8)
Ones swing, end facing down (8)

B1: go down the hall, 4 in line, turn alone (8)
up the hall, bend the line into a ring (8)

B2: Circle Left 1x
star Left 1x

The Baby Rose, by David Kaynor; from Rebecca Lay

longways; duple improper

Note from Rebecca: I often use Baby Rose to teach a Ladies Chain and star because the rest of it is so simple.

A1: Neighbor balance & swing (16)

A2: Circle L 3/4 (8)
Partner do si do (8)

B1: Partner balance & swing (16)

B2: ladies chain (8)
star Left 1x

Cranky Ingenuity, by Bill Olson; from Rebecca Lay

longways; duple improper

Note from Rebecca: Cranky Ingenuity is in that great category of dances that satisfy everyone in a mixed crowd; it's not confusing for beginners (and has lots of neighbor interaction, so beginners get to dance with lots of different people), and experienced dancers love it, too.

A1: Circle L 1x (8)
as a couple, Do si do Neighbors (as in Family Contra) (8)

A2: Neighbor Do si do (8)
Neighbor swing (8)

B1: Gents Allemande L 1 1/2 (8)
Partner swing (8)

B2: Circle L 3/4 (until you face up or down) (8)
balance the ring (4)
California twirl (4) (in each couple, Gent lifts up joined hand and lady walks under to face new neighbors)

Frederick Reel, by Tom Hinds; from Rebecca Lay

longways, duple improper

Note from Rebecca: Frederick Reel is great for orienting beginners because it begins with long lines going forward and back--something that everyone does, all together

A1: long lines forward & back (8)

ladies Allemande L 1 1/2 (8)

A2: Partner balance & swing (16) (end facing DOWN the hall/away from the band)

B1: go down the hall, 4 in line, turn as a couple (8)

up the hall, bend the line into a ring (8)

B2: Circle L 3/4 (8)

Neighbor Swing (8)

Airpants, by Lisa Greenleaf; from Rebecca Lay

longways, duple improper

A1: Neighbor balance & swing (16)

A2: long lines forward & back (8)

Ladies Allemande R 1 1/2 (8)

B1: Partner balance & swing (8)

B2: Circle L 3/4 (8)

Neighbor do si do 1 1/2 (8)

Push the Button, by Gene Hubert; from Rebecca Lay

Note: Rebecca Lay learned "Push the Button" from Rick Mohr, who got it from George Marshall, who collected it in the early 1980's from an unknown source. Daniel Luecking informs us that it is credited to Gene Hubert. It was originally called "The Button Push;" Rick added the balance in the B2 to improve the timing and changed the name.

longways, duple improper

A1: Neighbor balance & swing (16)

A2: long lines forward & back (8)

ladies chain (to partner) (8)

B1: ladies do si do (8)

partner swing (8)

B2: Circle L 3/4

balance the ring (4)

pass thru up or down (pass R shoulders with this neighbor to meet new neighbor)