

Doing Sound

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Amplified sound may not be appropriate for all events or occasions. When it is necessary, having an adequate and well-run sound system can be as important to the success of an event as the music or the calling. This article discusses how to get started with sound gear for your event.

DECIDE WHAT YOU NEED

Before you begin thinking about a sound system, ask yourself if you need amplification for your type of dance or music and in your location. At a contra dance the noise of the dancers almost always makes a sound system necessary. At an English dance you might not need amplification, or you might need only a slight boost for the caller. For other types of events, consider the likely noise of the crowd, the participants, the volume of the performers, and the need for clarity of any teaching or prompting. Will you be amplifying a whole band plus caller? Just a caller? How many instruments? How big is the space? How many participants/attendees/dancers do you expect? This information will help anyone you talk with figure out what gear you might need. When in doubt, ask performers, teachers or leaders what they think they need, and respect their requests. Try to find a balance point where you meet your needs for amplification with the minimal amount of sound gear and the simplest setup. It never hurts to familiarize yourself with a bit of terminology (see Bob Mills' All Mixed Up) so you know what to ask for.

FINDING SOUND GEAR

If you do need sound gear, don't start by running out and buying a really expensive system. Here are a few ideas for cheaper options.

Ask around with musicians and callers in your area. See if anyone has a sound system they are willing to let you borrow or rent. Go to a music store, a guitar center, or an electronics store and look around to see what they have. This will help you get an idea about the different components and the different sizes that are available. Contact a professional sound operator in your area and ask if they can make suggestions about finding gear to rent or borrow. If you are looking to buy something, you can often find used equipment available at a reasonable price. Check online, ask performers, check with professional sound people about any old gear they are looking to sell. Some organizations own sound systems, and some buildings include built-in systems that you may be able to rent or use. If you are on a campus the school probably owns some gear that you can check out or rent.

THE SOUND TECHNICIAN

If you decide a sound system is necessary, it is important to have a qualified person to operate the equipment and to have good communication with the performers about sound arrangements. There are a lot of approaches to how to make this work:

- **Cultivate a team of sound volunteers in your community.** Help them get training, starting with Bob Mills' All Mixed Up and give them time to try things out without an audience around. Encourage them to solicit suggestions from performers, who may know more than they do about sound systems. Organize a sound operators workshop, or send your sound volunteers to a CDSS summer camp Sound Operators Course. Over time you can develop a competent group to take care of the sound for your event. (This sort of arrangement works best for weekly, monthly or occasional events with one band and simple needs)
- **Ask performers to provide sound.** many performers have a lot of experience doing sound, some of them own their own gear, and some prefer to operate their own systems. Be prepared to pay them extra for doing this. Budget \$50 at a minimum for sound. (Works well for occasional events or regular events with only one band and simple to moderate needs)
- **Hire a professional sound person** with their own gear, or one who can operate your gear, or some combination of the two (the best option for weekends, camps, difficult spaces, events with more than one band)

COMMUNICATE WITH THE BAND

Whatever you choose to do about sound, be sure of several things:

Communicate with the performers ahead of time about their sound requirements. Ask them to send you (or the sound person) a stage plot or a list of the channels, cables, mics, DIs, monitors, monitor mixes, etc. that they require.

Be clear whether you are providing any instruments (esp. piano or keyboard, bass, bass amps, etc.) or whether you are expecting the performers to bring them

Leave enough time before the start of the event for setup and a sound check, and tell the performers what time they need to be there

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The best basic text for learning to operate sound gear in a folk or traditional music or dance setting is "All Mixed Up" by Bob Mills, available online (<http://www.bobmills.org/amu/>) or in print from the CDSS Catalog.