Here are some things you need to know about contra choreography as a musician. I'm assuming that you have a basic idea of what a contra dance is and are able to play your instrument at dance tempo. My hope is that these observations will help you develop a better understanding of how contra choreography works so you can play music that really connects with dancers. There are lots of right answers and I've tried to focus more on the mechanics of the figures rather than personal musical tastes. You'll need to discover how these concepts relate to your own repertoire and you'll probably find many more things to add! Here are some of my thoughts on:

- Figures
- Dances
- Programming and Performing

FIGURES

There are two broad categories of figures in contra choreography.

Category #1 - figures with uninterrupted forward momentum.
Examples: circle, swing, allemand, right shoulder round, heys and stars.

Category #2 - percussive figures with opposing momentum.
Examples: balances, petronella, forward and back, wavy lines.

The first thing to notice is that the timing can be very loose for figures with uninterrupted forward momentum. For instance, dancers will readily start a circle-left-three-quarters several beats early in order to get a longer swing on the side of the set. There will sometimes be significant differences in timing between different hands four, which is something to watch out for around progressions.
Think about: how long is a swing? How many beats does it take to circle left? How far do the dancers have to travel? These “smooth” figures tend to rely more on the phrasing of the music to indicate when to stop and move on to the next figure.

Percussive figures with **opposing momentum** should, ideally, happen at exactly the same time for everyone in the hall. These are the moments where the music and dancers are most in sync with each other. Sometimes they act as a kind of “reset” so that at least once in the dance, everyone should know where they are in relation to the music. If the dancers have some experience and percussive figures come at the beginning of obvious sections, then generally all the dance needs to keep going is a steady beat. The melody *can* be less important and sometimes entirely absent for several repetitions. Finally, knowing where these figures are in relation to the form of the music can help you sync up, if either you or the caller gets off.

There are some common figures that **do not** fall so neatly into these two categories.

- **Down the Hall**
  This is one of the rare figures in contra that requires dancers to stop their own forward momentum WITHOUT running into another dancers’ forward momentum. And the timing can be tricky. There are several different versions of how to turn around at the bottom of the hall and it’s often important to the progression of the dance. It takes more time to turn as a couple than it does to turn alone, and more time still if there’s some kind of cozy line, or other novel way of facing back up the hall. How do you get the dancers to stop and turn around when they need to?

- **Chain with a Courtesy Turn**
  This figure is very different depending on which role you are dancing. The ladies / robins have uninterrupted forward momentum but the gents / larks have to walk backwards (often with little relation to the phrasing of the music). Butterfly whirl is similar. **Right and left through always has a courtesy turn as well.**

- **Contra Corners**
  One of the longest figures (8 bars / 16 beats), with very different roles for the active and inactive couples. The timing can be extremely(!) vague because of all the walking and turning AND YET it always ends with a balance. How do you keep dancers engaged with the music during this complicated figure?
Balances can feel remarkably different if you’re moving your weight forward and back vs side to side. Compare most wavy line balances to petronella or square through. Look for ways to musically differentiate between these two kinds of balances.

Long lines, forward and back is one of the most visual figures; you really get the sense of dancing with the whole hall. It can be a good tempo test. If you are playing too fast, it’s likely that some dancers will be late to the start of the figure, creating a “wave” effect that’s easy to see from stage. It’s a figure where your forward momentum literally walks straight into another person’s forward momentum. BUT it’s important to remember that the moment of contact (when everyone really synchs together) is four beats in from the top of the phrase. This is somewhat similar to all the walk to a wavy line variations, except that moment of contact is on beat five (in other words, the balance at the top of the next musical phrase).

A full hey for four is about as long as we ever go in contra without touching anyone else. It’s also probably the longest amount of time you are solely responsible for your own momentum (in other words, there’s no “giving weight” in a hey). Like contra corners, a full hey very often ends with a balance, and because this figure is so long and weaving and has such vague timing, the phrasing of the music has an especially big impact on if dancers are able to arrive at that balance together. Note: the amount of time you are responsible for your own momentum is a significant difference between contra and English Country Dancing.

All the short little “mechanical” figures, things like roll away, box the gnat and California twirl, basically get dancers from one position to another position as efficiently as possible. They usually happen fast. If a dance has a “high piece count” that often means it includes a few of these short direction-changing figures, which usually means the caller has more words they need to say and the dance can feel kind of “busy.”

Petronella turns are the loudest contra figure because of the claps. And there can be anywhere from one to... four(?) of them in a row. Certainly not everyone does the claps but there’s also no point pretending they aren’t gonna happen. So how do you want to incorporate that into the sound of your band? It’s also good to remember that Rory O’More, box circulate and square through all have basically the same rhythm, but without the claps.

Give and Take - I have no idea WTF to do with this figure. Good luck.
DANCES

Here are some common kinds of dances that you'll encounter at most events. Consider referencing this list as you build your dance music repertoire / setlist.

- **“Bouncy” As and “Smooth” Bs (or vice versa)**
  All the percussive figures happen in one half of the dance, which means the As and Bs are quite distinct from each other.

- **Mostly Symmetrical Dances**
  The As and Bs have very similar and/or repeating figures (can be confusing for dancers).

- **Mid-phrase Percussive Dances**
  Multiple balances and/or other percussive figures that don’t (only) happen at the top of the As and Bs. This can also include long lines and walk to a wave.

- **Very Smooth but Grounded**
  Long sections of flowing, forward motion figures but still with at least one balance somewhere, to keep the dance together.

- **Very Very Smooth and Not Grounded**
  Entirely forward motion figures with NO balances or other percussive figures. Sometimes gets described as “Englishy” if there’s a lot of weaving (heys) and eye-contact (right shoulder round, Mad Robin).

- **Boring (aka Repertoire) Dances**
  Simple figures, low piece count, obvious progression. These are usually the safest dances for bold or complex musical arrangements.

- **Sneaky Squares**
  Often in four-face-four configuration. Usually fairly fast (or *feels* fast) and including some kind of pull-by figure, grand chain, square through and/or stars.

- **Lots o’ Friendly Faces**
  These dances have a mixer-like feel because you interact with so many different people. Examples: big ovals, traveling up and down the line, contra corners. Sometimes also includes promenades, down the hall and dances with shadows.
A good general rule is that the more different faces a dancer encounters, the more distracted they will be. *Interacting with new faces takes a lot of attention.* So a dance with a shadow may take a little more effort to get a specific response out of the dancers. Or it may need a slower build. Dances with lots of faces, like double progressions, traveling up and down along the line, or any of the big oval figures, are very difficult to manipulate because dancers usually don’t have enough attention left for big dynamics or intricate arrangements.

**PROGRAMMING and PERFORMING**

Here are a few thoughts on building a set list around contra choreography.

- Look for ways to match common figure patterns with different kinds of music. This will vary a lot depending on your band; the instrumentation, genre(s) you play, general aesthetic, ability and experience level of the musicians, etc. But for instance, try to put together two or three different sets with contrasting moods that all emphasize percussive moment on B1.
- Have a couple sets with big musical differences between the As and Bs. This could be a key modulation, major vs minor, low vs high melody, notey vs sparse.
- Pay attention to the phrasing of the music. Does your tune have a lot of sixteenth notes? Can you easily hum it? Does it have any specific syncopation? Remember, *how dancers interpret the phrasing often has more to do with the rhythm section* than the actual melody. More on phrasing coming up.
- If you have an arrangement for a tune that you are excited about, consider playing a simple generic tune first. This gives the dancers a chance to learn the figures before they need to pay attention to the music. The more complicated the choreography is, the more the caller will need to be on the mic and the harder it will be for dancers to connect with the music.

Communication on stage at a contra dance can be challenging. Consider scripting out a musical arrangement that lasts two, three, or more repetitions of the dance. Put whatever variations you come up with in a specific order and rehearse it ahead of time. Then on stage, all you need to communicate is WHEN TO START your arrangement and it will trigger all the pieces in order (rather than shouting them out, one at a time). This is especially useful for larger bands. Having both loose, spontaneous playing AND tight, scripted moments is a great way to connect with dancers and takes your sound to another level.
Most tunes we play for contra dancing are 32 bars (64 beats) long and have a repeated A section and a repeated B section. You can sometimes play three-part tunes as well if you’re able to fit them into the same number of bars (for example, ABCC or AABC). A good way of building tension and playing with dynamics is to triple one of the sections of the tune. For instance, AABB - BBBB will get you back to the A section at the top of the dance. It’s important to know what the first figure is (or where an obvious percussive figure comes in the form), in case you get off.

**Make the most of your instrumentation!** How many octaves do you have to work with? How many layers of rhythmic phrasing are accessible? What are your options for harmonies? Look for ways to introduce (and re-introduce, and re-re-introduce) elements gradually. What’s your band’s slowest possible build? Or: what’s your biggest, loudest single moment? Remember repetition = recognition and that’s another important aspect of connecting with dancers. Give them clues where you’re going and be sure to take them all the way there. If you work out an exciting piece of arranged music, consider playing it once about half-way through the dance and again at the end. It’s hard to overstate how distracted dancers can be and the more you break things down, spread them out and repeat them, the better you’ll be able to control dancers’ attention and the overall energy in the hall.

**TEMPOS AND PHRASING**

**Tempos** for contra dancing are more sensitive and subjective than you might expect. Watch the dancers carefully! Callers will often have a good sense for how dancers are handling a particular tempo and it’s important to check in with them on that. Experienced dancers in a crowded hall may want faster tempos because there’s not as much physical space / distance they have to cover. Inexperienced dancers may also need faster tempos because they don’t know how to time the choreography with the music and rush on to the next figure as soon as they can. Some choreography needs to feel exciting but can’t actually go very fast. Some choreography needs to feel spacious but can’t go too slow. Put some dedicated practice time into being able to adjust tempos while playing. There are also certain figures that accomodate tempo changes better than others: long lines and down the hall are especially good for this.

The vocabulary we use to talk about **phrasing** can be confusing. The best way to think about this is: **how big a chunk of music do the dancers recognize at a time?** Dancers may need help breaking down long phrases of melody into smaller chunks that correspond more closely with the length of the figures in the choreography. They may
also need help keeping time (with shorter phrases of music) during long periods of forward momentum figures. **Layering** different kinds of rhythmic phrasing is a very good way to connect with dancers. Think about the elements of a basic drum kit: kick drum, snare, high-hat, shaker / tambourine, etc. Each piece may be playing a different rhythm but they all fit together and relate to each other. How can you include different kinds of rhythmic phrasing in your playing and arrangements?

*Try this as an exercise:* start with a tune that’s mostly solid running sixteenth notes, no obvious chord changes or accidentals, strictly the melody with no accompaniment. This is an extremely long phrase of music and dancers may find it challenging. Now add in down beats, first just on A1 and B1. Then add in A2 and B2. Then between A1 and A2, B1 and B2. Keep dividing the phrase into smaller pieces and notice how that affects the way you (and the dancers) relate to the melody. What happens if you sustain those downbeats vs playing them as sharp staccato hits? How about adding chord substitutions? What other variations can you come up with?

Remember in contra choreography, there is very little actual footwork. Dancers are almost always walking forward with their feet falling on downbeats. Sometimes you’ll need to double-down and emphasize those downbeats to keep the dancers moving together. But other times they will have no problem putting their feet down and instead, may need the music to emphasize the offbeats to get them to pick their feet up! The offbeat falls between whatever downbeats you are playing. How you treat those spaces will have a huge(!) effect on the feel of the dance. Note: simple syncopation in the rhythm section may get dancers footsteps to fall in musical “spaces” that aren’t occupied by big bass notes. This is an exciting way to include the sound of people dancing in the music that you’re playing; another rhythmic layer!

**Phrasing also has a big impact on how dancers relate to the tempo.** The more often dancers hear a downbeat (in other words, the shorter the primary musical phrase) the faster it feels, even if the tempo itself remains the same. Music with long phrases and/or simple syncopation in the rhythm section may feel relatively slower. Pay especially close attention to this whenever you’re playing music that IS NOT phrased as a reel with sixteenth notes in 4/4. For example: jigs, marches, rags, swing tunes, etc.

Other things that can affect tempo and phrasing: quality of the floor (sticky vs slippery), sound system and noise level (how well dancers can hear the music / caller), temperature and humidity (super important), size of the room and lighting (gym vs dance hall). **Learn to adjust!**
Note: you may find callers occasionally ask for a “well-phrased” tune. This usually means they are looking for a tune that’s easy to hear in four-beat phrases, with relatively strong emphasis on the offbeat. Avoid tunes with solid running sixteenth note melodies, heavy syncopation or long chord drones.

Most dances have a mix of forward momentum and percussive figures. The music (phrasing) you choose will emphasize different parts of the dance. It’s possible to change that emphasis mid-dance! For instance, starting with a smooth jig to emphasize a full hey for four, followed by a driving mid-tempo reel to emphasize the balance at the end of that hey.

WORKING WITH CALLERS

Matching up your repertoire with the callers’ is one of the most unique aspects of playing for contra dancing. Both roles are essentially equally important to the experience of the dancers but there is a lot of nuance around who is responsible for what, when. Generally, the caller decides which dances to call and roughly how long they run. This means they are also shaping the dynamics of the whole program. Callers will often pick which dance comes next based on a combination of teaching strategy (for instance, introducing figures in a particular order) and their sense of pacing for the overall energy / intensity arc.

Many callers will use adjectives to describe a particular kind of music they’re looking for, to pair with the dance they’ve picked. A few common ones are: Bouncy, Smooth, Groovy / Slinky, Driving, Goofy / Party. Some of these descriptions can overlap pretty broadly and the better you understand how the choreography of the dance actually works, the more useful they will be. Don’t be afraid to ask the caller a couple quick questions before they start the walk through. Where are the balances? What’s the progression like? Is there a particularly important / challenging figure in this dance? Try to get on the same page as the caller about where you are in their overall program. Is this dance “up, down or somewhere in-between?” If you’re having a hard time deciding on the music, sometimes it’s helpful to know what the next dance will look like. For instance, maybe THIS dance works equally well with either smooth jigs or driving reels but the NEXT dance is definitely meant to be paired with smooth jigs.

It’s good to have a quick conversation with the caller ahead of time, so you get an idea of what to expect from each other. Have a brief description of your band thought out. Do you primarily play a specific genre? Do you usually play more than one tune per dance?
Talk about beginnings and endings. Who on stage does the caller primarily need to communicate with? You might want to know roughly how long the caller likes to run dances, what hand symbols they use and if they are planning on doing any squares or mixers, etc.

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

Usually, the band and caller work most closely together around the beginning and end of the dance. The caller is looking for four clear downbeats (aka “four potatoes” for some reason) to mark the beginning of the dance. It is possible to play a longer introduction, as long as the caller knows to wait for four, very clear and emphasized downbeats.

Another fun thing to work out is a rolling start. This is when the band begins playing a simple rhythmic groove during the walkthrough and continues straight into the start of the dance without a break in the music. There are a few important things to know about rolling starts.

- Talk to the caller and ask if this dance is a good fit for a rolling start. If the choreography takes a lot of explanation, it may be too distracting.
- Rolling starts work best with dances that have a clear percussive moment on A1. Remember the walkthrough itself may not line up with the music so it's your responsibility to recognize the first figure of the dance.
- Keep your playing very tight, sparse and rhythmic with basically no melody. You want a good solid groove to get people moving but don't do anything to distract from the caller. Consider keeping the melody out for the first time through the dance, just to make sure you are all on the same page. Then emphasize those four clear downbeats right before A1.

Callers will often signal the end of the dance by counting down a particular number of times through; usually three but sometimes two or four. This is a really important part of the band / caller collaboration! There is an expectation that the dance ends with the top couple being active (rather than waiting out) and that’s usually how callers decide how many more times through to run a dance. Having a solid musical arrangement for the end of a dance is another good way to connect with dancers. Consider making ending arrangements that last two repetitions. That means when the caller gives you a signal for three more times, you have one full time through to prepare and communicate with each other before your scripted ending arrangement.
I hope this contra choreography primer gives you some things to think about next time you're playing a dance. It is an amazing experience to see a hall full of dancers moving and connecting to live music! The better you understand how the figures work, the more you'll be able to fine-tune your repertoire to get the biggest response out of the dancers. Playing for contra dancing may be a bit quirky, but it's still worth doing well. One last bit of advice (for musicians, callers AND dancers): try to be as flexible, respectful and enthusiastic as possible!

If you have any questions or comments please feel free to contact me. Would you like to take a deeper dive on any of these concepts? I offer both private lessons for individuals and workshops / coaching sessions for groups and bands. You may also be interested in the tune book *Long Flight Home: original tunes by Andrew & Noah VanNorstrand* which is available for purchase online. Thanks for reading and good luck!

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**ANDREW VANNORSTRAND** is a musician, singer-songwriter and producer based in Cazenovia, NY. He has performed on festival stages, concert halls, dance floors and living rooms all over North America and beyond. For eighteen years he played fiddle and guitar in the popular and influential dance band GREAT BEAR with his brother Noah VanNorstrand and mother Kim “Mama Bear” Yerton. He currently performs with acoustic power-trio THE FAUX PAWS and bi-coastal folk quartet WAKE UP ROBIN. His debut solo album *That We Could Find A Way To Be* was released in September 2019.

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