

Programming an Evening

The three mandatory rules for programming (Larry Edelman);

1. What can they do?
2. What do they want to do?
3. What do you want to do?

These are followed in order – in particular, if you ever place No. 3 ahead of 2 or 1, you're asking for trouble.

Typically a caller budgets 15 minutes for each contra, which includes set formation, walkthrough, and dance. For a typical 3 hour dance this will result in 11 dances and a 15 minute break. At Duane Hall, the need to clear the hall by 11 p.m. reduces the typical evening there to 9 or 10 dances.

Most contra dances at Duane and elsewhere are made up of experienced dancers with anywhere from 5% to 25% beginners and developing dancers mixed in. For such audiences the first 2 or 3 dances are primarily aimed at making the newcomers feel comfortable with set dances in general and contras in particular. Thereafter the variety and difficulty of the dances will increase up to the limits of the audience's ability, normally reaching a peak or two in difficulty around the middle of the evening. Near the end of an evening, as some dancers tire either mentally or physically, the dances trend back to more simpler ones in an effort to let the dancers just dance to music.

Below are two sample programs, complete with typical dances taken from the CD*NY contra repertoire. The first is a traditional mix of contras and non-contras. Such a program was typical as recently as 20 years ago, when the influence of callers such as Ralph Page, Ted Sannella, and Tony Parkes was greatest. The basic idea was to introduce contras to those who didn't know them, while maintaining as broad an approach to country dancing as possible. Such programs are still commonplace in many rural communities, especially in New England.

Sample Program: Traditional Mix

1. Easy contra – Simplicity Swing
 2. Intermediate contra – Frederick Contra
 3. Circle Mixer – Love and Kisses (1)
 4. Intermediate contra – Centrifugal Hey
 5. Set of 2 squares (2)
 6. Intermediate contra – Weeks on the Road
- Break
7. Chestnut – Chorus Jig (3)
 8. Experienced Contra – 3, 33-33
 9. Non-contra – triplet, square, 4 x 4, etc.
 10. Intermediate contra – Good Friday

11. Easy contra – Hay in the Barn

(1) – Why not start with a mixer? The idea behind a mixer is to introduce new dancers to the experienced ones. Not everyone, new or experienced, is sure to be there at the start of an evening. A mixer placed second or third will more effectively introduce everyone. Mixers placed later than that don't as much impact, as most everyone has crossed paths by then, and a mixer will be viewed as too simple by the experienced dancers.

(2) – Why two squares instead of one? The main reason is that set formation and teaching the unique features of squares takes a fair amount of time, and after investing that time callers want to make use of it by calling two squares in a row. The disadvantage of this is those who are sitting out will sit out longer. This tradition is maintained in New England, but in other areas of the country single squares are more common.

(3) – A chestnut is best right after the break if there are normal length sets. Dances with active and inactive roles must be run longer to give everyone a fair chance at being active, and an extra-long dance is best appreciated after everyone (dancers and band) has had a break.

Next is an all-contra program, which is likely to be called by most callers at CD*NY and other urban contra dances. The shift from a traditional mix to all-contras has accelerated in the past 15-20 years. This is a combination of new contra choreography and the appreciation of that choreography by modern dancers. Dancers realized that the highly-active, maximum-swing-count contras are not just a lot of fun, but a convenient form of aerobic exercise. In many communities callers are now asked only to call contras, as dancers shun squares and circle mixers as not being active enough. These programs are thus more accessible to newer dancers and can explore contra choreography in more depth, but lack the breadth of a traditional program.

Sample Program: Modern Contras

1. Easy contra – Nice Combination
 2. Intermediate contra – Al's Safeway Produce
 3. Intermediate contra – Delphiniums and Daises
 4. Intermediate contra – Zombies of Sugar Hill
 5. Experienced Contra – Maliza's Magical Mystery Motion
 6. Intermediate contra – Marian's Delight
- Break
7. Contra medley – Heartbeat Contra/The Baby Rose/Centrifugal Hey
 8. Experienced Contra – Turning in Turn
 9. Intermediate contra – Poetry in Motion
 10. Intermediate contra – Mary Cay's Reel
 11. Easy contra – Awesome Double Progression Dance

