

Contraculture: An Introduction to Contradancing

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Introduction

These notes are intended for the analytical crowd. I believe that the best way to learn any type of dance is to just do it; observe and imitate those around you, let the music wash over you, let yourself go, and don't be afraid to goof up. Don't dissect it too much.

However, this learning style is difficult for many of us. Sometimes the educational emphasis on honing our logical, analytical, and verbal reasoning skills comes at the expense of developing our other intelligences. I hope that by explaining some of the technical aspects and social conventions of contra dance, these notes will help analytical types more quickly reach the comfort level necessary to abandon themselves to the power of the music and the flow of the dance—that's where the real learning and enjoyment begin

Lining Up For A Contra

Most contra dances take place in church halls, though school gymnasiums are also a popular location. As a rule, contra dances are accompanied by live music. The rooms tend to be rectangular, and the band and the caller position themselves at one end, usually up on a stage.

The dance is led by a caller. Often this is a person who has driven long hours to spend the evening creating the conditions for you to be able to enjoy yourself. He or she programs the evening's dances, may ask the band to play a specific tune or type of music for each dance, teaches and reviews the figures which make up each dance,

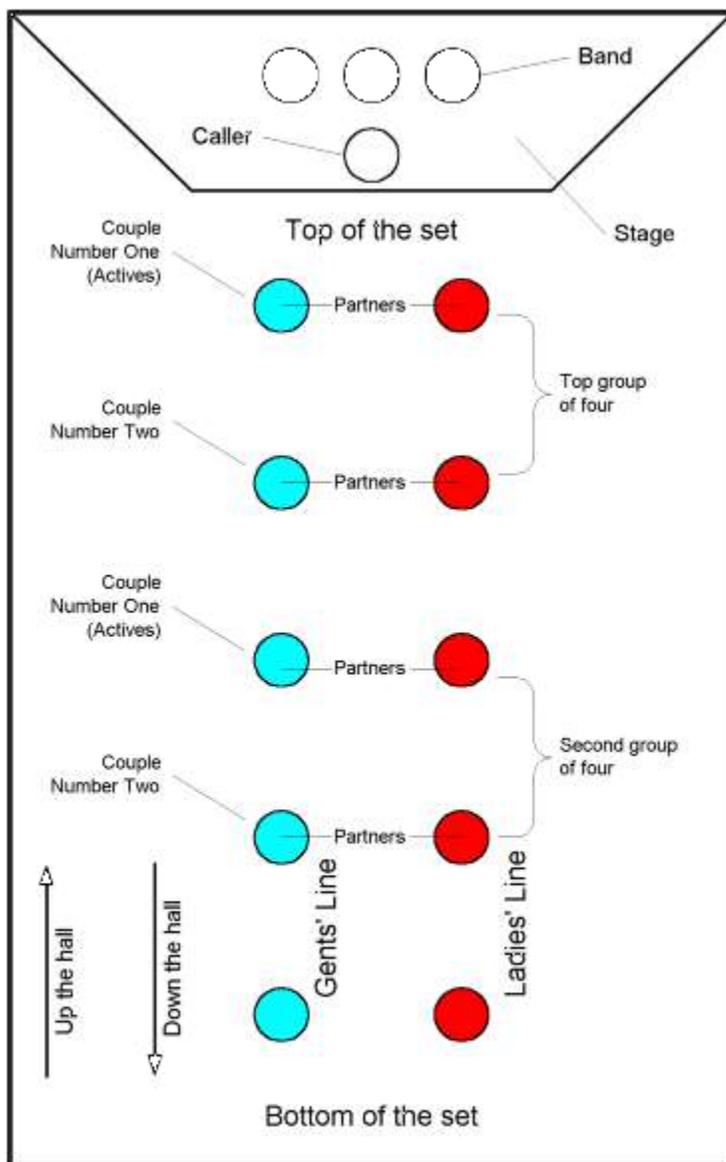
encourages those who are "hanging back" to give it a try, and accepts the responsibility if anything goes wrong. Usually, the caller gets paid very little for this privilege!

When the dance starts, the caller will ask you to find a partner and line up for a contra. Contra dancers don't follow the old custom of expecting a woman to wait to be asked by a man. Women and men both do the asking. After each dance, you will be asked to find a new partner. This exchange of partners is one of the reasons you don't have to bring a partner with you to a contra dance (although it is just as wonderful if you do); you will get to dance with many friendly people over the course of the evening.

There are usually approximately equal numbers of men and women at a contra dance. When that's not the case, women will dance the man's part if all the men are already "taken", and men will dance the woman's part in the opposite situation. In fact, many experienced dancers consider it an interesting challenge to dance the "opposite" part-the whole idea is to get out on the floor and have a good time!

Once you've found a partner, line up across from him or her so that all the gents form a long line down the length of the hall and all the ladies form another line across from them. (See the diagram.) Looking towards the stage, the men's line always forms to the left of the women's. The two lines together are known as a set.

The top of the set is the end closest to the band. The other end is called the bottom of the set. Contra etiquette dictates that should you wish to join the set after the lines have begun to form, you and your partner join in at the bottom of the set. Once the set stretches down to the end of the hall, couples will start to form another set, parallel to the first. As many sets form as are necessary to accommodate all the dancers.



Once everybody is lined up, the caller will ask you to "take hands four from the top". ("Hands four", for short). The two couples at the top of the set join hands to make a small circle of four people. Then the next four in the line do the same, and so on, all the way to the bottom of the set. If there is an odd number of couples in the set, one couple will be left standing alone at the bottom of the set. Not to worry. They will be included after one turn of the dance.

Within each little group of four, the couple closest to the music are known as the ones or the active couple. The others are called couple number two. Your partner will be across the set from you. The other person of the opposite sex in the little group of four (the one who is not your partner) is known as your neighbor or your opposite.

The configuration of partners shown in the diagram (with the gents in one line and the ladies in the other) is known as proper formation. If the dance is to be an improper dance (most modern contras are), the caller will now ask the number one couples to "cross over". This means that the gent and the lady trade places with each other, so that the genders now alternate down the length of each line.

At this point, the caller begins the walkthrough, teaching the dancers the sequence of moves or figures that make up the dance. Usually, the walkthrough is done without music. Once the walkthrough is finished and the band begins to play, the caller will continue to prompt the dancers for as long as necessary, reminding them of the next figure just before they have to dance it.

Putting It to Music

Typically, the band plays either jigs or reels, two traditional types of dance music. Both consist of musical phrases which are eight beats long and organized in a fixed structure. The footwork in contra dancing consists of walking in time with the music: one step for each beat. As far as your feet are aware, they could simply be walking down the street (at a fairly good clip!).

As you're walking about, you interact with your partner and one other couple. The four of you execute a number of "figures" (for example, join hands and circle around, walk down the hall in a line of four, swing your partner) which make up the dance. Most of these figures take eight walking steps to complete—in other words, one musical phrase. Although some people find it helpful to count out the beats initially, your goal should be to tune in to the musical

phrase and simply "feel" when one phrase ends and the next begins. It is important in contra dancing to try to finish each figure on time and be ready to begin the next as soon as the new musical phrase starts.

After you and your partner have finished dancing the sequence of figures with the other couple, you will find that you have progressed one position along the line. This will put you next to a new couple. The tune starts over, and you dance the same sequence of figures with this new couple. If you start the dance as a number one couple, each turn of the dance will take you closer to the bottom of the set (away from the music). Similarly, couple number twos are progressing up the set (towards the music). Eventually, you and your partner will dance with every other couple in the set.

Once you arrive at the end of the set, you wait out one turn of the dance before rejoining it. If you were a number one couple, you become a number two couple when you rejoin the dance. In like fashion, if you were a number two couple you wait out your turn at the top of the set and become "actives" when you rejoin.

If it is an improper dance (one in which the active gent and lady switched places with each other before the dance began), you must remember to switch sides with your partner before heading back into the dance.

At the end of each dance, people thank their partner and show their appreciation for the caller, the band and the other dancers in their set with a round of applause. The caller will then say: "Find yourself a new partner and line up for a contra." (Or whatever formation s/he has chosen for the next dance. Squares and circle dances are also common at country dances.) At this point, everyone mills around the hall and finds someone else to dance with.

If you're just starting to dance contras, don't fall into the trap of dancing only with other beginners. This is tempting, especially if you came to the dance with a friend who is also a beginner. You will learn much more quickly, and the dance will run more smoothly, if you find someone who knows what they are doing. Most experienced dancers are happy to dance with newcomers.

Eye Contact and Giving Weight

Giving weight is a technique that will make your dancing, and your partners', a lot easier and more enjoyable. The idea is to provide a bit of resistance to the person or people you're dancing with, each pulling against the other in a balanced fashion. Not only does this reinforce the sense of "connectedness" between you, it allows your bodies act as a single unit so that you can move together much more efficiently. Think of how as a kid you might have run around a metal pole stuck upright in the ground. It would take far more energy to run around it without touching it than it would if you stretched out your arm and grabbed hold of it. Same principle applies. When you come across someone in the line who hasn't yet learned to give weight, it bogs you right down and makes you feel like you're dancing with a wet noodle!

One the other hand, you have to be considerate and controlled when giving weight, especially if you are heavier or stronger than the person you are dancing with; the last thing you want to do is throw them off balance or make them struggle to keep their equilibrium. In particular, most of your weight should be centered over your own feet-if you lean back too far and give too much weight, you will feel immensely heavy to your partner. Your objective is to give just enough weight so as to stabilize your movement as a couple.

One of the conventions which makes contra dance so exciting is eye contact. People look into the eyes of whomever they are dancing with. Many people find this discomforting at first. However, once newcomers become aware that it is dancefloor convention, a way to

acknowledge and connect with your partner which reinforces the physical connection of joined hands, they usually begin to enjoy it.

Besides being fun, there are those who claim that maintaining eye contact will also reduce the dizziness which some people experience as a result of the swinging and spinning which goes on. Dizziness is a common complaint among beginning contra dancers. Within the contra dance community, advice and remedies for dizziness abound. I have heard a number of people say that they eventually just got over it-after dancing for a few months, they simply stopped getting dizzy.

Common Figures

Here are a dozen moves that make up ninety percent of every contra dance. It is next to impossible to give a simple explanation of dance figures using words. Verbal descriptions end up making them sound much more complicated than they really are. The best way to learn them is to observe and imitate. In fact, the caller will often ask one group of four dancers to demonstrate a figure to the others during the walkthrough. Probably the only way to make my descriptions effective would be to include a short video clip of each figure. Perhaps a future project!

So instead of trying to explain these figures in detail, I'll just give a few tips. They will be more meaningful after you've been to your first Contra.

Swing

Master the swing and you're guaranteed to have fun at a Contra. Face each other in "ballroom" position (such as for a waltz or a polka). Walk around each other. Walk forwards, not backwards or sideways. If you're using a "buzz step", don't bob up and down-try to keep it smooth and level. Always end by opening up so that the

woman is on the man's right. This happens automatically if you let go of your extended hand.

Balance

Often the prelude to a swing. Takes four beats. Face each other and join both hands. (Men palms up, ladies palms down.) Step towards each other with your right foot, step away from each other with the left foot. Pull each other gently as you step towards, push gently as you step away.

Gypsy

Think swing without physical contact, arms by your sides. Walk around each other while maintaining eye contact over your right shoulder. Can be very exciting. Usually "melts down" into a swing.

Allemande

Start an allemande right by gripping each other's right hand. Use a thumbs up, arm wrestler's grip rather than a handshake grip. Elbows bent. Make a good strong connection. Both walk forward around each other. Allemande left, use left hands.

Dos-à-dos (Do-si-do)

Arms relaxed, down by your sides. Walk towards each other passing right shoulders. Back up (walk backwards-don't turn around) passing each other by the left shoulder so that you get back to where you started. Some of the more experienced dancers can't even do a do-si-do anymore without spinning as they go. If you're one of the spinners, a really nice touch is to make eye contact with the other each time you come around.

Long Lines Forward and Back

Join hands with the people next to you on your side of the set. Puts you in a long line running the length of the hall. One long line faces the other across the set. The two lines walk towards each other for a count of four and then back away from each other for four. Count: "Right, two, three, touch. Back, two, three, touch." The challenge is for everyone to do it at exactly the same time, so the line doesn't get wavy.

Circle Left / Circle Right

Often done with the other couple in your group of four. Join hands in a circle. In most situations when gents and ladies hold hands, men have their palms facing up, ladies facing down. You're looking at the back of the person next to you and walking forward. (Not facing the center of the circle and stepping sideways.) Eight steps gets you once around the circle to the spot you started from.

Star Left / Star Right

Group of four standing in a circle. For a right hand star, extend your right arm into the centre of the circle. This pivots you slightly so that you are looking at the back of one of the people next to you. Gently grasp that person's wrist. The person behind you will grasp your wrist. Walk forward, circling around your joined hands. Eight beats to get once around and back to where you started. In some dances, it is more appropriate to use a handshake grip with the person opposite you to form the star, rather than the wrist grip. The caller will tell you when that's the case.

Hey

My favorite figure. Wonderful flowing motion. Sixteen beats for a full hey. Several variations in starting formation, but typically one couple facing another across the set, ladies on the gents' right. Ladies start first, followed almost immediately by the gents. From

where you are, walk across to the other side of the set, make a nice loop when you get there and walk back to the side where you started. You end up in exactly the same spot you started from. The fun part is that everybody does this at the same time, crossing paths in a weaving motion. Rules of the road: pass right shoulders in the center of the set with the person of the same gender; pass left shoulders with the people of the opposite gender on the side of the set.

Down The Centre Four In Line

All couples face down the hall, away from the music. Twos step apart from each other and ones step in-between the twos. This makes short lines (four people in each) facing down the hall. Sixteen beats to walk down, turn around and come back up. Two ways to turn around at the bottom (depending on the dance); either turn alone (simply drop hands and turn on the spot) or turn as a couple (center couple drops hands but keeps hold of the person on the end of the line; these two wheel around so that they're facing back up the hall; this has the effect of putting the number twos together in the middle of the line of four, the ones at either end). Point of courtesy: when you "turn alone", if you're in the middle of the line of four, make sure you turn towards the person on the end (don't turn your back on them). That way everybody has someone to smile at as they turn.

Ladies' Chain / Courtesy Turn

Two couples facing each other across the set, ladies on the gents' right. Ladies extend right hands to each other, pull by each other, and give their left hand to the gent who is waiting for them on the other side of the set. Ladies immediately place their right hand behind their right hip, palm facing out. Gents: take the left hand of the lady who is coming across to you in your left hand. Place your right hand on her right, which by this time is resting on her back, and wheel her around; gent walks backwards, lady continues to walk forward, until you're both facing back across the set.

Promenade

Lady on the gent's right, as if you had just opened up from a swing. Left hand joined to left hand, right hand joined to right. In southern Ontario, both of the lady's hands are up in the air for a promenade; gent's right arm is behind lady and over her right shoulder to take her hand. In places I've been to in the States, the lady's right hand is on the small of her back and the gent holds onto it there.