

A Community Dance Callers Workshop - Preparing:

Learn a diverse set of dances including singing games, nonmixing and mixing partner circle dances, single progression longways dances, dances that include cast off under the arches, scatter mixers, very simple contras, squares and Sicilian circle dances

Practice teaching a walkthrough as well as calling. Practice the calling you'd do at the beginning of a dance, when you prompt all the way through, as well as the calling you'll do later in the dance, with just occasional reminders. Practice with music to get your timing down.

Night of the Dance:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early to do sound check and meet musicians.

The Musicians:

Prepare a program for the evening. Include plenty of optional dances and singing games on your list. Be prepared to change your mind throughout the dance ('Oh, they need something a little more sophisticated now.' or 'They need a dance to calm them down', or 'They need a really simple, engaging dance right now' or 'Whoops, times almost up, time to cut to the last dance' etc.)

'Bring written music (or even better, send it ahead to the musicians) for any dances you might do that require specific tunes rather than generic jigs and reels, such as 'Chimes of Dunkirk', 'Sasha', 'Alabama Gal', 'Black Joke', 'Heel & Toe Polka', and 'Galopede'. Practice all of those tunes before the dance with the musicians.

Write down or learn their names so you can introduce the band to the dancers.

Decide on how you will communicate with them during the dances. E.G. *Is this the last tune in your medley?* or *Three more times through the dance.*

Let them know what kind of dance you are doing, what kind of music you want, before you start doing the walkthrough (especially if you have not prepared a dance set list for the musicians).

Give them a clear signal when you want them to start playing.

Let musicians know when to go out. You can start warning them 3-4 times before the dance is over. I typically will put four fingers up to musicians on the last B of the 5th to the last time through the dance. I continue to follow this pattern with 3, 2, and then one finger on the last B of the 4th, 3rd and 2nd to last time through.

Once the dance is going OK, and the dancers can dance the sequence on their own without your prompting, leave the stage and check the sound, particularly if there is not a designated and dedicated sound person. I use a wireless headset microphone, so I can keep calling the dance while I go down on the floor and check the sound.

Make sure the musicians are happy with the sound; particularly with their monitor mixes.

Introduce the musicians at least twice in the evening. Lead the dancers in enthusiastic appreciation for the music throughout the dance.

Advertise the musician's wares (CD's and books for sale).

Thank the dance organizers, workers and sponsors.

The Dancers

Make the dancers feel welcome. Often at a community dance, virtually everyone is a beginner. One way to avoid adults standing and watching their children dance is, early in the dance, to ask the children to each ask their mother, or their father, or any other adult, to be their partner. For some dances it is helpful to make a rule that anyone, say, in 2nd grade or under, must have for a partner someone who is 3rd grade or older.

Keep dancers successful and safe. It is fine to announce rules such as no running, or to announce that someone needs to remove a wandering toddler from the dancing area.

Take responsibility when dancers get confused: *"I'm sorry, I did not teach that very clearly..."*

Take responsibility for making the evening successful and fun for everyone by, for example, deciding and announcing how many sets there are, and asking dancers to make a new set

when sets get too crowded, having dancers spread sets out, both to the sides and up and down, and asking dancers from a long set to join a set that is too short.

If you are calling a square dance, or a dance that needs, say, 6 couple longways sets, you may need to go down onto the floor to help folks get the right number of folks into their sets, or to take a set that is made up of all young children, and trade some of those young couples for a couple of adult couples from another set, so that there is a better chance that everyone will be successful.

The Walk Through

At the beginning of the dance explain EVERYTHING to the beginners in a clear and concise way.

Use language throughout the evening that beginners will understand, even as you teach them the dance vocabulary. For example: ‘Dosido, walk around you partner without touching, and end up right where you started.’

Teach each new figure from scratch. When necessary have a small group of dancers demonstrate a tricky new figure.

Teach no more than one new figure in each dance.

Practice your walk through teaching.

Scan the whole floor when doing the walkthrough to make sure everyone is with you.

Repeat the walkthrough as necessary.

Calling the Dance

Remind dancers of 1st figure before the music starts.

Use clear diction and don’t talk too fast.

Call rhythmically to help dancers with phrasing.

End each prompt one beat before figure starts.

Practice calling (drill and drill) both “thick” (calling all the way through at the beginning) and “thin” (light, occasional prompting in the middle of a dance).

Keep an eye on dancers and throw in extra prompts as needed throughout the dance.

Peter Amidon

peter@amidonmusic.com • www.amidonmusic.com