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Round & Contra Intro

Since I don't cue Rounds – any regular Western Style dance is almost always comprised of a caller and cuer – my experience is on the contra and folk dancing side. Folk and contra provide a different dancing experience that most people, once given the opportunity to try and test, will find a new avenue of fun dancing calls that they can easily identify with. Experience has shown that there will always be square dance purists that feel that anything other than squares and rounds at our dances just doesn't belong. However, people are easily won over with quickly learned dances that they might never see again – but the experience made them smile and the variety might just stir their interest in something new.

For me, I look at the use of folk and contra dancing three different ways as I call three types of square and folk dances:

1. The first is the standard Western Style dance with myself and a cuer. Only if the people who are paying me are OK with the idea of trying a contra or folk dance during the course of the evening will I do this. I will only do one dance and will pick something quick and easy (also fun). My choices here would be: Kiwi Ring (a great folk dance that is music specific and easy to learn with excellent phrasing and steps). Sicilian Circles (mini squares in a wagon wheel arrangement). These are easy to learn and can be made up on the fly using calls we already know. OXO Reel (an easy proper contra adaptable to decently phrased SD music.
2. The Class/New Dancer dance. When contacted about a class dance, I will always request that I do the dance without a cuer. The reasons are simple. When new dancers go to a class dance they pay for a whole evening of dancing, but only get to dance half the night if a cuer is present. I've always felt that this shortchanges the new dancers. I propose the square and folk idea explaining that all new and experienced dancers can enjoy a more inclusive night without sitting out for rounds. I use a format of two SD tips and one folk/contra set. This provides an evening of variety and fun with an opportunity for people to sample several types of dancing again using calls

that they are already familiar with. Circle folk dances, Triples, simple proper contras are all easily used at a new dancer event.

3. The square dance party/the one nighter. Whatever you call them, they are the best opportunity to use contra and folk dancing. My dance parties are never about just square dancing. It is quite simple when a customer calls about having you call a “square dance” to sell the concept of a square and folk dance instead. As there is always something everyone likes even if they are not crazy about squares. The gloves come off at these events: squares, contras, several folk dances, maybe a line dance or two. The whole idea is variety and inclusivity. At this point to deliver an evening of just square dancing just doesn’t have the same fun quotient for me. In the years that I been using this formula, my customers have always commented positively about the difference in feel from a SD only night. The proof is always in the rebooks and happy customers.

Skills, Studies and Reminders

If all you have ever called is squares, then learning how to utilize contra and folk dances in your repertoire can be a great treat for your dancers, a break from what you have always done, and make you a better and more balanced caller. Original thought isn’t necessary because the material is out there and ready to use. A sense of timing and phrasing somewhat different from what some of us are used to with WSSD helps a lot, but passing on the fun can be more critical at times. Most contra and folk music forces you to pay attention to the phrasing anyway.

Study your material and use it in a manner that is gauged to the age, mix and abilities of the floor. Skills are not inherent; they must be developed. Find a mentor or dig in and learn it yourself.

Keep it simple and you and the dancers will be successful. Don’t over teach when walking your dancers through. Use plain english when walking the dancers through the set up. It doesn’t have to be hard as there is repetition in folk and contra, not puzzles. Look through your music for strongly phrased music that will

work for you or use the source guides for recommended music paired with specific types of dances.

My sources for folk and contra dances and music.

1. The CDP journal from Callerlab. Absolutely tons of great material written and choreographed by some very talented people. Talk to the people who staff the Beginner Dance Party leaders for advice. Their experience has always helped me.
2. Dancing for Busy People by Cal Cambell, Ken Kernen and Bob Howell. This one's my bible of folk dancing and is loaded with more dances than you can use in a lifetime (especially if you're just starting this now).
3. The Lloyd Shaw Foundation. Tons of beautiful, classic folk dance music.
4. If there available where you live, go to a contra dance for a sense of what is possible.

Adding folk and contra added a whole dimension to my abilities as a caller. I'm more marketable to a wider range of customers. Repeat bookings are easier to develop due to a more varied program and the customers appreciate the something for everyone approach. Last piece of advice: dump the corded microphone and buy a top quality wireless (not a handheld) mike. This is one of the best teaching and calling tools a caller can use. Teach from the floor, call from the floor, dance and call on the floor. This simple tool will change your life as a caller.

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