

DEVISING DANCE PROGRAMMES

by Peter Hastings

The other side of the successful dance evening is the creation of the programme that will need to be briefed. Peter Hastings, who dances, and devises programmes, in Edinburgh wrote this article for University groups in Scotland. He submitted it to Strathspey and assures us that "all rights are not reserved at all". We thank him for the opportunity to reprint his entertaining thoughts.

If you've been asked to write a dance programme - Congratulations! Many people have a legitimate interest in your programme:

The group that asked you will want a programme that attracts people to the event (for base mercenary reasons) and, maybe, the group itself (for the sheer joy of human companionship). They will probably vet the programme you devise, so be ready to be flexible.

All the dancers will want an evening's enjoyment in return for the price of a ticket.

The band will want information about any unfamiliar tunes. They may also want to offer advice about order, given that some tunes are particularly difficult to play well when the band are not yet warmed up or are really tired. They should also be able to tell you whether a given strathspey will be played as a slow air or not. Be nice to your band, the success of the evening hangs on them more than on any other single factor (including your programme).

You will want to produce a programme with some of your own favourite dances on it and sufficiently memorable that you'll be asked to do the job again (assuming you enjoyed doing it).

The Dances

Say you've been asked to do the programme because you have a wide/varied / weird repertoire. The temptation to cram a single programme with all your favourite (though obscure) dances is pretty overwhelming. If you do this, unless you're ridiculously lucky (I was) you will never be asked to do another programme.

However, unless unfamiliar dances are put on dance programmes (and danced!) both personal and group repertoires tend naturally to shrink - so a balance has to be struck. A look at previous programmes

should give you a feel for what is familiar to the group.

Dances fall into three broad categories - which dance falls in which category varies with place and time.

Not this one again - which may well be your reaction and that of your friends. However, many dancers welcome these as a guarantee of not messing it up / having a good time / a chance for a bit of fun. These dances are not danced over and over again because they're poor dances, a great many people enjoy them. Committees may question using them (since many committees have very experienced dancers on them) but can be reminded that less experienced dancers (who also pay to come) are often reassured by the presence of such dances on a programme. Experienced dancers can also use this opportunity to help a real beginner through a popular dance.

I haven't done this for a while - these are definitely part of the local repertoire (all repertoires are to some extent local) but they may not be done very often or they may just not have been done much recently. Committees and bands usually accept these without difficulty.

What? - these are pretty much unknown (except to you) and should be used sparingly. It does not matter how easy these unfamiliar dances are - people who are likely to be discouraged will not find this out. Your group may well rely on just such people to come to dances and to keep the group solvent. How many unfamiliar dances you use depends a lot on the people you expect at the dance - young/old, experienced/beginners, timorous/adventurous etc. Be ready to supply original directions for unfamiliar dances and allow time for a walk-through or two. Often you'll have to select just a few that you really want on the programme and save the others for another time (particularly if a certain

amount of restraint increases the chance of there being another time).

It also depends on what advance warning is possible - if the programme is on the original notice of the dance then people know what they're letting themselves in for. But if the paying public is getting a pig in a poke it will be your job to provide a well-known and widely acceptable pig.

Figures and Length and Type of Dances

You may well think that the strathspey allemande is an invention of the Devil and should be consigned to oblivion. It is also someone else's favourite figure. Get a good variety of figures (there are plenty to choose from) and spread them out. Try to vary the set sizes and the length of dances as well. If you can't keep a check in your head (I can't) of what figures you have on the programme - draw up a chart.

The Evening

The evening splits into four (very) roughly equal sections for the purposes of arranging what goes where:

Overture & Beginners

Folk are arriving, meeting old friends, being introduced to new people, warming up, and settling down. Some will arrive late or take time to settle. Since many dancers seem to take some time to warm up heads as well as feet, dances here can be drawn from the sack marked "Old Favourites". This way, people can get going and back into thinking about corners, reels, and all the geographical stuff without taxing themselves too much. Folk who are late or want to catch up on the gossip etc. won't miss anything they haven't done before and will surely do again.

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Act 2

Everyone is now warmed up and back in the swing of things so dances that are more demanding or less familiar can be put in here - people who don't want to do them won't anyway. For every person whose idea of a good programme is one with *some* unfamiliar dances on it there is (at least) one other whose idea of a good programme is one with *no* unfamiliar dances on it. Try keeping unusual material well separated (no one should feel they have to sit out two dances consecutively) and run up to food time with a couple of "Old Favourites". This should keep everyone on the floor all the way to the break and give those setting up the refreshments a clear run unhampered by people hanging around. The "caterers" also don't miss anything that they won't

get another opportunity to dance.

Act 3

This is very much a reprise of the earlier section - play 'em in gently after the meal (not too much pas-de-basque with a laden stomach perhaps), get everyone back in business and then put in some of the unfamiliar / interesting / challenging / different / bizarre material while brains and legs can still cope.

Finale

This is the "home stretch" - the thoroughbreds are beginning to tire but are still willing to dance till they drop. A short run of "Old Favourites" should keep them all on the floor until *Auld Lang Syne* and then they can stagger off into the

night totally shattered and telling each other what a great dance it's been. Try to get everyone up for the last few dances particularly. Try to avoid anything that demands a specific set size - the last dance should always be possible with a three couple set or whatever. No one should be excluded from the last dance because they're the extra couple left over.

Extras

Get these from the "Old Favourite" sack. They are very handy if the previous dance has gone badly. A popular extra will get folk back up and dancing if the MC is on (rather than merely at) the ball. If extras are going to be used, it pays to keep them short and maybe use two (not necessarily consecutively) if there is a gap to fill.

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