

TACTalk V. 26 No. 3 – December 2001

Dance Program Selection from the Musician's Point of View

by Andy Imbrie, pianist & member of the RSCDS San Francisco Branch

As a dancer and a musician, I have found that the type and order of dances on a program make a significant difference in the overall enjoyment and excitement level of a dance evening. I realize that there are many factors to be considered when planning a dance program, including program length, variety of figures, familiarity, and so on. I would suggest that the evening's music is no less important a consideration than this. The music for each dance should play an important role in the selection and placement of dances on a program.

Based on this premise, I have made a list of recommendations for program devisors to consider when planning a dance evening. First, however, some background:

Most dances have a suggested or signature tune that goes with the dance. The band will (almost) always use this tune for the first and last rounds of the dance and choose other similar tunes to play as the "arrangement" for the dance. Most dances can be categorized by their signature tunes as follows:

Category A Reels: musically exciting reels (e.g. *Mrs McLeod, De'il Amang the Tailors, The Montgomeries' Rant*)

Category C Reels: quarter note reels (e.g. *Bratach Bana, Let's Have a Ceilidh, Peat Fire Flame, Irish Rover*)

Category B Reels: all other reels

Category A Strathspeys: strong, driving strathspeys (e.g. *Monymusk, Balquidder Strathspey, Sauchie Haugh, Dalkeith's Strathspey*)

Category C Strathspeys: song tune or strathspeys derived from slow airs (e.g. *Miss Gibson, Sean Triubhas Willichan*)

Category B Strathspeys: all other strathspeys

Jigs can also be divided into categories, but this is less important for program planning. One other definition will be helpful: show-stopper arrangements are those designated as such by your band.

Here are some suggested guidelines for creating a program with consideration to the dance music:

- Most importantly, consult with the band about the program
- End each set with a *Category A Reel*; in addition, the very last dance should be a show-stopper reel; do not end sets with strathspeys or jigs
- The more show-stopper arrangements, the better
- Start the first set with a jig (this is always easier for the musicians to warm up with and usually easier for the dancers as well)
- It is a good idea to start the second and third sets with a jig, though it is not a problem if one of them starts with a reel, especially if it is not a driving reel; do not start sets with a strathspey.

- The entire program should be balanced in terms of the number of jigs, reels, and strathspeys; try to have one-third of the program for each; do not have more jigs than reels on a program
- Don't place two dances of the same type together unless separated by one of the intermissions
- Don't place more than one Category C Reel on the program
- Don't place more than one Category C Strathspey on the program
- If there are uneven numbers of dances in each set, the last set should be shortest; similarly, if there are shorter dances on the program (e.g. 3 times through or 4 times through dances), they work best nearer the end of the evening

I hope this set of guidelines will prove useful to the dance program devisors. Of course, nothing is set in stone, but I have found through long experience that if these guidelines are followed, a successful dance evening can almost be guaranteed.