

Factors affecting the Difficulty of a Contra

By Dottie Welch for Contralab presentation, Louisville, June 2010

Dancer Knowledge and Experience

- Mostly new dancers with no knowledge of contras or any of the calls
- Square dancers who have rarely or never danced contras
- Dancers with some previous contra dance experience
- Dancers comfortable with typical Alternate Duples
- Dancers with knowledge of Contra specific calls such as Heys/Reels and Contra Corners

Number of New Calls

- All calls described in simple English
- One call which dancers must learn to associate with a specific action (ex. Dosado)
- Two or more new calls that might be confused (ex. Ladies Chain and Right and Left Thru)

Body Flow

- Does every action flow comfortably into the next?
- Is it clear where one action stops and the next begins?
- Are there places where a dancer must adjust quickly?

Forgiving

- Is there some call or pair of calls that provide catch-up time if needed?
 - Ex. Circle Left followed by Circle Right is forgiving because the distance turned doesn't matter.
 - Star Left followed by Star Right
 - Long Lines Forward and Back
 - Long Swings are forgiving because they allow time for a late start
 - Go Down in Four, Turn Alone and come back is forgiving

Safety Net Present or Precision Required

- Does a tricky call end in an easily obtainable spot so confusion can be sorted out?
 - Ex. Hey that ends with a partner swing(Swing your partner is the classic safety net)
- Is there ample time to complete unforgiving calls?
 - Ex. Circle Left followed by Ladies Chain is unforgiving because if the Circle isn't completed the Ladies may end up on the wrong side.

Swings

- No Swings
- Swing with Partner only, incorrect ending position possible for new dancers
- Swing with Neighbor/Corner, correct ending necessary for progression
- Swing with both Partner and Neighbor resulting in a potentially dizzying dance

Factors affecting the Difficulty of a Contra (page 2)

Turns

Do all of the calls involve turns of some kind?

Are there some calls with movements forward and back or straight ahead?

Fractional turns of two or four dancers

Inherently Difficult Calls

Lots of "weaving" such as Heys and Square Thru

Lots of "turning" such as Turn Contra Corners or Reeling the Set

Progression

Obvious and simple

Ex. Top couple Sashay Down the inside to the bottom

Obvious but not simple

Ex. Virginia Reel

Sicilian Circle Pass Thru

Sicilian Circle with Weave or California Twirl

Proper Duple Progression where 1's must know who they are

Proper or Alternate Duple where reminder to refocus below is needed after each sequence

Alternate Duple with obvious progression except perhaps at the top and bottom.

Ex. Couples facing up and down Pass Thru

Alternate Duple where crossover at the ends is required

Does the dance feel different after changing at the end?

Number of Different Roles

Dancers with a special part are only those at the top

Dancers with a special part are only those at the top and bottom

Proper Duple dance where left side dancer action is different from right side dancer action

Ex. Right and Left Thru or Square Thru

Duple but no call that applies to only the #1s or the #2s except "new four"

Calls specifying Actives or Inactives do something (Or #1 and #2)

Triple with three different roles

Factors affecting the Difficulty of a Contra (page 3)

Changes of Focus

- Long Lines facing across
- Two Tidal Waves or a center Tidal Wave
- Lines of four facing down or lines of four facing up
- Groups of four facing up and down in boxes
- Promenade up and down either as a couple or single file
- Action on the diagonal
- Action with the couple below and the couple above

Separation

Actions that separate a working group and bring them back together
Can dancers find the other pair by looking for their partner?

Does the choreography tend to spread out the dancers?

Ex. Lines tend to spread out down the hall so dancers must move up.

Ex. Action tends to separate the lines so that proper timing requires inward adjustment.

Type of Contra Formation

- Proper
- Proper Duple
- Proper Triple
- Triple with actives crossed over
- Triplet
- Alternate Duple
- Alternate Duple beginning facing up and down
- Becket
- Sicilian Circle
- Concentric Circles
- Mescolanza

Prompting

- All the calls are 8 beat actions
- The music is clearly in 8 beat phrases
- The prompter always pre-cues the calls properly
- The prompter is aware of tricky spots and adds extra helpful words

Timing of the Choreography

- Is the timing comfortable?
- Is it all in 8 beat phrases?
- Is the timing different for dancers moving down from those moving up?
Example: Swing and end in lines of four facing down.