

Learning to Prompt a Contra

In order for a contra dance to provide a simple and satisfying wind-in-the-face experience, it must be prompted properly. Learning this skill will take some practice on the part of the prompter.

-- Find some music that has a 64-beat tune with clear 8-beat phrasing.

-- Tunes usually have two distinct melodies called part A and part B. Each part is 16 beats. Part A is played twice and then Part B is played twice so the sequence is AABB to make the full tune. A beat is the time a dancer uses to take one step. For the musician this "beat" may actually be several notes (often two or four for a Reel and three for a Jig).

-- If possible set the tempo of music to 116 to 120 beats per minute. Note that this is slower than typical modern square dance music.

-- Most music has some kind of introduction. The introduction may be a single chord, or 4 beats, or something more elaborate such as all of one part (16 counts). Listen to the music to identify the introduction. Then figure out when to give the first prompt so that the dancers step off on the first beat after the introduction.

-- Initially, you may find it helpful to have an assistant who counts the beats in eights. Watch the prompter's version of the cue sheet to count the "silent" beats and say the words when indicated. In the following example, the underlined syllables indicate which should be said on the beats. The rest of the syllables fit in between beats.

-- Develop awareness of the two melodies so you can sense if you are prompting the first part of the second half of the action just before the beginning of Part B in the music. You should also be starting again just before Part A begins again.

-- When you feel ready to try it with dancers, find one or more willing volunteers and a bit of dance space.

-- It may take time for the dancers to develop their awareness of the music, and to learn to complete the calls in the allotted beats.

-- Have patience, everyone will develop their timing skills and music awareness. Soon, it will all come together and feel wonderful. Most people have an instinctive sense of rhythm and will know when everything is in synchronization. This is really the heart of the dance experience.

-- There will be situations when the dancers cannot complete the dance in 64 counts. In those cases, focus on prompting for the eight beats and do the best you can to ad-lib the ending.

Cheticamp Long Potato Simple Variation

Traditional idea from *Step Lively 2 – Canadian Dance Favourites* by Marion Rose (Cheticamp is a village in the French-Canadian area of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia)

Music: Traditional French-Canadian Reels

Usage: Contra for mostly new dancers, no previous dance experience needed

Difficulty: Forgiving and easy -- simple setup, simple progression, forgiving Circle and Arm Turn actions that go one way and then return so distance doesn't matter. Calls are described in simple English. Security is provided by the presence of the same dancers on each side all the time except when at one end.

Formation: Proper Contra Lines of Partners Facing (no gender differentiation)

Prompts: (The numbers are the 64 beats of music and indicate when to prompt.)

Intro or

57-64 - - - -, - - Circle Left;

01-08 - - - -, - - - -;

09-16 - - - -, - - Circle Right;

17-24 - - - -, - - - -;

25-32 - - - -, - - Turn Partner Left;

33-40 - - - -, - - Turn Partner Right;

41-48 - - - -, - - Forward and Back; (with a "Whoop")

49-56 - - - -, Top Two Down the Center (sashay, gallop or strut).

Description:

01-16 All dancers make one long, skinny circle and Circle Left for 16 beats.

17-32 All dancers Circle Right for 16 beats back to their starting location.

33-40 Partners turn by their left arms for 8 beats.

41-48 Partners turn by their right arms for 8 beats back to start.

49-56 Long Lines move forward 3 steps and touch then back up 3 steps and touch.

57-64 The top two dancers (nearest dancer to the caller in each line) sashay, gallop, or strut down between the lines to the foot (far end). Those two dancers face each other, and back up to stand at the far end of their own line. The other dancers all move one side step towards the top of the hall.

(When there are lots of dancers in one line, consider reducing the number of repeats by calling "Top Four dancers go Down the Center".)