Playing Music for Morris Dancing

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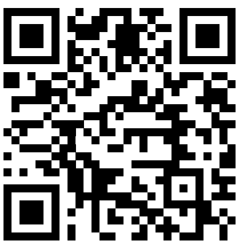

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Morris Music: A Brief History

Morris dancing is a form of English street performance folk dance. Morris dancing is always (or almost always) performed with live music. This means that musicians are an essential part of any morris team. If you are reading this document, it is probably because you are a musician (or potential musician) for a morris dance team.

Good morris musicians are not always easy to find. In the words of Jinky Wells (1868–1953), the great Bampton dancer and fiddler:

> . . . [My grandfather, George Wells] never had no trouble to get the dancers but the trouble was sixty, seventy years ago to get the piper or the fiddler—the musician. Sometimes they had a very great difficulty in getting one, they've had one from Buckland, they've had one from Field Town. . . and they've had to go out here to Fairford and Broadwell and out that way to get a piper . . . [1]

The best musicians knew the dances at least as well as the dancers. Jinky Wells remembered his grandfather, George Wells, praising the playing of Richard Ford:

> . . . Dick Ford was the best fiddler we ever had. He was born and bred here [in Bampton] . He knew every movement in every dance. My grampy said he would make them do it right ... [2]

In fact, "It appears that knowledge of the dance steps and movements and the ability to play . . . to accommodate and facilitate the execution of those features was considered more important by the participants themselves than the type of instrument used."[3]

[1] "William Wells; Morris Dancer, Fiddler and Fool", Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, VIII, (December 1956), p.4.19

[2] BBC interview with William Wells, 1943; transcript in Vaughan Williams Memorial Library; partial transcript published in *Country Dance and Song*, IV (1971).

[3] "150 years of fiddle players and Morris dancing at Bampton, Oxfordshire", *Musical Traditions* No. 10, Spring 1992

Stepping into the Role of Morris Musician

Even if you are already a morris musician, you may or may not be ready or able to step into all of the roles described above, but your team needs music, and that's something that you're one of the few people who can provide; in other words, your team needs *you*.

One of the frustrating aspects of being a morris musician is that most of the dancers don't really understand music. They can tell when the music is or isn't doing what they need, but they don't usually know enough to be able to articulate what's wrong. Or worse yet, they may think they know *exactly* what's wrong, but when you make whatever change they ask for, the problem doesn't go away. They get more and more agitated, and keep telling you "You're not doing what we want!" until you're doing it in such an exaggerated manner that they shout, "Don't be ridiculous! Now you've gone too far!"

Unfortunately, although it is acceptable for a dancers to not understand the music, the musician doesn't have the luxury of being ignorant of the dance. You may well be the only person who can understand both, so you absolutely need to become familiar with the dance and how the music fits with it. It is difficult if not impossible for a musician who has never morris danced to understand what makes the music "danceable." The ideal morris musician should:

1. **Listen to morris music,** ideally in the context of a good dance performance. This is the best way to get a feel for the style.
2. **Dance.** Musicians should spend a minimum of 6–8 weeks learning the dances, and should be able to perform at least one dance competently. This is to get a feel for how the music fits the dance and what it feels like from the dancer's perspective. (If you are physically unable to dance, you should go to practices and observe for several weeks, paying particular attention to the dancers and how they respond to the music.)
3. **Learn and memorize the tunes,** not just to the point where you can get through them, but to the point where you can play them *effortlessly* from memory. The less you need to think about (or worse yet, read) the music, the more you can watch the dancers and focus on creating the perfect blend of movement and sound.
4. **Learn everything you can about morris music.** Read about it. Talk with experienced morris musicians. Talk with experienced dancers. The more you know, the more you can do.
5. **Experiment.** After all, practices are for the musicians as well as for the dancers. (Just remember not to do this in a performance. The *audience* should be surprised, not the *dancers*!)

Instruments

Good morris musicians can convey a tune, tempo, and style on a wide variety of instruments, but there are a few caveats about instrumentation.

Some common melody instruments that work well for morris include squeezebox (accordion, melodeon and concertina), whistle (pennywhistle and tabor pipe), and violin ("fiddle"). Other less common instruments that I have seen work successfully include trombone, bassoon, and saxophone. In general, any instrument with the ability to change loudness (dynamics) and note length (staccato *vs.* legato) is likely to work.

Some instruments (*e.g.,* recorder and dulcimer) are simply too quiet to be heard outdoors over bells, sticks, and crowd noise. If the dancers and audience can't hear the music, there's not much point in having it. Plucked instruments (*e.g.,* guitar, mandolin, banjo, and dulcimer) can be problematic because of the inability to change the note length. Most percussion instruments can be too loud and cannot convey a tune. Each of these instruments can add color and texture to the music, and there's nothing wrong with *adding* them, provided that you already have a suitable melody instrument (and musician) that can do everything the dancers need.

Percussion

Percussion instruments can add a lot to a morris performance, but they create their own challenges. Percussion instruments by their nature play short (staccato) sounds. Short notes can be a profoundly effective way to adjust the tempo. (This will be discussed further later in the document.) This means that an inexperienced morris musician with a percussion instrument can have an unintentional but profound effect on the tempo.

In professional orchestras, percussionists need to be some of the best musicians. Their notes can be heard over the entire orchestra, and if they play even a few milliseconds before or after the beat, it will shift the entire orchestra. Similarly, among morris musicians, percussionists need to be excellent musicians. They should also be dancers themselves, or at least have a strong sense of what the dance feels like. The practice of handing a drum to a non-musician so he'll have something to do during the performance can do more damage than handing him a fiddle.

If a side uses percussion, the percussionists need to convey the beat. This does not mean playing 1–2–3–4 *ad nauseum*, but it does mean that embellishments need to happen *in addition* to the downbeats, not instead of them. Many good morris percussionists drum mostly with the dancers' footfalls, adding embellishments like rolls or interesting rhythms to bring out certain aspects of the dance. These can be used effectively on an upbeat to add energy and excitement leading up to a caper in a Cotswold dance, or to impart energy to a surge or stick clash in a border dance. The best examples of this can be found by listening to a skilled pipe-and-tabor player.

The Bodhran in particular deserves its own discussion. A well-played Bodhran is indeed a pleasure to listen to in the right context. However, the way the beater is used works well for fast rhythms and interesting rhythmic patterns, but it works poorly for keeping a strong beat. For this reason, I think the Bodhran should never be the *only* percussion instrument in a morris band, and that it should never be louder than the instrument that is keeping the beat.

What the Dancers Need

Other than just needing music to dance to, morris dancers have specific musical needs. According to Jan Elliott, dancers need:[4]

1. Confidence and trust between dancers and musician, including the ability to clearly see and hear one another, and knowledge by everyone of the basic style.
2. A suitable—or better yet, perfect—underlying tempo.
3. Rhythmic flexibility, appropriate to the elements of the dance.
4. Inspired and inspiring music, melodically speaking, with regard to articulation, dynamics, phrasing, and embellishments.
5. Where applicable, percussion, harmony, and/or counter-melody which enhances the performance.
6. An awareness by the musician of elements unique to:
    (a) the particular dance;
    (b) the specific set of dancers; and
    (c) the immediate situation, including tiredness, dance surface, weather, injuries, drink, *etc.*

How well the musicians are able to meet these needs will have a lot to do with the ultimate quality of the resulting performance.

How the Dancers Respond

One of the most important realizations I have had from playing morris music came when I looked at something my team was doing and thought, “They’re all doing it wrong, but in *exactly* the same way and perfectly together. How can they *do* that?” The answer, which opened the floodgates of understanding for me, was that they must all be responding to *something*, and the only candidate for that something was the music. In other words:

If all of the dancers are doing the same thing at the same time, whether right or wrong, it is because something in the music told them to do it.

If what the dancers did was right, the cue is helping them and you should keep it. (In fact, it will probably help the dancers if you emphasize the cue slightly when you play the tune.) If what they did was wrong, the cue is probably the cause of the problem and you need to change how you play the tune in order to remove it.

[4] Jan Elliott, “Who Follows Whom?” *The American Morris Newsletter* Vol. 21/1, March 1998, and Vol. 21/2, July 1998.

Tempo

Probably the single most important thing about playing for morris is finding a good tempo (speed). Regardless of who is following whom at any given moment, the musician always has overall responsibility for the tempo.

The tempo is never fixed; it is constantly changing, depending on the dancers' particular needs of the moment. Even when you are certain that the tempo is perfect, you should continue to act as though it's slightly off and you're trying to figure out how to fix it. Continually look for cues from the dancers, and make slight adjustments based on those cues.

The most important adjustment happens in the once-to-yourself, which sets the base tempo for the rest of the dance. According to Jan Elliott,

> When I play the [once-to-yourself], I don't worry too much about getting the tempo perfect—I like to just get it in the right range. One of the musicians I interviewed starts slowly and kind of "winds it up" till it feels right, but always hits his stride well before the opening movement…Most dances begin with some kind of introductory movement, such as a pair of backsteps, which leads to a large gesture like a jump, step & jump, or caper. As soon as the dancers start moving, I check the set with particular attention to #1 or another strong dancer. [5]

In other words, assume your tempo in once-to-yourself is not quite right and watch the dancers carefully as they come in. Use their first movements to synchronize with them, and then keep adjusting until everyone looks comfortable.

Throughout the dance, each figure and each kind of step may require a slight adjustment to the tempo. If your team has a lot of older or out-of-shape dancers, they may need their plain capers to be a little faster so they won't look labored. If a dance has long stick tosses, dancers are usually afraid to start a toss until the previous toss has been caught, which can slow the tempo down significantly. Your tempo needs to include the give and take that the dancers need at any point in the dance.

Even for the same step or sequence in the same dance, the same tempo won't be perfect every time. The optimal tempo is whatever makes the dancers look their best under the present conditions, which as Jan Elliott said, can be affected by tiredness, familiarity with the dance, the dancing surface, weather, inebriation, injuries, *etc.* In fact, the perfect tempo by the end of a dance may be different from what it was at the beginning. If you've made all these micro-adjustments perfectly throughout the dance, it is likely that no one but you will be aware of it. In fact, the dancers will probably reward your careful and timely micro-adjustments to the tempo by saying "Great job keeping the tempo steady!"

[5] Elliott, *Op. cit.*

Staying With the Dancers

One of the age-old questions people ask about morris music is "Who leads and who follows?" The answer is, of course, "Everyone does both at different times." A dance performance is a lot like an orchestra concert. All of the musicians are watching the conductor. However, in the best professional orchestras, the musicians maintain an awareness not only of what the conductor is doing, but also of precisely how the other musicians are responding to it. The musicians place their notes, rhythms, and phrasing carefully into the group performance. If the conductor makes an adjustment, the musicians have to follow, but they follow as a group, not individually. Each musician needs to listen and adjust exactly as quickly or slowly as the others, so that the ensemble always remains perfectly together.

The best morris teams (including the best musicians and the best dancers) do this with the dance. The dancers look to the lead dancer and the musicians look to the lead musician, and the lead dancer and lead musician are constantly adjusting to each other. However, the dancers are also constantly adjusting to one another, and to the music. The musicians are constantly adjusting to one another, and to the dancers. Every subtle change or adjustment happens to the entire group, all at once.

This give and take happens in every measure, and the musicians (as a group) and dancers (as a group) take turns leading and following. One of Jan Elliott's most famous quotes is "Play the dancers into the air and follow them as they come down." In musical terms, this means the musicians usually lead on the upbeats, and usually follow the dancers on the downbeats.

The upbeat is when the musicians show the dancers where the downbeat should be. The dancers use this upbeat to synchronize their movement towards the downbeat, in the same way that an orchestra uses the conductor's upbeat to synchronize their notes on the downbeat.

In morris dancing (unlike ballet), the dancers usually land on the downbeats. Once the dancers are in the air (thanks to your upbeat), gravity takes over and they have no way to adjust. You, however *can* adjust, so your job is now to adjust the downbeat so that it *exactly* matches the dancers' landing. In the words of Maud Karpeles, "The job of the musician is to make the dance audible and the job of the dancer is to make the music visible." If the music and dance are absolutely in sync, the combination will give the audience a profound sense of precision. Moreover, it will also give the *dancers* a profound sense of precision, creating a positive feedback loop that can carry the performance to a higher level.

Cues that Affect Tempo

Sometimes even when the tempo is right, the dancers can respond to unintentional cues to change it. You may start out at a perfect tempo, and the dancers seem to randomly decide as a group to either rush or slow down. And, of course, when they do this, they become angry with the musicians.

This is not, in fact, a random occurrence. If the dancers speed up, it is because they feel the tune seeming to speed up, and they subconsciously follow. Similarly, if the dancers slow down, it is because they feel the tune seeming to slow down, and again they subconsciously follow. There are, in fact, musical cues that cause this to happen, whether or not the musicians are aware of them. And, just as musicians can give unintentional cues that change the tempo, they can also give *intentional* cues that can bring it back where it needs to be.

The cues that affect tempo can generally be divided into two categories: those that rush the downbeat and those that delay it. The examples I will use are the "B" part of the Cotswold tune *Constant Billy*:

as commonly played

and the *Theme Vannitaise*, which has been used by some border and molly sides:

When the Dancers are Rushing

If the dancers are rushing, it is because something in the music is fooling them into thinking that the downbeat should be sooner than it actually is. The following clues are evidence that the downbeat is being rushed:

- The dance and tune are getting faster and faster.
- The dancers are landing before the beat (especially on capers or foot-together-jump).
- The dancers are clashing sticks early or too fast.

When the dancers feel that the downbeat should arrive too soon, it is probably because the upbeat was either too early or too short. An early upbeat fools the dancers into thinking that the beat is ahead of where it should be. A short upbeat leaves an empty space in the music, and the dancers tend to rush to fill it.

To fix the problem, first try lengthening the long notes (which will fill in more of the upbeats), as in the following version of *Constant Billy*:

If that doesn't help, try delaying the off-beat notes slightly, making the tune sound like more of a hornpipe, as in the following version of *Theme Vannitaise*:

These tricks can be surprisingly effective. A single fiddler can use this technique to rein in five accordion players in a massed dance. (I know this because I have been that fiddler on more than one occasion.)

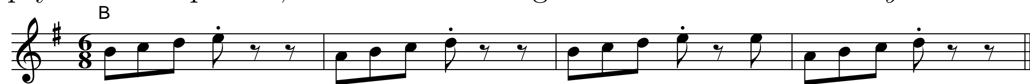
When the Dancers are Dragging

If the dancers are late, it is because something in the music is fooling them into thinking that the downbeat is going to be later than it actually is. The following clues are evidence that the downbeat is being delayed:

- The dance and tune are getting slower and slower.
- The dancers are landing after the beat (especially on capers or foot-together-jump).
- The dancers are clashing sticks late or too slowly.

When the dancers feel that the downbeat should arrive too late, it is probably because the upbeat was either too late or too long. A late upbeat fools the dancers into thinking that the downbeat will be later than it should be. If the upbeat is too long, the dancers' internal pulse will pause until it ends, creating a delay.

To fix the problem, first try shortening the long notes slightly (more *staccato*), which will empty out the upbeats, as in the following version of *Constant Billy*:



If that doesn't help, try also making the upbeat notes slightly earlier, making the tune sound like more of a strathspey, as in the following version of *Theme Vannitaise*:

Note that playing tunes like a strathspey can make them sound a lot less like morris tunes. Musicians need to be especially careful to only adjust the updeats by a very small amount, which the dancers and audience will not be conscious of but will respond to.

Transitions

In Cotswold dances, slow capers can present a special problem in that you have to show the dancers the new tempo before they start dancing to it, so they can change together. This means you need to make the adjustment in *the bar before* the slow capers start or end. (This is the same idea as using the upbeats to lead the dancers to the downbeat.) Whenever practical, it usually works best to have the tempo change happen in the music two beats before the dancers start (or come out of) the slow steps.

One caveat in coming out of slow capers is to make sure the dancer has time to finish the caper before coming out of the slow tempo. This sometimes means you'll end up with an odd extra beat in the tune. Don't worry about this—in general, it's better to have an extra beat than to have the dancers confused about when to move.

One particularly challenging example of this is the kick capers in Sherborne *Orange and Blue* (sometimes called *The Orange in Bloom*). Most dancers have vastly different ideas about what the tempo of kick capers should be. Any time the dancers have very different tempos in mind, the musician needs to take the lead. An effective musical cue will transmit the same tempo and timing to all of the dancers, which will make the transition look and sound seamless and effortless. An ineffective cue is likely to result in a rough transition that is awkward and noticeable to the audience.

Here is how I play the transition from the double-steps (in 6/8 time) into the kick capers (in 4/4 time), and back to the double-steps (6/8) again.

The first transition occurs in bar 4 (which I have labeled "T1" in the above excerpt). What would normally be the final 6/8 bar is split into a 3/8 bar and a 2/4 bar. The quarter notes in the 2/4 bar show the dancers the new kick caper tempo, which gives them two full beats to hear it before they have to dance to it.

The second transition occurs in bar 9 (the beginning of the second line; which I have labeled "T2"). This time what would normally be the final 4/4 bar is split into a 2/4 bar and a 6/8 bar, with the two beats of the 6/8 bar replacing beats 3 and 4 of the 4/4 bar. These two beats show the dancers the double-step temo, again giving them two full beats to hear it before they have to dance to it.

Note also the accent in the middle of the long note in the 6/8 bar. This is because the dancers need to hear both beats, but the tune doesn't have a separate note on the second beat. I use a "pulse" accent on the second beat to provide this information. This pulse accent does not need to be particularly strong—the dancers are already looking for it (whether they realize it or not), so even a subtle pulse will be enough for them to synchronize.

Sticking

Even the best musicians have trouble controlling sticking. The sticks are themselves percussion instruments, and are usually louder than the melody instrument. I have had the best success by playing extremely short (staccato) notes on the beats where the clashes occur. This tells the dancers very precisely where the beat *should* be. I then change the upbeats slightly (such as in the hornpipe *vs.* strathspey example) to adjust the tempo.

Sometimes, however, the dancers are determined to speed up during the sticking, and will cheerfully ignore all of the cues you give them. If this happens, all you can do is go with them. When they are about to start dancing, treat it as a transition, and use the last two beats to slow the tempo back down to a reasonable speed. It makes a better performance to have the sticking together but too fast than to have it happen at the right speed but not together.

Style

If the job of the musician is to make the dance audible, it would be a lot easier if the tune actually sounded like the dance is supposed to look. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. Many of the tunes have too few or too many notes, or notes, accents, or rests in all of the wrong places. It's a difficult task, and you need to do the best you can with what you've got to work with. However, within the limits of the tune, it is usually possible to make some adjustments to fit the style.

Border

Border dances are often characterized by aggressive, vigorous movements and sticking. If the music has this character, the dancers will feel it and will imitate it subconsciously in their movements. For example, consider the *Theme Vannitaise*, a tune used by some border sides:

Note the phrasing in this version. The music surges into every other bar. Playing long (tenuto) notes and getting louder (crescendo) as you come into every other bar gives the impression of a swell into the beginning of each phrase. The dancers will pick up on the swell and the dance movements or stick clashes in the bar right after each swell will be stronger and have more emphasis, which will give the dance drive and direction.

Also, border dances often have a downward, "into the ground" feel. The longer notes help to emphasize this.

Cotswold

Many Cotswold traditions and dances are characterized by upward, lofty movements. Again, if these characteristics are present in the music, the dancers will imitate them.

Different Cotswold styles and traditions may suggest different musical styles for the stepping. Traditions that are largely "up" (such as Bledington and Fieldtown) need short notes and a lot of empty space. For example, consider the Cotswold tune *Constant Billy*:

The above version is grossly exaggerated to emphasize the effect, but moving even slightly in this direction will give substantially more lift to the tune, and consequently to the dance.

For traditions and steps that have more of a "down" character (such as Ilmington or Bucknell), use longer notes (but not too long) to "play the dancers into the ground." One example of this is the "chicken-chaser" sidesteps in Bampton *Highland Mary*.

One of my favorite dances is the Bledington jig *Lumps of Plum Pudding*. This jig is unusually well-suited to the music, and is a great tune for playing around with stylistic adjustments. In fact, when I dance the jig, I substitute forrie capers into the end of the A and B parts, because I think these movements fit perfectly with the music (and because it furthers my discussion of this section). If you're not too much of a traditionalist, you might even decide that you prefer to dance it this way.

side - step side - step dou - ble step side - step side - step dou - ble step

for - rie caper for - rie caper plain ca - per plain ca - per plain ca - per plain caper

Capers

One of the best ways to enhance capers is to use long notes for the lead-up (upbeats), and then play an accented *short* note when the dancer leaves the ground. There is a natural tendency to play long notes for capers, but this actually glues the dancers to the ground. Remember that long notes stop the dancers' internal pulse; if this happens during the leap, it will be difficult for the dancer to put in much energy.

I also like giving the music an accent—sort of a staccato punch—on the takeoff note. This accent gives the dancer the last bit of energy to get into the air, while still being short enough to not get in the way of the take-off. The extended silence after the short note also grabs the audience's attention while the dancer is still in the air and enhances their anticipation of exactly when the dancer will come down.

Finally, the short note also gives the most leeway for the musicians to synchronize the downbeat with the dancer's landing, giving the audience the impression that the landing was timed perfectly. Of course, the landing *was* timed perfectly, but by the musicians more so than the dancer.

Accents

You can use accents to draw attention to something in the dance. These can be useful in reinforcing/reminding the dancers when a particular thing happens, such as when to come in at the end of once-to-yourself, or exactly when a hankie flick or stick clash is supposed to occucr. These kinds of accents can also be useful to highlight a preparatory beat for the dancers. However, be sure to watch how the dancers respond to the accent. Sometimes an accent can confuse the dancers by making them think they need to move too soon.

Modifying Tunes

As I mentioned earlier, some tunes have too few or too many notes, or notes in the wrong places. At times like this, your best option may be to modify the tune to better fit with the dance.

Of course, some people place a lot of importance on performing the dances and tunes as closely as possible to the way they were collected; people who feel this way will probably never be happy with any modification you might make. My feeling is that like the steps and figures of the dance, the tune should also be subject to interpretation and modification, in order to achieve a higher level of performance.

One example of a modification that has become fairly common occurs in the Headington dance *Constant Billy*. The "B" part of the tune as given in Cecil Sharp's *The Morris Book, Vol. 1*, is:

Lionel Bacon gives two versions of the tune in *A Handbook of Morris Dances*. The first is Sharp's version. The second is similar, but more heavily dotted:

Here's the way most of the musicians I know play it. This version has evolved because it works much better with the sticking:

Simplifications

As important as it is to be fully prepared for performances, there will inevitably be times when you'll need to play a tune before you're ready. If that happens, it's essential that you keep the tempo steady and play enough of the tune that the dancers can keep their place in the music. Unfortunately, the way most musicians learn and practice a tune is to always play all of the notes, starting slowly and gradually playing faster and faster until you reach performance tempo. When you're practicing by yourself, it's natural to slow down a little for difficult passages without even being aware of it. Unfortunately, either of these will derail a performance.

A good morris team practices how to recover from mistakes, so they will know what to do if there's a problem in a performance. Similarly, as a good morris musician, you need to practice keeping the tune going in the correct tempo, even if you're leaving out most of the notes.

As an example, consider the Bampton dance, *Highland Mary*. The "real" tune looks like this:

Start by practicing a "framework" consisting of only the first note of each half-measure. This is a shortened version of the tune that you can use to keep it going in an emergency:

Practice this framework until you can play it substantially faster than performance tempo. Then practice adding in *some* of the "decorations"—the notes that make up the rest of the tune—but leaving out others. One example might sound like this:

Vary which decorations you play and which ones you leave out until you can switch back and forth at will between the full tune and the framework for every section. Once you can do this, you'll not only be able to play the tune well, but if you ever have a problem, you'll be able to drop down to the framework and keep the tune going. This also gives you an "entry point" in every measure, where you can pick up the full tune again.

Practices

As I have mentioned in other places in this document, practices are for everyone—dancers, musicians, fools, beasts, and anyone else connected with the performance. The point of

practicing is for *everyone* to improve, and musicians should be encouraged to use some of the side's practice time to work on playing together (ensemble), phrasing, and different ways to play for elements of the dances to bring out key elements.

Just as the lead musician and dancer #1 need to work closely together in performance, the side's dance foreman and music foreman need to work closely together during practices. Some of the dance problems a foreman may be trying to correct (such as everyone landing together on the beat) may be best addressed by having the musicians adjust their playing first, and then putting it back together with the dancers. Musicians need time to work on transitions from one tempo to another, first between the lead musician and the foreman (to make sure the intended transition can work), then with each other (so they are all playing it the same way), and finally with the dancers.

Sometimes the musicians will want to try out a change to see how it affects the dance, and often this is best done as a single-blind experiment, *i.e.,* with the dancers being unaware of what the musicians are testing. Dancers need to be patient and good-natured about this and trust that the musicians will explain after the fact.

Each side has a different dynamic, so the interplay between dancers and music will vary. I think musicians should try to take up no more than 1/4 of the practice time on music-related issues. However, I also think every practice should include something explicitly focused on the music. This keeps the musicians interested and engaged, and it also keeps the dancers cognizant of what the music needs to do beyond just playing the notes. Occasionally, it is useful to devote an entire practice to music-related issues, in which the lead musician decides the agenda, and the dancers' job is to shut up and dance so the musicians can see the effects of what they're doing.

Performances

Ultimately, dancing is a performing art, and the purpose of any dance side is to get in front of an audience and give the best possible performance. This means artistic decisions need to be focused on the audience's experience.

For example, in practices, the musicians might help the dancers by keeping the beat steady and easy to dance to, and the dance foreman would expect the dancers to even out their capers or sticking to stay on the beat. During performance, however, the musicians would make more adjustments so that the music and dance remain perfectly synchronized, even as the dancers speed up and slow down.

Musicians can enhance a performance by helping to keep the flow going. Often, sides don't consider the flow of a performance, and keeping the audience interested and engaged between dances. If the musicians play a reprise of the tune as the dancers walk off, it gives the audience the impression that something else is going to follow. Also, if a side is slow to form its sets, the musicians can play a short tune between each dance and the next. Finally, a medley of tunes in place of one of the dances can serve to both highlight the side's musicians and to give the dancers a much-needed breather.

Etiquette

When you're playing with your own team, you have more responsibilities to practice on your own than the dancers do. They can't begin to learn the dances until the music is solid and steady enough to dance to. This means you need to learn the music in advance, so you are ready to play it in practice. Memorize the tunes as soon as you can, because the more you can watch the dancers, the more of your practice time you can use for experimenting with ways to fit the music to the dance. (Remember, it's *your* practice too!) It is, of course, reasonable for you to ask the foreman to tell you which dances you need to prepare for each practice or dance-out.

In terms of playing in with other teams, remember that while most musicians love to play together when they're jamming, this is generally not welcome in a performance. Imagine if you went to see the Boston Ballet and someone in the audience grabbed his violin and ran into the orchestra pit to join in! Different teams use the same tunes in different ways, and often at very different tempos. A team's musicians have a rapport with the team that an outsider doesn't, and each team's musicians will have their own ways of implementing the techniques and tricks described in this document, which are probably different from yours. When a musician joins in who is not "tuned in" to the team's conventions, the performance often loses its fine edge, and differences in style or interpretation may be noticeable to the audience, or worse yet, confuse the dancers.

If you want to play in with another team, it's best to ask some time other than during a performance. Most teams have guidelines, which can range from "No, never, no way, don't ask, ain't gonna happen!" to "Of course! Any time!" and everything in between. When in doubt, the following guidelines are usually safe:

- Don't play in with a team if you haven't talked with them in advance.
- Don't play in if the musicians who are currently playing don't know you, *even if you have previously played in with other musicians on the same team.*
- Don't play in if you can't play the tune correctly, in tune, and from memory.
- Don't play in if you aren't familiar with the dance, style, or tradition.
- Be sure you know who the lead musician is. Note that the lead musician may not be the loudest; outside musicians who are following the instrument that they hear may inadvertantly drown out the lead musician.
- Always follow the team's lead musician, *even if you know the tune better or you are a better musician yourself.* Never decide to push the tempo or hold it back. If you think the tempo may be wrong, drop out (or drop way down) and let the team's musicians adjust.
- If the music gets messed up, drop out and let the team's musicians sort it out before joining back in.

Conclusions

If there's a single theme that runs through this entire document, it is that whether you like it or not, you have control over precisely when everything happens in the dance. Get used to it; learn how to use it to make the dance the best that it can be.

Experiment with the music at practices and see how the team responds. Keep the ideas that work and discard the ones that don't. Admit to your failed experiments (so the team won't worry about it happening again) and also your successes (partly as a way of calling attention to the fact that you're doing more than just playing the notes, and partly because if they know to listen for a cue, they'll be aware of it and will continue to respond to it). And most importantly, enjoy the music and the dance, and delight in your contributions to both!

As Tony Barrand once quipped: "You can dance badly to good music but you cannot dance well to bad music." This means that if your team is capable of dancing well when you're playing, you must be a good morris musician.

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