

Andrew's notes on calling

Here are some thoughts on calling. Feel free to disagree with them. They certainly don't cover all the things you might need to consider, and probably cover a load of stuff you don't necessarily need to consider, but hopefully will give you some points to think about!

These are my opinions only. Not everyone will agree with everything in here. They might be right.

I call for a wide range of levels of experience, so I've mixed examples relevant to beginner's ceilidhs right up to complex dances for experts. Feel free to skip over bits that don't seem relevant to your style of calling.

Event setup

The setup of the venue can make a big difference to the success of the event.

The floor

You are after several things in a dance floor:

- It must avoid sapping the energy out of the dancers and preferably give it back;
- It must be safe to dance on (not too slippery and no tripping hazards);
- It must be a sensible shape for the dances;
- It must be large enough for the number of people without being so large as to lose atmosphere.

Regarding the surface, a sprung floor is best but you will be very lucky to get one and unfortunately they are getting rarer. Most venues have a hard wooden floor, which is fine. Concrete is just about usable but very hard on the joints and dangerous if dusty. Carpet is also just about usable but to be avoided if possible. Grass is only usable for short periods and then only if flat and firm. Note that dance speeds are affected by the surface: they'll be slower on a sprung floor than on concrete, especially for hornpipes.

The usable area is roughly equal to the largest rectangle you can draw on the floor -- while most dances are in individual sets for 8 or 10 dancers, some require a big circle or similar. Big chunks cut out of one side are bad, as are unusual shapes such as L-shapes.

You need a minimum of 1.5 square metres per simultaneously dancing person (this will be very squashed), and 2 is better. That said, remember that you will probably won't get everyone dancing until the last dance, so don't worry too much for a beginners' dance if the calculations show it will be a little squashed. If the floor is very big, it can lack atmosphere, and people will feel conspicuous getting onto it.

The bar

Many venues have a bar. At beginners' events, this can make a big difference.

- Ideal venue: The bar is integrated into the hall, with tables for people to sit at the sides/bottom of the hall where they can hear your calling.
- Nightmare venue: The bar is in a separate room, as are all the tables, and once sat there, people can't hear your microphone. If it's a social function such as a wedding or birthday party, people are likely to go there and not come back.

PA

Being legible is more important than being aesthetically pleasing. The syllable sounds are at about 3kHz, so some people turn things up around there. Boomy bass is really bad; turn it down, and quite a lot of people turn the bass EQ down to 0!

You should have a microphone that you are used to. Bring your own if possible. Dynamic microphones are generally preferred. A good one with a cable will cost you £70-100, a wireless one in the region of £250. A switch is really useful if you like to hold it in your hand. Beware cheap SM58 mics on ebay -- they're probably fake.

Make sure you can be heard where people are sitting. If your invitations to dance cannot be heard, people will probably not get up to dance. If people aren't responding, maybe you need turning up?

Microphone technique

When talking into the microphone:

- Avoid talking across the top of it. Microphones are directional and don't work too well at right angles. That said, you want to minimise "popping" on your p's and b's, so if you haven't got a pop shield you often need to use it at a slight angle.
- Let the microphone do the hard work – there's no need to shout. A calm voice can keep going for longer, and is more legible (when shouting the vowels get louder more than the syllables, and it's the syllables that give legibility).
- If you're getting lots of feedback then it can be helpful to hold the microphone close to your mouth, so you can be turned down, but otherwise try to leave about 6 inches between your mouth and the microphone. "Close-mic" technique accentuates the bass frequencies and is less legible.
- Speak slowly and enunciate. Beware trailing off at the end of sentences. I don't have myself in the foldback and like to be able to hear my voice reflect off the floor so I can naturally accommodate the room's acoustics into my vocal technique.
- If you're trying to attract people's attention, make sure you don't blend in with the background chatter. The speed and quality of your voice can be as important as its volume – so talk even more slowly to catch the room's attention.

The MC role

By default, you're the MC (Master of Ceremonies) of the evening (unless you've established that someone else is doing the announcing). Questions:

- When should it start and end? Is what you've been told actually what was advertised? Is the start time when people expect to start dancing, or just to start arriving? Do you have to stop by the end time as a condition of hiring the hall?
- Is there an interval, and are the organisers expecting one? I usually recommend an interval for any gig over 2 hours or so.
- What's happening in the interval. Food? Pudding? Entertainment? A raffle? Do you need to announce any of it?
- How long is the interval? I usually allow 20-30 minutes for a regular interval, 45 minutes for one with food, and an hour for a full sit-down meal with pudding. You have some influence over the length of the interval – be prepared to tell the band when you want them back on stage.
- Are there any other announcements that need making?
- At the end, don't forget to thank the band, and if applicable, the sound engineer.

Preparation

Programming the evening correctly is at least as important as the quality of your calling. It's the unnoticed skill – it makes a huge difference to the success of the evening, yet no-one really notices you doing it.

Preparing a programme

Arguably the ideal preparation is to have a programme organised for the whole evening, matched to the tunes, with spares and replacements selected that you might need. These days, for gigs such as weddings, I'll turn up with a pile of cards I might want to use and make up the programme as I'm going, because I can react better to circumstances that way – but you should only do that once you're confident about your repertoire.

Before each gig, I go through my dances and pull out a set of dances that are candidates for being used. I then pull out the ones I want to use. If it's not for complete beginners, I then put together a programme, a "Plan A" from which to deviate. Then I find spares and alternates in case the audience is more or less competent than I was expecting. Finally I go through my deck one dance at a time, calling the dance through in my head – I find this is the only way to spot problems in the flow of the programme, and also reminds me how I'm going to call each dance.

For ceilidhs, If you're calling with a good band with distinctive sets, it's worth trying to match them against prospective dances, even if you change your mind. This can often only be done just before the gig. You should always make sure you give them an opportunity to use their best sets, so make sure you know what they are.

Choosing repertoire

This is one of the toughest skills of being a caller – what dances deserve to be in your box?

To begin with, it's simple – go to as many dances as possible and write down your favourites. Try not to steal *all* your repertoire off the same person (make it your own), but most callers won't mind you "collecting" dances from them, and will be happy to confirm whether you got it right if you ask at the end. I think you have a responsibility to attempt to find the dance's name and author if possible by at least asking the caller you got it from whether they know.

I think you're looking for dances which have one thing about them that is noteworthy compared to other dances you'll be calling that evening. The thing can be a special figure, or formation, or even music – if you're calling one hornpipe in the evening, then it's already noteworthy just by being the hornpipe. Ask yourself whether, if you were asking someone if they enjoyed that dance after the evening, you could say "it's the one where..." and name a single element of the dance that would be distinctive.

Note that I said *one* thing that is noteworthy. One is the right number. Many noteworthy things makes for confusion!

Difficulty

You don't get any prizes for calling difficult dances. Difficulty is your enemy. You make people happy by calling *interesting* dances which have an element in them that makes them memorable (see above). Difficulty is just sometimes a necessary evil to achieve that interest.

Never fall into the trap of trying to show off how good a caller you are by calling complicated dances. Concentrate on making it fun for the dancers. Remember that most of them do this less often than you. The real skill is giving them a fun evening where everyone succeeds.

The first dance or two must go really well. Make sure you start every gig with a dance that you are really confident of.

- The dancers are getting into it at the beginning, so you don't want to test them yet.
- *You're* getting into it too – it takes a dance or two to settle!
- You might have misread the audience, so play it safe.
- First impressions are important – both for you as a caller, and to make sure that those who get up to dance have a really positive experience and want to do it again.

The last dance before the interval and last dance of the evening need to be guaranteed successes too.

You want to gradually ramp up the difficulty at the beginning. By the last few dances, people are likely to be getting tired, and you want some guaranteed successes, so the difficulty needs to ramp down there too. You also want a few easy-ish dances sprinkled throughout the programme, so there's never a run of more than 2 or so really hard ones. It's a good idea to announce when a dance is harder or easier, so people who are less confident can choose their dances.

The consequence of all of this is that there's not actually many complex dances you can call in an evening, and they'll probably be in the second and third quarters. Opinions vary massively on this though, so do what works for you.

If you are planning a complex dance that you're not entirely sure will go right, plan to follow it up with a simple one you're really confident will go well. And if you're unsure of what the crowd will be like it's often a good idea to have a backup card behind it to use instead if you decide when you get there that it's not such a good idea after all!

Types of learning

I've encountered two primary ways in which people learn dances:

- *Individual journey*. This is the dancer who remembers his or her path individually in relation to the other dancers, much as you would remember the way to the shops in relation to the buildings you pass.
- *Overhead pattern*. This is the dancer who can visualise the pattern that the whole set is making, and understands his or her part in that.

Our brains are wired to remember the individual journey, but there are many problems with this way of thinking:

- One person going wrong can make the whole set go wrong because it wrecks the "signposts".
- It is harder to dance a role you haven't already walked but have only seen.
- Timing is much harder.
- There is far more to remember, because the journey for each position is different. Great simplifications occur when you can think about the pattern as a whole.

Most good dancers learn to use "overhead pattern" thinking. As a caller, try to do so too. You need to be able to visualise what everybody in the dance should be doing, simultaneously.

Preparing a dance

An idealised method for preparing a dance:

1. Run the dance through in your head until you can visualise the whole dance, without instructions, at dance speed. It might be easier to do this with music playing in the background; I did to begin with although I don't any more.
2. Work out what the most challenging aspect of the dance is likely to be.
3. Work out what the calls for the dance will be, and run it through your head at dance speed with those calls. Again, you might find music helpful here.
4. Work out what you need to say during the walk-through.
5. Write out a card with the right amount of information on it to enable you to quickly reproduce the walk-through instructions and the call.

Dance cards

Everyone's format for cards is different. I usually put the following on my dance cards:

- The dance's name
- Who wrote it, if known
- Formation
- Music type, whether it has a set tune, whether that tune *has* to be the tune or is just convention
- What collection it's in: ceilidh, contra, Playford, etc.
- Approximate difficulty
- Special properties, e.g. mixer, silly, usable in a contra medley
- The actual dance
- Key danger points
- Where I got it from

I use 5x3 inch cards. Some people find these too small; I very occasionally use the other side if needed (generally only 3-part Playford-style dances) and use a lot of abbreviations. If it still can't fit then I don't want to be calling it.

I try to limit the words on the card, and use a regular format. If I have a memory blank, I need to be able to find my place in the card in about 1 second (especially if I'm calling something hard).

The walk-through

Announcing the dance

Once you've selected a dance, you need to get people onto the floor. Considerations:

- I would suggest you say what its name is, even if no-one there is going to know it. Unless you don't know it, or even are making it up on the spot!
- Give the set formation. How to describe formations the audience haven't come across?
 - Longways: "Two lines of 5 people facing each other, with your partner in the other line".
 - Sicilian: "Next to you your partner in big circle, couples facing alternate directions; facing a couple and with your backs to another couple". Or do you just start with a big circle, get down on the floor and guide them into position one couple at a time?
 - Square: For complete beginners, get 4 couples in a circle first and go from there.
- Is there anything people should know before deciding to join the dance or finding a partner?
 - How hard is it? If you say "it's easy" then you better be confident that everyone will be able to do it, otherwise some people are going to feel stupid.

Conversely, if there are some people who are significantly less experienced than everyone else and are low in confidence, it's good to highlight the ones that they're most likely to succeed at.

- Is it unusually energetic, or slow? People with reduced mobility or energy might want to know.
- Are you going to lose your partner? Particularly important for parents bringing unconfident kids onto the floor. Or are you going to get very close to your partner? If it's a close couple dance like Rosza then it's only fair to warn people!
- Why should they really want to do this dance? The more excited you are about the dance, the more excited they will be too. It's not your right to expect everyone to naturally want to dance just because you've said it's time to do the next one!
- What if no-one gets up? Or only one enthusiastic couple? Persevere or play a tune? In wedding-type events, this can happen; if it happens too often people stop believing that things are going to happen just because you say they will, and you don't want to be pleading for people to get on the floor. Maybe right now people want to talk to their friends and family they haven't seen in years – it's fine to give them some time, play some music that makes them want to dance, and try again later.

Walk-through length

The walk-through is a balancing act:

- People want to feel successful and enjoy the dance. You want it to work for everyone.
- People come to a dance to have fun. In most cases, they want to get dancing as quickly as possible and spend as little time as possible in the walk-through.

It flows from this that your aim, outside of a workshop environment (which I shall not cover here), is **to get everybody as quickly as possible to the stage where they can successfully enjoy the dance at speed, with the benefit of the calls you are capable of giving during the dance.** Or to put it another way, if you walk the dance through and all the moves take less time than it would have taken to dance them, then that walk-through was probably unnecessary (although note the need to make beginners feel confident). Things that will affect this include:

- Your skill in teaching the dance and in calling during the dance – partly a matter of your experience level in general and partly whether you've called this dance before.
- The novelty of the dance to the dancers.
- The "meanwhile factor" of the dance – dances with lots of things going on at the same time will prevent you from calling them all individually.
- How much the roles change in each time through the dance – e.g. if I've called a square dance for the heads, it's likely I'll need to call it for the sides too.

- The familiarity of the dancers with what you're doing.
- The mental suppleness of the dancers – older people do tend to remember things less well than students.
- The attentiveness of the dancers.
- Your audibility – rooms with bad acoustics can be problematic and you might have to rely more on the walk-through.
- Any language barriers.

Of course, you do not always know ahead of time how long a walk-through will take, and therefore whether it is strictly necessary. It is rare that a walk-through can be omitted entirely unless you have a room full of experienced dancers or a significant number of the people there know the dance already (although I'll sometimes do Circassian Circle without a walkthrough since it's so easy; contra medleys necessarily don't have a walkthrough but they're not for beginners; square dance breaks obviously don't have a walkthrough but you can always square the set at the end of them if they break down).

Talking/Showing/Walking

There are a number of different styles of learning:

Listening. This is highly ineffective. At any given moment in time, a significant proportion of the floor is likely not to be listening to you, and those that are listening will forget what you have said shortly afterwards.

Watching. This is far more effective in terms of understanding. A demonstration is worth a thousand words. However, organising a demo is time-consuming so only worth it occasionally; the more people in the room, the less often it's worth it.

Doing. This is the most effective, and is what's happening in a walk-through.

A talk-through (an explanation of the whole dance while everyone stands still) is (in my opinion) usually a waste of time, because you could have given the same level of information during the dance call, and people will remember very little of what you have said anyway (but then I also know people who like being given a talk-through!)

What people *do* matters more than what they *hear*. Therefore *the path people take on the floor needs to be the path they take during the dance*. Consequences of this are:

- If you walk a full right and left through bit by bit to beginners, but they make lots of random turns during the walkthrough, they're likely to take a while to get it right in the dance.
- You want to finish the walkthrough of each move in the place needed to start the next one, so that they practice the flow between the moves and not just the moves in isolation.

- Finish the walkthrough by saying how it leads into the first move again, so they complete the loop.
- If people walk through something wrong, if they do not walk it through again correctly then they are likely to dance it incorrectly as well. So if you screw up the walkthrough, think about walking that bit again.
- If you accidentally call it wrong during the dance, even if you were about to drop the call, call it right again the next time through before you drop the call.

Walking through difficult figures

So, if your goal during the walkthrough is to replicate the path that the dancers will take when the music starts, when calling each move, your goal is:

- Work out in advance all the ways people might get the move wrong, and steer them to avoid it.
- Have a strategy to “catch” the floor at the end of the move, so they’re in the right place to do the next move.

A belt-and-braces process for calling complex moves is:

1. If you don't want people to move right away, tell them.
2. Say who you're talking to (if not everyone).
3. Tell them which way / who to face to begin with.
4. Say where they're going to finish, and how they'll be facing then.
5. Say how they're going to get there, highlighting any traps if applicable.
6. Tell them to do it, and reinforce the description as they're doing it.

The order can be varied depending on circumstances.

Before each call, ask “how could this go wrong?”. Often this will be down to experience – an expert is someone who has made all the mistakes already. Use that knowledge to define the words you're going to use.

Example: calling a square set grand chain to beginners. Here the trap is turning around and coming back the wrong way. For a long time I called something along the following lines:

“Face your partner. In a moment, you're going to go right around the set, with your partner going in the opposite direction, and finish back here. You'll want to turn around – resist that temptation. Give your right hand to your partner to start, now... pull by right hand and give a left hand to the next person you meet. Pull by with the left and give right to the next, left to the next, keep going past your partner on the other side, right and left, right and left until you're facing your partner again.”

Note that delaying the floor moving can be a subtle direction such as “in a moment you're going to ...”, implying not yet. Sometimes that can be less distracting than the more direct “don't move yet”, although the latter is what you want in the most extreme circumstances. Here's one of them.

These days I usually do something simpler:

“Face your partner. Give a right hand to you partner, pull past them **and with the next person you meet** give a left hand. Pull past them too and give a right hand to the next...”

This relies upon being able to (clearly) say “and with the next person you meet” before they’ve started moving, so they’re already looking for them. The reason I can get away with this now and didn’t previously is probably due to timing and emphasis so they hear those words when they need them.

Order and timing of words

Unless told not to, people will usually start moving as soon as you start speaking, with the incomplete information you’ve given them.

For example “do-si-do with your neighbour, starting passing left shoulder” is not ideal – some people might have started a right-shoulder do-si-do by the time you get round to talking about the left shoulder! “Left shoulder do-si-do your neighbour” could be worse if people aren’t already facing their neighbour – they might have started do-si-doing their partner by the time you get to the neighbour. “With you neighbour, left shoulder do-si-do” is probably safer, or even “Face your neighbour... left shoulder do-si-do”, as two separate instructions, giving time for people to catch up and check they all know where their neighbour actually is!

Another classic in contra dancing: “...swing your neighbour. [*Everyone swings a bit and faces across.*] Face down in lines of four...”. You could say “finishing facing down the hall, swing your neighbour”, but that’ll confuse some people. “...swing your neighbour and finish facing down the hall in lines of four” is normally fine, since you’ll reach the end of the sentence before anyone has finished their practice swing. All this does mean that you need to be thinking about the next move when you’re calling the previous one. And if some people have gone wrong and need additional explanation once you’ve started the call, you might no longer be in a position to finish it in time for the people who got it right...

Setting up catch-points

It’s easy to get caught out even by some ceilidh classics, such as Boston Tea Party. “First couple face down and start a dip and dive, keeping going until you reach the bottom, where you make an arch...” and then a set full of people who are experienced dancers but don’t do much ceilidh dancing have started a full dip and dive, turning around at the ends. Calling the cast at the same time as a dip and dive is hard unless most of the floor know the dance already. Better (and I can’t take the credit for this one):

“First couple face down, everyone else face up, holding nearest hands. The first couple is going to dip and dive to the bottom; everyone else just wait for a moment when they’ve gone past. First couple go under an arch made by the second couple, arch over the third couple, under the fourth couple and over the fifth, then make a two-handed arch at the bottom [*catch*]. Everyone else face up, and as soon as the first couple have come past, lead towards the top, cast down the outside of the set to

the bottom and come up through the first couple's arch, which should be there by the time you reach it."

Arranging to have a mid-way catch to enable the dip and dive to be walked separately makes this far more tractable to call. Note that I've said twice that when the dance is done for real, this all happens at the same time ("as soon as the first couple have come past", "which should be there by the time you reach it"); we've actually broken the rule of the walkthrough being the same as the dance (albeit in a minor way) so we need to be very clear about the difference between the walkthrough and the dance. If calling for complete beginners I'd probably repeat that section only with the next couple, this time doing it all at the same time.

Reinforcement

In a complex dance where people might be disorientated, try to find waypoints that will reassure people they're in the right place. E.g. (from many contra dances): "circle left three-quarters so your partner is on the other side of the set, facing up and down and pass through to face a new neighbour".

Sentence structure

We speak in sentences. Dances have phrases too. Make your calling phrasing match that of the dance. Think of the end of 8 bars being the end of a sentence, and halfway through the dance being the end of a paragraph. It's a subconscious hint as to where people should be when, especially when there are a lot of moves (such as contra dances).

I follow a common convention in writing out dances that I got from Colin Hume, using a semicolon to express a 4-bar boundary and a full-stop to express an 8-bar boundary. If you call these dances as they're written, the sentence structure flows naturally.

Consistency of terms

I struggle with this one sometimes. Several terms are synonyms:

- "Do-si-do" and "back-to-back"
- "Hey" and "reel"
- "Ladies" and "women"
- "Gents" and "men"

Different terms are more appropriate in different contexts. I tend to use "do-si-do" for contra and ceilidh, "back-to-back" for Playford. "Hey" is used for contra and Playford but the ceilidh crowd use "reel", especially Scottish ceilidh crowd. What's most important is you use the same term throughout the evening, and especially that you use the same term in the dance as you did in the walk-through!

"Ladies" vs "women" is a particular minefield, with female dancers having appealed to me to use the other term in equal measure when I've used one or the other. I did briefly try to use "ladies/gents" in contra and "men/women" everywhere else, but I just got hopelessly confused and inconsistent. These days I use "men/women"; alternatively you can avoid the whole subject and go gender free if you want to, which is a different minefield...

A full walkthrough call

Here's a script for a full walkthoough of the contra dance "Heart of Glass" (<http://ravitz.us/dance/#hg>, Becket formation):

"Take hands in a circle of four, circle left three quarters until your partner is across the set from you [*reinforcement*], facing up and down [*catch*]; ... pass through and swing your new neighbour [*confirmation we've just progressed*], finishing facing across with the man on the left [*catch*]. Men allemande left once and a half and keep hold, stop when you're standing next to your partner [*catch; reinforcement of what once and a half means*]; put your arm round your partner's waist to form a star promenade [*check they've got it, gives this formation a name we can use in the call later*], then go round halfway and when you're on the other side keep your arm round your partner, break in the middle and whirl on the side, man going backwards and women forwards. [*Called in one flow because they flow and time taken to say it roughly matches the time taken to dance it.*] If you're running late, the whirl is the thing to drop [*Adds recovery time*]

Women, who are coming towards each other at this point [*emphasises continued flow*], pass right shoulders to start a full hey across the set and back, until you're facing your partner again on the side you started. [*Lots of reinforcement because the hey will take a lot of time to walk so I've got time to say stuff; catches them at the right point coming out of the hey before they wander somewhere else and break the flow.*] Balance and swing, and finish facing across to the other couple."

I might need to explain the hey in more detail if there are people who haven't covered that yet. If I started the walkthrough from the starting formation, I'll then walk it through again from there because there is a couple standing out at each end which hasn't walked through more than the first few bars yet. If I only want to walk it through once, I'll ask the whole set to "sausage right" one couple before the walkthrough so everyone gets the walkthrough.

Communicating with the band

What do you need to tell the band?

Before each dance, at least:

- What sort of music you want.
- What speed you want, and potentially the feel.
- How long you're likely to run it for.

Music choice

Just because you don't play an instrument doesn't mean you don't need to understand the music, at least a bit. In ceilidhs you generally need the following:

- Jig: "humpty dumpty" rhythm. Good for gallopy dances.

- Polka/Reel/March: A continuum of rhythms that different bands often use to mean different things. Some English bands think a polka is slower than a reel; Irish bands can play their polkas really fast.
- Hornpipe: Step hop dance, slower.
- Waltz: 3-time dance.

In more advanced ECD note that not all dances in 3-time are waltzes – many Playford ones in particular are 3-time hornpipes, although you wouldn't step-hop to them. These tend to have set tunes anyway though.

In all of these, I find that the most reliable way to get the band to choose a set that will really fit the dance is if I can sing or "yip-di" the rhythm to them beforehand, and let them choose something that fits. Even if it's a set tune it helps to get the feel I'm after. Do a little dance on the spot if you need to!

You do need to know how many bars the dance is. Most bands will have 32-bar versions of most tune types, and some 48-bar jigs, but don't take it for granted. Many bands have a couple of 48-bar jigs but will struggle if you ask for four! If it's a set tune you should check for disagreements over where the repeats are, especially if it's a Playford one!

Dances with a set tune

If it's a dance with a set tune then that gets you off the hook from selecting a tune, but you should still know the tune style so you balance the styles of music over the evening. And you should also get a feel for whether it's a good tune. The ECD world has a huge repertoire of modern dances to set tunes, and a lot of bands complain about the number of frankly naff tunes they are asked to play. If you're picking dances with set tunes, try to pick ones you expect the band to enjoy playing – and give them the right of veto!

Introduction

What introduction will the band give? Two notes? Four bars? "Four potatoes" (in the case of contra)? A 16-bar long indulgent introduction (known to some ceilidh bands)?

Whatever it is, make sure you know and are ready to call so that people start at the right time. I find it's worth telling less experienced people that the dance starts "after the introduction", so they know to wait.

Signals

It is your job to confirm when the music should stop. I tend to tell the band about 8 bars before the end of the tune that there are two times left (to give time for them to do some dynamics if they want), by signalling with two fingers. You can use one finger one time beforehand. Be prepared to give reassuring confirmation when they should actually stop if they look at you (I use a fist for "no times").

Never expect the band leader to count to more than 2. It's hard enough playing an instrument as it is!

It's fine to actually talk to them too if you need to!

Look out for dances which aren't the same length as the tune. E.g. have you got a 64-bar dance with a 32-bar tune? If so, are they expecting you to tell them the number of times of the tune or the dance? Expect the former; I'll often make a point of showing two fingers to the band leader as I'm saying "one more time" and check he/she has understood me to make sure there's no confusion.

Calling during the dance

When the call starts, you've got a number of objectives:

- Make sure everyone succeeds in getting through and enjoying the dance. This involves:
 - Imparting the moves.
 - Imparting the *timing* of the moves.
- Imparting energy, through the way you call.
- Getting out of the way so the dancers can enjoy the music.

Imparting the moves

The calls you give during the dance need to be short and using the same language as you used during the walkthrough. The hard work was done during the walkthrough, and by this point hopefully you've set the dancers up such that all they have to do is reproduce the path that they've walked already, following language they've already followed.

Imparting the timing

When I was younger I was once persuaded to go to France with a group of musician friends. They had a common French friend who was studying in the UK and having a party for his extended family and friends, and they wanted me to call as I had done for them many times. "But I don't speak French!" "No problem, we'll work it out!"...

Turned out the French family didn't speak much English either. It ended up with me calling in English, and the host translating my calling into French as we went along. Which was fine until we got to the dance itself, and I realised just what happens when you give people the right calls at the wrong time!

When you're calling during the dance, a large part of what you're doing is imparting timing. Sometimes you'll do a call just for timing. For example, in a ceilidh dance which starts with the first couple galloping down the set, even when you're sure everyone knows how it goes, you might call "First couple gallop down" or even just "First couple" to remind them it's their turn to go, and that it's time to start the next time through, even if some people are still swinging.

I generally time the call to finish one beat before the new phrase of music. E.g.:

"First couple gallop down"
5 6 7 8 1

The actual command is the move itself (in this case, "gallop down"), which is the bit that wants to be just before the move starts and which indicates its timing. You can precede this

with additional description such as who's doing it, and follow it with reinforcement information that can be given once it's started, or even information that tells them where to stop. For example, "men face, allemande left... [*move starts*] go once and a half, face your partner...".

Thinking time

It's better to call too early than too late. And people almost always call too late. Remember that, before the move starts, people need time to:

- Hear your call.
- Process it.
- Work out what that means they're going to do.
- Get themselves in the right place and moving in the right direction such that they can execute the move without it feeling awkward.

I've never met a caller who I've thought called too early. Nearly every new caller calls too late.

You can increase the thinking time available without compromising timing by saying who's doing the next move, where to face etc. well ahead of the actual command.

Calling to the beat

Something I try hard to do when I'm calling during the dance is to call to the beat of the music. It probably helps to be a musician to do this, but even non-musician callers should be able to follow the beat. I do this because:

- It's more pleasant to listen to.
- It adds energy to the dance (without needing to use cliché phrases such as "here we go").
- It makes the timing of the moves clearer.
- It actually makes people dance to the music better!

It's difficult to write about, so all I'd say is, practice making every call to a beat. The tricky bit is that you want to *finish* each call at the end of a phrase, not start each call at the beginning of one – so you need to consider the length of the whole call before you say it. Eventually that becomes automatic – I don't plan every call to the beat, I just give approximately the right time for the call and vary the stresses as I'm saying it such that it fits well enough.

If I'm doing something unexpected where you need the dancers to wake up and pay attention, as well as raising my voice very slightly, I bend the timing of my call so it's slightly *off* the beat. That jars and makes it stand out, so people listen to it more.

Once you get the hang of it, it's possible to do call rhythmically during the walkthrough too, which is sometimes appropriate, either to give a feel for how long something takes, or to get the dancers tuned to the right rhythm early on in the walkthrough.

Dropping the calls

Ideally, you want to drop the call when everyone has got the hang of the dance. But what to drop first?

Factors which make it more likely that a move can be dropped earlier than others:

- It's got good "storyline" – it follows naturally from the previous move.
- If the move is started late, it doesn't break the dance. Especially if it's reversible – e.g. "star right, star left", where if you start the star right a bit late it doesn't matter since you just star left a little less too.
- Everyone does it, so unconfident dancers can follow the confident ones.

For example, if doing a cast and arch into a swing, the "swing" call can be dropped early – it's easy to remember that a swing comes next, everyone does it, and if it's left out it doesn't matter.

Conversely, a move probably wants to be dropped later if:

- It starts from an anonymous position (e.g. after lines forward and back – anything could follow that).
- The timing is tight, such that if some people start late they might not get to the following move in time. Especially if they finish in a different position.
- It's done by only some people, so they have to have the confidence to do it themselves rather follow more confident people.

It's possible to subtly hint that calls are going to start being dropped. If you've got a right-hand star followed by a left-hand star, some beginners might get confused if you say "right-hand star" and drop the call for the left-hand star, because they're waiting for your call for the timing. If instead you just say "stars" however, it makes it clear that you're not going to call the left-hand star separately.

Likewise, "first couple" might be all you need to say to confirm that it's time for the first couple to do their special move – they know what it is but need confidence and/or timing.

Counting

It's important to be able to count so you can bring the band out at the right time. I use several strategies:

- Count on my fingers. This is my most reliable strategy. No-one ever seems to notice.
- Find a confident set and remember who started at the top.
- In a longways set, remember that it usually alternates between a couple standing out at each end, and everyone dancing – which helps avoid off-by-one errors.

Number of times

5 minutes or so seems to be a good dance length, which translates to 8-10 times for most dances. Contras tend to go a bit longer; 11 is my default, but it at least partly depends on what the music is doing and I'll often do longer.

You should always spend longer dancing than walking, so if it's a long walkthrough I'll often run the dance longer too.

I don't like spending ages walking a complex Playford dance only to run it three times and stop; I'll usually run it through again at least once (or make it progressive!). I usually don't stop after the dance has gone round once, if it's going to be done again; it seems to me a waste of time to stop only to start again.

Sometimes if people aren't getting it such that they're not enjoying it it's better to cut your losses earlier. Conversely, if people take quite a few goes through to really understand it, don't stop it when it finally starts working well – give them the reward of relaxing into the dance and really enjoying it!

If you think you know in advance how many times you're going to do a dance, let the band know. Also make sure you've arranged how much notice they want for when to stop: 8 bars, one time, or two times?

If the dancers start looking at you once the dance has been going on for a bit, or start making mistakes, they're probably getting bored. It's important not to stray too far away from audience expectations and stamina!

Getting the call wrong

It happens. I generally find it happens in one of two places:

- First time through. If it keeps going then great, if not then it's only the first time, no big problem with stopping the dance, laughing about it, and trying again. The dancers will almost certainly forgive you!
- Later when everyone knows the dance, I'm starting to think about other things and I accidentally say the wrong thing. Almost always they do the right thing anyway, at which point I make sure I call it right again next time through to undo any confusion I might have introduced, and start to drop the calls.

Ethos

Emotional impact

When you're standing on stage with a microphone, your emotions will be reflected on everyone else. If it's obvious that you're not having fun then neither will the audience. Think about the emotions you can have and the impact they will have on the audience:

- Excited
- Nervous
- Energised
- Confident
- Calm
- Frustrated
- Tired

- Having fun

Which are good? Which are bad?

Some emotions can be both. An evening I got particularly good feedback from was one where I was under the weather with a cold and sat on a stool all evening – because it forced me to be very calm all evening, which was reassuring to the dancers. I had no energy in that event but it was a Playford ball with a number of people who weren't that experienced, and apparently it put them at ease.

Making mistakes

Everyone makes mistakes. If you make a mistake, laugh about it, apologise, and move on. If you beat yourself up about it then you'll just make everyone else feel bad too – and more worried about going wrong themselves! They don't want blood, they want a good time. Tommy Cooper made a very successful career by at least appearing to do magic tricks badly, and while you do really want to be as competent as you can be, you really can get away with a lot as long as you have the audience on side.

If the band screws up, never blame them, and if possible take the flack (e.g. for not communicating with them) – you can apologise, whereas they can't.

Positive feedback

Can you remember doing something new for the first time? That feeling of vulnerability, when you're not quite sure whether you're going to be good or bad at this? If you've not grown up with this stuff, can you remember going to your first country dancing event? Not only unsure of what it'll be like, but in front of lots of people watching, and terrified that you're going to make it go wrong for everyone else?

Our dances can be terrifying for newcomers. It's very easy to make dancers feel that they're not welcome, and for them to then give up. And as a caller it's your responsibility to make these people who have taken the step of trying out country dancing (of whatever genre) want to come back.

Most importantly, if someone gets something wrong, then don't make them feel stupid at any cost. Take full responsibility – “sorry, I didn't explain that well, let's try again”. If the dance breaks down, it's (at least publicly) your fault.

More generally, people need about five times as much positive feedback as negative (<https://www.happybrainscience.com/blog/the-ideal-praise-to-criticism-ratio-at-work-51/>). They'll be getting or assuming lots of negative feedback from the floor when they go wrong, and you need to try to balance that. It's worth explaining that they're not going to get everything “right”, and that that's ok. If there are newcomers in a regular event, I try to make the point of explicitly saying “welcome” to them. When they do well, say so. Be encouraging. Help them believe in themselves.

Gender in calling

This is a topic which has shifted over the years and there's not universal consensus yet. I'm not putting myself forward as an expert on the subject.

Gender roles can easily be a barrier to inclusivity:

- People often just want to dance with their friends – why should they be of the opposite sex? I find this is more true the younger the age profile.
- It's extremely unlikely that all of your audience are heterosexual.
- Children in particular often don't want to dance with other children of the opposite sex.
- Some people are non-binary in their gender identity.

On the other hand, many people are used to gendered calling, and some dances have very different moves for the traditional male and female roles.

In today's society, I think some things are a given in all events:

- If you use gendered terms, you must be explicit that these define a role, and that the person can be a man or a woman. It's up to their choice which role they take.
- Even if it's a man and a woman dancing together, it's their choice which way around to stand – I think it is a legitimate choice to tell people what the convention is (depending on the event) but not to tell them that they have to follow it. This means that rather than saying "put the man on the left", if I'm giving gender information, I use "if you're dancing as a man and a woman, it's customary for the man to be on the left" or "the person dancing the man's role should be on the left". If two people are the "wrong way round", it might be newcomers who don't know the convention, or it might be totally deliberate on their part. You shouldn't in general make assumptions.
- If two women have stood up to dance together, it's no longer acceptable in today's society for two men to ask them to split up. It is extremely likely that they are dancing together because they would prefer to dance with each other, not because they hadn't noticed the men in the room. For many older dancers it was considered reasonable when they learned to dance, so if people do this you need to handle it respectfully, but times have changed.
- You should not sexualise dances. 20 years ago it was considered reasonable to emphasise the opportunity to get close to or rub against people of the opposite sex. You shouldn't expect that everyone dancing the man's role is attracted to everyone dancing the woman's role, or vice versa. I know of a number of people who consider certain ceilidh callers "creepy" as a result of this.

Quite a number of callers on the ceilidh scene are now calling gender-free and some events are requesting that they do so. This has been quietly moving for a number of years and is gathering momentum. It's largely already happened in the balfolk (French dance) world, where "men" and "women" have largely been replaced by "leaders" and "followers", reflecting the roles taken by the dancers rather than the gender.

For simple dances where you can avoid bringing up gender altogether then it's likely that no-one will notice. Sometimes you can use features of the room to aid you. However

sometimes you just need to give the roles names and here probably the biggest barrier is that gender-neutral terminology hasn't reached a consensus yet.

"Leader" and "follower" terms aren't really appropriate to country dancing, because the roles are equal – the men don't "lead" the women! I'd avoid "As" and "Bs", especially if you have a longways set – try giving instructions to 1s and 2s, As and Bs, 1st and 2nd corners! Likewise calling people "left" and "right" can cause problems for many dances – calls such as "lefts right hand star" are really not helpful! "Larks" and "ravens" is a common set of terms in the USA for gender-free contra dancing, on the grounds that larks are on the left and ravens are on the right; they also have the same number of syllables as men/gents and women/ladies respectively. My wife Daisy sometimes uses "lions" and "tigers" with children.

If a dance can be called gender-free without anyone noticing then I'd encourage giving it a go. Whether to go full gender-free, or whether to use gendered terms where the roles need naming, is I think between the caller and the organiser. I tend to use gendered terms in most of the evenings I call because they're usually more complex dances, that's what the audience are usually used to, and it's what I've always done. I'm happy not to if asked. I might change my defaults in future as the scene evolves. I'm certainly a lot more mindful of the issue than I was when I started calling!

And finally

While you should always aim to be the best caller you can be, you don't need most of the stuff in here to be a good caller, and there's no magic formula.

It's human to fall foul of imposter syndrome, to question whether you're really good enough, especially if you know and respect the dancers in the room. Remember that if someone has asked you to call then they believe in you, and you should do too. Just do the best you know how to do. Anything that doesn't go the way you'd like it is just a learning opportunity for next time.

Mike Courthold always reminds callers at Chippenham Folk Festival that at the end of the day we're all actually entertainers, and I think that's a very healthy way to look at it. If the audience have a good time, we've done our job.