

How To Play For Your First Contradances:

(written by Jonathan Werk, based on collected community wisdom gathered from many sources)

Contradance is a social dance taught by a caller and danced in long sets. It has a lot of similarities with square dancing and ceilidh dancing, but has its own set of differences that can make playing for contra just a little bit different.

This guide is intended for musicians who are new to playing for contradance but probably already excel at playing in other settings. Playing for contradance is not complicated, and once you understand the ground rules it can be quite forgiving, and yet when people play for their first contradance, they often underestimate the importance of just a few key principles. Hopefully this guide will help avoid that, so that we get to enjoy dancing to your excellent music.

Choosing Tunes that Work for Contra

Every tune should be a two-part 32 measure tune with the structure AABB. Virtually every single contradance fills up 32 measures of music (64 beats) and follows that same structure. There are many many many tunes that fit this structure, so it shouldn't be hard to find enough. There are very few exceptions (such as "Fan in the Doorway" by Gene Hubert, which fits a three-part slip jig), but you don't need to worry about those. If a caller is planning to go off-template, they would let you know in advance and coordinate it with you.

Each contradance set lasts about 15 times through the music, and the ending will be cued by the caller. Most bands will play sets of two or three tunes for the duration of each dance, though you can play fewer or more as you like. Be ready to play tunes 5 times or 6 times each, sometimes more. Don't worry about dancers getting bored of tunes - they are very distracted and busy, not to mention that the caller will be speaking over the music some of the time.

Contradancing comes from a merging of multiple traditions. The music can come from any origin, whether Irish, Scottish, Quebecois, English, New England, Old-Time, Cape Breton, as long as the tunes fit the form and the phrasing is clear enough for the dancers and the

caller to follow. Some bands will also add swing, ragtime, klezmer, and pop music as well, but the core repertoire comes from the celtic traditions, primarily reels and jigs.

Two-part 32 measure tunes with the structure AABB.

To help reinforce that concept, here is a sample of some contradance choreography, with beat counts included.

Box the Cat, by Lisa Greenleaf

Section	Beat count	Dance figures
A1	8 2 6	Neighbours, right-hand balance and box the gnat Neighbours, pull-by right hand Previous neighbour, allemande left once around, returning to
A2	16	Current neighbour, balance and swing
B1	6 10	Circle left 3 places Partner swing
B2	8 8	Robins chain across to neighbour Left-hand star 4 places, face new neighbours

Each section of the tune starts a new figure in the dance, and it is very rare for a figure to cross through the phrase of the music.

Most figures in the dance are in groups of 8 or 16. Many of the dancers will be unaware that this is happening, but the music will tell them when the next move starts, by nature of the way it falls into phrases of 8 and 16 beats. Part of the magic of contradancing is that the caller will stop speaking, and the dance will continue to flow. The dancers will have learned what the figures are, and the music tells them when to proceed with each one.

Even when there are two shorter figures, the dancers will usually feel one continuous movement that adds up to 8 or 16 counts. For example, in the B1 of Box the Cat, circle left 3 places and swing your partner is effectively a 16 count move combined. No one will actually count or feel the 6 beats of circling, but the music will indicate when to end the swing to start the next move. In the A1, the right-hand pull-by combines with the allemande to fill 8 counts, in what will feel like a continuous motion. The music tells the dancers how much time they have to complete those figures before starting the balance and swing on the downbeat of the next phrase. Every contradance follows this same structure, but with different figures in different combinations.

If the music becomes misaligned from the dancers, either due to an irregularly shaped tune or a slip from the band or the caller, dancing becomes very difficult. The caller has to prompt every single figure, and dancers become disoriented or filled with uncertainty, unsure when to start each move. Many dancers won't be aware exactly what is happening, but they'll be snapped out of the flow and will find themselves struggling, for reasons unknown.

That's why we emphasize playing square tunes! Repeating for clarity: **32 measure, two-part tunes with the structure of AABB.**

Second endings, or variations in each part are totally fine, as long as it is clearly phrased in groups of 8 and 16 beats.

What about single reels with a structure of AB? What about four part tunes with the structure of AABBCCDD?

Those can all add up to the same number of measures, and the phrases have the right number of beats... but I strongly advise you not to play them for contradancing. It is so incredibly rare for a tune to be so good that it's worth doing mental math on stage while playing. It is very rare for a tune to be so good that it can't just be replaced by a tune that's the right size and shape for contradance. While you are playing, the caller is talking, and the dancers are concentrating really hard. Many of the dancers won't notice that you played an amazing tune. They will notice an amazing groove, they will notice amazing dynamics or changes in texture, but they may not even notice what tunes you are playing. You don't need to waste any effort forcing a complicated twisty tune to work for contra, when you could just play something that already fits.

Once you have more experience you'll be able to supersede my advice because you'll have a good handle on how it works, but until then, keep it simple.

Tempo and Style

The core of your contradance repertoire should be reels and jigs. There's room for other tunes, like marches or polkas or an dros or bourrées (as long as the beat count is correct, and the phrases are in groups of 8 and 16), but most of the tunes should be reels and jigs. Tempo should be in the **108 bpm to 126 bpm** range. Reels should be on the quick side, jigs should be on the slow side. If every set is pushing 126 bpm, the dancers will tire out quickly, so give them a chance to recover by playing a variety of tempos across that range in your different tune sets. Watch the dancers while you play, and see if they are running to keep up with the music (possibly too quick) or finishing figures early and standing around to wait for the next one (possibly too slow).

Experienced contradance bands ensure that the music is going to be suitable for the dance that is being called. The caller may show their card to the band in advance, or offer a suggestion of feel or style. Matching the music to the dance is secondary to having clear 8 beat phrasing, but it can really enhance the dance experience. A dance that has a lot of balance/stomping figures like long wavy lines or petronella twirls might call for driving reels with heavy groove, whereas a dance with a lot of smooth traveling figures like heys-for-four, poussettes, turning by right shoulders might call for smooth and lyrical jigs. Some dances will have contrasting figures in the A part from the B part, so you could pair those with tunes that have striking differences between the A and B parts. Many dances don't have a strong feel themselves, so you can choose tunes more freely, and the dancers will respond to the mood set by your music.

Examples of Tunes That Are Not Good Choices

These examples are just to help you avoid some common traps.

Hommage à Gilles Laprise (Philippe Bruneau). This is an extraordinarily fun tune, and on the surface it appears to follow the rules of AAB; however, it has very deceptive phrasing. The entire B part sounds like it is offset by one count. Half of the dancers are going to hear the false downbeat and adjust to fit the music, and half the dancers will continue moving one beat at a time, and since they aren't together, everybody is going to feel lost at sea. The caller will usually get fooled by the B part as well. The return of each A part should be a very clear moment where the dancers can arrive together and regroup and celebrate, but with this tune, half of the dancers are going to be surprised because they thought there was still one beat remaining. I write this from experience because a lot of musicians in Quebec really really really want to play this tune for contradancing and the result is always the same.

Marche au camp (Jean-Paul Loyer). This gorgeous smooth jig is a favourite to play, but turns out to be bad for contradancing because the A part does not feel neatly grouped in phrases of 8. More like 9 and 7 or something, but really just a continuous 16 without a clear demarcation of the groups of 8. It's a shame, because the tune is lovely, but it often leaves people quite lost or uncertain during the A part. You could make a case for playing this tune when the A part of the dance consists only of 16 count figures (for example, a hey-for-four, followed by a partner balance and swing) but not only is that rare, it's also a big gamble. It'd be wise to play a different tune.

Fleure de mandragore (Michel Bordeleau). There's an extra beat at the end of the A2. A lot of New England contradance bands take that beat out and play the tune as if it were square. I advise caution, because if you already are comfortable with the tune in its original form, there is a big risk that you'll slip into auto-pilot and become detached from the dancers.

There are so many tunes that are already excellent for contradancing, so there's no good reason to spend a lot of effort making an inadequate tune adequate, when instead you can make an excellent tune even more excellent.

Starting and Ending the Dance

Almost every dance will be started with "four potatoes" or a count-in in the form of four beats played by the band (usually the back-up instrument, such as guitar or piano, but can be played by any instrument). The caller will fit their first call into these four beats and the dancers will know exactly when to start, so they start out the dance already lined up with the music. There's not much more to say about the four potatoes, but play them loudly and clearly enough that the first one will clearly cut through the noise of the hall, so that there's no doubt what's coming. Sometimes, instead of the four potatoes, you can play a melodic tag that fills up four beats of music; however, that's less clear. Check with the caller first.

The caller chooses when the dance ends and will signal the band. The caller will clarify their signals with you before the dance, but an example of what most callers will do is to give you a hand signal indicating how many times left (for example 3 more times) during the B part, which means 3 more complete times through the tune after the end of this one. When they signal 1, it means finish this time and play 1 more. A closed fist usually signals "Out at the end of the tune." They will only signal for the end of the dance set as a whole, not for individual tunes. You may change tunes at will while the dance is going.

The caller may provide some other signals as well, such as asking you to speed up or slow down (when they signal this, try to adjust the tempo in a gradual or subtle manner. It probably only needs a few clicks difference). At the beginning of each dance, watch the caller to see how they react to the tempo you set, in case it needs an adjustment. The caller may also end a dance prematurely if something totally melts down, probably with the closed fist gesture. If it's a manual shutdown, don't play to the end of the tune, just drop out and let the caller solve the problems.

It can be helpful to have a quick conversation with the caller beforehand to get to know how they like to communicate with the band.

The Whole Evening

Most contradance evenings are divided in two halves with a short break in between. There could be four to six contradances followed by one waltz in each half, so it is good to be prepared with at least **eleven or twelve sets of tunes, plus two waltzes**. Having more sets to choose from can let you react to the dances and the mood of the evening. Waltzes are much less structured; choose the tunes at your own discretion and play them as long or as short, fast or slow as you like. I would recommend a tempo of around 110-120 bpm to the quarter note, and to stick to waltzes that have phrases of four or eight bars, but if you choose to deviate from that, it's entirely your choice, and most dancers will still enjoy it.

In between each dance, the caller will give a quick walk-through of the choreography, so you get frequent short breaks to discuss the upcoming sets; however, try not to play too loudly, or the dancers will be distracted from hearing the caller's instructions.

Examples

Here are a few videos of great contradance bands. This is just a small selection.

["Crowfoot" at Glen Echo, MD Contradance 2012-12-07 / CALLER: Mary Wesley - YouTube](#)

[Dance Flurry 2014: Mary Wesley & Tidal Wave 2/15/14 - YouTube](#)

[Contra at Youth Dance Weekend 2017 - YouTube](#)

[YDW 2018 - Nova - Contra Dance - YouTube](#)

[Stomp Rocket & Will Mentor @ Montreal Contradance - YouTube](#)

[Portland, Maine Advanced Contra Dance 7/21/17 Joy Compass with Dugan Murphy - YouTube](#)

[Chimney Swift at Beantown Stomp - YouTube](#)

[LCFD Dance Camp: Donna Hunt & Nor'easter 10/19/13 String of Swings - YouTube](#)

[Contra Dance Chattaboogie - Seth Tepfer & Buddy System - Heart of Joy - YouTube](#)

Advanced Tips

Some bands do some very cool stuff that appears to violate the advice being given in this document. They get away with it because they understand the dancing very well, and are probably extremely experienced contradancers themselves. There is a wide and fascinating world of possibilities, but don't fly too close to the sun too soon. Once you have gained some experience playing for contradances, the nuances of what will work and what won't

work will become more clear and you can make your music even more special than it already is. Go wild!

I've harped on again and again about playing tunes with clear 8-beat phrasing, but the truth is that the phrasing is more important than the tune, and letting the groove continue without melody can be an excellent special effect, as long as the groove has clear 8-beat phrasing. Don't lose track of where you are in the tune!

When you have a cool idea, play it more than once. The dancers are very busy and they'll have more opportunities to appreciate your cool ideas if you repeat them or draw them out longer.

Conclusion

The most important takeaway is that **every tune should be a two-part 32 measure tune with the structure AABB**. Tunes that have a clear sense of 8-beat phrasing are strongly preferable to any tune that could be described as winding or twisty. The dancers won't be able to tell how smart you are, but they will know how good you make them feel. Come prepared with at least two waltzes and at least eleven or twelve tune sets with a variety of flavour and style.