



South East Region Teachers Association

Preparing a Dance Programme for Dancers and Musicians

Ian Muir

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Photo: Stephen Webb

For many years we have enjoyed dancing to the music of Ian Muir and the Craigellachie Band, but it made a very interesting change to hear Ian's views expressed, not only through his music, accompanied by Judith Muir, but in his own words too.

As inspiration, Ian had taken Shakespeare's "If music be the food of love, play on." (Twelfth Night – Act I Scene I) Ian told us he was first asked to play for a dance in 1975 and reflected on the popular dances of that time – The Lea Rig, The Shepherd's Crook and Rest and Be Thankful. It is more difficult now to get good crowds and although the number of dancers is declining,



the number of dances has not diminished at all; something we all need to think about.

The objectives of the session were to explore the nuances and issues around what makes a good programme, look at the contribution that music makes to the dance in terms of variety and atmosphere, 'unpick' the different tune types and, from the musicians' point of view, think about what makes a nightmare programme. All were interspersed with dancing to illustrate a point.

We were given cards with the essential ingredients for organizing a dance – type of function, cost, band or CDs, recaps, food, dance floor etc. and in discussion arranged them in a 'Diamond 9' formation with the most important at the top, least at the bottom. Did we agree? What sort of programme do we put together to fulfil the purpose of our dances? If the function is a celebration, then often the setting or the band are more important than the dances themselves as most will come for the event. One club has a 'John Drewry' night with walk-throughs or a 'Bangers and Mash' night; each producing a 'cracking' atmosphere.

If we think about why people would want to come to a dance, do we need to engineer our programme to maximize this? The chief considerations are the dancers' expertise and difficulty of the dances, first and last dances, 'pot-boilers', how many dances are in each half, walk-throughs, a balance of formations, modern or old dances, formations and their sequences and the type of people you wish to attract (novices for instance). Ian also suggested we needed to think about the physical nature of the dance – how many times do we see Muirland Willie on a programme nowadays? The very number of dancers in a hall can make down the middle and up in a dance difficult – all add to the debate. Those to avoid are definitely programmes by committee, everyone's favourite dance or 'first dances' from the previous years as balance is lost; nor is it a good idea to have a programme with half the dances devised by local dancers.

What other dimensions does the musician bring? What is the musician's perspective? Ian entreated us to think of the musicians, especially for the first dance when they, just as dancers, have to warm up. Ray Milbourne, for example, is a very difficult tune to play and we must consider the variety of styles and types of tune. What was the key of the original tune? What are the acoustics like in the hall? An echo, for example, causes the band to play in a completely different way. Musicians have to watch the floor and make sure they slow down if the dancers need it. Think about the length of dances, whether they are 32, 40, 48 bars long – too many 40 and 48 bar dances can be killers for the musicians AND the dancers. Encores and the end of the dance are all part of the musicians' preparations.

Continuing the theme of Shakespeare with "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't it" (Hamlet – Act II Scene II), we then looked into tune types linked to dances and found "but, for mine own part, it was Greek to me." (Julius Caesar – Act I Scene II) Ian painstakingly described and played the different reel types which occur; a Single Reel, such as Maxwell's Rant, is mainly crotchets whereas a Hornpipe, typically Catch the Wind, has many notes and always ends with "yum pum pum". A Double Reel – The Montgomery's Rant is one – again has lots of notes and is very different from the first two while a Pipe Reel, such as Mrs Macpherson of Inveran, has different sequences because of the limited range of notes in a pipe scale. We then went on to dance The Montgomery's Rant with each of the four tune types to appreciate the difference.

A band really needs to be able to explore its repertoire and the range of music is severely limited if only one of these four types were to be chosen in compiling a programme. Careful thought must be given to a set of tunes and Ian can engineer the music to compliment the dances. He suggested going back to the CD to listen to the tunes and not to pick dances because a dancer likes the tune – this can be problematic too.

Moving on to jig time, The Frisky was our example of a Single Jig and showed a nice relaxed tempo, but a Double Jig has many more notes and we could hear this in Machine Without Horses. Pipe Jigs are more frenzied because of the limited range again, such as in The Duke of Atholl's Reel.

In strathspey time, we sometimes find that all the dances on a programme are Slow Airs (such as Miss Gibson's Strathspey), but the one tune which defines the whole of Scottish Country dancing and is unique to the Scottish tradition is the Scotch snap and should never be excluded. The Fiddle Strathspey was never meant for dancers but as exhibition tunes for musicians to show off their virtuosity. Ian told us that the music for The Dream Catcher, which we danced, has provoked some interesting outbursts; the original tune was composed as a concert piece, not for dancers – would it be as popular though with a different tune?

With “To play or not to play the original tune, that is the question” (Hamlet – Act II Scene II), the ‘old chestnut’ had raised its head.... As Ian freely admitted, he has got into a lot of trouble for not playing the original tune over the years! However, as he explained, there is probably a good reason why this happens. Scottish music is both stylistically and technically demanding and some tunes are simply too difficult to play or so distinctive that finding a matching set of tunes can be a bit of a nightmare. Do the dancers want a band to struggle with a tune nearly ruining the dance? Certain original tunes are dire musically and some we are simply used to and actually prefer without the original, such as The Montgomeries' Rant, top of the world's most popular dances. Ian showed us dances which share the original tune (often unbeknownst to the dancers) and which could easily appear on the same programme, thus duplicating music in an evening. Original tune or not? The jury is still out!

We then analysed ‘nightmare’ programmes where too many dances were danced 4/5 times through, had 40+ bars or tricky tunes or were

not well known. Ian's view is that, if we are struggling to get people to come, we must think more deeply.

"This is the true beginning of our end" (A Midsummer Night's Dream Act V Scene I) brought to a close a very thought-provoking afternoon.

Deborah Draffin

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