



South East Region Teachers Association

Music and Teaching SCD

Muriel Johnstone accompanied by Ian Robertson

19 March 2019

Reporter: Jan Collings



“Dancing is music made visible,” was Muriel Johnstone’s opening chord* when she and Ian Robertson led our fully booked SERTA workshop. She and Ian were fresh from playing at the previous night’s Watford and West Herts 100th Anniversary Caledonian Ball and they have 100 years of Scottish music and teaching experience between them. (**The quote is from George Balanchine, influential 20th century choreographer.*)

Muriel and Ian led the discussion of music and teaching of SCD, how to maximise the benefit of music in a class, working with musicians and recorded music, and techniques to get the best from microphone equipment. They also got us to experience dances at different tempos and it was a delight to witness the wonderful

interaction of two musicians totally at ease and in synch with each other playing so beautifully. Muriel and Ian didn't disappoint!



Music and teaching

When getting ready for a class, music choice should be top of the preparation list both for warm up and dances. Scottish music can be unfamiliar to many new dancers so the moment you arrive at the hall, play music to increase their familiarity. It's important to keep the warm up interesting, so don't choose the same warm-up music and routine each time, brighten it up with marches, ragtime or even ABBA. For step practice make sure that the beat in the bar and the eight bar phrases can be clearly heard. Use simple reels for practising pas de basque, and for strathspeys slow down the music so dancers can think about the placement of their feet. Tell the dancers what the tune is, who wrote it and who's playing. Give them gentle transitions throughout the teaching process into fully performing the dance. Always remember the RSCDS manual is a great resource with pages showing lists of tunes that can be used.

Muriel gave the example of Stan Hamilton as a model of "steady as a rock" time keeping when using recorded music for a class. Also, the 'Amazing Slowdowner' is a great tool that can be used with digital recordings to find the best speed and can be purchased on line relatively cheaply.

A good step practice CD is '*With the Music, Ready..... And!*', devised for the RSCDS by Peter Knight with music arranged and played by Muriel Johnstone and recorded in 1986. It's now out of print, but copies can still be found on book/CD stalls at Day Schools. Muriel

advised if it were to be reprinted it would benefit from an update, and Jane Rose agreed to write to the RSCDS to discuss this.



If you can get a musician to play for your class and they are new to SCD music, start them off playing eight bars at a time initially, then build up. Give them support, allowing them time to improve. Don't leave any musician sitting around getting cold, keep them busy and involved. If something is amiss with the music or a change of tempo is needed, speak to them quietly and privately – don't shout across the room. In a class environment the teacher should ensure the musician can see and hear them on the floor, especially when using a radio microphone.



Dancing to a different tempo

Muriel demonstrated the correct way to bow and curtsey to the chord at the beginning of the dance. She and Ian demonstrated three different ways of playing the chord and explained why a “pick-up” note is helpful before the chord.

We also danced ‘Berwick Johnnie’ and ‘The Deil among the Tailors’, again danced in two different rhythms – jig and reel. The two dances are virtually the same but felt very different in the two different rhythms and possibly explains why “De’il among the Tailors” is the more popular – the tune is great!

‘The Montgomeries’ Rant’ was originally devised as a strathspey-reel (probably a medley), which we danced in reel-time and then

strathspey time. All agreed it was much better danced in reel-time. We finished with a revitalised version of the 'The Lea Rig Strathspey' with a very peppy reel tune.

The right tune

Muriel doesn't find it necessary to always use an original dance tune for class teaching, dancers should be supported with music that works for the lesson. At a dance or ball, original tunes are usually only played at the beginning and end of each dance, with other tunes played in between. However, Ian pointed out the cracking original tune is invariably the reason for a requested encore, but they are often repeated with totally different tunes.

Muriel played various examples of recorded music to give us a feel for the different styles of other artists, and to show you can use any music to get people to move in a class situation. Muriel then played recordings of her own band, showing the layering of the individual musicians. She started with the full mix, followed by one or two of the musicians playing separately, finishing with the complete mix again – totally fascinating!

Musicians and MC working together

Muriel and Ian talked about the importance of the partnership between the band and MCs at a dance. When announcing a dance keep it simple such as "Make up four-couple sets for the 'The Wild Geese'. Don't add unnecessary comments as the band wants to get on and play some music to enthuse the dancers.

Often the band needs to react to changes in the room and they are reliant upon the MC noticing and giving feedback if something is awry with the sound. Every band wants their sound to be the best it can be, and reputation hangs on their last gig.

Temperature change can cause instruments to go out of tune and humidity is an even worse factor. People in the room absorb some of the higher frequencies, some leave a dance early, and this change

in dancer numbers can make a big difference in the sound quality. The MC can help the band become aware the sound has changed so they can quickly assess what needs to be altered while still playing. It's useful for the MC to have someone reliable on the dance floor who will indicate to them if there is a sound problem.

Working the microphone

Ian Robertson set up the microphone and gave dancers the opportunity to practice and gave advice for teachers and MCs. Use a normal speaking voice and don't shout. Make a point of speaking more slowly and clearly, particularly in larger halls where there can be a big echo. Higher pitched voices don't come across well and it's important for ladies to try and speak in a lower register to be better understood. Microphones will be used better on a stand rather than hand held, and they are expensive items, so don't tap them, either blow gently or do a "Testing one, two, three" sound check. Always switch off the microphone at the handset after use (and remember to switch it on again).

It was a wonderful workshop and Muriel and Ian generously shared their knowledge and experience, hopefully making us better teachers and MCs. A great day!

Jan Collings (24/03/19)

