



## South East Region Teachers Association

### **The Chicken and the Egg** *or was it The Egg and the Chicken?* **Ian & Judith Muir** **Sept 2016 Weekend**

Reporters: Robert & Maggie Morgan

Photo: Stephen Webb

SERTA members were treated once more to a brilliant challenge from Ian and Judith, to think of the interface between the dancer and the musician. What the class musician (for those of us lucky to have one!) brings to the class, what support the teacher can expect of the musician, and



what the musician might expect of the teacher. But this presentation was not only relevant to those who are fortunate to work with class musicians, there were many valuable hints about music and teaching that gave us food for thought and ideas to enhance our teaching. Each point was ably illustrated as it arose.

Ian told us that the learning and enjoyment of dancing is hugely affected by the way the music is played. Good Country Dance musicians will lift the dancers rather than drive them into the floor. They achieve this by really understanding the dancers' needs and getting "inside" the music. They adjust where the notes sit in the phrase and subtly drive the dancers forward.

We were reminded of the different styles of Scottish dance music. Dancers think in terms of jigs, reels and strathspeys, but for the musician, there are many different styles of music within those categories. Jigs can be Single Jigs, Double Jigs, Two Steps or Pipe Jigs; Reels can be Hornpipes, Single Reels or Double Reels; and Strathspeys are either Traditional Strathspeys (with the "Scottish snap"), Slow Airs or Song tunes (without the "snap"). We were challenged to identify the type of tune and name the dances. Ian reminded us that a well-balanced social dance programme should comprise a variety of music styles to provide variety for dancers and musicians. I have always tried to include a suitable mix of formations in my programmes. Now I need an additional column in my matrix for music styles.

Ian also reminded us that as dancing is moving to music, one of our roles as teachers is to help our classes to listen to the music and dance in time to it. He suggested that to do this, we should use a variety of simple tunes with a very positive rhythm for learning the steps and sometimes vary the pace and style during the practice. We should encourage dancers to feel the difference between Jigs & Reels and the types of Strathspey. Class musicians can alter pace and type while dancing. Using recorded music the pace can be varied, but the type can only be changed by changing the track, or do some very clever compilation. Ian observed that very complex/busy "named tunes" can make learning difficult and suggested they could be replaced by simpler tunes of similar style to facilitate learning. He also said that contrary to popular belief a class musician can play 4 bars if that is what is wanted and can assist in many other ways e.g. play quietly to detect foot dragging.

Ian summarised what the class musicians do to support and help the teacher. They prepare sets of music to suit the dances, play at constant speeds, pay attention to teacher and dancers and respond to their needs. He said, the musician is an unobtrusive, but a positive musical presence.

Ian then went on to talk about what the musician expects from the teacher. He said that the musician needs plenty of notice of the lesson plan to get suitable sets of music together. As a minimum this should be at least 24 hours for a class programme, or 2-3 weeks for a day school. In planning programmes, teachers should be aware that musicians also need to warm up. In a class warm up the musician can choose suitable music which may not be Scottish, but for a social dance programme a simple jig tune is best.

Positioning of the teacher within the class is crucially important. The musician should always be able to see the teacher and vice versa. For a slick performance, the teacher should know how many bars of music they want played and if using the tune for the dance, which bars. Ian reminded us that the rhythm of the “ready and” indicates the pace required and we should take more care to get this right. He also said we should involve the musician as much as possible. The worst sin a teacher can commit is to ignore the musician. The second cardinal sin is to deviate from the planned programme. We should keep the musician busy, keep them involved and keep to plan. If the teacher wants the musician to talk about the music they should always ask in advance as some really dislike it and should not be put on the spot.

So what does come first? The chicken or the egg? Without music there would be no dancing, but without dancing there would be no need for musicians.

The most important thing is for teacher and musician to work together and respect each others’ needs.