



South East Region Teachers Association

Dancing technique Paul Plummer March 2013

Reporter: Judy Snook

Photo: Stephen Webb

SERTA met for its spring workshop in March 2013. Paul Plummer, our tutor for the day aided by Christina Hood with her fiddle, took us from teaching raw beginners to intermediate and advanced classes. After a simple round the room warm-up dance, Paul went through the various steps, their key features, typical faults and corrections, and the use of music to support the teaching. We also picked up on the various transitions.



1. **Slip step.** The usual faults: heels down, feet parallel, dancing out of time and lack of anticipation of change of direction. We must encourage use of the balls of the feet, 90 degree turn-out, heels connecting, rhythm and the change of direction. We tried these out by practising 4 bars each way, then only 2 bars each way to keep us on our toes;

2. **Skip change of step.** The value of turn-out was emphasised in ensuring heels and insteps meet and keeping the step controlled and tidy. We discussed the use of jig versus reel time music, and it was agreed that beginners found reel time easier for skip change at first, although we are expected to use jig time in RSCDS exams. We practised transitions such as from slip step to skip change, in either direction, with various degrees of success at leading off on the right foot in skip change. We also practised rights and lefts, with emphasis on the use of ALL the music, completing the steps as we make the polite turn;

3. **Pas de basque.** Paul demonstrated teaching the pas de basque step as a sideways movement for beginners to get the beat, then reducing the spread later, and introducing the jeté to finish. We tried this in both reel time and jig time, being encouraged to notice the different feel – the ‘long, short, short’ of a jig, or the steadier ‘1, 2, 3’ of a reel – and adjust our steps to these rhythms. Many dancers do not detect this. However, we did consider whether we need to worry for beginners, who may well not hear the difference; only for an advanced class will we expect everyone to appreciate the difference. We also did transitions from skip change to pas de basque. Later in the day we danced the Golden Pheasant, a dance full of difficult transitions;

4. **Strathspey time.** We spent some time on turn-out and foot positions such as making a ‘T’ when closing feet; also a straight knee and length of step especially in strathspey travelling step. We also concentrated on toe pointing in the pull-through in strathspey travelling step. We practised set and link, making it a smooth curved formation, helping each other round. For an advanced class, we practised the dip at the start of both travelling step and setting. We practised circling, while facing in across the circle, but legs going round. We did The Braes of Breadalbane to different styles of strathspey playing, featuring

the Scotch snap, or lyrical strathspeys or slow airs, to feel the difference. Beginners need a strong beat, certainly not a slow air.

As well as these insights into footwork, we looked at other elements of dancing 'technique': we tried signalling to our partner, the ladies first being given a written sequence to get the men to join in with, and then the men had their turn. This was easier for a very simple sequence, less successful for a more challenging set of instructions.

Paul provided valuable tips on the use of the voice in teaching: we must use the diaphragm to project the voice around a hall. As far as possible, teachers should face the class, or, when the class is in a circle round you, keep turning, as lip-reading supplements hearing. Make the teaching interesting, listen to yourself, and if you make a mistake, correct yourself quickly. An occasional joke will keep attention and liven the mood. Look at the class, have they gone to sleep, wake them up! Plan ahead but be flexible, depending on the numbers and abilities of the group. Avoid individual criticism, but tactfully indicate faults without embarrassing anyone.

The day was an excellent mix of practical elements and discussion, which included considering the use of original tunes for dances. If we learn a dance to a particular tune or track, it can seem wrong to use the nominated tune later. Some dances are seldom danced to the correct tune such as The Montgomeries' Rant and Black Mountain Reel. We should discuss choice of music with our musicians. They will be able to advise and help a teacher or a programme deviser and add to the whole experience. When using recorded music but lacking the correct tune, listen first and choose, as best you can, tracks to suit the dance. In this respect Christina's playing and her choice of music added extra enjoyment to Paul's teaching.

We also talked about the integration of 'reelers' and RSCDS dancers – can this be a gentle progression? Too much emphasis on steps too early will put people off. To put on a ceilidh as a starter event, and lead on to a relaxed style of class, will get some people wanting to

improve their technique in time. We should concentrate first on rhythm, then hands and then feet.

Paul reminded us finally that, whilst dances around Europe may be better identified by the costume than by style of dance or steps, Scottish country dance is instantly recognisable, but still developing, with new formations using the old steps. It is a living tradition.

We were very fortunate to be able to share some of Paul's insights in doing our bit to further that tradition.

Judy Snook