

Notes for New Players

This document is meant to help new players integrate into Contra Dan's without taking an inordinate amount of our limited rehearsal time.

Overview

Purpose of Contra Dan's

- To play for contra dances, and to be the best contra dance band we can be.
- To teach and support individuals to become the best contra dance musicians they can be.

Rehearsals

Although not everyone can come every single time, attendance is expected at most rehearsals, especially at the rehearsal before the band plays a dance.

Rehearsals are only two hours long. We socialize (generally before and after rehearsals) and we have fun, but we also work hard in the limited time we have.

Please bring your own music stand, and arrive early enough so that you are tuned and ready to play at the agreed-upon start time.

Tunes

Unless you play solely by ear, please download our official Contra Dan's tune versions from <https://www.hatds.org/contra-dans.php#tunes>. If you play by ear, please record rehearsals, and be aware that we rarely play tunes slowly.

We play medleys of two tunes for most dances except waltzes. Our medley list can be found at the same location as the tunes.

The tune folders contain parts for Bb instruments such as clarinet, trumpet, and tenor sax. If don't play one of those instruments, ignore those versions.

Playing Notes

In General

- Tempos for jigs and reels is around 115 bpm, and around 130 bpm for waltzes.
- A raised foot means there's a change coming that affects everyone. That change can be to the next tune (or in a few cases, back to the first tune), or it could signal the end of the tune. If you see a raised foot, raise your foot to acknowledge the change and to signal others who may not have seen the original raised foot.
- It is imperative that everyone look up frequently to see raised feet, hand signals, or when there's a conductor, the conductor's signals.
- For both melody and rhythm players, some separation between notes—a crispness—is desired in the jigs and reels. The goal is to give lift to the music and dancers, and to avoid the aural mud that a large band can easily produce.

- We've found that it sounds best when we end with a clean, short last note. There are a few exceptions such as Blue Jig and Tom Kruskal's, but usually only waltzes have sustained last notes, and those are 4 beats long (think **1 - 2 - 3 - off**).
- For most jigs and reels, the piano or a guitar will give a four beat introduction. For waltzes, a solo melody player will play the last four bars of the tune, unaccompanied, as an introduction, and then play the complete first time through as a solo. Rhythm players come in after the introduction.

Default road map for jigs and reels:

Tune 1

1st and 2nd times through: everyone plays.

3rd and subsequent times through: solos and subgroups play.

Tune 2

1st time through: everyone plays.

2nd and subsequent times through: solos and subgroups play.

Last time through: everyone plays.

Default road map for waltzes:

As noted above, a solo melody instrument plays the intro and first time through. Then we rotate through solos, and everyone plays the last time through. We usually play waltzes about five times through, and the featured instruments are often chosen on the spot.

For melody players:

- The rhythm section sets and keeps the tempo. Don't expect them to follow you if you rush or drag. Part of your job is to stay with *them*.
- When playing solo you are welcome to play a different version of the tune and/or improvise.
- When more than one person is playing the melody it will be Contra Dan's version of the tune.
- When playing as a section (such as fiddles), multiple players can all play the melody, or some play melody while some play harmony. Section players decide among themselves who will play what.
- If a tune is too difficult, try leaving out some notes and playing a simpler version. Many tunes were once originally simple anyway, and have become notier in the folk process.
- If you are not comfortable taking a solo and no one is conducting, it is your responsibility to communicate to the person following you in the rotation that you will be passing, not playing.
- If someone fails to play when it is their turn, then nobody—**nobody!**—plays any part of the melody for that complete time through the tune. The rhythm section will carry the dance for that iteration.
- When not playing the melody, you are encouraged to play rhythm and you are welcome to harmonize as long as you don't grab attention from the lead instrument. Harmonies should generally be lower than the melody, softer than the melody, or both.

For rhythm players:

- Keep the tempo steady and on the musical phrase, no matter what the melody section or soloist is doing. They are to stay with *you*.
- If no one plays the melody, the tune becomes a rhythm section solo. Make the most of it!
- Try to separate notes. It's really easy for strings to keep sounding into the next note, which muddies the sound. Do what you can to dampen the strings and give space between notes.
- Emphasize off beats; strong off beats are one characteristic of this style of music and dance. If you can play just off beats, great! If you need to play a downbeat in order to play the off beat accurately, that's good also; just emphasize the off beat.

Tunes to learn first

The tunes listed here are just a few of the ones that we play often. If you're not familiar with *any* of our tunes, start with these.

Over the Waterfall is the tune we use for sound checks; you may want to memorize it.

Jigs

Bad Hair / Blue Jig

Lanigan's Ball / Swallowtail

Reels

Bonaparte Crossing the Rhine / Redwing

Caliche Creek / Cold Frosty Morning (note there is a one beat rest between the tunes!)

Colored Aristocracy / Ragtime Annie (A & B parts only)

Girl I Left Behind / Huntsmen's Chorus (with kazoos and singing)

Kitchen Girl / Granny Will Your Dog Bite

Mississippi Sawyer / Four Little Girls

Over the Waterfall / Snake River Reel

Waltzes

Ash Grove

Love in the Shadows of Time

O'Carolan Medley (esp. the first two. Although grouped in a medley, we play only one at any time.)