

## NOTES ON COMPOSING CONTRAS by Al Olson

These notes were prepared rather hastily to form the basis for discussion at a contra dance workshop given at the Michigan Dance Heritage Weekend, September 23-25, 1988. They form a highly personal, opinionated, and unscholarly introduction to composing contra dances.

Since one workshop period doesn't allow much time for discussion, I hope people will feel free to talk with me about contra dances any time before or after the workshop. Of course, there will be times when I'll be unavailable because I'll be dancing or attending other workshops myself.

### A Brief History of Contra Dance

My interest focuses on "contemporary history", which is whatever happened since I started dancing in 1962. I have only a casual interest in "past history", whatever happened before then. As far as I am concerned, past history is adequately covered in Rickey Holden's The Contra Dance Book, published in 1956. The preface declares, "This is a compilation of all the contra and progressive circle dances which have appeared in readily available American literature between 1850 and 1953." The total number of dances, excluding minor variations, is 109, a remarkably small number, but there undoubtedly were a good many more dances in callers' card files everywhere.

When I started dancing, the dances I encountered were probably much like those in Holden's book. Ralph Page and Ted Sannella had undoubtedly introduced some new compositions of their own, but there was still a certain amount of restraint, a tendency toward elegance, a presumption that eight counts was the appropriate amount of time for an allemande once around. Now, in 1988, it is obvious that there have been lots of changes in contra dancing since my introduction to it back in 1962. Dancers now expect a lot of vigorous action, elegance has largely disappeared, a caller has a hard time getting dancers to use a full eight counts for an allemande once around, heys for four have been introduced, contras with much more complex patterns are acceptable, and there are a great many new dances.

It is my belief that the large number of new dances is based on just three developments. The first is the demand from the dancers for more vigor in their dancing. The second was the realization that callers could specify and dancers could respond to rotations measured in quarters. That is, circle, star, or allemande going  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{3}{4}$ , 1,  $1\frac{1}{4}$ ,  $1\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $1\frac{3}{4}$ , or 2 times around. The third is the reintroduction of the hey for four about 1975, probably by Ted Sannella in his contra Bonny Jean. With

that everything was in place and waiting for people to compose new contras. And they did! I'm a collector of contras and related New England style dances, and I now have more than a thousand in my collection.

### Why Compose Contras?

It can be argued that there is no need for new contras. With a thousand dances already available and with hundreds of them very good dances, a contra dance group can dance for a very long time without running out of "new" material. If we accept that argument, there is no need to develop new composers of contras either. However, people are going to keep on composing contras, if only because it is satisfying to the composer himself and because his dance group can have a feeling of pride in their own dances. I personally compose because I'm compulsive; when a "new" dance idea strikes me, it won't leave me in peace until I work out a whole dance pattern displaying it in a nice way. Then comes the chore of deciding whether the dance is worth circulating or not, but at least the compulsion is satisfied. Finally, people still do manage to compose dances, occasionally, which are truly distinctive and thus worthy additions to the dance repertoire, destined to become modern classics.

### Prerequisites for Composing Contras

You must know a little about the structure of contra dance music, how much time it takes to dance different figures, and how the dance figures fit the music.

Practically all music for contras has an AAB structure. That is, there is an A melody of 16 beats or counts (or dance steps), which is repeated, and a B melody of 16 beats, which also is repeated. Once through the music, AAB, has 64 beats, and the matching contra dance pattern thus has 64 steps. Each of the melodies has various subdivisions, but we need only consider that each melody breaks into two eight-beat phrases. This is important because a great many contra dance figures require just eight beats or steps to complete, and such figures usually should be danced to match one eight-count phrase.

Many composers write up dances with a notation relating dance figures to the 16-count phrases, labelling them A1, A2, B1, B2.

I prefer to <sup>use</sup> the eight-count phrases, labelling them 1, 2, 3, ..., 8, because this emphasizes the close relationship of eight-count dance figures to eight-count musical phrases. With either notation, a complete contra pattern comes out with the same 64-count total.

Each of the following dance figures usually takes a nominal eight counts to complete: forward and back, do-si-do, gypsy, half figure eight, circle four or star once around, circle six halfway, ladies half chain, half promenade, half right and left, actives go down the center ~~xxx~~ and turn somehow, actives return and cast off, go down four in line and turn somehow, return four in line and face across the set, actives go down the outside, actives return up the outside.

Figures with timing other than eight counts include: pass thru: 2 or 4 counts; balance: 4; swing: 8, 12, or 16; balance and swing: usually 16; allemande: 4-8 counts for once around; hey for four: 16; hey for three: 12 or 16; turn contra corners: 16.

A lot of good dancing takes place with the timings given, but let's go ~~back~~ back and reconsider some of these figures:

- Forward and back in long lines. Some people consider this a dull figure, particularly when it is repeated. Others consider it one of the best, for it allows ample opportunity to flirt with the opposite person.
- Do-si-do and gypsy. These can be danced leisurely in their full eight counts, but they easily can be squeezed down to six counts when the choreography calls for it. Do-si-do 1 1/2 in eight counts is quite demanding and calls for a forgiving figure before or after it.
- Half figure eight needs its full eight counts.
- Circles (four) and stars can be danced once around in eight counts easily if the dancers start the figure on time and move with determination. However, dancers left to themselves will turn only about 3/4 around in eight counts. This doesn't matter in "cir L; cir R" because everyone gets back where he started. However, one-way circles and stars <sup>in eight counts</sup> are comparatively demanding, and a caller probably will have to push his dancers to get the figures done on time.
- Circle six halfway in eight counts is very leisurely and may

leave a ~~letter~~<sup>composer</sup> with spare time. Circle six  $3/4$  around in eight counts is quite demanding (as in Sackett's Harbor), and dancers rarely complete the figure on time. Circle six once around in 16 counts is very ~~too~~ leisurely, while 12 counts is brisk, much like circle four in 8 counts.

- Ladies half chain has lots of spare time in it, as does half promenade; either figure can be done easily in six counts. Half right and left also can be done in six counts, but that's a rat race.
- In the family of figures going down the hall, turning somehow, returning, and adjusting to a final position, it is usually possible to break the action into two eight-count portions, as I have done, but that sometimes amounts to "the official wishful thinking". What is important is that the whole operation gets done within its allotted 16-count phrase.
- Pass thru. Danced across the set from a standing start in long lines, four counts is reasonable. The unit "circle L  $3/4$  (6); pass thru along (2)!" is common, with a two-count pass thru, but the ! mark indicates, in this case, a need for speed.
- Balance. Always done in four counts. This is a marvelous, powerful figure with many uses. It is unique in that it has a precise fit to its own four beats of music, and dancers love to dance balances at exactly the right time. If a whole roomful of dancers is balancing at the right time, anyone whose timing is wrong by as much as one beat will know it at once and try to do better. The balance can serve as a nice punctuation ~~mark~~ or anchoring figure in an otherwise smooth dance flow. It can be used as a shock absorber between figures which would not fit together well by themselves. In "1&2. Bal & sw N 3&4. Act sw", for example, few dancers could make a smooth transition from one swing to the other. In "1&2. Bal & sw N 3&4. Act bal & sw" (that's from Lady of the Lake) the actives can be wildly out of position after the first swing, regroup during the balance in ph 3&4, and get a nice swing with their partner. If a ~~letter~~ composer knows dancers are likely to be late in one part of his dance, and if he can follow that part with a balance, the dancers will do their

best to be on time for the balance.

I think most dancers these days use a forward and back balance in "bal & sw pt". When I left Boston in 1981, my balance was done with right hands joined, stepping forward on my right foot and bringing my right shoulder near my partner's, stepping back onto my left foot and separating from my partner. Then we pulled into our swing. Dancing in other parts of the country has made me realize that two-hand balances are just as good and that choreographic flow sometimes makes it appropriate to come forward with partners having left shoulders adjacent instead of right. Thus I now advocate right hand and two hand balances (I understand that some parts of the country use left hand balances) and, more important, right-shoulder or left-shoulder balances as called for by dance flow.

□ Allemande. The timing is quite variable, ranging from 4 to 8 counts for once around. A nominal rate easily achieved by experienced dancers is one count per-quarter turn for rotations of any amount. That would give 6 counts for a mid  $1\frac{1}{2}$ , but 8 counts would do nicely and give a more relaxed and comfortable pace. Allemandes halfway around have to be used with care; they are fine when sandwiched between balances in waves, then given 4 counts, but they should be regarded with some suspicion elsewhere. There isn't enough travel to build up a good allemande feel unless the surrounding figures are right, and the timing is iffy.

□ Swing. An 8-count swing in one of my odd-numbered phrases (the beginning of a 16-count phrase such as A1 or B2) tends to be troublesome for a caller. Dancers simply do not want to stop ~~at the~~ swinging when they should because the music doesn't speak loudly enough to them there. They are quite willing to stop swinging on time at the end of an even-numbered phrase, where the music speaks more loudly. If you use short swings in odd phrases, the caller may have to call your dance in every single change to keep the dancers with the music.

□ Hey for four. Sixteen counts is about right. Contra dancers often have difficulty completing the figure on time because of crowding or because they keep the figure too compact even when they are not crowded. Some composers try to sneak an extra step or two into a 16-count phrase along with a

hey. Some groups can handle one extra step, but few can handle two.

□ Hey for three. A 16-count hey for three is a lovely figure when it has ample space, as English country dancers know. In most contra scenes there is not that kind of space, and 12 counts is just right for a somewhat crowded hey.

□ Rough rules of thumb for estimating how long a variety of familiar and unfamiliar figures should take. I assume an ideal contra set with dancers spaced twice as far <sup>apart</sup> across the set as their spacing along the set. It takes two counts to move one position along the set, four counts to cross the set, eight to go all the way around a stationary person (four to go halfway), two to turn away from partner and get ready to go down the outside, two counts to turn alone after going down the center, four to turn as a couple, four to cast off after coming up the center. For a familiar example consider this action in a triple-minor contra: cast down the outside below two, come up the center, cast off. That's turn away from partner (2), go down the outside two positions (4), go halfway around that person (4), come up to the next person (2), cast off (4). Total of 16 counts, perfect! However, the same action can be danced in a duple minor set, in which the actives go down one position farther (because another active person has moved on) and back. This should add four counts for a total of 20, but the dancers still can do the action in 16 counts. This shows that these estimates are indeed rough, but they still can be useful for less familiar figures. Just remember that dancers can adapt their timing by an amazing amount as long as they know their destination and the allotted time.

Another prerequisite for composing contras, more important than what we have discussed so far, is to have enough dancing experience to know what figures you like, to know which transitions from one figure to another you like, to have begun to get a feel for how much time it takes to get from one place to another, and to have started to think about such things while you are dancing.

### Sources of Ideas for Your Contras

Some composers will decide to sit down and write a new contra to celebrate some occasion or other, apparently without having any particular

new dance idea in mind. I've never done that. Quite often I will get an idea from something which happens while I'm dancing. Years ago I danced Tony Parkes' Reel in C Sharp and was delighted by the way two of the dancers in a hey for three flowed from the hey to a swing with each other, but I didn't like the fact that the third person didn't fare so well. I wondered if a hey for four could have all its dancers flow nicely into swings, and this led me to a whole family of hey dances featuring that action. Another time I noticed that I liked the way a final star left took me into an initial swing with my new neighbor, and I wondered if I could get the same action with partners leaving different stars left to swing with each other. That gimmick is the heart of my Boston Baked Beans; everything else is compatible filler which suits my tastes in dancing. Ed Shaw heard a caller say, "and now we will have the actives balance and swing, as we always do after turn contra corners." He promptly decided he wanted a dance with turn contra corners, a hey, and a long partner swing not following the contra corners. It took him a while to meet that challenge, but the end result was The Dancing Sailors.

I've been lucky in having Larry Jennings give me "dance commissions" or problems to solve, such as having the men active in turn contra corners. Having a specific goal in mind gives you a focus which concentrates your attention usefully and makes it easier to come up with a dance pattern.

If you have a friend who also is interested in composing dances, getting together and talking about dancing ~~is~~ can be very productive of new ideas. One person's casual remark about something he saw at a dance somewhere may be all it takes to set the other person on his way to a new dance idea and perhaps a new dance.

One of the richest sources of dance ideas, for me, is dances from inexperienced composers who plunge in and try almost anything, perhaps because they don't know the "rules". Frequently the overall dance is quite unsatisfactory, but frequently there will be one little dance fragment or one unusual transition which is a gem. I'll take that gem and play with it and polish it

and give it the best setting I can, sometimes coming up with a nice new dance. I do try to give credit where credit is due in such cases.

The point to all this is that you need some gimmick, some idea, some goal to get you started. Then you add onto whatever you've got, both before and after it, using figures and transitions you like until you've got a full 64-count pattern.

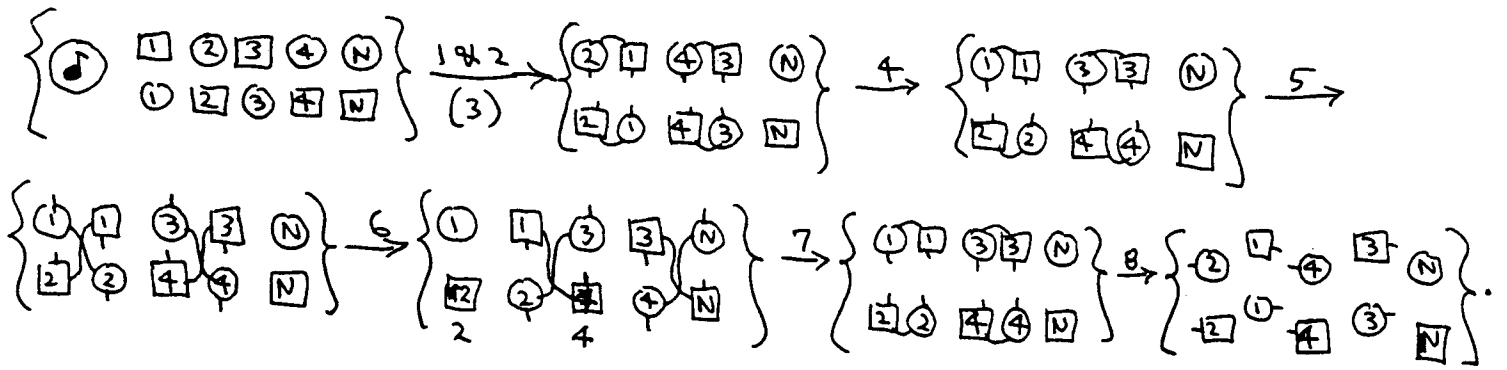
### Diagramming Your Dance

Supposedly, some composers push cups, salt shakers, glasses, and the like around on a tabletop to help them visualize the action in a new dance. Some composers have such good powers of visualization that they don't need any such aids. I like to make diagrams for my new dances because they make it easy for me to study every transition for every person and to see exactly what happens at the ends of the set. Furthermore, I can plow through my diagramming procedures even when my mind is too worn out for visualizing complex actions. Finally, I get a permanent record which I can consult later. I'll want to use some diagrams later on, so lets discuss the process now.  $\odot$  represents the music, the head of the hall.  $\square$  is a man,  $\circ$  is a woman, and dancers sometimes grow noses so you can tell which way they are facing:  $\square \rightarrow \circ$ . I'm going to be using the dance notation from Larry Jennings' book Zesty Contras, since that is what now comes naturally to me. Here's a sample dance and its diagrams:

#### BOSTON BAKED BEANS by Al Olson Duple & improper contra.

- 1 & 2. Bal & sw N    3. Long lines: fwd & bk
4.  $\frac{1}{2}$  w ch    5. Star R!    6. All separate from pt along into different stars L!
7. All sw pt!    8. Cir L  $\frac{3}{4}$  & pass thru along!





The first diagram, with  $\textcircled{!}$ , shows the starting formation, where the head of the set is located, active couples #1 & #3, inactives #2 & #4, and a neutral couple N. The diagram after the first arrow shows the positions of the dancers after ph 1&2. Ph 3 changes things so little that the same diagram suffices. The third diagram shows the positions after ph 4, and soon. In these diagrams we see that a pair of dancers waits at the head after ph 5 with nothing to do in ph 6, while the neutral couple joins in the dancing during ph 6, and we see that nothing very complicated happens at the ends of the set.

As for the dance itself, the ! marks indicate that unusual care must be taken about the phrasing. In this case the dancers have to hustle in ph 5, 6, and 8, and they must remember to stop the swing on time in ph 7, one of those notorious short swings in an odd phrase. The dance is exciting for skilled dancers but too demanding for the inexperienced. I might remind you that the whole dance grew out of my wish for the action in ph 6 & ph 7.

### Concepts for Composers

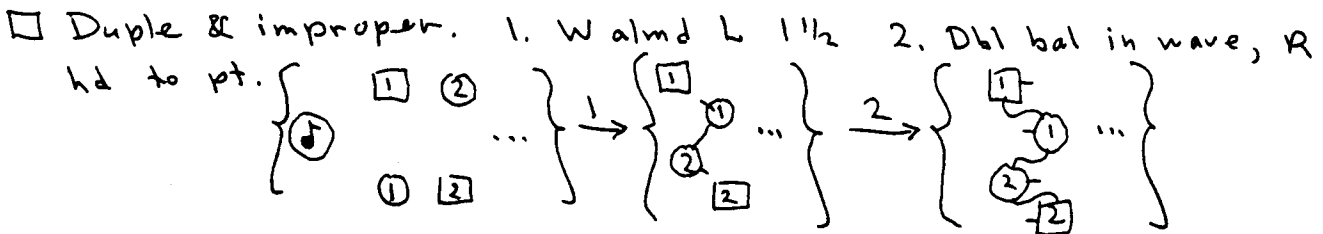
Phrasing. Dance figures simply do not cross from one 16-count phrase to another except in the most unusual circumstances. It is so important for contra dances to be danced to the musical phrase that I long objected to having figures cross my numbered eight-count phrases except for standard 16-count units such as balance and swing, hey for four and turn contra corners; such units must fill a ~~16-count~~ single 16-count musical phrase. More recently I have begun to accept figures which use all of one eight-count subphrase and a bit of the other one within a 16-count phrase (like A2 or B1),

something like "star. L  $1\frac{1}{4}$  (10); allemanda R with someone from the next star (6)". Finally, long exposure to Jed's Real has gotten me to accept, reluctantly, "3&4. M: bal; dsd; alnd R  $1\frac{1}{2}$  !" just because that dance gives so much pleasure to so many dancers despite this "defect".

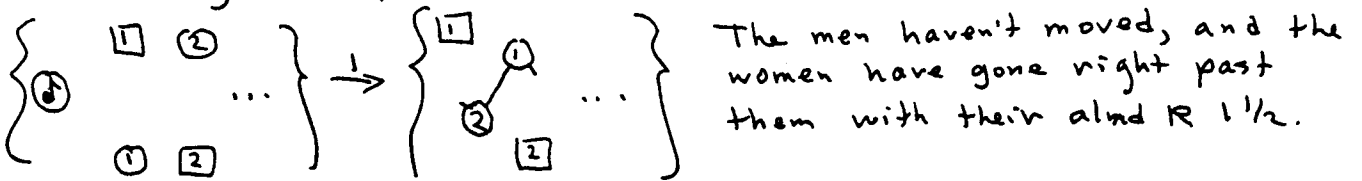
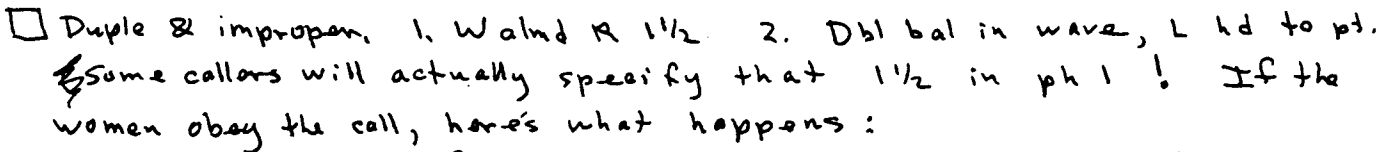
Another kind of phrasing involves common pairings such as "Cir L; cir R", "star R; star L", "Wch; ret", " $\frac{1}{2}$  prom;  $\frac{1}{2}$  R & L"; "down the hall & turn somehow; return and adjust somehow". These are 16-count packages which occupy a single 16-count phrase (such as B2) unless there is some very good reason to violate this rule. Note too that it is "Cir L; cir R" and "star R; star L" unless there is a good reason to reverse L & R.

Smooth flow. This encompasses a whole collection of little things which serve to make the action flow naturally in a dance pattern and to help people, particularly the beginners, to do the right things easily without having to think much about them. Beginners find themselves in the right places automatically. Waves and hoys naturally form squarely across the set rather than askew, something which I think makes dances easier, particularly for beginners. The velocity acquired at the end of one figure is just what is needed to begin the next figure, both in speed and direction. Angular momentum acquired in one figure is used nicely in the next. And so on. I usually put a lot of effort into trying to achieve smooth flow in my dances. Let's consider some examples:

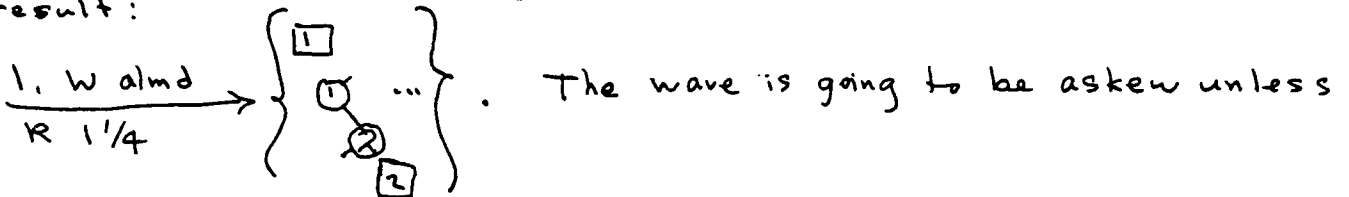
- Duple & improper. 1. Cir L! 2. Alnd RN  $1\frac{1}{2}$ , till M face in. Dancers acquire cw momentum in ph 1 which is continued into ph 2 for smooth flow
- Duple & improper. 1. Cir L! 2. Alnd LN  $1\frac{1}{2}$ , till W face in. The cw momentum acquired in ph 1 fights the ccw momentum needed in ph 2. Not smooth flow.



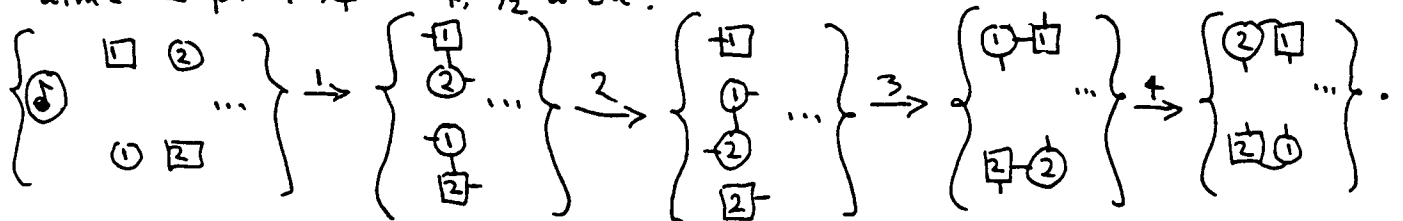
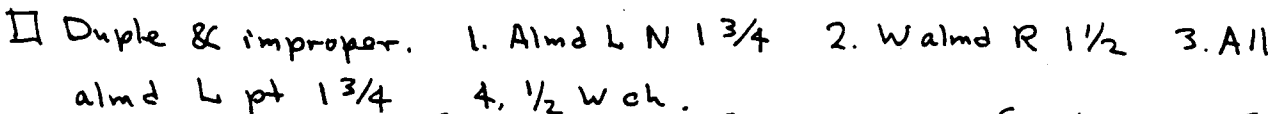
The men don't have to move at all; the wave just naturally forms squarely across the set. Smooth flow.



Even if the women, being smart, turn about  $1\frac{1}{4}$ , here's the result:



the men think ahead and move to an appropriate position. Definitely not smooth flow.



The velocity acquired by the women at the end of each of the first three phrases is just what they need to start the next phrase. Smooth flow throughout.

Conquering adversity. Skilled dancers become very good at compensating for dance patterns which do not have smooth flow. They shift around as needed to make waves come out squarely across the set despite

any choreographic failings, they can reverse their momentum to make things work even when it's not "natural". I'm convinced that skilled dancers get a lot of pleasure out of "conquering adversity" this way, and I'm impressed by the enjoyment they can derive from dances which I consider loaded with awkward spots. As a result I sometimes wonder if there is much reason to strive for smooth flow, but then I remember the less experienced dancers; they do much better with dances having smooth flow.

Composing for a specific group. I compose a lot of my dances for a hypothetical group of Boston dancers who can start and end figures on time, circle once around in eight counts easily, do an allemande twice around in eight counts easily, and end swings facing the right direction. As a result, these dances tend to be rather demanding for an average group of dancers such as those who might be encountered at a one-night stand. A lot of these dances have a pace which might be considered vigorous and exciting. Boston Baked Beans, presented earlier, is such a dance.

Another caller might prefer a more relaxed and comfortable pace, characterized by, say, circling  $3/4$  in eight counts and allemanding  $1\frac{1}{2}$  in eight counts. His dances might well be better suited to one-night stands.

You can tinker with a completed dance to adjust its demands. Friends told me that Boston Baked Beans was a bit too demanding for their circumstances, in large part because of four ! marks in a row. I altered the dance to make it more forgiving without changing its character much:

BOSTON BAKED BEANS #2 by Al Olson  
Duple & improper contra.

1. Alnd L (now) N  $1\frac{1}{2}$  2.  $1/2$  W oh 3. Star R!
4. All separate from pt along into different stars L!
- 5&6. All sw pt 7. Cir L  $3/4$  8. Sw N

This dance has only two ! marks and it is considerably more forgiving, but it preserves the distinctive rush from star to star to partner. Sometime later it occurred to me that I

could make the dance almost undemanding, though still mildly distinctive, with very small changes:

BOSTON BROWN BREAD by Al Olson

As before, p. 12, except for: 3. All separate from pt along into different stars R 4. Same four: star L 5&6. All bal & sw pt

The basic change is trivial, separating from your partner in ph 3 instead of ph 4, but the character of the dance is altered so drastically, with no rush anywhere, that I felt a new name was called for. Bread is a dance suitable for a one-night stand in the hands of a thoughtful caller.

To repeat my points: consider who you want to do your dance, and choose figures to give it an appropriate pace and an appropriate level of difficulty.

Consider your dance hall. If you have the luxury of dancing in an uncrowded hall, you can use dances featuring all swing partner in the center or all allemande partner in the center. If your hall is usually crowded, you would do well to avoid such figures. If your hall is tightly crowded from head to foot, you would do well to avoid figures having dancers going down the hall and back.

Consider all the dancers. When you compose a contra, you should think about what every dancer in the set has to do. Male composers frequently give the women the awkward moves and frequently give them more idle time. Here's an actual example by a male composer: Duple & proper. 1. Dsd own sex below  $1\frac{1}{2}$ !  
2. Act facing out, #2 in: bal in long waves... ~~A fair~~

A do-si-do  $1\frac{1}{2}$  in eight counts is a fair challenge all by itself, but the men have the velocity generated in ph 1 taking them forward into their balance in ph 2. The women have to travel farther than the men to get to the position in which they will balance, and the velocity generated by the do-si-do would carry them

away from the wave they are supposed to balance in if they didn't compensate somehow. The women have a much tougher move than the men!

### Random Thoughts for Composers

- Transitions are what contra choreography is about
- Any figures will go together if you come to a dead stop at the end of each, but does anyone want to dance that way?
- Four counts of idle time is never noticed by the dancers; eight counts is.
- Worried about a transition? See if you can find it in some dance you already know
- You can try any strange figure that interests you, provided that a caller can explain it clearly, quickly, and easily.
- If you are new at composing, keep your dances simple: not too many pieces.
- Dancers can do "anything", but that doesn't mean they'll like it.
- When you are thinking of composing dances, don't forget triple-minor contras, triplets, circles, etc.
- Triple-minor contras do not have to be dull for the inactives; check out some of those given in Zesty Contras.
- The category of dances using straight sets of four face four is just waiting for someone to compose such dances. There aren't many out there yet, and it is easy to compose interesting new ones right now.
- There are no good contras. There are contras good for total beginners, contras good for groups with mixed skill levels, contras good for the very experienced....

- Analyze dances you like and try to figure out why you like them. You may learn even more from analyzing the ones you don't like
- As you compose your own dances and analyze other people's dances, you will accumulate bits and pieces of dances which may come back to you at unexpected moments in surprising combinations.
- After you have composed a new dance, think about starting its pattern at a different point. Maybe you can arrange to have its partner swing as the last figure.
- Some dances require repeated exposure before dancers learn how to cope with and appreciate them. Symmetrical Force seemed pretty awkward the first few times I danced it, but I caught on eventually. Now that dance is a modern classic.

### A Bad Contra

Some years ago, Eric Zorn and Gerry Prokopowicz sponsored a contest to see who could compose the worst contra. The judges found that my entry "lacked the ~~necessity~~ necessary outrageously Bad moves in that it really could have been a dance that some poor misguided soul would write." I present the dance here in the hope that you might enjoy figuring out what is bad about it. I think a group of experienced dancers might be able to dance the pattern despite its many faults:

#### DOES IT MATTER? by Al Olson

Duple & improper bad contra.

1. Almd L N  $1\frac{1}{2}$  † 2&3. Hey, st M L sh in cntr †
4. Same four; star L!
5. Sw N & face across!
6. M almd R once around and a bit more (4!); bal in wave (across), L hd to pt
7. All sw pt & face across!
8. Cir R  $\frac{3}{4}$  & pass thru along!

## Some Trends in Contras

**End effects.** In modern contras the end effects can be much more complicated than they were in traditional dances, and dancers sometimes become idle at an end of the set several times before the dance pattern takes them out of <sup>the</sup> range of the end effects. Many dance groups have become quite sophisticated about such things and cope with complicated end effects without instructions from the caller. Thus a dance pattern usually need not be discarded because of its complicated end effects.

**Shadows.** In a fair number of modern contras a dancer will do ~~the~~ part of the pattern with the same person, not his partner, in every change. Such a person is variously called your second partner, your secret affair, your trail buddy, and your shadow. I prefer "shadow" because it is the shortest term and because a shadow, in real life, is something that follows you around forever whether you like it or not. Forty-Two is a popular contra in which you swing your shadow in every change.

Here is an example showing one way to acquire a shadow:

Duple and improper. 1. Alnd L N  $\frac{1}{2}$ ;  $\frac{1}{2}$  W eh! 2.  $\frac{1}{2}$  R&L & turn away from pt 3&4. Sw next ind along the line (your shadow)....

A lot of these dances are interesting, but they carry a risk since you don't get to choose your shadow: if you and your shadow don't swing well together or just don't get along with each other, you'll still have to put up with each other in every change of the dance. I've composed dances with shadows, but I've tried to keep the amount of interaction between shadows small. I would never use a 16-count shadow swing as in the example above, and I would think long and hard about using an eight-count shadow swing.

**Becket formation.** Composers are using contras in Becket formation much more than they used to, and for very good reasons. Dancers like equal dances and they like to swing their partners. In general it makes



Sense to swing partners at the sides of the set when everyone is swinging their partner at the same time, and that means the set is in Becket formation at that moment. While it is possible to start in an improper duple formation, achieve a temporary Becket formation for the partner swing, and then return to the improper duple, much of the dance will be spent in getting from one formation to another. The dance might as well start in Becket formation in the first place, and a lot of composers have realized this.

Oddly enough, Becket Reel itself is an atypical dance in Becket formation, since it uses a double progression achieved with the aid of the distinctive but somewhat disorganized diagonal right and left. The obvious way to progress in a Becket formation dance is to have everyone shift one position left (or right) around the entire set so that everyone is opposite a new neighbor. The following dance illustrates this in its simplest possible form:

MIDWEST FOLKLORE by Orace Johnson  
Contra in Becket formation, single progression  
1. All shift L one pos around the entire set to face new N across; cir L  $\frac{3}{4}$  ! 2. Dsd N  
3&4. Bal & sw N 5. Cir L  $\frac{3}{4}$  6. Dsd pt  
7&8. Bal & sw pt & face across †

The title acknowledges contributions from a number of midwestern composers.

Here's the same progression in a slightly camouflaged form:

8. All dsd op (6!); all shift L one position along to face new N across.

Another useful single progression for Becket formation:

1. Noting the cpl on L diag:  $\frac{1}{2}$  R&L (across), adjusting along to face the noted cpl 2. With the noted cpl:  $\frac{1}{2}$  R&L

One more: 1. W ch 2. Ret, adjusting along during the courtesy turn to face a new op cpl, to your right of the previous op cpl

I expect to see even more Basket formation dances in the future

Sameness. There are a lot of new dances coming along which are very well crafted. I will examine a new dance in detail, <sup>and</sup> conclude that every move in it is good, ~~not that~~ that all transitions are good, and that the dance would have been exciting ten years ago for its good features. Now, however, the dance is just another good modern contra, with a feel much like that of the last ten dances to come my way even though the actual figures are different. Sameness has set in. The challenge these days is to compose good dances with good flow which are somehow distinctive, and that's a tough challenge!

### In Parting

May you enjoy composing contras and occasionally, at least, compose some good and distinctive ones!

9/23/88

Al Olson