Contra Dance Choreography -- A Reflection of Social Change

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Asthetics of Contra Dancing

FLOW

The most common short response to the question, "What makes a good dance?" was "good flow." The concept of "flow" seems to refer predominantly to the transitions between the dance figures rather than to the figures themselves, and it relates to how smooth these transitions feel to the dancers.

If the dance is smooth, it means that the transition from one figure to the next is easy to achieve. You do not ever have to turn the hard way. You don't ever have to stop, literally stop in your tracks, and backtrack to do something else. Everything flows into the next thing, so you are eternally walking forward. (Park 1990)

The term "flow," as used by my informants, has both physical qualities which have to do with the laws of physics, and nonphysical qualities which have to do with the expectations of the dancers and the degree to which they perceive the dance as "making sense."

The physical component of "flow" concerns the motion of the body. In a dance with good flow the dance sequence avoids transitions where the dancer must change his or her momentum suddenly through either a change of direction or a change of dancing speed. ("Suddenly" is an important qualification, since many dances have either a full stop, or an assisted change of direction through an "allemande" or other strongly connected figure performed with another dancer.) If such a change of momentum is easily anticipated and can be done comfortably, it may not disrupt the flow of a dance. An example of a comfortable change of momentum might be the change from a "circle left" to a "circle right," a transition which is common and anticipated and for which dancers have learned to adjust their footwork to make it smooth. An example of an uncomfortable change of momentum might be an "allemande left" followed by a "circle left," in which the dancers must change from a forward counterclockwise motion to a sideways clockwise motion, requiring both a change of body position and a change of direction. Bad flow may also result from movements that are difficult because the hand that is needed is not free.

The nonphysical component of flow has to do with the internal logic of a dance and seems to overlap the concept of "story line," which will be discussed below. This component is related both to the expectations of the dancers, and to the "social sense" exhibited by the sequence. To "balance" with another dancer and then swing him or her feels comfortable, both because it is a common and therefore expected combination in contra dancing, and because the "balance" serves as a kind of greeting prior to the more intimate "swing." To balance one dancer and then swing another does not feel comfortable, both because it is rarely done and therefore unexpected, and because it feels inappropriate to greet one dancer and then swing another. These ways of feeling comfortable are not related to the actual motion of the body.

In the composing of contra dances with good flow, conservation of momentum is an important principle. The movements work better when one takes advantage of the momentum already established in a previous figure, because the dancers do not have to work as hard to perform the dance. In particular, when rotating figures move into other rotating figures, the direction of rotation should not be reversed. Gene Hubert elaborates:

If you're going to have a circle on either side of an "allemande right," it should be a clockwise circle, which means "circle left"....And "allemande left" means that you're going around the other direction, which is basically "circle right" direction. So "allemandes" and "circles" work together that way....And "swings" to "circles" and "circles" to "swings" are the same deal. A "left circle" is a basically clockwise movement, and a "swing" is a clockwise movement. They go together real naturally. (Hubert 1990b)

The conservation of angular momentum may produce acceleration and deceleration within the dance. For example, going from a "circle" into a "swing" involves an acceleration of movement, because as two dancers pull closer together for the "swing," the conservation of momentum results in their going faster, an exciting and pleasing effect.

One way for the dancers to change directions without disrupting the flow of the dance is to use *assisted* changes of direction, as noted above. An "allemande," for example, can be used to send two dancers in the opposite directions from which they came, without their having to stop or turn around.

The last principle of flow discussed by my informants comes out of the problem of too much flow discussed above. In order to avoid a dance being disorienting or dizzy, the dance composer needs to insert moves which do not revolve, to break up the circular flow of a dance which contains a lot of "swings" and "circles." Straight line movements such as the "forward and back" figure or a "down the center and back" figure will serve to break up a dizzying circular flow, as will any kind of "balance" figure.

FIGURES

There are some figures whose inclusion is considered important in the making of a good dance, the primary example being the "swing." Contra dancers today expect at least one "swing" in a dance, and many are disappointed if a dance provides no opportunity to swing with one's partner or at least with one's neighbor.

The [good] dance would feature...the zesty figures which are "swing," "allemande," "circle"...and then intermediate would be "right and left [through]" and "ladies chain." And then "long lines forward and back." And then less important is "dosido."...It depends on context. (Jennings 1990b)

Most composers are not this explicit about the figures that they use, but they do tend to use the more connected figures—figures in which there is muscle tension between the dancers—because they facilitate good flow.

Today's contra dances frequently include figures borrowed from other traditions. The "hey for four" and the "gypsy" have been incorporated into contra dance from English country dance, and figures such as the "four-leaf clover," "box the gnat," and "grand right and left" (around the whole set) have been borrowed from the square dance traditions. Figures performed on the diagonal, and fractional figures (e.g. "circle three-quarters") are also common in today's dances. These borrowings and innovations

make the dances in which they are used more memorable, and serve to differentiate them from the older traditional dances.

COMPLEXITY

The term "piece count" is used by some dance composers to indicate the difficulty of a dance. Larry Jennings defines "piece count" as: ...an estimate of the number of dance fragments which an "average" dancer must keep in mind to visualize the entire sequence....Dances with only four or five pieces rarely give trouble, while a dance with nine or more usually requires close attention. (Jennings 1983:89)

A "piece" does not necessarily correspond to a "figure," since some sequences, such as "circle left and then circle right," can be remembered as one unit by the dancers.
Many dance composers touted the virtues of simple dances:

[Dances should be] not too contrived or too complicated in the construction....where you can have time to visit with people and you're not so concentrated on what's coming next. (Breunig 1990)

One reason for keeping the dances simple is that everyone is there to have fun, and dancing should not be perceived as a chore by the dancers. George Marshall points out that simple dances also leave more room for the dancers to improvise, because they do not need to concentrate so hard on the choreography, and because the dance itself has more spaces within which improvisations can fit:

Another major justification for keeping the dances simple is that the dancers need to be able to remember them as they dance. After a dance is taught the caller usually prompts the dance until it seems like the dancers know it; but if a dance is quite complex, the caller must prompt the whole way through, and the dancers do not have the opportunity to relate directly to the music without the intervention of the caller's voice:

All the time the voice is going, the music can only be really background. It can be real exciting background music potentially, but it's going to be background music until that calling stops. (Sutherland 1990)

If a dance uses a figure more than once, the dancers will be confused about which occurrence of the figure they are dancing. If, for example, there are two "half ladies chains" at different places in the dance, a dancer will forget which one he or she is dancing and not be sure what comes next.

You want to avoid using the same figure more than once if at all possible, with the only real exception being swinging. It's nice if it can be a different kind of "swing."...An example that works nicely is maybe "circle left" and swing on the side, and at the end of the dance maybe "forward and back" and the actives swing. So you have two "swings," but they're in very different contexts, so the dancers don't get them mixed up as far as which "swing" I'm in now. (Hubert 1990b)

Although dance composers want their dances to be easy to remember and not confusing for the dancers, they also find that dancers enjoy a certain amount of mental effort. A group of dancers may get a good deal of satisfaction out of mastering a difficult sequence:

[It may be] a challenging dance where the joy of the dance is in the mastery of teamwork and cooperation that, wow, we pulled this challenging thing together! (Edelman 1990)

I tend to look for dances that have some interest, that have maybe a twist on some of the basic figures, something that's a little bit different to keep the experienced dancers happy, and yet have a lot of the basic substance of contra dance style there to let the beginners learn. (Dalsemer 1990)

In summary, the good dance must be relatively simple, but without foregoing the possibility of a challenge within the sequence. It must be easy to remember so that the caller can step out and leave the dancers dancing to the music. Sequences of figures that are of particular interest to experienced dancers must be placed in a context in which the beginning dancer can recover from confusion without causing the set to fall apart. It is a matter of balance -- enough complexity to be stimulating, but not enough to cause the dancers problems.

SOCIAL INTERACTION

After thinking about social interaction in dance for some time, Krumm came up with four levels of intimacy in contra dance figures. First are "getting-to-know-you figures" such as a "balance," or perhaps a "forward and back." Next come the athletic figures like doing an allemande twice in eight beats. Third are the impersonal figures, such as "stars" and "circles," which are neither athletic nor intimate. The last group is made up of the intimate figures:

"Swing" was definitely one, but also "gypsies" are almost too intimate, so intimate that...people put a mask on and then, you know, make them impersonal. Going "down the center and back" I found was a very intimate figure—with my partner. (Krumm 1990)

Interacting with a larger group of dancers in a figure has some special qualities. Figures in which several dancers hold onto one another are excellent for teaching new dancers to dance, because it is much harder for a beginner to get lost holding onto others in a circle or a line. The recent incorporation of "heys" and "gypsies" in addition to the "dosido" has resulted in dances where there is less physical connection between dancers, which makes them harder to learn for beginners. Group moves in which the whole room is moving together, such as "lines forward and back," or "down the center four in line," remind the dancers that they are dancing with a whole community of dancers, and not just with their little subsets of four or with their partners. This is also true of the "balance," because of its sound. When the whole room balances in unison, the result is a very satisfying stomp. Group moves and balances enhance the feeling of community in the room.

I think one of the most important things about a contra is that it have a good story line, that the dance seems to go somewhere. One of my favorite lines is that a lot of dances these days seem to start with "happily ever after," and end with "once upon a time." For instance, I think that a dance flows better in just social terms if you start by more or less flirting with your neighbor, and then end up with a good solid "swing" with your partner, and maybe a "down the center and back" to cement the idea that you're with your partner. (T. Parkes 1990)

The story line...has to do with the way the bodies are moving on the floor...and the way that feels; the peaks and valleys of energy that you're expending; the speed that you're traveling; who you're working with; all those things, like various ingredients to a dish. No, you can't really say that this particular ingredient—the allspice, the pinch of allspice—made this dance, made this dish what it is. It's not any of those things. It's all the ingredients, and the way that they're combined; and the way that they're served and the garnish. (Pearl 1990)

EXPECTATIONS

Another element in a good dance has to do with the degree to which the dance moves conform to the expectations of the dancers. An unexpected move can be exciting and can be a successful gimmick in the composing of a dance, but more often it is disorienting and will disrupt the flow of an otherwise successful dance.

Some combinations of figures have been used traditionally more than others, and dancers come to expect these combinations and to expect them to occur in a particular order. If the order of such figures is reversed, it feels uncomfortable to the dancers.

Dancers not only have learned to expect figures to occur in a certain order, but they have also become accustomed to figures lasting certain lengths of time. A figure that is significantly shorter than usual will be a problem to the dancers, who tend to overshoot the next figure by remaining in the short one too long.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE MUSIC

How a dance fits with the music leads to a very important cluster of criteria for a good dance. The dance figures must fit with the musical phrase; they must be danceable at the tempo being played by the band; and care must be taken in the way figures that require more speed and energy are arranged to fit into a given fragment of music.

Of primary importance is the fact that the movements called for in the choreography of a dance must be possible to execute in the time allotted for them by the music. Having established movements that are possible to dance within the allotted music, the next consideration is that the dance figures be phrased to conform with the musical phrases.

There are a couple of figures for which the location within the musical phrase is important. One of these is the "balance." A "balance," according to my informants, should come at the beginning of the phrase, on the strongest beat, because it is an accent in the dance and should correspond to the accent in the music:

It's always preferable if "balances" come at the beginning of the phrase. Of course you can do them anywhere, but it...drives the musicians crazy if there's a "balance" in some weird spot, like half way through, or at the very end of the phrase. (Hubert 1990b)

The other figure for which the placement in the musical phrase is important is the "swing." Dancers have a tendency to swing to the end of an eight-bar phrase, and if the choreography calls for a four-bar "swing" during the first half of such a phrase, the dancers have trouble stopping in mid-phrase and going on to another figure. If a four-bar "swing" is in the second half of an eight-bar phrase, on the other hand, the dancers will stop more or less on time.

Another way to look at the fit between dance and music is to examine the ease with which a given sequence can be danced in the time allotted by the music. Dance composers sometimes describe this quality by using the terms "forgiving" and "unforgiving." Larry Jennings, in his book *Zesty Contras*, defines these terms as follows:

FORGIVING: Most contras are sufficiently simple that the dancers can conveniently regroup, even after a major mind lapse. Some relatively difficult dances or dance fragments also have this property of easy recoup; they are forgiving. (Jennings 1983:10)

UNFORGIVING: Not favoring quick and easy correction after a lapse of mind....In extreme cases an entire set may become disorganized beyond recoup. (Jennings 1983:12)

In a good contra dance it is important to have some sort of alternation between forgiving sequences and unforgiving sequences. The forgiving sequences act as buffers between the unforgiving ones, so that if dancers have trouble or get behind during the latter, they are able to recoup during the former:

[A dance] has to be comfortable....It has to have a combination of forgiving and unforgiving figures. If a dance has only forgiving figures, it doesn't have any oomph to it....If a dance has only unforgiving figures, then it's a rat race. You have to have a combination of the two....The forgiving figures are the buffers in between the unforgiving figures. (Sannella 1990a)

ACTIVITY LEVEL

Dance composers say that it is important to have enough activity within a dance, but not too much. "Enough" means that the dancers do not find themselves with time on their hands between figures, which causes them to stop and disrupts the flow of the dance.

Another thing that a good dance choreographer has to think about is that a dance be not too vigorous, too tiring....Some figures are more tiring than others, and if you string them all together in a row, it makes a very exhausting dance. (Sannella 1990a)

I feel strongly that dancers today want dances which feature roughly equal roles, which is to say, everybody does pretty much the same thing. If the lines are long, you don't really want to run a dance an incredibly long amount of time in order to allow everyone to change roles....I prefer to write equal dances these days. (Pearl 1990)

Table 1. Aesthetic Criteria for the Contemporary Contra Dance

FLOW:

1. Transitions are smooth, take advantage of momentum, and do not require backtracking or moves that are physically awkward.
2. The choreography avoids "too much flow" which can leave the dancers dizzy.
3. Assisted changes of direction facilitate good flow.
4. The choreography avoids right-left distinctions made by individual dancers.
5. The last move flows into the first move.

FIGURES:

1. The dance includes "swings," most desirably with one's partner.
2. Figures with strong connection are used to facilitate good flow.

FORMATIONS:

1. Triples and proper dances are less popular.
2. The improper and Becket formations, which facilitate symmetrical moves, are more commonly used.

COMPLEXITY:

1. The choreography is complex enough to offer a challenge.
2. The dance is simple enough so dancers can remember it without continuous calling.
3. Care is exercised in using a figure twice (with the exception of the "swing"), as it makes the dance harder to remember.
4. There is a challenge for the experienced dancers that still allows the beginners to recoup.
5. There is a reward for the successful completion of a difficult sequence.

SOCIAL INTERACTION:

1. The choreography contains a variety of interactions with partner, neighbor, the larger set, and members of the same gender.
2. Interactions are satisfying and not frustrating.
3. A social plot is desirable.

EXPECTATIONS:

1. The dance for the most part conforms to the dancers' expectations with regard to the order of the figures, the timing of the figures, the direction of motion, and the social interactions within the dance.
2. Unexpected moves may be used judiciously to add spice to a dance.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE MUSIC:

1. Figures can be successfully performed in the time allotted by the music.
2. Figures conform to the musical phrase.
3. "Balances" are located at the beginnings of phrases, and "swings" run until the ends of phrases.
4. Tempos are appropriate to the difficulty and the intricacy of the choreography.
5. Unforgiving moves are buffered by forgiving moves.
6. The dance contains places in which dancers can improvise.

ACTIVITY LEVEL:

1. The activity level is high enough so that dancers do not need to stop and wait for the next move.
2. The activity level is low enough so that dancers do not become exhausted.
3. There is a balance of activity between the active and the inactive couples, and between the sexes.

UNIQUENESS:

The dance contains something special that makes it memorable.

DANCING STYLE

It will be useful to describe a few of the basic elements that go into the dancing style used for contra dance. First, there is a minimum of complicated footwork, most figures being performed with a simple walking step. Exceptions are the "balance," the buzz step "swing," and individual flourishes which are not integral to the dance figures. Most contra dance figures are basically floor patterns and are walked.

In contra dance it is important to fit the figures to the music. This is an element of the dance style which must be learned by beginning dancers. A "circle" to the left must fit a four-bar musical phrase, and a "circle" back to the right must fit the next four-bar musical phrase. Changes of direction are usually made at the end of the preceding figure in order to start the new figure on the beat. Dancers try to dance each figure in such a way that it exactly uses up the music allotted for it, finishing the figure neither too late nor too early, but exactly at the end of the musical phrase.

"Giving weight" is another important element of the contra dance style. Dancers create a tension between them by pulling slightly as they take hands with one another, and this tension helps the dancers move quickly and efficiently through the figures. Giving weight is in fact necessary in order to finish the figures on time, especially in some of the faster moving modern contra dances. If the arms are held limp it is not possible to go around another dancer as quickly, nor is it as much fun.

Connecting strongly to other dancers is considered important in contra dancing. One should make every effort to feel the physical presence of the other dancers in any figures in which dancers touch one another. In a circle, for example, one should have a sense of the weight of each dancer, including the dancer across the circle from oneself.

Eye contact is used in the contra dance style to establish contact with another dancer with whom one dances a figure. This element of the contra dance style often makes beginning dancers uncomfortable initially, because they are unsure how to interpret this direct look.

It is important in contra dancing to keep the spacing on the floor orderly and predictable. Ideally lines should be straight, circles should be round, and dancers should time their moves so that they reach the appropriate positions with the musical phrase. In walking down the hall, care should be taken not to go too far, so that the return can be accomplished without rushing. Attention to these matters makes the dancing more pleasurable to do and more beautiful to watch.