

Calling To Live Music

This are matters to consider when working with live musicians.

Sometimes an experienced contra band will ask to see your intended choreography and figure out from that what to play. In other cases, the band may play typical contra music but not have much idea about the issues that are important for contra dancing.

1) The 64 beat phrasing: A musician would say 32 bars and should be looking for a tune that has an A part of 16 bars that repeats and then a B part of 16 bars that repeats. (No C part or if there is they should not play it.)

2) A tune with strong 8-beat phrasing. The strong phrasing is best judged by having them play a bit for you. If you can't hear the phrase, try another piece of music.

3) The tempo: Comfortable contra dance tempo is between 112 and 120 beats per minute. They will say "tap it for me" so be prepared. Or have them play and you time it (hope you have seconds on your watch).

4) Introduction: Usually musicians use the last 2 or 4 bars of the tune for their introduction (agree ahead). An easier alternative might be one long chord.

5) Switch tunes (medleys) are nice but not necessary. If used, the transition must be smooth.

6) Include waltzes in the breaks. They probably already know some, but caution them about playing at a reasonable dance tempo (usually they play them too fast).

Matching Dances with Music

The best way to make a match is to try dancing the contra to various pieces of music. Many contras are quite flexible and will go with lots of types of music. Others, particularly those with footwork or clapping, require something that has the required rhythm at the right spot. Usually that is found in a jig, or a march.

Complex choreography may require a slower tempo at least at the beginning.