

# So you want to be a Caller

by  
**Charles Bolton**

Originally published by Cotswold Music in August 1992

Copyright Charles Bolton 1992

Artwork - Chris Beaumont

Re-Published as an E-Book by

[DLBMUSIC](#)

August 2008.

Re-Published as a Kindle Book April 2014



**Charles Bolton**

## Contents

1. First Thoughts .....	2
2. EQUIPMENT .....	2
3. PREPARING A DANCE .....	3
4. WALKING IT THROUGH .....	4
5. CALLING A DANCE .....	6
6. PREPARING A PROGRAMME .....	8
7. WORKING WITH A BAND.....	9
8. BEFORE THE EVENT .....	11

## 1. First Thoughts

My main aim in writing these notes has been to provide a practical guide for those of you who want to try your hand at calling, but I hope that more experienced callers too may find something to interest them.

I should emphasise first that all callers have their own styles and methods, and many will disagree with some of the things I am going to say. What I have put down are the things that work best for me. I hope that my suggestions will help you to avoid making some of the mistakes I have made since I first started calling many years ago.

It would be a good idea first of all to ask: why do people come to dances? Obviously, they come to dance, but that is not all. They also come to socialise. They come to enjoy themselves. They may come because they like a particular band, or caller. They may be there for the first time, to "see what it's like". They may even come because they have nothing better to do. You should bear all these things in mind.

Just as important is another question: why do you want to call? You may feel that you want to help others share the pleasure you get from dancing, and from folk dance music. You enjoy seeing people have a good time. You want to experience the thrill of watching a hall full of dancers moving together under your guidance. You like making new friends and meeting interesting people. You feel that besides getting a lot out of folk, you want to put something back into it. Or, on a rather different level, will it give you an opportunity to show-off, or a chance to "be in charge"? Or do you think it will be an enjoyable way of making a little extra money?

(Note: a little extra money - no one ever became rich through calling). Any or all of those reasons may apply to you. You should think about it.

One brief note before we begin. I have referred throughout to others (band leaders etc) purely for convenience as "he". There is no chauvinism intended: my female caller and musician friends know me better than that!

## 2. EQUIPMENT

The first piece of equipment we should consider is a microphone. If you are calling with a band, they often provide one for the caller, but be sure to check that they do. You may of course be happier using your own if you have one. If you do decide you want to buy a mike, make sure it has dual impedance, and spend as much as you can afford: buying a cheap one is a false economy. A mike stand is also a good idea: trailing microphones inevitably come to grief sooner or later.

You will also need some means of amplification. Make sure that your amplifier has separate controls for voice and music, with separate bass and treble controls in each case. You will also need at least one reasonably powerful speaker.

If you are using recorded music, you should add to the above a record player, and/or a cassette player with at least a rev counter for track location, or better still, a search system. A variable speed control on either of these can be very useful. These days music is provided on CD or on a digital device as MP3 files downloaded to your computer.

It is possible to manage with little or none of the above if you are calling at a folk dance club, as all the equipment is often provided for you, but if you intend to take up calling seriously, you ought to have your own equipment.

You will of course need records and/or cassettes, CDs or MP3s. Be sure to get to know the recordings: how fast, how many bars, how many times through the tune, etc. For example, using a 32-bar tune for a 48-bar dance will lead to trouble.

You should also have some of the standard books of notations. The ones you will choose depends on what dances you are interested in calling. Today there is a vast choice of material, and if you are undecided, the best advice I can give is for you to spend a little time browsing in a Folk Shop or go on-line to a suitable website. Hopefully, this will give you plenty of ideas.

Many callers like to note their dances on small cards, using one card per dance, which can then be filed alphabetically in boxes according to the set formation, the style of the dance, or in any other way they prefer. It is then a simple matter to extract the cards you need for the session. Another favoured system is the large A4 file. This has the advantage of taking up less space: I currently have over 1200 dances noted down in just one file, which I find very convenient. (A systematic index is of course essential.)

While on subject of collecting dance notations, do beware, when you go dancing, of making quick notes of dances that take your fancy. Never assume that the caller has it right! And even you may remember it wrongly. I have seen many examples of serious mistakes creeping into dances accumulating as they are passed from caller to caller. It is usually possible to check dances with the original source, you should make a practice of always doing so.

Finally, your dress should be appropriate to the occasion. You may wish to wear something colourful and eye-catching. A band will often have a rig of some sort, and you may care to either match in, or possibly contrast with them.



### 3. PREPARING A DANCE

If you are just starting out as a caller cut your teeth by choosing reasonably simple dances with which you are already familiar. In this way you should know any potential trouble spots in the dance, and can prepare those sections with extra care.

Do get used to explaining the simpler movements and patterns before tackling the more complex dances. Above all, avoid the temptation of picking an unknown dance from a book because it "looks interesting".

This can be fraught with danger for the inexperienced caller, who will probably not have spotted any potential problems. For instance, some dances may not be laid out in the usual 8-bar sections, or they may have unusual phrasing, and you may find it difficult to see how they fit the music. Also to be avoided for the moment are those dances, mainly modern, where dancers are doing different things at the same time, which are often technically quite difficult to call.

Most callers make notes of the layout of the dances they intend to call. Using notes is preferable to reading from a book as you are calling. The descriptions in books are often necessarily meticulous and lengthy, in the interest of absolute clarity, and reading from them verbatim can produce ludicrous results. For example, I have seen a caller solemnly read from a book, to a four couple set, "the first man, followed by the second, third and fourth men, casts off to his left, while the first woman, at the same time, followed by the second, third and fourth women, casts off to her right", when a simple "all face up and cast from the top" is all that is required. In other words, you should read the instructions, think about how you would explain them to the dancers in a simple, direct way, and then note the dance down as you might call it. An additional bonus is that the very act of writing it down helps to fix it in the memory.

When going through the dances you have selected, try to visualise the positions of the dancers in the set at each point of the dance. This can be difficult, and some kind of visual aid may help. You may want to draw diagrams to see what is happening. Many callers, myself included, prefer to use counters. I use numbered draughtsmen, red for the men and black for the women. Chessmen too can easily be adapted for the purpose, and even salt and pepper pots have been pressed into service! Whatever you decide to use, you will find it an invaluable tool to analyse the geography of the dance.

Don't forget to think about the music. Many dances, particularly those in Playford (English) style, have strongly associated tunes which can be enjoyed for their own sake as much as the movements of the dance itself, and which, moreover, give a subconscious reminder of those movements. As callers are in the habit of saying "the music will tell you what to do". So, if a dance has a dedicated tune, use it. I would go so far as to say that, except in a very few cases, if you can't use the correct tune, don't do the dance.

When you are preparing a dance, familiarise yourself with the music by playing the tune or listening to a recording, and note the phrasing of the music in relation to the movements of the dance. Run through the tune in your head, trying to remember the movements as you do. In this way you too will learn to associate the tune and the movements. When you feel sufficiently confident to do this without your notes, then you are ready to call the dance.

If you are too dependent on your notes, you will find yourself looking at them all the time, instead of at the dancers, and strange things may be happening on the floor. Use notes by all means, but as a reminder, not as a crutch. All callers have occasional memory lapses, and it is very reassuring to know that a prompt is there if you need it.

As you get more experience, you may feel that you can "improve" the dances you are preparing by altering them. I would advise against this, unless you are absolutely sure of yourself. If, for example, it is a question of interpretation of an old dance, and you have access to the original, then, in theory, your opinion (if you have done your homework) is as valid as anyone else's. Even so, if you decide to tamper with any of the well-known classical dances, you will almost certainly meet with great hostility. If the dance is modern, bear in mind that you are tampering with someone else's original work, and apart from possible copyright problems, there are ethical considerations.

So, on the whole, the position can be summed up quite simply. If you don't like the dance as it's written, don't call it.

## 4. WALKING IT THROUGH

If the dancers are unfamiliar to you, it is wisest to start by assuming that they know nothing. You should be ready to explain technique where necessary at club nights and workshops, but preferably not at public dances: the emphasis there should be on enjoyment, not instruction. However, if large numbers of beginners are present, as sometimes

happens at Barn Dances, the teaching of 'basics' will become necessary. Make sure that this is done in small doses, arising directly out of the movements of the dance, and be sure that the level of difficulty is consistent with the apparent ability of those on the floor. A dance which takes three or four times as long to explain as it does to actually dance is an unwise choice for a public evening.

Always have your notes and music ready before you get the dancers on the floor. Sets should not be kept hanging around interminably, while you hunt for an elusive recording.

Before you start to call, make sure that sets are made up, and that longways sets do not have couples standing out at the bottom, if this can be avoided. Make best use of the space available, especially if the hall is crowded. And do make sure you have their attention before you begin.

Any information you can give which is relevant to the better understanding of a dance (i.e. source, date, editor or composer, circumstances of composition, etc) is usually appreciated by the dancers, but be sure you keep it brief and to the point.

As I have already said, you should not stand calling with your nose in a book. You should be using your own words to explain the movements, not someone else's. Besides which, you should be watching the dancers. Keep an eye on them as they are walking each section, and try to make sure all have successfully completed the movement before you go on. Don't just assume that because you have said something, they have done it.

Take it steadily, and don't try to rush: if some dancers are slower than others, you will have to be patient. Extra minutes spent on the walk-through will often save trouble when the dance begins. It is better to make sure they have understood than to have to stop the music when they get into a tangle. There are few things musicians hate more than having to grind to a halt just as they are getting going!

Do try to avoid getting into a situation where everyone has to keep going back to the beginning of the dance and walking it again because it will not come out right. The reasons for this are, more often than not, inadequate preparation, or lack of understanding of the dance. Remember that a dance, however complex, should be quite clear to you before you attempt to call it: it is not a puzzle to be worked out on the dance floor, using the dancers as guinea pigs.

Movements where no change of position is involved (e.g. back to back, whole ladies' chain, etc) need not necessarily be walked through unless this is necessary for the understanding of the flow of the dance. However, you should always let anyone walk any movements that they wish.

If any movements have to be done more quickly, or more slowly than usual, now is the time to give the dancers a warning. When the music starts it will be too late.

When walking through a set dance, it is important to remember that the dancers often find it much easier to understand instructions referring to their current position in the set, rather than to the number of their original position (which they tend to forget in any case). For example, the instruction "top man change places with bottom lady" can be more readily understood than "the second man change places with the third lady". Indeed, as a general principle, it is preferable to label the dancers according to their position in the set at the time reinforcing this with their original numbers if necessary. For example, it saves much confusion if it is made clear that in a longways set a term like 'first corners' applies to the people currently occupying the 1st position on the man's side and the 2nd position on the woman's side, whoever they may be. Position labels like 'bottom lady', 'middle couples', 'neighbour', '2nd corners', etc are unambiguous, easily absorbed, and can be visually confirmed very quickly by both caller and dancer. Hybrid expressions like 'original 3rd lady's place' are confusing, and are best avoided.

Many dances are dominated by one couple only, and most of the directions are given to them. It will save time if they are referred to throughout as the 'leading couple'.

Occasionally, particularly at crucial points in the dance, give a check to remind the dancers where they should be - this is very reassuring to them (and to you!) and it helps them to remember.

With a longways dance, it is usually sufficient to walk one turn, but some dances, particularly 4-couple sets where the end couples do movements significantly different from the middles, should have two turns walked through and it is usually best to go back to original places after the walk through: don't say: "we might as well do it from there", or you are losing the chance to reinforce the walk through by dancing it.

Demonstrations are often better than words. Ask a good set to show any tricky or unusual movements to the others - or you may even arrange a demo beforehand with the "experts",

Try to encourage interaction between dancers. Point out that they are dancing with someone, and that they should be aware of that person, making eye-contact, and acknowledging them when appropriate.

There are many courtesy movements which lose their point if one is not paying attention to one's partner.

In the dance world, it is generally assumed that men do the leading, and it is convenient to work on this assumption. Nevertheless, try to avoid calling as though the women were mere accessories ("you put your partner on your right" etc). Say "men put their partners on their right".

Bear in mind that your assessment of the difficulty of a dance may not coincide with that of your dancers. You should not assume that because you, who have studied the dance, find the figures easy to understand, that others will find the same. If you announce before you begin a dance "this is really very easy" and they do not find it so, they may have doubts about their dancing ability (or your calling ability). If, on the other hand, you say a dance is difficult, they may go wrong because they half expect to. This is not to say that at certain points they should not be warned to be extra attentive.

If things do go wrong, you should not put the blame on to the dancers. Always remember, if they haven't understood, that it's your fault, not theirs.

If you have to correct individual dancers, be sure that your manner is friendly and helpful. Close friends and other callers are always fair game, of course, but other people may be embarrassed, or may even take offence if you sound over-critical.

Adopt an easy, relaxed manner. This may have to be cultivated a natural manner does not always come naturally! Greater confidence will come with experience, and of course you will feel much more relaxed if you are in command of your material.

Light-hearted repartee with those on floor, or with the band, can be very entertaining, and make for a relaxed atmosphere. But do keep it under control: remember that most people have come along to dance, not to enjoy your anecdotes, or listen to a cross-talk act between you and the band leader. A little of that can go a very long way.

At the beginning of a session, you should ask whether you can be heard clearly, especially by those at the back. Problems can often be ironed out by careful adjustment of the amplifier, or, if the hall is difficult acoustically an alteration of the angle of the speakers may help. Remember that you may need further adjustments when you have to compete with the music.

You may already be blessed with a voice which comes over well through a microphone. If not, you will have to work at it. Aim to keep your voice up, but without shouting, and don't rush: speak fairly deliberately and enunciate clearly. A plastic foam shield over the mike will often help to cut out unwanted sounds. If you have a close friend among the dancers, ask him afterwards how you sounded, and tell him to be honest. Once again, experience is invaluable.

## 5. CALLING A DANCE

When the music begins, there is not time for the elaborate explanations of the walk-through: find the key-words to describe the movements and call them rhythmically with the music. The dancers need to know what to do before they have to do it, so try not to be late with the call, which, ideally should come in time to be absorbed as they are finishing the preceding movement.

You should aim at cutting out the call as soon as possible: the dancers should be listening to the music, rather than to you. In a longways dance, the last few turns at least should be without a call if possible. In set dances, which are usually more complex, it may not be possible to do without the call altogether, but if a full call is given the first time through, you should try to cut it down on a reprise of the dance.

Having said all this, I must emphasise that you should still keep calling if your dancers genuinely do need it, but try to avoid spoon-feeding them: they are usually capable of remembering much more than they claim.

When calling set dances, be careful to count the turns so that the dance ends when all are home. For example, if the dance is a 3-couple progressive, the music should go 3 times through (or possibly 6 times if the dance is short and snappy). There is a real sense of fulfilment in getting back to original places, which is destroyed if the music goes on at random.

Counting the turns can be quite difficult: obviously, if you are using recorded music there will be no problem as you will (or should) have chosen appropriate music, and the counting problem is automatically solved. If you are working with a band, however, they will expect to be told when to stop, and it is very easy to lose count. With experience, counting tends to become automatic, but until then, try counting on your fingers, or you may care to keep an eye on a good set and note which is the first couple: when they have reached the top again, the dance is over. However, this last method is not reliable as the set may go wrong, so beware.

After once through a dance, you should judge for yourself whether to repeat it by watching the dancers' reactions and seeing how much they applaud. This is better than asking them whether they want it again, which may cause confusion.

I personally feel that, unless the dance is really light-weight, it should normally be repeated, particularly if it is unfamiliar.

The first time through is rarely perfect: a reprise gives the dancers another chance to try it and, with increased familiarity, to enjoy it more (and, hopefully, to listen to the music rather than to you!)

When calling a longways dance, avoid having dancers standing out at the top for the last turn (particularly in triple-minors). Of course, you can't do anything about those standing out at the bottom, which is another reason for trying to make sure that sets are complete before you begin.

It is sometimes difficult to decide how long to let a longways set run on. This depends to some extent on the difficulty of the dance: complex dances need more time to absorb. Apart from that, people are usually happier to carry on if the band is playing especially well, or if the gathering is large, and new faces are being encountered.

To add to the problem, different countries have different expectations. What would be normal for a longways dance in the USA would be considered inordinately lengthy in England. As a very rough guide, for English dancers you should let the dance run through a minimum of 7 turns for duple and 10 for triple minors, so that all are dancing at the end - but you will have to use your own judgment!

If the dancers have coped well, particularly if the dance has been a tricky one, praise them. If, on the other hand, things have not gone so well, try not to carp, but give positive help so that matters can be put right on a reprise of the dance.



## 6. PREPARING A PROGRAMME

The first thing you should do when preparing a general programme is to find out from the club or organisation running the dance the general style they would prefer for the evening and the previous experience of those likely to be present. You should then choose a selection of dances appropriate to these considerations, aiming to have plenty of variety and contrast.

Choose your dances from different periods and styles. Today there is a tremendous amount of material available, ranging from edited reconstructions of 17th and 18th century dances right up to recently composed dances. There are dances at all levels of difficulty, and in all kinds of styles. The caller really is spoiled for choice!

When working out your programme, try to arrange it so that successive dances will contrast with each other in some way. There are many possibilities: for example, follow a lively dance with a slower one, a new dance with an old favourite, an easy one with a challenger, etc. Remember to apply the principle of contrast to the music too: the tunes may be sad or gay, and of course they have different rhythms (jig, reel, triple-time, polka, hornpipe, rag, waltz, etc). As you see, it is not difficult to avoid monotony!

I think that if you aim to include something to please as many different tastes as possible, you will not go far wrong.

Even if you are preparing for a dance with a specific theme, such as a Playford Ball, or an American evening, there is still plenty of scope for variety.

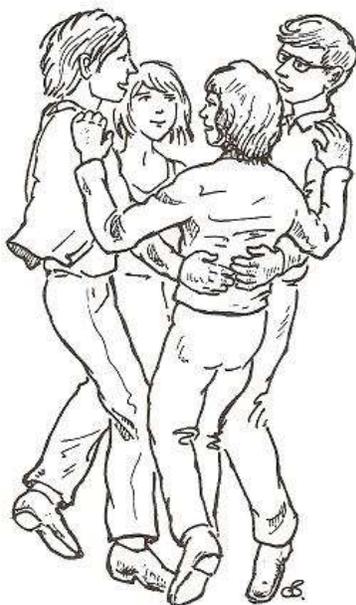
When I work out my own programmes I don't call the dances in a strict order. I prefer to prepare a list of about half as many more dances than I am likely to need (assuming an average of about six dances an hour, including reprises), and then choose from the list as I go, playing it by ear. You may well find that the level of experience of the dancers turns out to be rather different from what you had expected, and it is very useful to have a wider range of dances to draw upon.

If you have called for a particular group before, you will have a good idea of their preferences and capabilities, and your choice of dances should reflect this. For example, Playford orientated dancers will not take kindly to a lot of lively barn dance material and American squares, although the odd one may not come amiss.

And don't fall into the trap of calling only dances that you yourself like, and avoiding those you dislike other people's preferences may be different!

Your repertoire of dances should be sufficiently wide that you don't have to keep calling the same ones at every dance.

Repeating dances over a period of time will of course help the dancers to become more familiar with them, but when dances are repeated ad nauseam, tedium may set in, especially when the dance is walked through in great detail each time. I myself prefer the stimulus, both for myself and the dancers, of calling less familiar material, and I try to spring-clean my programmes regularly.



## 7. WORKING WITH A BAND

The caller and the band leader must work together in a positive relationship for the benefit of the dancers.

When you arrive at a gig, if you have not met the band before, introduce yourself to the leader and offer your help in setting up. He may well prefer to have you out of the way, but the gesture will be appreciated.

When arranging your positions on the stage, be sure that you and the leader can see each other clearly. You will need to communicate during the dance.

The band will probably want to play something before the dancing begins: this not only serves as a pleasant start to the evening, but also gives them a chance to warm up and to check the balance of the ensemble.

When the dancing is under way, you will find the following conventions useful. To speed up the music, move your hand in a small circle fairly quickly ("winding-up"), and to slow it down, wave it slowly up and down ("damping-down"). The faster the movement, the greater the change in speed you require.

The leader will need to know when you want the dance to end. In a dance with a lot of turns, he often likes to be told when there is one more turn to go, so that he may plan the music for the last turn. For example, if he has used more than one tune, he may wish to go back to the original tune to finish with. You may let him know by saying "one more", or putting up one finger, but do this early in the last half of the current turn, so that he has time to think about it.

If you are doing a set dance with only three or four turns, you may simply raise your hand for the last turn, or say "last time", but again, do leave at least eight bars for the band to do it comfortably. Slamming on the brakes is not a good idea!

If the band should go wrong, try to avoid stopping the dance.

The usual cause, particularly in a long dance, is miscounting the repetitions of the A and B music, and it may be possible to get them back on track by calling "A" or "B" to the leader without people in the hall even being aware that there is a problem.

If the band are playing particularly well, give the dancers a chance from time to time to show their appreciation. I also like to thank the band personally at the end of the evening, whether the organisers do this or not.

When choosing your dances, try to bear in mind the band's usual repertoire. There is not a great deal of point in having a "Playford-style" evening with a band that specialises in exciting reels and jigs! Even so, bands will usually, if given sufficient warning, make an effort to prepare any particular dances you are anxious to call, and you can discuss this with them when you contact them before the event.

You should make sure, however, that the band will not have to deal with a great deal of unfamiliar music. More than, say, half a dozen new tunes make an unacceptable extra load. Remember that the tunes may need to be harmonised, copies may have to be made for the other musicians, and band parts sorted out. All this involves extra work for the leader. If you know that the band is likely to have only a small repertoire of dedicated tunes, you will have to plan your programme accordingly.

You should not, as a matter of courtesy, give musicians an unfamiliar and/or unharmonised piece of music just before you expect them to play it. This is not to say that they would be incapable of sight-reading it, but they will be much more able to do it justice if they have had a chance to look at it. In any case, musicians often like to watch the dancers so as to match their playing to the movements of the dance, and being already familiar with the tune gives them the chance to do this.

Having said all this, I can nevertheless say that many bands today are quite at home playing in a variety of styles, and most are excellent readers.

Before each dance, be sure to tell the band leader what you are going to call before you tell the dancers, so that he will have time to sort out the music.

Do give him an idea of the tempo you want, and also the number of times through (but don't expect him to count the turns for you!)

With the very powerful amplifiers which many bands have nowadays, you may find that they have set the volume too high. If your call cannot be heard over the music, or if those sitting out cannot converse without shouting, then it is too loud, and the volume should be reduced as necessary.

Generally speaking, you will find that bands are co-operative, and anxious to work with you to make the evening a success.

Problems rarely arise which cannot be resolved amicably, and the evening should end with you and the band looking forward to the next time you will have the chance to work together.



## 8. BEFORE THE EVENT

As already mentioned, when you are booked for an event, you should ask the organiser or club secretary what kind of a dance he would like. It is also useful to know roughly how many dancers usually turn up, what their general level of experience is likely to be, and so on. This information will help you to work out a suitable programme.

If you are to be working with a band you should get in touch with the leader about a fortnight beforehand to let him know your intended programme. If he has not met some of the tunes you want to use, you will need to send him copies, so that he may familiarise himself with them if he wishes, and sort out band parts.

You should also discuss the question of amplification for yourself. Bands are usually able to provide a microphone and stand for the caller, but don't expect them to do so without warning. You may of course prefer to use your own mike in any case, and if so you should check that it will be suitable for their system.

If the location of the venue is unfamiliar, be sure to work out exactly where it is, and estimate how long it will take you to get there. The organiser or club secretary will often send a sketch map to help. Allow plenty of time to get there without rushing, particularly if you will be travelling when the roads are busy (and when are they not?).

A brief phone call to the organiser on the morning of the event to say that all is in order is a small courtesy, and will allay any fears that you may have forgotten all about it. Believe me, such things do happen!

Aim to arrive in good time, up to half an hour before you are due to start. This will give you time to make contact with the organiser to check the arrangements, and to set up and check your equipment, or, if the music is live, to contact the band leader and liaise with him about the position of your microphone, balancing your voice, etc.

In any case, if you are going to do a dance which you know will be unfamiliar to most people, you may like to tell them beforehand whether it is easy or tricky, stately or fast, etc, in case they have any doubts about getting up.

Help the dancers to make up sets by asking them to raise their arms to let you know if they need couples, and by directing those looking for a vacancy to the right part of the hall. If you have an incomplete set, try to persuade those sitting out to make up the numbers, but do not persist if they are obviously unwilling to get up. They have every right to sit out if they so choose, and may well resent having attention drawn to them. The best you can do is to apologise to the incomplete set, ask them to sit down for the moment, and suggest that they be ready to change in if there is a reprise.

Also, when making up sets, if men are having to sit out when there are ladies dancing together, you may suggest that the ladies split up to let the men in. But be careful not to press them, as they may prefer to dance together.

'Mixer' dances are a good way of livening up an evening and creating a relaxed atmosphere. I believe that mixing should be encouraged as far as possible. In England, the tendency, particularly at public dances, is to do almost every dance with the same partner throughout the evening. This is by no means the case elsewhere. In America, and on the Continent, it is quite normal to change partners between dances. One way you can encourage people to do this is by keeping the dancers on the floor after a 'mixer', with their current partner, for the next dance. You may also announce an occasional "Ladies' choice", which will help the dancers to mingle. If you are calling a set programme, and the circumstances are appropriate, you may care to issue dance cards beforehand. These list the dances on the programme, with a space beside each one to write in the name of the partner for that dance. This needs more preparation, but always makes for a very pleasurable evening.

In the first part of the dance, keep things moving, avoiding longueurs between dances, but later, you may relax the pace when the dancers have worked off their initial head of steam.

Remember the dancers also come to socialise, and sometimes a hall can be quite noisy. You don't want to spoil a good atmosphere by damping them down unnecessarily, but there should be quiet when you are walking through a dance, and during announcements. A request for quiet and an occasional gentle "shush" usually do the trick.

If the hall is full of beginners, as often happens at Barn Dances, your approach should be very relaxed, and the "entertainment" factor becomes much more important. Do not set your sights too high or you may discourage them completely and find it practically impossible to prise them away from the bar. The dances should be very easy, short and snappy, with longer intervals for them to recover and to socialise. Running a successful Barn Dance is an art in itself, and is outside the scope of this booklet.

At other dances, don't worry too much if there are a few beginners: the more experienced dancers will "carry" them. (It helps if you can tactfully separate them as they inevitably congregate together in one set.) Problems do arise when you have a large number of beginners, together with a lot of experienced dancers. This is a difficult situation to handle. It is possible to compromise for some of the time by choosing dances which are easy but unfamiliar, but you may eventually have to resort to giving a warning when you announce a dance if it is not suitable for beginners, and alternating these dances with "dances for everybody". I have always found that experienced dancers are very tolerant of this kind of situation, and are more than willing to help the others.

You will make mistakes from time to time. Don't worry about them: just laugh them off and carry on. But remember to make a note if necessary on your crib card, to make sure that you don't make that particular error again.

Some callers prefer to run dances together in groups of two or three. This has the advantage of not having to get the dancers up at the beginning of each item, and so keeps things moving and saves time. However, there are certain things to avoid. The dances following one another should have the same set formation, or one to which the dancers can easily change. Otherwise you will lose more time than you save. Following a three-couple set dance with a square will quickly bring chaos to the hall.

Secondly, the dances which you run together should be in the same style. Dancers who take the floor eagerly for a Playford dance may not take kindly to being asked to stay on the floor for an American square. It is embarrassing for them to walk off the floor and leave the set minus a couple, but if they choose to do so (and why should they not?) time will be wasted while another couple is rustled up. In addition, you should bear in mind that the ladies may prefer not to have to dance with some men for more than one dance at a time. Finally, make sure that any dances which are run together in this way are reasonably short and snappy. Otherwise, a couple who had intended to take a rest for just one dance may find themselves sitting out for up to half an hour.

You may occasionally get a request for a particular dance from the floor. It is up to you whether you include it or not, but before you decide, you should check that the band are happy to play the tune, that you yourself are sufficiently confident to call it without preparation, and that the dance itself is a suitable one for the occasion.

It is best to avoid doing long, complicated dances during the last half-hour or so. By then, people are getting tired, and easier, more familiar material is preferable.

Be sure to include one or two old favourites, especially in the latter part of the dance, and, most important of all, your final dance should be one that all may join in without difficulty, preferably a circle or longways dance, so that no one will be forced to sit out.

Arrange for the band, caller, etc to be thanked before the last dance. The evening should end with dancing, not with speeches.

Always remember that, as a caller, you owe it to your dancers to be adequately prepared: it should not be necessary for those on the floor to have to correct you, or remind you of what comes next.

Whenever you go dancing, you have a golden opportunity not just to enjoy yourself, but also to benefit from the chance to see other callers in action. See as many different callers as you can: as I have already said, all have their own style and ways of putting things over, and you should always be on the look-out for something to learn (or to avoid!).

You may ignore many of the suggestions I have made, and still be a good caller. So much depends upon your manner on the platform. If you can cultivate a friendly, warm approach, everything else tends to fall into place.

You will find that the relationship between yourself and those on the floor is not at all one-sided. On the contrary, there is a constant give-and-take as the atmosphere builds up. You will learn to recognise and respond to the feedback coming from the dancers, and this special relationship with them is, ultimately, the most rewarding thing of all.

I sincerely hope that the suggestions in the preceding pages will help you to avoid some of the more obvious pitfalls when you are calling. Remember, they are not intended to be hard and fast rules: choose the tips which you feel will help you, and try to develop a style of your own.

Good luck!

***Charles Bolton***