

Notes for MCs and Briefers of Dances

Introduction: These notes are primarily written as suggestions for balls and other stand-alone events. Modifications need to be made for multi-day events such as workshops, camps, and schools with social dances every evening and classes during the day. These are guidelines, not hard and fast rules; you always have to use common sense in light of the particular event and composition of dancers and dances.

General Responsibilities of MCs

1. You are in charge of the general pacing of the dance. Work closely with the musicians to keep the program on schedule, moving at a reasonable speed between dances and during intervals so that you end on time and leave room for encores. A common guideline is that there should be about 6 dances per hour at a social dance. The pace will have to slow if it is particularly hot or humid.
2. Before the program begins, check with the chairs to see if there are any demonstrations, announcements, or other activities that have to occur during the intervals so that you can plan the length of the rest portions of the intervals.
3. Work closely with the musicians. Arrange how each dance will be introduced. Normally, the musicians play the first 8 bars and the MC/briefer announces the dance and asks sets to form. Give the musicians time to breathe between dances and set up music for the next dance, but keep the pace of the program moving.
4. Determine the appropriate number of lines for the dance floor and monitor that extra lines don't form. As sets are forming, adjust the lines if the spaces between lines are uneven.
5. If necessary, remind dancers early in the program to avoid forming sets until the first eight bars are played and you announce the dance. Also, encourage people to mix, dance on the other side of the hall some, dance with people they don't know, and ask people sitting out to dance.
6. When announcing the dance, indicate the number of couples in each set. "Please form four-couple sets for 'Monymusk'." If the dance requires sets that are not longwise sets of four couples, announce that fact clearly and quickly before people start forming and counting off sets. When forming sets, remind the top man or couple to count off if they are not doing so. See if you can combine partial sets or indicate the number of couples needed in which sets.
7. Don't push people sitting out to complete a set if they are obviously reluctant: there may be good reasons why they don't want to dance, including not knowing the dance. If one or more five-couple sets are the best quick option, ask the 4th and 5th couples in 5-couple sets to share the last two rounds.
8. You should be the only one communicating with the musicians and sound people. Dancers should bring their concerns to you, not to the musicians or sound people.
9. You are responsible for deciding if there is to be an encore of a dance. If necessary, early in the program or the multi-day event, ask people to indicate an interest in encores by raising a finger. You have to decide quickly before sets begin to break up. Weigh the amount and breadth of enthusiasm. If the request is widespread, check how you are doing on the overall schedule and check with the leader of the musicians to get the leader's consent before announcing an encore.
10. If you decide to cut a dance because you are running out of time, be certain to announce it at least one dance before the one to be cut. You don't want people lined up for a particular dance only to be told that it won't be done.
11. At least once in each set of dances, ask the dancers to join you in thanking the musicians. During the first set of dances, either you or the lead musician should introduce the musicians. Do this when you have people's attention, most likely once sets are formed and before you brief the dance. For multi-day events,

Note: Portions of these guidelines are adapted from those by Anselm Lingnau (<http://www.scottishdance.net/scd/tips/Calling.html>) and Bill Zobel, "Notes for MCs," *Scottish Country Dancer*, No. 13 (October 2011): 21.

this introduction only needs to be done at the first party unless there are changes in the musicians. If there is a different leader for each program, you probably should recognize and thank that leader even if you don't introduce the entire band.

12. At the end of a set of dances, announce the length of the interval and then stick to it. Try to keep the intervals to between 10 and 15 minutes. If there are any activities that have to occur during the interval, announce them, ask people to be back in time for them, and shorten the "free time" a bit. Confer with the leader of the musicians about 5 minutes before the end of the interval to assure that the musicians will be assembled and ready to begin at the appointed time.
13. You are not there to entertain or to give the history or origins of the dances. If the deviser of a dance is in the room, though, you should recognize and thank the deviser.

Guidelines for Briefing Dances

1. Study the dances beforehand using the original instructions, not just diagrams or cribs. There is nothing more embarrassing and confusing than a briefing that is constantly corrected by people from the floor. In addition to your notes, have the originals next to you in case you need to check them.
2. Practice the briefings out loud. Refine them to avoid confusing phrasing and to make them as succinct and clear as possible. Briefings should last between 30 and 45 seconds. To jog short-term memory, brief is usually better than long and detailed. For most dances, one briefing is enough, and you don't need a recap of the briefing. Reminding people how the dance begins, however, often helps solidify the entire dance in short-term memory. In multi-day events with memory overload, you may want to give *very* brief recaps of all but the simplest dances, but these recaps should be 3- or 4-word labels for each of the figures to help people recall the overall structure.
3. Try to structure your briefing in phrases of generally eight bars. Then leave a short pause. This helps your breathing and also makes it easier for the dancers to figure out where you are in the dance.
4. Don't try to teach the dance in your briefing. Your job is to jog people's memories. You want to include just enough detail so people will know what to do.
5. Use RSCDS terminology and other widely known terms, avoiding local terminology. Select words that reinforce the patterns of the figures. "Circle 6-hands round and back" conveys in two ways the figure while "dance 6-hands round and back" conveys it in only one way.
6. Avoid bar numbers as in "2s step up on bars 19 and 20" since nobody will be able to calculate what moment of the dance you're talking about. It's better to say "1s cast off while the 2s step up." If that isn't possible, relate the bar numbers to the current figure, e.g., "2s step up on 3 and 4 of the phrase."
7. If the dance in question contains a "compound" figure like "Corner pass and turn" or "Set and rotate," resist the temptation of explaining all the little movements that it consists of. The dancers are supposed to know the figures -- you just remind them which one comes when.
8. For "meanwhile" figures, it's usually clearer to describe the pattern for one group and then for the other, rather than describing what both groups are doing bar by bar.
9. For complicated or unfamiliar dances in parties for multi-day events, consider using a demonstration set to illustrate the dance while you brief it. Having all sets walking is often confusing and hard to control with different sets going wrong in different ways.
10. Speak loudly, clearly, and slowly. If you feel you're speaking a bit too slowly, then it is probably just right for the audience to understand. If you are using a microphone, listen to the sound coming out of the speakers and adjust the position of the mike (both angle and distance) to get the best sound. Try to do this during the band sound check before the program begins. Voices with a lower register are usually easier to understand. If you have a high register voice, practice lowering the pitch of your voice.