

Living the Music

Michael Pollock

It was a cool, wet spring evening, but the church basement was warm and bright, and the smell of fresh-brewed coffee greeted people as they arrived. The fiddler was warming up in a corner trying a few new tunes to see if they would sound all right at dance speed. A coffee can on a table at the door held the admission money—whatever was taken in would be divided between the band, the church, and the caller. As people came in—alone, or in couples, or in small groups—they were greeted by those who hadn't seen them since the last dance, and the counter in the kitchen blossomed with edibles of all sorts to be enjoyed at the interval. The caller gauged the mood of the room, allowing the socializing that was as important as the dancing itself, until he sensed anticipation growing and finally called the words that all were waiting for: "Take partners, please!"

The passage above probably sounds like a description of a rural community dance of some years ago, but in fact it is a recollection of the last dance held by a group of contra dance enthusiasts in Calgary just over a month ago. Many people would be surprised that such an event could take place in a large urban centre, and would assume that it is the result of an organized club, or a group of individuals with a common background preserving their traditional customs. Neither assumption is correct. Our dance group is emphatically *not* a folk-dance club, and we have consciously avoided the organization and formalization that club status usually involves. Similarly, it is *not* a group devoted to preserving a beloved heritage; indeed, so far as I am aware there is no tradition of contra dance in Alberta. So what's going on?

When my wife Karen and I first came to Calgary some years ago, we had assumed that since Calgary had (and has!) several folk music clubs, that folk dancing of various sorts would be linked to the folk music scene. Specifically, we were interested in New England-style contra dancing. Unfortunately, we found that such dances were held only irregularly, called by Benjamin Goldberg whenever he happened to be in town. Because we were keen, Benjamin kindly gave me some brief instruction in calling contras, let me copy his dance cards, and introduced us to some able musicians. With a bit of encouragement, we then organized a series of monthly dances. This may be regarded as the Field of Dreams approach: "If you hold a dance, they will come!" Such ideas work well in movies but alas, not in real life. Although we had a handful of very enthusiastic supporters, on the whole the dances were not well-attended. We had found a hall that charged us only \$15.00 for rental, and we charged \$3.00 admission to the dances. The night we didn't cover the cost of the hall (I'll let you do the arithmetic to realize how poor the turnout was) we decided to give up the dances.

Our most committed dancer was George Lyon (co-editor of this *Bulletin*). George loves contra dancing so much that, after the demise of our dance series, he rolled up the carpet in his front room, and invited likely people to a house dance. I was able to teach and call, and after a very few such dances it became clear that George's front room wouldn't hold everyone who wanted to dance. John Leeder (our other co-editor) and his wife Marge suggested that we rent a local church hall and take up a collection to cover expenses. Some of the dancers

from George's front room were also musicians, so from the start our church-basement dances have had live music. (This is a particular attraction for many dancers.) The band is very enthusiastic, and typically breaks into polkas, schottisches, and waltzes during the breaks in the contra dancing, so that the die-hard dancers can dance nearly all evening if they wish. The musicians have been very supportive of our dances, and play for the fun of it; although our dances are now well enough attended that the musicians' take will pay their babysitting, they were willing to perform in the early days when it probably cost them a little bit to be there.

As people came to the dances and had enjoyed themselves, they invited friends that they thought would be interested. Our informal group has now grown so that we regularly have thirty to forty dancers. For me, the particular delight of these dances is that they are "community dances" in a very real sense. They are not highly organized, and people are coming to dance strictly for the fun of it. The chief difference between these community dances and those of times past is that ours is not a geographical community, but a "community of friends" drawn from the four corners of the city. The sense of community in the group is evident in the degree of socializing that occurs during the breaks in the dance; sometimes it's difficult to get people to stop talking and come back to dancing!

The community aspect of the dances has allowed us to be very informal. The dances are held about once a month from October to June, but the schedule has to be somewhat irregular to suit my schedule and that of the band. When we can arrange a consonance between our commitments and the availability of the church we have a dance! Dancers are notified of the upcoming event by telephone; the 'phone calls are handled by several volunteers, so that no one has a particularly onerous task. No one is "in charge" of refreshments. Marge keeps the coffee brewing, and other food is provided by those who wish to contribute. (We sometimes have more food than we can eat!) Our collection at the door is strictly on a break-even basis; after the church receives a donation, the remaining funds are divided between the musicians and the caller. No advertising is necessary, since we rely on word-of-mouth to swell our ranks.

Part of the success of the current dances is, I think, due to the nature of contra dance itself. For those unfamiliar with

this dance form, contra dance is related both to English country dance (from which it evolved) and modern square dance (which evolved from it), although the precise genealogy of the three dance forms is open to question. Most people regard contras as progressive line dances, in which each couple dances a repeating cycle of figures with several different couples in sequence. The figures of the dances are drawn from a relatively small pool, and the delight of the dances is in the near-infinite variety of combinations of these figures. Most of the figures are done using walking steps; thus footwork is kept to a minimum. The calls are not singing calls, or improvised calls (as in modern square dance) but rather prompts to remind the dancers of the figures. The dances can be quite complex, but are also very forgiving of mistakes. Even if dancers are completely lost during one cycle of the dance, they need only find their progressed position before the start of the next cycle, and their errors will have no consequence for the remainder of the set. As a result, the other dancers are generally not annoyed by mistakes, and slips are accompanied by good-natured laughter and assistance.

I try to program dances so that each successive dance introduces at most two new figures; this ensures that the complexity of the dances increases as the evening proceeds, but that the progression is very gradual. This allows the dances to be very welcoming, and ensures that new dancers will be able to keep up. We are also fortunate in now having a critical mass of seasoned dancers who can provide advice, assistance, or (if required) a gentle nudge in the right direction

to those with less experience.

Why did our first dance series fail, and our current series blossom and flourish? When we tried to start our first series, we were not well-connected in Calgary, and so we were unable to contact people who would be interested in the dance, and would themselves know others who would be interested. It is exactly this type of network (or "community") that has made the current dance series a success. Whereas in the past geographical communities provided the common ground for community dances, we have made the dance itself the defining feature of the community.

Contra dancing is complex enough to provide a challenge for the dancers, but not so difficult that the social pleasures of interacting with your partner and with other dancers are lost. For me, however, the special magic in dance occurs in those all-too-rare moments when the dance and the dancer become one, when the figures of the dance flow effortlessly one into the next without conscious thought, when everything except the music and the dance disappear. When I see that the dancers are doing well in a particular dance, when the patterns are flowing smoothly and with confidence, I try to encourage these special moments of timelessness by allowing the dance to continue without calls. The dancers can then make the music visible, feeling the pace of the dance in the phrasing of the tune, moving smoothly through the figures effortlessly and artlessly.

My nine-year-old daughter is now old enough to attend our dance, and I take great delight in seeing how well she moves to the music, and with what confidence she interacts with the other dancers. Coming home from the last dance, tired, but bubbling over with the excitement of the evening, she tried to put into words why she enjoys dancing so much. "It's like flying..." she said, and then, realizing that wasn't quite right, "It's like ... living the music." I gripped the steering wheel a little harder, and indulged in the secret proud smile of a father whose child has astonished him with her wisdom. She has found the heart of the dance.

