

# **San Francisco Branch Teachers' Committee Guidelines for Ball and Party Programs**

***Revised Draft: January 4, 2001***

These guidelines are offered to assist teachers, musicians, and event committees in creating programs for balls and other types of Scottish Country Dance events. The intent is to produce programs that are balanced, enjoyable, and exciting, and that the participants will remember as a positive aspect of the evening.

The Teachers' Committee meeting on September 16, 2000, mandated that a subcommittee address these issues in response to some comments received concerning programs. The subcommittee met on November 24, 2000 with the following attendees: Coletta Busse, Bruce Herbold, Andy Imbrie, Paula Jacobson, Susie Langdon Kass, and Alan Twigg.

This discussion has four sections:

- General guidelines for good dance programs
- Specific considerations for SF Branch annual events
- Monthly party programs
- Dance Program Selection from the Musician's Point of View (by Andy Imbrie)

## ***General Program Guidelines***

While most teachers have learned the general rules for creating good dance programs, no RSCDS, TAC, or SF Branch publication lists them. Most of these are common sense, but are included here as a reference point.

## **Committees**

Teachers' Committee policy is that subcommittees, usually consisting of three teachers, are responsible for program creation. These subcommittees are chartered for each event at the January meeting of the full Teachers' Committee.

- For Monthly Party programs, each subcommittee consists of the Continuity Person for the year plus two other teachers, and each subcommittee is chartered to make up the programs for two consecutive monthly dances. The Continuity Person handles the meeting logistics and communicates the results.
- For balls and other special events, the subcommittee consists of three teachers, one of whom is designated the convenor. The convenor is responsible for arranging meeting(s), communicating inputs and results, and inviting two additional participants to the initial meeting: a musician - either a representative of the band scheduled to play for the event or the current Branch Music Coordinator (or delegate) - and a representative from the event organizing committee.

It is important to schedule meetings with enough lead-time that all the participants can attend. If one or more can't meet the schedule constraints, it is better to find substitutes than to meet without their

input. As a last resort, collect input beforehand from those unable to attend and get their approval on the draft result before publishing it. On no account should a program for a special event be published without approval from a musicians' representative and the event organizing committee.

If possible, schedule the program meeting with enough lead time to create the program, put it aside for a couple of days, and then review it before publication. A fresh look can spot hidden difficulties, resolve knotty dilemmas, and so forth.

**\*\*A proposal (subject to ratification from the full Teachers' Committee): All programs for special events shall be subject to review by the Branch Music Coordinator and Monthly Party Program Continuity Person prior to publication.**

## **Program Content**

Every dance program should include the following:

- A variety of different formations and steps, balanced throughout the program. Repeated or similar formations should be separated, with other dances in between, as should dances with a lot of slipstep or pas de basque.
- Certain basic formations, such as allemande, quicktime poussette, set and turn corners, reel of three, reel of four, rights and lefts, hands across, hands round, down the middle and back.
- Dances at varying levels of complexity and strenuousness, as appropriate to the intended audience. Again, balance the levels so that easier dances are sprinkled throughout the evening. Bear in mind dances that are physically and mentally stimulating and those that emphasize teamwork.
- Mostly 8x32 dances with a two- or three-couple progression. Use variety as a spice: one or two long dances, one or two dances using a 3- or 4-couple set progression, at most one medley, one square, one 5-couple dance, one round-the-room or up-and-down-the-hall dance, one or two dances with highland steps. Not all of these variants need appear in every program.
- Balance of jigs, reels, and strathspeys; it is better to have more reels than jigs. A 15-dance program might typically have 6 strathspeys, 5 reels, and 4 jigs. Vary the musical styles (more on this topic under Dance Program Selection from the Musician's Point of View).
- A good rule of thumb is to have no more than one third of a program come from non-RSCDS sources. (Theme programs may be an exception to this rule.)
- Do not include dances unknown to the committee members. If a dance is unfamiliar to most, take a break from the meeting and dance or walk it through with ghosts if necessary.

## **Program Choice and Ordering**

Most SF Branch programs consist of between 15 and 20 dances divided into three approximately equal sets by intermissions. Each committee should establish at the outset of the meeting how many dances are to be on the program, if there is any question. When making this decision, bear in mind:

- Conditions that might affect participants' energy level, such as accompanying workshops.

- If the hall is known, any factors that might affect the length, such as a curfew hour, or the choice of dances, such as a hard floor that doesn't take kindly to heavy pas de basque or an odd shape that won't permit round-the-room dances.
- Likely number of encores, and whether or not dances will be briefed; for special events, the event committee is responsible for these decisions, and should instruct the emcee appropriately.
- Grand marches, waltzes, and other couples' dances should not be included in the total that makes up the "18-dance program" (or whatever), but should factor into the time estimate if they are to be part of the evening.

If the program does not divide equally into three sets, make the last set shorter. Even if the total is divisible by three, a shorter last set might be preferable, depending on other factors; for example, an 18-dance program might divide into 6-7-5 to accommodate an extra strathspey in the second set and a shortened last set.

Choose and order the dances with regard for building the energy level and excitement in a series of peaks through the evening:

- The first dance in each set should be light in weight, from both a dancing and musical perspective: less strenuous/complex, definitely quicktime and mostly skipchange, jigtime or possibly a quarternote (single) reel. The first dance of the evening, in particular, should exemplify these characteristics; preferably an easy 8x32 jig with a 3-couple progression and minimal pas de basque or slipstep. Avoid starting the evening with a round-the-room dance, since they are quite strenuous, although starting a later set with one is fine.
- Each set should vary the musical type, for example JSJSR or JRSJSR.
- Preferably the first strathspey of the evening should have a strong traditional tune. Avoid putting 2-couple strathspeys in the last set, or else specify that they are to be danced in 3-couple sets. For programming purposes, medleys take the place of strathspeys.
- The middle of each set, and in particular the midpoint of the evening, should be a focal point for a featured dance. This could be a long or complex one, or a locally composed or theme dance for the evening.
- The last set can be good placement for a short dance, such as a 3-couple set strathspey or something danced once through without a progression. Bear in mind that these dances often get encored; a 3x32 strathspey will still be a bit shorter than average if dancers encore it to 6x32, but a 4x32 reel will be just as long as one that started out 8x32, except that most 4x32 dances are more strenuous than average.
- The last dance of each set, and in particular the last dance of the evening, should be a driving reel with exciting music. The final dance should be an 8x32 reel with a 3-couple progression, accessible to most or all of the participants. (Two-couple dances tend to be too strenuous and repetitious for the end of the evening, and 4-couple or other set patterns require exact numbers and might exclude some people.)

## **SF Branch Annual Events**

The San Francisco Branch currently holds three special events on an annual basis:

- The Jean Patrick Memorial Dance
- The Kim McGarrity Memorial Ball at Asilomar
- The Valentine's Ball

Each of these events has its own considerations from a programming point of view, discussed in following sections.

First, some points that pertain to special events programs as opposed to monthly parties and other dances. (While the Jean Patrick Dance is not a formal ball in terms of dress or some other details, it is similar to the two balls from a programming point of view.):

- Consult the event organizing committee for any special themes, anniversaries, etc. that should be reflected in the dances chosen for the program.
- Consult a band representative, if the band has been chosen, for any particular dances they recommend (or recommend *against*). Sometimes a band has a hot arrangement they would very much like to play.
- Think about the likely participants – will there be a lot of out-of-towners, beginners, casual dancers who don't go to classes much? Will there be reviews or practices dedicated to this program beforehand?

### **Jean Patrick Memorial Dance**

This dance coincides with the Pleasanton Highland Games and kicks off the Fall dance season of classes. Its program should align to the following special criteria:

- Many dancers and dance classes take the Summer off, and so participants will be rusty. There is typically a greater attendance by visitors and occasional dancers than at other Branch events. Therefore, this program should not introduce new or unusual dances. Most dances should be old favorites or have appeared on the previous year's programs.
- A large number of Sacramento dancers usually attend, and Jean Patrick founded that Branch. Check with local teachers to see what they've had on programs during the previous year.
- Many people have been performing at the Games during the day, or will be the next day; some haven't been dancing regularly during the Summer months. It also can be quite warm Labor Day weekend. These factors speak to making the program a bit less strenuous than usual.
- New beginners aren't likely to dance at this event, so avoid the extremely simple dances that cater to them.
- Jean Patrick herself loved stretchy strathspeys, and None So Pretty was a particular favorite of hers.
- At least in the current hall, there is plenty of room for dances that require it.

## **Kim McGarrity Memorial Ball**

This ball accompanies the Branch dance weekend; all participants attend the full weekend and reside on site. Its special criteria are as follows:

- Program is published well in advance; there is lots of time for participants to prepare, and there are dedicated practices beforehand and during the afternoon. All participants have been dancing for at least a year. These factors suggest a bit more freedom in including some complexity and an unusual dance or two.
- A lot of out-of-towners attend, so if unusual or local dances are on the program, make sure the descriptions are clear and available.
- Hall space is constrained, so avoid dances that need a lot of room or travel outside the set, particularly in the first two-thirds of the evening.
- It may be wise to limit encores, since people have been dancing all weekend and may have reduced stamina.
- Include some basic dances, but not the dead-simple ones that cater to novice dancers who've attended classes for only a few months.
- Consult with musicians about Kim's original tunes or arrangements they might wish to include.

## **Valentine's Ball**

This is a "free-standing" ball (not accompanied by any other event). Most attendees are local dancers, but some don't attend classes regularly. The following criteria apply:

- This is likely the most elegant event on the Branch calendar. Most people think strathspeys emphasize elegance; consider including an extra one by having a seven-dance set. If including 2-couple strathspeys, think about whether they show well if danced 8 times through, so the whole hall is moving together.
- Physically challenging dances may conflict with the formality of attire and the feeling of elegance.
- Promenades emphasize elegance, as do some of the more traditional dances and movements.
- Space constrictions are not usually a problem.
- This is usually the first big event attended by new dancers who started the previous September. One third of the program should be accessible to them, including the first and last dances of the evening. In this case, dances consisting of four traditional formations are preferable to more modern styles or variations.

## ***Monthly Party Programs***

Monthly Parties in the SF Branch are another type of special case, because there are a number of specific rules governing dance selection on these programs. Try to adhere to the general guidelines given in the first section when creating Monthly Party programs, but at times it will be necessary to compromise and bend those rules a bit.

While the committees should endeavor to make these programs social and enjoyable, they serve a dual function, as part of the teaching syllabus of the Branch. It is expected that they will cover the range of formations and dance types over the course of the year, and that in particular the basic-level dances will progress throughout the year to keep pace with beginner dancers' training.

## **Structure and Requirements**

A Monthly Party program consists of 15 dances, arranged in three sets of five each. Generally each set should consist of the pattern QSQSQ, where Q is quicktime (reel or jig) and S is strathspey. As mentioned earlier, it is preferable to start sets with jigs and finish them with reels, and maintain an overall balance that tips in the direction of reels.

The usual rule is to have five basic-level dances, three advanced ones, and seven intermediate. Note that these designations are somewhat subjective, and also slide around a bit depending on where the program is placed in the dancing season. On a November program, one might choose to have three very simple dances suitable for new Fall beginners, three basic/intermediate dances geared towards the previous year's basic class, six additional dances at a solid intermediate level, and three advanced ones. At that time of year, a simple dance with a pousette would be considered B/I, and a standard dance with set to and turn corners would be considered full intermediate, while the same dances on an April program might both be suitable for the previous Fall's beginner class and thus be rated Basic.

In addition to the general guidelines, Monthly Party programs draw on the Branch Repertoire list for roughly half of their content. The intent here is to increase the familiarity of a set of dances established as representative. The Repertoire List is published on the Branch website as both a database and a flat file suitable for import; it can also be obtained in hardcopy from the Teachers' Committee Secretary. The current version of the list records all the dances that have appeared on Branch-wide programs over the last ten years; those considered part of the current repertoire are marked with either a "C" (for core) or an "S" (for suggested) in the Rep List column.

Monthly Party programs maintain continuity by cycling the content from month to month, so that most dances appear for three consecutive months. The Monthly Party Continuity Person is responsible for maintaining this formula by setting which five dances rotate off the program list each month. From the end of one dancing year to the beginning of the next (June to October Monthly Parties), the continuity need not be as strict; in choosing dances for the October program, review the June program but also the Jean Patrick and Asilomar Ball programs as source material.

## ***Dance Program Selection from the Musician's Point of View***

**-- By Andy Imbrie, revised December, 2000**

As both a dancer and a musician, I have found that the type and order of dances on a program makes a significant difference in the overall enjoyment and excitement level of a dance evening. I realize that there are many factors to be considered when planning a dance program, including program length,

difficulty, variety of figures, familiarity, and so on. I would suggest that the evening's music is no less important a consideration than these and that the music for each dance should play an important role in the selection and placement of dances on a program.

Based on this premise, I have made a list of recommendations, which program devisors may wish to consider when planning a dance evening. First, however, I must provide some background:

Most dances have a suggested or signature tune that goes with the dance. The band will (almost) always use this tune for the first and last rounds of the dance, and choose other similar tunes to play as alternates: this is called an "arrangement" for the dance. Most dances can be categorized by their signature tunes as follows:

1. "Category A Reels": musically exciting reels (e.g. Mrs. McLeod, De'il Amang the Tailors, Montgomerie's Rant)
2. "Category C Reels": quarter note reels (e.g. Bratach Bana, Let's Have a Ceilidh, Peat Fire Flame, Irish Rover)
3. "Category B Reels": all other reels
4. "Category A Strathspeys": strong, driving strathspeys (e.g. Monymusk, John McAlpin, Sauchie Haugh, Dalkieth's Strathspey)
5. "Category C Strathspeys": song tune or slow air derived strathspeys (e.g. Miss Gibson, Sean Triubhas Willichan)
6. "Category B Strathspeys": all other strathspeys

Jigs can also be divided into categories, but this is less important for the purposes of program planning. One other definition will be helpful: "show stopper" arrangements are those designated as such by the band.

Now the list – here are some suggested guidelines for creating a with considering the dance music:

1. Most importantly: consult with the band on the program.
2. In general, plan to have three sets on the program – especially for events with more than 10 dances.
3. End each set with a "Category A Reel"; in addition the very last dance should be a "show stopper" reel; do not end sets with strathspeys. It is sometimes acceptable to end a set with a jig, but this is usually a musical letdown, and I would advise against it. In my opinion, the very last dance of the evening **must** be a reel.
4. Start the first set with a jig (this is always easier for the musicians to warm up with and usually easier for the dancers as well).
5. Start the second and third sets with a jig if possible. It is acceptable to start the second or third set with a reel, but usually not both. Do not start sets with a strathspey.
6. The entire program should be balanced in terms of number of jigs, reels, and strathspeys; try to have 1/3 of the program for each. Do not have more jigs than reels on a program; however it is acceptable (even encouraged) to have more strathspeys than reels or jigs. For example, a typical 15 dance

program might contain 5 reels, 4 jigs, and 6 strathspeys arranged as: J,S,J,S,R then J,S,R,S,R, then J,S,R,S,R.

7. Do not place two dances of the same type together unless separated by one of the intermissions.
8. Avoid more than one or two "Category C Reels" on the program.
9. Avoid more than one or two "Category C Strathspeys" on the program.
10. If there are uneven numbers of dances in each set, the last set should be shortest. Similarly if there are shorter dances on the program (e.g. 3x through or 4x through dances), they work best nearer the end of the evening.

I hope this set of guidelines will prove useful to the dance program devisors. Of course, nothing is set in stone – but I have found by long experience that if these guidelines are followed, a successful dance evening can almost be guaranteed.