

## **Dancing in Circles**

John M Ramsay

Before the days of microphones, dancing masters taught their dances on the floor among the dancers. They sometimes rapped a cane on the floor to call for attention and used it to beat out the cadence. The visual conveyed nuances which were reenforced by words.

The visual is so important in teaching dance. Posture, attitude, the size of a leap or a step are quickly seen but not easily conveyed by words. Even today, callers will sometimes put down the microphone, come down on the floor and demonstrate what they mean. Dance leaders are, however, also beginning to make use of video in dance notation for the same reason that they demonstrate a figure.

Anyone trying to reconstruct an old dance from the printed page knows the limits of words in describing a dance, and those who have choreographed a dance know how hard it is to choose descriptive words for the printed page. Words are static while dance is motion. Even two-dimensional visual drawings cannot capture the motion of dance. Here is a link to a website where you can be inspired by the potential of the digital world for country dance. Look at the “sample” of this young videographer and his friends’ use of visual motion combined with words and graphics to describe country dances. [Stately Steps](#)

When I began calling dances in the late 1940’s, we did not use microphones and “called from the floor.” I still like to call from the floor altho there are certainly advantages to being on a stage with microphone in hand; I have done my share of using that technology. Now, we have wireless microphones and are no longer tethered to a mike stand. I have taken to returning to the floor with a tiny microphone hooked, taped, or pinned in the proximity of my mouth.

Last Saturday night, Berni and I led our ninth Christmas Ball in Jefferson City, Missouri. We had 116 dancers in a dance hall with a low ceiling and no stage. Homeschoolers are mannerly, but that many teenagers make a microphone necessary if for no other reason that teenagers grow up in an amplified world. I repeated the previous year’s selection of dances because it had worked well. Most

of the dances were in a circle formation with Berni and me providing a visual demonstration in the center where all could see. I had to keep in mind that the orientation of those behind us made it easier for them to mimic our actions even though they couldn't read our lips while those facing us could see our faces but had to account for the mirror image impulse regarding "right" and "left." Berni and I would often about-face so that the mirror image group would understand. Mimicking the visual trumps the aural "right" or "left" for most people. I admit that the hall would accommodate a few more dancers if they were in lines, but it would be far more difficult to manage this one-night-a-year event in lines instead of a circle when at least twenty-five percent of the dancers have never even seen a country dance—much less participated in one.

Country dances in "longways for as many as will" formation dominated the dance scene in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In that era, time had a different value. The custom was for the top couple to "teach" the figures as they worked their way down the set. Sometime in the nineteenth century, as the value of time shifted, the triple minor gave way to the duple minor and then to "hands four from the top" so that all could instantly begin dancing at the start. In teaching the dance to all at once, it is at least awkward to ask dancers in longways formation to hunker down so that all may see a demonstration. Circle formations make this unnecessary.

Here is the circle oriented program I used in Jefferson City with notes to show how teaching the figures progresses, and a nod to some history:

- Grand March: Queen's Highway, King's Highway, Phalanx, Serpentine, Spiral
- Ostende: delightful but simple 1910 St Louis schottische in a double circle
- [Circassian Circle](#): mixer in single circle with a buzz-step swing
- [Spanish Waltz](#): Civil War era in circle formation with right and left hand stars, progression
- Scatter Promenade: simple mixer reenforcing stars, buzz-step swing, and promenade
- Duke of Kent's Waltz: 1802 longways capitalizing on Spanish Waltz figures plus a cast
- Christchurch Bells: in a double circle men in outside circle, ccw facing couples as #1's
- Circle Waltz Mixer: also known as Oslo Waltz; Greensleeves works well for Christmas
- Black Nag: all sets as spokes facing center (makes for fun galops to center in first figure)
- Sir Roger De Coverly: Fessiwig Virginia Reel with "corkscrew" instead of reel; sets ad lib
- Oh, how lovely is the evening: for all, 3 concentric circles as a round; no partners needed

I chose a few links (inserted above) to hint at the potential of the digital world in describing dance; but the links also show the need for quality in shooting,

editing, and level of dancing. There is a lot of poor material to discard as one searches the internet for something useful. CDSS has made a start, [Childgrove Channel](#), at compiling a juried collection but much much more needs to be done.