

Notes on Choreography
for Duple Minor Improper Contra Dances
2025

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Introduction

These notes are about the choreography of duple minor (two couple minor sets), improper contra dances, i.e. modern contra dances. They are for potential and practicing choreographers and callers and assume that you have a working knowledge of contra dancing.

This information is based on my experiences dancing, calling, and writing dances. It is part fact and part opinion. For choreographers, I expect that you will disagree with many parts of it, but perhaps it will give you something to consider. For callers, I hope that you will learn something that will help you understand complex dances more easily and choose better dances to call.

This is an update based on my notes from 1998 and 2003. And I have made a number of revisions in 2017.

Partners, Neighbors, and Shadows

I am using gents and ladies to name the two roles of the dancers in a contra dance.

Your partner is beside you, ladies on the right at the start of any duple minor improper contra. Your neighbors are the people in your minor set other than your partner or shadow.

A shadow, sometime known as a trail buddy, is someone that you meet (generally in your minor set) on every cycle of the dance (your partner might be considered your primary shadow). Every opposite role person that is on the same side of the set as your partner is a potential shadow. Anyone else that you meet is a neighbor. Shadows appear in your minor set when you progress differently from your partner, for example ladies chain on the left diagonal. In Becket formation long lines, the person beside you that is not your partner is a shadow that is not in your minor set (there may be other shadows in the same dance).

Excluding end effects, if your partner is in a different minor set in a dance walk-through, then in your minor set one opposite role person is a neighbor and one is a shadow. Look up or down the set for your partner. The opposite role person that is on the same side of the set as your partner is the shadow.

At the end of a set a partner or shadow may dance the part of a neighbor.

(2025) trail buddy is now often used to refer to the opposite role person in the couple that is traveling with you in a four facing four dance.

Figures

The figures that make up a contra dance, such as do-si-do, swing, and circle, have several interesting characteristics. Figures may change the position of the dancers. Some do -

- ladies chain across
- allemande 1+1/2 or 1+3/4
- circle or star 3/4
- 1/2 hey
- right and left through across
- swing starting with ladies on the left.

And some don't. For callers, these figures are very handy to repair a dance that is off the music. They can be dropped or added without messing up the dance -

- do-si-do
- circle or star once around
- hey
- right and left through across and back
- ladies chain across and back
- long lines forward and back
- swing starting with ladies on the right.

Some figures are positionally equivalent to other figures. For example star right 3/4 is the same as circle left 3/4. Right and left through across is the same as 1/2 hey. Balance and roll to the next position to the right as in Petronella is the same as circle left 3/4.

Figures may change the orientation of the dancers. Some do, such as star and hey. Some don't, such as long lines forward and back, right and left through across, and circle. And some allow dancers to change their orientation, such as swing and do-si-do.

Figures provide different relationships with your partner. In some figures partners move together, for example right and left through, swing, star, circle, and long lines. In a hey they do the same motion but not together. In a ladies chain they do completely different motions. This can be used to nice effect -

- right and left through across (together)
- 1/2 hey (one partner leads the other)
- balance and swing (together again).

Figures can be modified to include a progression -

- butterfly whirl and shift right to a new couple
- hey and look for a new neighbor
- ladies chain on the left or right diagonal
- promenade or right and left through and shift right one place to meet a new couple
- star left or right and look for a new neighbor.

Ladies or gents allemande 1+1/2 in the middle (or any multiple of 1/2) has an implied movement by the dancers that are not participating in the allemande. These people should, in general, move to the side slightly to line up with the person on the other side of the set. This sets up the minor set for a swing, allemande, or wavy line (for example) and leaves the two couples aligned. It also makes the usual allemande fractions work out precisely, for example allemande 1+1/2 in the middle / allemande 3/4 on the side to long wavy lines.

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The swing is an important part of any dance and it has unique characteristics. There is no specific number of rotations. It ends at a phrase break. It ends with the lady on the right, regardless of the positions at the start of the swing (for other figures the ending position depends on the starting position). And it allows transition to a variety of figures, including circle left (clockwise), star left (counter-clockwise), promenade, long lines, ladies chain, hey, right and left through, ladies allemande right, and gents allemande left (although some work better than others).

Each figure requires a certain number of dance counts to execute. Some of these are easy, some require the dancers to slow their pace, and some are rushed, requiring the dancers to move briskly to get to the next move on time -

- allemande 1 - 4 counts rushed or 6 counts
- allemande 1+1/2 or 1+3/4 - 8 counts
- allemande 1/2 - 2 counts rushed or 4 counts leisurely
- allemande 2 - 8 counts rushed
- allemande 3/4 - 4 counts
- balance - 4 counts
- balance and swing - 16 or 12 counts, ends at the phrase break
- box the gnat, California twirl - 4 counts
- chain across - 8 counts leisurely
- circle left 3/4 and pass through to a new couple - 8 counts rushed
- circle or star 1 - 8 counts rushed
- circle or star 3/4 - 6 counts rushed or 8 counts leisurely
- circle or star 7/8 - 8 counts
- contra corners - 16 counts
- do-si-do 1 or 1+1/4 - 8 counts
- do-si-do 1+1/2 - 8 counts rushed
- do-si-do as a couple - 8 counts rushed
- gypsy 1+1/2 - 8 counts rushed
- half figure eight - 8 counts
- half poussette - 6 counts or 8 counts leisurely
- hey - 16 counts rushed
- hey, look for a new neighbor - 16 counts very rushed
- long lines f/b with a roll away - 8 counts
- long lines forward and back - 8 counts
- mad robin - 6 counts or 8 counts leisurely
- Petronella or Rory O'More balance and spin - 8 counts
- promenade across - 8 counts leisurely
- pull by - 2 counts
- right and left through across - 8 counts leisurely
- roll away with a half sashay - 4 counts
- square through (with 2 balances) - 16 counts
- swing - 8, 10, or 12 counts, ends at the phrase break.
- zigzag out and back - 6 counts or 8 counts leisurely

In addition to the time that it takes to execute a figure, it may take some time to transition to the next figure. A hey to a balance with a new neighbor is noted as "very rushed". For a circle left to a star left the distance traveled of both figures may be shortened.

Formations

Duple minor means that each minor set is composed of two couples. Improper means ladies are on the right for each couple. Triple minor sets are beyond the scope of these notes.

I use the term improperish to refer to any formation where ladies are on the right side of a couple (with partner or neighbor) - this is any improper or Becket formation that isn't reverse improper. I use the term reverse improper to describe ladies on the left. Some people use the term indecent.

Proper only has meaning in the context of contra lines - gents are on the right side line (from the caller's view) and ladies are on the left side line. From the dancer's view, proper is ladies on the left if you are facing down, ladies on the right if you are facing up.

The traditional duple minor contra formations are proper, improper, Becket, and Sicilian circle. Becket includes clockwise and counter-clockwise formations. Reverse improper (often referred to as indecent) has some usage. Improper, reverse progression has a little usage. I have written a few dances using cross contra formation. Some have tried Becket, lady on the left (can be clockwise or counter-clockwise).

Regardless of the formation, ones progress down the hall, twos progress up the hall. A Sicilian circle is a (generally improper) contra line bent into a circle, counter-clockwise is down the hall.

To be specific -

- improper - ones face down, twos face up, ladies are on the right (improperish)
- proper - from improper, ones trade places
- Becket - from improper, circle left one place (improperish)
- Becket, counter-clockwise - from improper, circle right one place (improperish)
- reverse improper - from improper ones trade places and twos trade places
- improper, reverse progression - from improper, circle two places (improperish)
- cross - from improper, the one lady and two gent trade places (any rotation or mirror where partners are diagonally across the minor set)
- Sicilian circle - contra line in any of the above formations bent into a circle

And you could use Becket, ladies on the left; Becket, ladies on the left, counter-clockwise; reverse proper; proper, reverse progression; reverse proper, reverse progression; reverse improper, reverse progression. But I don't see much point to it.

Regardless of the starting point, most contra dances are predominantly improperish because many (or most) of the figures are designed to start and/or end with ladies the right. A typical proper, reverse improper, or cross contra dance will become improperish after the first or second figure, stay improper through the last swing, and then progress into its original formation.

The formation influences the dance. For example, one big advantage of Becket dances is that you can end the dance with a partner swing. Another is that the dance can progress either left or right, giving more flexibility in its construction. An improper contra could end with a partner swing but the swing would be in the middle of the set, causing problems (having only the ones swing is not a good solution for me). And it could be reverse progression, but that can be confusing.

Sicilian circles have a couple of advantages over improper contras. There are no end effects. And you can do large circles left and right. One disadvantage is that you dance with only half the people in the set.

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Proper dances are more difficult than improper dances because at the start of each cycle it is not obvious which couples are ones. I don't know of any payback for this difficulty, so I have never written or called any proper dances (one exception now - Formation Rotation).

Reverse improper dances have no advantage over improper dances, however some useful progressions result in reverse improper formation. From a partner swing on the side -

- one Petronella turn
- star left or right $3/4$.

Progression

My definition of progression is that point when you leave one minor set and join another minor set, minor set being defined by position on the floor rather than people in the set. This is not the same as progressed position, which is the position that allows a progression. When you are in progressed position you can turn to face a new neighbor to progress.

original set	6 5	4 3	2 w	(odd numbers are ones)
	6 5	4 3	2 m	
progressed position	5 6	3 4	w 2	
	5 6	3 4	m 2	
progressed	- 5	6 3	4 w	2 -
	- 5	6 3	4 m	2 -

You can progress multiple times in a dance sequence. A progression on a diagonal is equivalent to two single progressions - you dance with and then past a couple on the diagonal.

If you draw an X on the floor in the middle of each minor set, then in a single progression dance the Xs will move with each cycle.

original set	6 5	4 3	2 w	
	6 5	4 3	2 m	
progressed	- 5	6 3	4 w	2 -
	- 5	6 3	4 m	2 -

In a double progression dance, the Xs stay in the same place.

original set	6 5	4 3	2 w	
	6 5	4 3	2 m	
progressed	- 3	6 w	4 -	
	- 3	6 m	4 -	

In a double progression dance no one is ever out at the top at the beginning of a cycle.

Partners can progress separately. For example, ladies chain on the left diagonal is a double progression for the ladies but the gents stay in the same minor set so they do not progress. This sequence may be resolved by the gents doing a double progression move or the ladies may unprogress singly while the gents progress singly. For example -

- ladies chain on the left diagonal
- star left 3/4
- turn to face your partner.

Diagramming Dances

Diagramming a dance is useful to verify that it works, to determine where people should be at various parts of the dance, and to explain the dance to others.

In general you need to diagram the one gent (m) and lady (w), everyone else in same minor set (-), and the position of the minor set (enclosed by |). The head of the set is to the right. For example -

	Jump Start - improper contra
- w	
- m	
	neighbors balance and swing
w -	
m -	
	right and left through across
- m	
- w	
	1/2 hey
w -	
m -	
	star right 3/4
- -	
w m	
	partners swing
- -	
m w	
	circle left 3/4
- w	
- m	
	pass through up and down
w -	
m -	
	look for a new neighbor (progress) to do-si-do
- w - -	
- m - -	

The minor set of interest moved one place for a single progression.

Diagramming the gent's (or lady's) shadow (s) may be useful.

	Whitewater - Becket
- - m w	
	long lines forward and back and partners roll away
- - w m	
	look for your shadow (progress)
- - - - - w m s	
	long lines forward and back and shadows roll away
- - - - w - s m	
	circle right 3/4
w - s - - - m -	
	look for a new neighbor (progress)
- w - s - - - - - m - -	
	neighbors swing
w - s - - - - - m - - -	
	circle left 3/4
- - - - - - w - s m - -	
	shadows allemande right 1+1/2
- - - - - - - w m s - -	
	look for your partner (progress)
- - - - w m s -	
	partners balance and swing
- - - - m w - s	

The minor set ended up one place to the left for a single progression, clockwise. Note that the gent's shadow (s) is always on the same side of the set as his partner (w), so it's easy to spot a shadow without diagramming.

If you have a dance with wavy lines it will be helpful to indicate the direction that each dancer is facing. And if the dance becomes proper at any point it will be helpful to diagram the two gent or lady so that you know what type of neighbor the ones are dancing with.

Sequence of Figures

Each of the standard figures has merit for the dancers, assuming that they are not overused. So a primary focus in choosing a sequence is the transitions between figures.

Figure pairs that force hands to be separated before the first figure is finished should be avoided -

- box the gnat / allemande right with the next
- balance in a wavy line / swing.

An exception to this is circle left or right / allemande right or left, perhaps because the nice feeling of continuing the rotation with a smaller radius overcomes the undesirable feeling of tearing your hand away before the figure is finished, or perhaps just because this transition is used often.

A couple of points about timing are important. Timing in the middle of a phrase is not necessarily strict. For example, with star left / star right 3/4 with a new couple, nominally each star takes eight counts, but to walk both figures at a steady speed, the first will take a bit more and the second a bit less. The dancers will work this out.

When a rushed move is followed by a balance, and the music is too fast to make it easy, the dancers will reach the balance late and the dance will lose its flow. Some examples are -

- hey / look for a new neighbor / balance
- circle left 3/4 and pass through to a new neighbor / balance.

This doesn't mean that dances that use these combinations are bad, but the caller should note that the music should not be too fast for the dancers to get to the balance on time. And the rest of the dance should match.

There are a few commonly used transitions that I don't like because I don't think that they flow very well -

- balance in wavy lines across the set / swing on the side
- long lines (ladies on the right) forward and back / swing
- long lines (ladies on the left) forward and back / swing
(but long lines / ladies roll to face the gents / swing works well)
- swing / anything with the next in line
- swing / ladies chain
(but I will use this if I can't find a way around it).

Others work well only with a flourish that helps the dancers to face the right direction -

- ladies chain across / anything with a new neighbor
(use a twirl instead of a courtesy turn)
- right and left through across / anything with a new neighbor
(use a twirl instead of a courtesy turn).

The Structure of a Dance

The figures of a dance might be classified as -

- central figures - the interesting part
- swings - the fun part, includes any balance or gypsy lead in
- setup - setup for a central figure or swing
- progression - might be part of central figures or setup

Viewed in this way many dances look very similar. The structure of the dance implies the length of the central figure, the possibility of combining the central figure and progression, and it imparts a shape to the dance that dancers will feel. When writing a dance, I find it helpful to start with a desired structure and work within that framework. A few of the many common forms include -

improper contra

- neighbor swing (16)
- central figure and setup (24)
- partner swing (8)
- progression (16)

For example Woven Waves. This structure gives widely separated swings, but limits the complexity of the central figure. Note the progression is one of the black box common sequences discussed below.

Becket

- setup (8)
- neighbor swing (8)
- central figure, progression, and setup (32)
- partner swing (16)

For example Pigtown Petronella. The first section yields the black box common sequence circle left 3/4 / swing.

Becket

- progression and setup (8)
- neighbor swing (8)
- central figure and setup (32)
- partner swing (16)

For example Heart of Glass. This structure allows for a neighbor swing, 16 count partner swing, and a 32 count central figure unencumbered by a progression. The first section produces another black box common sequence, circle left 3/4 / pass through / swing.

Black Boxes, Inside and Out

A black box is a device that can be viewed in terms of its inputs and outputs, without knowledge of its internal function. In a contra dance, you might have a black box sequence that starts at the end of a neighbor swing, runs 16 counts, and sets up the dancers for a partner balance, ladies having changed side, and another, that starts at the end of a partner swing on the gent's side, runs 16 counts, progresses and sets up the dancers for a new neighbor balance in improper formation. Then you could create a dance like this -

- Improper contra
- Neighbor balance and swing
- Black box - From neighbors swing **to** partner balance, ladies change sides, 16 counts
- Partner balance and swing on gents' side
- Black box progression - From partner swing on gents' side **to** progress improper, new neighbors balance, 16 counts

Now you can choose any black box sequence from the two categories to create the final sequence. Many dances have this exact structure. But there is typically nothing unique in these dances, just commonly used black box sequences. For a more interesting dance, use one of these common structures -

- Improper contra
- Neighbor balance and swing
- ...
- ..., Partner swing
- Black box progression - From partner swing on ?'s side **to** progress improper, new neighbors balance, 16 counts

or -

- Becket
- Black box progression - From partner swing on **Becket** home side **to** progress to 8+ count neighbor swing on home side, Neighbor swing
- ...
- ...
- Partner balance and swing on home side

Prepare a central figure, choose appropriate black boxes, and you are done.

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Black Boxes - No progression

From neighbor/partner swing to 8+ count partner/neighbor swing, ladies change sides, <=8 counts

- Circle left 3/4
- Ladies right 1+1/2
- Ladies pass right
- Gents push off, ladies 1/2 hey
- Gents step forward and right to start a 1/2 mad robin, ladies pass left
- Petronella balance and spin
- Give and take gents take ladies (from Give and Take I by Larry Jennings)
- Pass through to a wave, partners allemande right 1/2, gents allemande left 1/2

From neighbor/partner swing to partner/neighbor balance, ladies change sides, 16 counts

- Long lines forward and back, ladies allemande right 1+1/2
- Gents pass left to start a 1/2 hey, gents allemande left 1+1/2
- Gents allemande left 1+1/2, gents pass left to start a 1/2 hey
- Pass through across, California twirl, gents allemande left 1+1/2
- Circle left 3/4, do-si-do
- Long lines forward and back and partners roll away with a half sashay, circle right 3/4 (from Winter Wind by Cary Ravitz)
- Circle left 3/4, neighbors pull by by the right, partners pull by, neighbors pull by (from Janet's Journey by Cary Ravitz)

From neighbor/partner swing to 8+ count partner/neighbor swing, gents change sides, <=8 counts

- Gents allemande left 1+1/2
- Gents pass left
- Gents pass left to start a 1/2 hey, ladies push off
- Give and take ladies take gents

From neighbor/partner swing to partner/neighbor balance, gents change sides, 16 counts

- Long lines forward and back, gents allemande left 1+1/2
- Long lines forward and back and partners roll away with a half sashay, gents allemande right 1+1/2
- Right and left through across, ladies allemande right 1+1/2
- Ladies chain across, ladies pass right to start a 1/2 hey
- Gents step forward and right to start a mad robin, gents allemande left 1+1/2
- Pass through across, California twirl, circle left 3/4
- Right and left through across, circle left 3/4
- Circle left 3/4, ladies pass left to start 1/2 hey (from Barbara's Becket by Cary Ravitz)
- Pass through to a wave, balance, partners allemande right 1/2, gents allemande left 1/2

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Black Boxes - Improper with progression

From partner swing on improper ladies' side to progress improper, new neighbors balance, 16 counts

- Right and left through across, ladies chain across
- Circle left 3/4, balance, California twirl
- Right and left through, circle left 3/4, pass through up and down
- Circle left 3/4, neighbors pull by by the right, partners pull by, neighbors pull by (from Jim's Whim by Rich MacMath)
- Gents pass left to start a 1/2 hey, gents start a hands across star left and ladies fall in behind your partner, from initial positions turn the star 1 for gents and 1/2 for ladies (from Dance and Dream by Cary Ravitz)
- Right and left through across, partners trade places gents behind ladies, star right 3/4
- Right and left through across, partners roll away with a half sashay, star right 3/4
- Right and left through across, ladies start a hands across star right and gents fall in behind your partner, from initial positions turn the star 1 for ladies and 1/2 for gents
- Ladies pass right to start a 1/2 hey, ladies start a hands across star right and gents fall in behind your partner, from initial positions turn the star 1 for ladies and 1/2 for gents
- Gents chain by the left hand to a mirror courtesy turn, star right 1
- Petronella balance and spin, balance, California twirl
- Star left 3/4, neighbors allemande left 1+1/2 (from Flying Flamingos by Cary Ravitz)
- Ladies chain across, partners balance, partners pull by by the right, neighbors pull by by the left
- Ladies chain across, ladies pass right to start a 1/2 hey
- Ladies pass right to start a 1/2 hey, ladies chain across

From partner swing on improper gent's side to progress improper, new neighbors balance, 16 counts

- Ladies chain across, star left 1 (from The Nice Combination by Gene Hubert)
- Circle left 3/4, pass through up and down, new neighbors do-si-do
- Circle left 3/4, balance, pass through up and down
- Ladies allemande right 1+1/2 / neighbors allemande left 1+3/4
- Gents start a hands across star left and ladies fall in behind your partner, from initial positions turn the star 1 for gents and 1/2 for ladies, new neighbors do-si-do (from Diane's Dream by Cary Ravitz)
- Circle left 3/4, neighbors allemande right 1+1/2 (from Delphiniums and Daisies by Tanya Rotenberg)
- Pass through to a wave, balance, partners allemande right 1/2, gents allemande left 1/2, neighbors allemande right 3/4
- Long lines forward and back, ladies do-si-do 1+1/2 (from 3,33,33 by Steve Zakon-Anderson)
- Gents pass left to start a 3/4 hey, neighbors 1/2 gypsy (from Wildcats by Cary Ravitz)
- Gents pass left to start a 1/2 hey, ladies push off / continue the hey, gents finish an ordinary hey, ladies push **across**, and all face new neighbors (from Jaded by Cary Ravitz)
- Right and left through / ladies push off and gents start a hey, ladies continue with a hey and gents push **across**, and all face new neighbors (from Seven Stars by Cary Ravitz)
- Long lines forward and back, ladies chain across

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Black Boxes - Reverse improper with progression

From partner swing on reverse improper ladies' side to progress reverse improper, new neighbors balance, 16 counts

- Star left 3/4, new neighbors do-si-do
- Circle left 3/4, ladies pass left to start a 1/2 hey
- Long lines forward and back and with partners gents roll away and ladies half sashay, circle left 3/4, pass through up and down (from Oh, Geez! by Joseph Pimentel)

From partner swing on reverse improper gents's side to progress reverse improper, new neighbors balance, 16 counts

- Gents pass left to start a 1/2 hey, hands across star left 3/4 (from Living in Zen by Cary Ravitz)
- Right and left through across, hands across star left 3/4
- Right and left through, Petronella balance and spin
- Petronella balance and spin, star left 1
- Circle left 3/4, star left 1

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Black Boxes - Becket with progression

From partner swing on Becket home side to progress to 8+ count neighbor swing, ladies change sides, <=8 counts

- Circle left 3/4, pass through up and down
- Slide left 1 place, new neighbors circle left 3/4
- Promenade clockwise (or slide left) to new neighbors, ladies allemande right 1/2
- Forward to the left, straight back gents taking ladies
- Gents start a hands across star left and ladies fall in behind your partner, from initial positions turn the star 1 for gents and 1/2 for ladies (from Polar Vortex by Cary Ravitz)

From partner swing on Becket home side to progress, neighbor balance, ladies change sides, 16 counts

- Everything in From partner swing on **improper** gents' side **to** progress improper, new neighbors balance, 16 counts
- Forward to the left, straight back, ladies allemande right 1+1/2
- Forward to the left, straight back and partners roll away with a half sashay, circle right 3/4 (from Winter Wind by Cary Ravitz)

From partner swing on Becket home side to progress to 8+ count neighbor swing, gents change sides, <=8 counts

- Slide left 1 place, circle left 1/4
- Slide left 1 place, neighbors 1/2 gypsy (across), circle left 1/4 without hands
- Slide left 1 place, neighbors 1/2 gypsy (across), circle left 1/4 without hands, neighbors gypsy 1/2
- Forward to the left, straight back ladies taking gents
- Star left 3/4, look for new neighbors

From partner swing on Becket home side to progress, neighbor balance, gents change sides, 16 counts

- Everything in From partner swing on **reverse improper** ladies' side **to** progress reverse improper, new neighbors balance, 16 counts
- Forward to the left, straight back, gents allemande left 1+1/2
- Promenade across and shift right to a new couple, ladies allemande right 1+1/2
- Promenade across and shift right to a new couple, ladies start a hands across star right, gents join in behind partners, from initial positions, turn the star 1 for ladies and 1/2 for gents
- Right and left through across, Petronella balance and spin

From neighbor swing, gents on Becket home side to progress, partner balance, Becket home side, 16 counts

- Right diagonal ladies chain, star left 1 (from The Dance Gypsy by Gene Hubert)
- Circle left 1, new neighbors circle right 3/4

From neighbor swing, ladies on Becket home side to progress, partner balance, Becket home side, 16 counts

- Right and left through across, right diagonal ladies chain (from Fractal Fling by Cary Ravitz)
- Gents pass left to start a 1/2 hey, with a new couple circle right 3/4
- Right and left through across, next ladies allemande right 1+1/2
- Ladies pass right to start a 1/2 hey, next ladies allemande right 1+1/2

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Black Boxes - Becket counter-clockwise with progression

From partner swing on Becket home side to progress counter-clockwise to 8+ count neighbor swing, ladies change sides, ≤ 8 counts

- Petronella balance and spin and look for a new neighbor.

From partner swing on Becket home side to progress counter-clockwise, neighbor balance, ladies change sides, 16 counts

- Everything in From partner swing on **reverse improper** gents' side to progress reverse improper, new neighbors balance, 16 counts
- Forward to the right, straight back, ladies allemande right $1\frac{1}{2}$
- Forward to the right, straight back and partners roll away with a half sashay, circle right $\frac{3}{4}$

From partner swing on Becket home side to progress counter-clockwise to 8+ count neighbor swing, gents change sides, ≤ 8 counts

- Balance, gents trade places
- Gents pass left to start a $\frac{1}{2}$ hey, ladies push off

From partner swing on Becket home side to progress counter-clockwise, neighbor balance, gents change sides, 16 counts

- Everything in From partner swing on **improper** ladies' side to progress improper, new neighbors balance, 16 counts
- Forward to the right, straight back, gents allemande left $1\frac{1}{2}$
- Right and left through across, slide left 1 place, next ladies allemande right $1\frac{1}{2}$
- Right and left through across, slide left 1 place, new neighbors circle left $\frac{3}{4}$

From neighbor swing, gents on Becket home side to progress counter-clockwise, partner balance, Becket home side, 16 counts

- Pass through across, California twirl, next gents allemande left $1\frac{1}{2}$
- Gents pass left to start a $\frac{1}{2}$ hey, next gents allemande left $1\frac{1}{2}$

From neighbor swing, ladies on Becket home side to progress counter-clockwise, partner balance, Becket home side, 16 counts

- Long lines forward and back, next gents allemande left $1\frac{1}{2}$
- Star left 1, with new neighbors star right $\frac{3}{4}$, gents turn in to face partner (from Strawberry Swirl by Cary Ravitz)
- Gents step forward and right to start a mad robin, next gents allemande left $1\frac{1}{2}$

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Complex/Difficult Dances

I do my best to make each dance that I write as simple as possible while encompassing the goals that I have set for it. If the goal is a strange individual progression then the dance will be difficult. If a complex sequence of moves is required to make a central figure work, I will use it. But there is no reason to add complexity except to accomplish your goals.

Here are some things that tend to make a dance difficult. No hands moves - it's a lot easier to lead lost dancers with hand holds than with hand signals and verbal instruction.

Reentry with the lady on the left - it happens regularly and confuses people regularly.

Figures that take less than eight counts - these can make the dance fun, but too many can make a mess.

Multiple individual progressions - this causes dancer disorientation and nasty end effects. In return it can result in a totally unexpected partner reunion that people will like.

Complex figures done with your partner - if there is a complex figure done with a neighbor, people that understand the figure will go down the line showing new neighbors how it works. If the figure is done with your partner, there is no mixing of knowledge.

Diagonal heys - these tend to straighten out and put the dancers out of place. For example in the sequence 1/2 hey on the left diagonal / right and left through across the dancers will generally need to look a little to the right to find the correct couple for the right and left through.

New or Unusual Figures and Transitions

New or unusual figures and transitions can be good or bad. They are almost always difficult to call.

You've got to convince the dancers that you know what you are doing, get them to listen, convince them that it will work, and convince them that it is worth their time to learn. Even for a simple new figure this is not easy.

The first time that I called neighbors allemande right 1+1/2 / star right the reactions were - I assume that you mean star right with a new couple and are you sure that you have the dance written down right? The transition works but you've got to convince the dancers.

Over the years, unusual things can become ordinary. A number of figures have become commonplace in the last fifteen years, probably because they are useful, easy, and fun -

- forward left / straight back
- gypsy star
- half poussette
- mad robin
- push offs in heys.

Unusual transitions that have been reasonably successful in the last 15 years include -

- swing / star left
- star left / allemande left
- box the gnat / star right
- ladies pass right to hey / star right
- ladies chain or right and left through / circle right (2025).

Many other new figures and transitions have been successful in individual dances, and they add to the character of the dance.

What to Avoid

A few things should be consciously avoided when writing a dance. Dances that use a continuous clockwise rotation for more than about forty counts can make even experienced dancers very dizzy. The common sequence balance and swing / circle left 3/4 / swing is twenty-eight counts and doesn't cause problems. Add another eight count circle left at the end and things get questionable.

The dance pace should be even. Mixing figures that require brisk movement in one phrase with deliberately slow movement in another breaks the flow of the dance.

Some figures are boring when repeated and some benefit from repetition. Circle lefts are very handy but I don't like to use two in one dance. One do-si-do is enough. Many dances use two ladies chains, but I'm not partial to this. One balance and swing is enough, although two swings are desirable. But I limit the swings to a total of 20 counts.

Some figures seem to demand repetition. Balance and turn as in Petronella, balance and slide as in Rory O'More, and half a square through seem to need a repetition to be complete. If you only use one it seems to be just a trick to get people where you need them, not a figure that you wanted in the dance.

Watch out for excessive shadow interaction. People don't choose their shadow and they are stuck with them for the entire dance. In a Facebook discussion on shadow swings, Chris Page pointed out two reasons for shadow interactions - they are used to set up a partner lost and found situation, and they give you a second partner-like dancer. I use the first reason often. I do not like the second reason. You do not choose your shadow so in this case the caller is choosing your second partner. And it takes time away from your chosen partner. I will not write or call a dance with a shadow swing or gypsy.

Swings that end in the middle of a sixteen count phrase are not easy for dancers or callers. If the music doesn't have a clean break at the end of the swing then many dancers will not know when to stop. Consider it part of the challenge of writing a dance that this is not allowed. A somewhat popular exception to this is the sequence ones swing in the middle / neighbors swing on the side.

Avoid dances with too many figures. Each transition is a mental and physical effort. This is fun if not overdone. I like to see at least one sixteen count figure or figure pair. For example a balance and swing, hey, or two Petronella turns lets people mentally relax for the entire phrase. I also like to see four count figures kept to a minimum.

Symmetry

Symmetry is one aspect of a dance that can make it feel like a work of art rather than an odd sequence of figures that happen to work together. And it is one of the most interesting aspects of a dance, often providing a sense of wonder that the symmetry can be fit into the rigid structure of a contra dance. It can take many forms - a figure (or sequence of figures) done with neighbor then partner, a figure done by ladies then gents, a figure done by ones and then twos, mirror image figures, medleyed pairs of dances that trade partner and neighbor roles, and more. Symmetry is not required for a dance to be good. It is just one factor that can elevate a dance beyond ordinary. Below are some of my favorite examples from my dances.

Snake in the Hey uses a simple symmetric sequence -

- ladies allemande right 3/4 to a wavy line in the middle and balance
- ladies back out and gents go forward to a wavy line and balance
- gents allemande left 3/4 to your partner.

Fractal Frolic and Fractal Fling use an ordinary star promenade followed by a star promenade with ladies in the middle to make an interesting symmetric figure. And this pair of dances make an example of almost identical dances that invert neighbor and partner roles. This example can be generalized - for any improper contra that progresses with ladies chain / look for a new neighbor to balance and swing, there is a symmetric Becket dance that progresses with ladies chain on the right diagonal / look for your partner to balance and swing, in which all other figures are identical except for trading the roles of partners/shadows and neighbors. This can be applied nicely to, for example, Gene Hubert's Shades of Shadrack and Jim Kitch's The Green Eyed Girl (with the last figure replaced by ladies chain across). Gene Hubert's The Nice Combination and The Dance Gypsy comprise a similar inverted pair.

Flip-Flop is an example of a dance that alternates ones and twos dancing the same sequence on alternating cycles of the dance. Also see Jim Kitch's Alternating Corners. You can run any non-symmetric improper contra this way. The alternate version is the same dance sequence with ones and twos swapped and up and down the hall reversed.

Roadkill and Megadance are examples of dances that use a sequence of figures twice with partner/shadow and neighbor roles reversed, in this format -

- setup (8)
- central figure (16)
- neighbor swing (8)
- same central figure with roles reversed (16)
- partner swing (16).

These dances are simple when viewed as a sequence of simple symmetric figures but complex when looking at the unusual individual progressions that follow from the structure.

The Enchanted Forrest and Passion Breakdown, for example, offer symmetric, medleyable alternate versions.

Aesthetic Considerations

Dances are not exercise routines, they are dramatic stories. Not necessarily stories that you can put words to, but stories of feeling.

I have never liked the term storyline when used with contra dances. It implies that a literal story goes with the dance. But in the context of a contra dance, storyline may refer to a level of fun, tension, or other feeling, not necessarily a literal story.

In this context, the partner swing is the climax of the story. The neighbor swing is a lesser climax. The central figure is a buildup to the climax. The partner swing is an emotional climax because it is the ultimate dance connection of two people and this is reinforced by the unique rules of a swing - regardless of the entry into a swing, it ends at a phrase break with the lady on the right. (So you've got a figure sequence that is more fun than a swing? Try it without a swing and see how it goes.)

I have heard a caller teach something like - neighbors balance and swing, circle left 3/4, partners swing, now that we have the swings out of the way we can do something interesting. The rest of the dance may be interesting, but the climax is in the past.

So - think about the emotional flow of a dance, not just the physical flow.

What Makes a Dance Good

I've seen inspired sequences of figures that made poor dances and dances that flowed beautifully that were not fun. And I've seen almost trivial sequences of figures that made very good dances. You will have to dance a dance to see if it is good, but when writing a dance I try for certain things.

A dance should flow well. One figure should lead to the next by position, direction, and handholds.

A dance should be easy to remember. Having a good flow is the best first step to this. Repeated moves, especially from the same or similar positions will detract from it. For example if there are two partner courtesy turns on the same side of the set, the dancers will sometimes confuse where they are in the dance at the end of the courtesy turns.

Given that the swing is the climax of a dance, the central figures of a dance should build to that climax. Neighbors balance and swing, circle left 3/4, partners swing, for example, to start a dance leaves 32 counts for the central figures and progression, but it all happens after the climax - not good.

A dance benefits from a theme or symmetry that holds it together as a dance rather than an unrelated sequence of figures. But if overdone this can make the dance boring.

A dance needs a hook - something to make it special. This can be a new or unusual figure, transition, or sequence of figures. It can be a transition that allows a special flourish such as swing / star left (I like to swing with left hands held and twirl the lady into the star) or do-si-do to a wave (I like to swing instead of do-si-do and twirl the lady into the wave).

The hook can be a sequence that unexpectedly works. Sutton Hey by Ken Bonner uses neighbors allemande right 3/4 / gents pull by / partners box the gnat / hey. The timing is unusual - three counts for the allemande, two for the pull by, and three for the box the gnat. It works great and the hey follows nicely.

The hook can be a lose and find your partner sequence. I sometimes try to confuse the dancers in between the lose and find to make the reunion unexpected.

A confusing progression can be a nice hook. It will also make for a difficult dance.

The level of partner interaction is an important aspect of a dance. It can range from nothing to spending the entire dance with your partner. I like dances where you spend most of the dance with your partner, dances where you split time with partner, neighbors, and shadows, and dances where you spend most of the dance with neighbors and shadows and return to your partner for a balance and swing. Each of these has a place in an evening of dances.

To me, a partner swing is essential for a good dance, and a partner balance and swing or gypsy and swing is desirable. A neighbor swing is also desirable.

I think that it is nice for the dancers to change position with every figure. Do-si-do, circle or star once around, and other moves that leave the dancers' position unchanged make a dance easier but less interesting.

I prefer that dancers not stand still during a dance. Gents or ladies allemande in the middle and actives only moves leave half the dancers standing. This won't ruin a dance if it is kept within reason, but I always look for dances that keep everyone moving all the time.

I like to see dances with no balances or reverses of direction such as long lines forward and back. I will only call these once or twice in a night, but they have a special feeling that I like.

My Rules of Choreography

A lot of people get upset when I talk about rules for contra dances. Why should there be rules? Why should we be limited?

Rules create a structure that pushes you into what makes something fun/good/useful, based on experience. Imagine music without 8 tone scales and 1/3/5 chords - it might still have a danceable rhythm but it will likely sound awful.

Having rules doesn't mean that you can't break or change the rules. Some innovation occurs within the rules and some occurs by breaking or changing the rules. Explicitly expressing rules makes it easy to find rules to break, which can be very useful. Other rules are embedded so deeply that you don't even realize that they are rules. Keep in mind that the rules are a collection of experiences and should not be broken without reason.

Some rules of contra dance are deeply embedded and implied - four 16 count phrases to match the music. Some of my rules are to prevent physical problems in dances (dizziness, wear) - only one circle left per dance. Some prevent boredom - only one of each of the standard figures in a dance. Some are artistic - partner swing comes after the neighbor swing. I chose them based on my dance experiences.

Rules hopefully make you think about the dances that you write and help you decide if there are better ways to do things. When you write a dance, at some point in the process you are likely to have satisfied the original concept and have created a working dance. At this point I suggest looking at your rules. If they are all satisfied then perhaps you are done. If not, it's time to start looking for variations that will satisfy your rules. If you succeed, the dance may be noticeably improved.

Here are my rules. I use these rules to evaluate dances that I have written or am considering calling. They are personal, and looking at the current body of contra dances, published and called, most choreographers and callers would have serious disagreements with a number of them. I am documenting these guidelines to help you understand my dances and to encourage you to think about your own guidelines.

The first rules are rigid - I allow no exceptions unless the theme of the dance requires it.

- There must be smooth flow, by position, direction, and hand hold.
- The timing must be clean - not too tight or too loose and not widely varying in different phrases, and any timing sloppiness should be within a 16 count phrase.
- There must be a partner swing (that means everyone, not just the ones).
- Shadow swings are not allowed.
- Swings end at the end of a 16 count phrase.
- The dance must not be excessively clockwise.
- Circles and stars should be a maximum of once around, allemandes maximum 1+3/4, and do-si-dos maximum 1+1/4.
- Maximum of three balances.
- Maximum of one circle left, regardless of the circle distance.

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These next rules are more loosely followed.

- There must be a neighbor swing or a figure that is interesting enough to make up for the lack of one.
- There should be exactly one minimum 12 count swing. This includes a 16 count balance and swing, gypsy and swing, or swing. Three swing dances are excluded from this rule.
- The basic figures, circle left, star left, star right, ladies chain across, right and left through across, etc. are not to be used more than once in a dance unless all uses are part of the central theme.
- The total number of figures should be minimal.
- Time spent standing still should be minimal.
- There should be minimal filler (figures that just take up time).

And these are some artistic rules.

- The partner swing should be the last swing of the dance.
- There should be an interesting buildup to one or both swings.
- There should be a theme or symmetry that holds the figures together as a dance.
- Long lines forward and back seems to me to be an opening figure, so I will not use it in B1 or B2 (unless paired with another in A1 or A2).
- Petronella turns, Rory O'More slides, and push offs in heys need to be used in pairs to feel right.
- Down the hall seems to me to be an up/down and unequal figure that doesn't fit in a Becket dance.

Writing a Dance

My preferred way to write a dance is to start with a concept - what it is about the dance that will make it special. This can be a figure, a transition, a sequence, an unusual progression, a theme. This gives you a starting point to build the dance around. Without a concept to guide you, it is likely you will end up with a boring dance with no distinguishing features.

For Roadkill I started with the sequence -

- right and left through across
- balance and turn as in Petronella and turn alone to swing the next
- right and left through across
- balance and turn as in Petronella and turn alone to swing the next.

After working out how this sequence moved people, I determined where partners had to start so that they end up progressed and together for the second swing. That reduced the problem to finding a move that put partners in that position. Starting from Becket formation, long lines with a shadow roll away put people in the right position. This also left time for a balance and swing at the end. It all worked out easily.

For Whitewater I started with this progression -

- ladies progress and gents unprogress
- ladies and gents progress
- ladies unprogress and gents progress.

The first progression separates partners. The second progression causes confusion as people expect to find their partners but don't. And the third reunites partners. There are two other equivalent ways to look at this progression that may make it easier to work with -

- ladies progress with their neighbor
- ladies progress with their shadow
- ladies unprogress with their neighbor

or -

- gents unprogress with their neighbor
- gents progress with their shadow
- gents progress with their neighbor.

For Interstate 75 I started with this progression -

- gents and ladies double progress
- gents and ladies unprogress.

I worked this out from Becket formation as -

- right and left through across
- 1/2 hey on the left diagonal
- 1/2 hey across
- star right 3/4
- look away from the star for a new neighbor to balance and swing.

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The wonderful initial figure from Peter Lippincott's Snake River Reel is interesting to work with. From improper contra formation -

- ladies walk to a long wavy line in the middle (4)
- balance (4)
- ladies back out while gents walk to a long wavy line in the middle (4)
- balance (4).

This figure is also used in Trip to Lambertville by Steve Zakon-Anderson and Snake Oil Reel by Roger Diggle (and perhaps others that I am not aware of). But none includes a sixteen count partner balance and swing, so I decided to look into it.

Assuming that you are starting from an improper contra formation with the figure in A1, the only phrase for a partner balance and swing is B1. (You are out of position for A2 and B2 must end in position for the next cycle.) It is nice to end the dance with the ladies set up to move forward, such as a hey or ladies chain. If the partner swing is on the gent's side then the dance could end with circle left / ladies chain across. If the partner swing is on the lady's side then the dance could end with right and left through across / ladies chain across.

So that leaves A2 to get partners together. It seems best to start A2 with gents allemande left. They could go $1+1/4$ to their partner in six counts but that will cause timing confusion and leaves you ten counts to work with. That leaves $3/4$ in four counts or $1+3/4$ in eight counts, leaving them facing out at their neighbor with right hands free. You now have twelve or eight counts to get partners together. The obvious ways to get partners on the same side, ladies chain, circle $3/4$, ladies allemande $1+1/2$, and gents allemande $1+1/2$ don't fit. Ladies do-si-do $1+1/2$ or gypsy left $1+1/2$ work but don't sound very good to me. Also keep in mind that the ladies have been standing still for four counts at the start of A2 and gents have had eight counts of standing still in A1.

Perhaps you can do better in Becket formation or moving the figure to a different phrase. Or you could time it so that it starts four counts before a phrase, putting the balance at the start of the phrase.

My solution to the problem, which I called Snake in the Hey, was to replace ladies walk to a wavy line with ladies allemande right $3/4$ to a wavy line. This moves the ladies to the other side of the set so in A2 gents allemande left $3/4$ puts partners together with 12 counts to go. I used partners box the gnat / $1/2$ hey to set them up for a balance and swing. And right and left through / ladies chain was the obvious finish. It is interesting how a small change can impact an entire sequence. This is part of what makes writing contra dances interesting.

Another solution, which I noticed a year after writing the above, is gents allemande left $3/4$ / $3/4$ hey. This puts partners together on the lady's side. Then partners balance and swing / right and left through / ladies chain. This turned out to be Roger Diggle's The Snake River Strut.

After you have written a dance, go back and look for variations. Substitute equivalent figures, shift the timing, and see if you can fit it into Becket verses improper contra. Then choose the best version or document good alternatives.

An Evening of Dances

A random selection of good contra dances will not, in general, make for a good evening of dancing. Here are my guidelines for programming an evening of contra dances. They are somewhat limiting, but they provide a framework that makes it easier to create a coherent program. As with many of my choreography notes, these are here to cause you to think about the subject, not document right or wrong.

Let's start with swings - I would suggest that half of the dances in an evening have a sixteen count neighbor swing, balance and swing, or gypsy and swing, and all of these have an eight count partner swing. The other half of the dances should have a sixteen count partner swing, balance and swing, or gypsy and swing, and half of these have an eight count neighbor swing. The exact numbers are not critical, but it is easy to get far off of them if you are not careful.

Single swing dances have much more time for interesting sequences and progressions than two swing dances. And since dances without partner swings are not well received, it is easy to fill an evening with dances that have no neighbor swings. My limit is one fourth of the dances. If you want more interesting sequences for the other dances, search out creative two swing dances.

Then consider repetition of figures and sequences. The most common figures, allemande left or right, circle left, and star left or right, are used often in any evening of dances. But you can minimize the abuse of these figures. First, avoid dances that use these figures more than once. Then find dances that do not use specific figures, for example one dance might have no circle lefts and one might have no allemandes. You should then be able to put together an evening with, on average, less than one of each of these figures per dance.

Common sequences can dominate an evening of dances if you do not watch out for them. Look for gents allemande left 1+1/2 / swing, circle left 3/4 / swing, right and left through / ladies chain across, and ladies chain / star left, for example.

Improper contras often progress in B2 after a partner swing in B1, so the progressions can be repetitive. You can relieve this repetition by using dances that progress in the middle, many Becket dances (but some improper contras also).

With two swing dances, long, interesting sequences can push the two swings together, resulting in the common sequences gents allemande left 1+1/2 / swing or circle left 3/4 / swing. Look for dances where the swing is part of the interesting sequence.

For variety, consider dances that have unusual figures or sequences that may be danced only once in an evening. Rotate the waves, zig-zag, star promenade, and two or four leaf clover are relatively rare figures (in my experience) and will make a dance feel completely different than other dances of the evening.

Medleys are another way to add variety to an evening. I think it is important to have a connection between the dances of a medley, either a symmetry or a common sequence. Choose dances that connect properly with each other at the change. You can shift the change into the dance - it doesn't have to be at the start of A1. Or modify the start or end of one of the dances for the transition. Make sure that you don't switch the direction of progression by, for example, changing from a clockwise Becket dance to a counter-clockwise Becket dance without including a compensating transition.

I avoid dizzy dances. At a glance, avoid multiple circle lefts and multiple allemande rights. And if you must do one, keep it short and surround it with dances that are not dizzy.

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Some dances, to me, stand out as far better than typical contra dances, and these should be used regularly. But you cannot, in general, do a whole evening of them because it would violate my other rules. Still, don't let the rules force you into an evening of average dances.

No walk through dances are great, especially after the dancers have been standing still for a while (after a break or announcements). But not at the expense of having the dance break down, so choose the dances carefully. The first dance after the break should be easy and if possible, danced with no walk through. Get people dancing as quickly as you can.

And finally, I put special requirements on the last dance of the evening - it should be partner oriented and have a neighbor swing, it should be reasonably easy, and it should not have oddly placed balances or four count figures. This helps ensure a successful dance and allows the band flexibility in tune choice.

Ending a Dance

I think that every dance should end with partners together, preferably in a swing. Practically, this makes it easy and quick to acknowledge your partner before finding a partner for the next dance. Aesthetically, it just feels right.

Many dances end each cycle with a partner swing. In this case the dancers need to know when the dance is about to end so that they can end the swing appropriately rather than starting into the next figure. Many bands will make this obvious, but some will not, and some will play fake endings for dramatic effect. So give the dancers a cue, for example "last time" just before the last cycle or "that's all" before the last swing ends.

For dances that have partners together at the end of B1, you can call a partner balance and swing to end. If there is no partner balance and swing in the dance, this is my preferred ending. If B1 is a partner balance and swing, and you don't like to do two in a row, you can often use the first figure of B2 to help. For example, if the next figure is right and left through, use pass through across and swing. If the next figure is circle left, use circle left once around and swing.

If B1 ends with neighbors together, write out a short final sequence for your dance card. You can use the first half of B2 to get partners together for a swing or the second half of B1 to set up a partner balance and swing. Gents allemande left $1+1/2$, ladies allemande right $1+1/2$, or circle left $3/4$ will work.

Proper and Cross Contra Formations

This is a quick overview of proper and cross contra formations. These are variations of contra dance sets. Proper puts all of the gents on the same side of the full set. Cross contra puts partners diagonally opposite in the set of four. Contra dance formations can be the starting point of a dance or transient within a dance.

Proper dances have a very long (and unfamiliar to me) history, presumably predating improper dances.

Chris Page researched the possibilities of dancer position in the set of four and wrote a detailed analysis (2013, The twenty-four duple minor formations at <https://contrachoreography.wordpress.com/>). He found two dances that are, apparently, the earliest dances that use cross contra formation - The Diagonal Dilemma by Gene Hubert (1988) and Equal Opportunity by Jeffrey Spero (1992). Both of these dances set up partners diagonally opposite in the set of four within the dance. In The Diagonal Dilemma this sets up a ones swing in the middle and in Equal Opportunity it sets up a ones chain and ones pass right to start a hey. The dance write-ups by the authors do not name this unusual formation and I have filled the void with the term cross contra.

I am using the term cross contra to describe any rotation or mirror with diagonal partners. I don't think there is enough value here to name the variations individually.

In a contra dance set of four, partner gent, partner lady, neighbor gent, neighbor lady, there are three basic formations, distinguished by the diagonal dancer. Chris refers to these formations as improperish, properish, and diagonal. The diagonally opposite person may be

- same role neighbor - improperish, includes common formations improper, Becket, reverse improper (indecent)
- opposite role neighbor - properish, includes the common proper formation
- partner - diagonal, cross contra is my name for all variations here.

To get from/to improperish to/from properish - ones trade places **or** twos trade places.

To get from/to improperish to/from cross contra - one gent and two lady trade places **or** one lady and two gent trade places.

To get from/to properish to/from cross contra - gents trade places **or** ladies trade places.

You can get from improperish to cross contra without calling "one gent and two lady ..." - go from improperish to properish, then properish to cross. For example from partner swing on the side, to progress and move to cross contra, circle left 3/4 (8), ones California twirl (4), look for a new neighbor, ladies box the gnat (4).

No symmetric contra figure can move from one formation to another because the diagonal person stays the same - chain, right and left through, hey, circle, star, etc.

The **usual** simultaneous swings end facing the other swinging pair with the lady on the right. So at the end of any such swing the set is improperish. Because of this, proper and cross contra formations will typically be transient.

What makes cross formation useful is the meeting of partners in the middle in figures such as push off hey, chain, and gypsy for four. Where improperish gives you same role middle meetings, properish gives you opposite role neighbor meetings, cross contra gives you a partner meeting - much more satisfying.

What makes proper formation useful? It's traditional. Meetings in the middle are opposite role. The usual contra corners starts proper.

More on Formations - Reverse Progression, Becket Counter-Clockwise, Reverse Improper

I consider "reverse progression" to be a misnomer. By definition, ones progress down and twos progress up. In an improperish set of four, if the couple closer to the band progresses up, then they are the twos. This is not improper formation. If you are calling a dance in this formation, I suggest starting the instructions from improper and turning two places. Or you can, in general, convert it to Becket or Becket, counter-clockwise by changing the starting point to the figure that follows the partner swing (or other partner interaction).

A similar situation arises with Becket formation. From improper formation, circle left one place to give Becket formation. The ones are on the left side of the set from the caller's perspective, and they progress down the hall, i.e. to the left or clockwise.

From improper formation, circle right one place to give Becket, counter-clockwise formation. The ones are on the right side of the set from the caller's perspective, and they progress down the hall, i.e. to the right or counter-clockwise.

Since I consider Becket and Becket, counter-clockwise to be two different formations, I start the instructions from improper formation and turn to the Becket orientation that preserves the status of ones and twos, left one place for the usual, or right one place for counter-clockwise. This helps the dancers understand the dance because they know where they are headed. It also preserves the concept of ones and twos.

And a linguistic issue - I call an improperish formation with ladies on the left, "reverse improper". Other people call this "indecent". To me, indecent has a negative connotation that I don't want applied to a dance. Proper is a high level of goodness, decent is just acceptable. So improper means not great and indecent means not even acceptable. I'll stick with reverse improper.

Six Count Figures

There are several figures that are best or often danced as six counts -

- mad robin
- half poussette
- allemande 1
- allemande 1 with orbit 1/2
- zigzag (just out and back, past one couple)

These take special handling to fit into music with 8 count phrases. Some possibilities include -

- 6+2 - mad robin, step to lines at the side (Mad Robin Landing by Will Mentor)
- 2+6 - allemande 1/2, 6 count allemande/orbit (Reel to Reel by Cary Ravitz)
- 4+6+6 - circle 1/2, mad robin, 1/2 poussette (Songbird by Cary Ravitz)
- 6+6+4 - 1/2 poussette, mad robin, gents pass right (Songbird by Cary Ravitz)
- 6+10 - allemande 1, star promenade, butterfly whirl with progression (Galax by Cary Ravitz)
- 6+10 - allemande 1, mad robin, half poussette, or zigzag into swing

Dances that use six count figures don't match the music as well as dances with eight count figures, but there can be a good payback in dance flow.

Contra Flow

Flow

Contra flow is the feeling of continuous and varied motion while dancing a contra dance. This motion executes sequences of figures and transitions in the dance. At different points in the dance it is individual, cooperative with another person, cooperative within a set of four people, or cooperative within the full contra line.

Variation in the type of flow is critical to a good experience. Trading individual forward momentum for two person rotational momentum, using four person rotation to start a two person pull by are examples of cooperative flow that I like.

Sequences of continuous motion with varying types of flow makes contra a unique and wonderful dance experience.

Figures and Transitions

Each figure is called by the caller, but the specific execution of the figure is determined by the dancers. Each transition is implied by the current and next figure and the specific execution of the transition is determined by the dancers.

Symmetric (the same for all dancers) figures and transitions for two dancers (allemande), four dancers (circle, circle left to star left), or the full set (long lines forward and back) are an equal and joint effort of the dancers.

Asymmetric two person figures and transitions (swing, ladies chain to star left) are led by one of the dancers, with communication via touch. The lead in an asymmetric figure or transition can be the gent (swing, swing to circle) or lady (gents roll away and ladies half sashay, gents chain to star right).

Symmetric figures should be executed in the traditional manner with limited embellishment. Symmetric transitions are done as an individual, for example in a circle left to star left, each dancer may choose how to turn around. Asymmetric figures and transitions are for two dancers and may be danced in the traditional manner or individualized, generally as suggested by the lead. For these figures, the lead should also help the follow dancer to execute, for example in a swing, the gent is responsible for communicating the right position to finish the swing.

Balance and long lines forward and back are used to prepare or synchronize dancers for the next figure. I consider them setup for a flowing sequence.

Dances

A number of issues in dance choreography can contribute to poor flow - mistimed figures, excessive setup figures, excessive short figures.

Transitions that flow well are critical. Some dancers can make poor transitions flow well with flourishes. But I prefer that all transitions work well without embellishment.

Swings that do not end at the end of a phrase ruin flow because the moment to end the swing is not obvious.

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Mistimed dances are a problem. Often figures are timed for the convenience of the choreographer rather than the dancers. A well timed dance works well in the entire contra dance range - 110 to 120 counts per minute.

Allemande 1+1/2 in the middle with orbit 1/2. This is mistimed - an orbit takes 5 or 6 counts while the allemande takes 8 counts. And at the halfway point in the figure everyone is in the middle of the set, causing crowding.

A butterfly whirl 1+1/2 in 4 counts or a hey to a balance in 16 counts limits the upper range of tempo. A number of dances use allemande 1+1/2, star promenade, whirl, hey, balance. With a slow tempo, this is a beautiful flow sequence. Too fast, and it's just work.

A four count figure (which has little time to generate a flow) between two balances is 12 counts without flow. Stacking these together (for example two consecutive balance and spins) adds to this. That doesn't mean that it's not fun, but it takes away from flow.

Sequences of short figures, for example the contra corners allemandes, can have wonderful flow, but timing is critical. Each transition needs good timing to flow. If the dancers are not synchronizing well due to lack of experience or confusing music, reducing the number of transitions will help flow.

A dance needs a combination of different flow types to be interesting. The different types of flow, individual, two person, four person, full set, with various kinds of dancer to dancer connection, and the transitions between the different types of flow make the complete flow of the dance interesting.

Some dances have a wonderful flow when danced by skilled dancers, but fall flat when the dancers don't execute well. For example turn around and swing the next, when timed perfectly, is wonderful, but when timed poorly it is clunky. You may get a crowd to execute the patterns of an intricate dance, but getting the dance to flow well is a different issue.