

CHOREOGRAPHY, BODY FLOW, and TIMING

by LES GOTCHER

Choreography: the art of composing ballets and other stage dances, and planning and arranging the movements, steps, and patterns for stage dancers.

Choreographer: A person who creates dance compositions, plans, and arranges dance movements and patterns for stage dancers; ballet dancers.

Looking over the aforementioned description, or definition given in the dictionary, it would seem that all square dancers would have to be classed as professional dancer, which they definitely are not. It would seem to me that any caller working on putting dances together should be called an arranger, not a choreographer. I am going to use the word ARRANGER because to me an arranger is a caller who has the ability to arrange inter-flowing, colorful kaleidoscopic patterns that are beautiful to the non-dancing spectator, and in some cases they are entertaining for the advanced square dance world.

A caller has to take many things into consideration when arranging his dance. Are you calling a dance for non-dancers? If you are then I would not use a complicated figure like Tea-Cup Chain. Here are my reasons. The Tea-Cup Chain is a pattern that is going on inside the square, very complicated to someone not understanding it. Instead, I'd use something like Venus and Mars Stars. This pattern moves dancers from one star to another, ladies moving into one star while the gents are moving into another. This is something that a non-dancer can watch, following each step, and watch it unfold right in front of their eyes. This is something that should be taken into consideration when you are arranging a dance for the public to watch. (*Also when calling an "angels" tip for your beginners. B.W.*)

If you are calling to show off before square dancers, the sky is the limit. Use any pattern you want as long as they are smooth. Watch your timing because timing is most important in any dance whether it be square dancing or round dancing or ballroom dancing. Timing does not refer to just the music, it also refers to calling the figures. Assuming that the music is perfect, the calling must be just as smooth. If the calling is not timed perfectly you can't expect the dancing to be perfect.

Whatever type of calling you want to do, have a goal in mind. Most of the time, we will start off easy and work up to the ultimate goal we have in mind. Try this idea:

1. Begin with the ultimate goal and work backwards.
2. What figure are we going to use to get into the finale'? Before setting your mind on any certain figure, check in your mind and see how many different patterns will put you into that position. Next, figure out which figure will be more effective. Not just to your or the dancers, but which will be more effective to the audience.
3. When you decide what figure you want to use, then move backward one more position, or pattern. Keep this up until you have a complete dance ready for the big show.
4. You have your dance all set but you don't stop here. You get dancers and go over it, then go over it again. Make corrections, and always ask the dancers to speak up and advise you on what seems to be free flowing, hand changes, how is this, or that.

Dancing is only as smooth as the flow of the body movement. This means that there can be no movements that are jerky. This also means that almost everything is determined by the caller.

If the calling is not smooth, the dancing will not be smooth and flowing.

At one time several years back I decided that this could or should be named "Hand Calling". I started watching the dancer's hands. I wanted the hands to be reaching all the time. I found that you should be ready with your next call and when the dancer reached to do something with the left hand, right then was the time you should tell them what to do the right hand. Keeping those hands reaching all the time never gave the dancer time to think. If you allow them to think, they will invariably go wrong. So keep them listening to every word you say; convince them they every word you say is as if jewels are dripping from your lips. Don't say that to them, just make them believe it.

If you have sat beside a stream and watched the flow of the water rippling at a steady flow, you must have noticed how the flow was steady, always moving along, no jerky movements, no stops. Think of the body movements when dancing. Keep them gently flowing along. If you want to work on a dance that will always allow you time to watch the flow of the dance, try Venus and Mars Stars. Watch the flow as the dancers move from a left hand star into a right hand star. You will notice the dancers are actually doing a figure eight and even though they are changing from star to star, the body flow is there.

We are looking for the ultimate, the ever changing kaleidoscopic pattern we have in mind, and when it's right

you will feel it. If you are already into this type of arranging, you know that it takes a lot of effort and persistence on your part. No one ever said that it would be easy, just know what you want, then go after it. When you have exactly what you had in mind, you will have that feeling of satisfaction that comes with something well done.

Finally, it is up to the caller to teach the dancers how to make the flow of the body fit into the smoothness of the dance. For instance, dancers are in a Star Promenade. You want the ladies to Back Track, so instruct the ladies to turn right face and to keep it very smooth. Go over this with each lady until she will know exactly what it is that you want. Teach them body flow until they do it automatically without even having to stop and think about it. If you start early in your beginner classes you will have a group of dancers that you can be proud of. Their dancing reflects the ability of their instructor.

Callers and instructors should realize that there is a great responsibility involved when you decide to go out in front of dancers. You don't just learn and call and call it. Your every movement, what you say, how you say it. Think about all the responsibilities that you are subjecting yourself to, then keep in mind that you are going to be judged by how the dancers you turn out act, how they dance, how they react with others, and (importantly) the smoothness with which they go through the movements of the dance. You have a big responsibility, just like everything else, to do it right you must work at it.

In teaching your beginners, call everything on four beats. In other words, call "Allemande Left with your left hand" on four beats. Just as soon as you do this, have all the dancers repeat the call and execute the command while they are saying it. Then you can go on with "Right to your partner, right and left grand." This is also done on four beats and then on the next four beats the dancers repeat and do it at the same time. Actually, the dancers are doing their own call. You will find that when they are saying it, there will be no mistakes in it. Another thing this will do is teach the dancers that timing is important. They will automatically get more rhythm and better timing into their steps.

After you work with your dancers awhile, change your calls around so that they will not get used to any one set call and acquire the very bad habit of anticipating the caller. If you can teach your dancers to listen and to stay four beats behind the caller all the time- you will have a group of the best dancers anywhere.

When I say "timing the call to the dancers," I don't mean that the dancers know the dance and that you are supposed to call to what they are dancing, in time with them. You should be able to fit your call to the dancers no matter what they are doing- even if it is something they have never done before. For instance, if you have the dancers in a promenade and there is a lot of patter you would like to get in and you are still calling that "left over" patter when they arrive home, the dancers are going either to have to stand around and wait for you to finish the patter and give the next call, or just keep swinging until you're through. This is very tiresome. Watch your dancers constantly and know where they are every moment. When they arrive home and start to swing, that is the time to give the next command.

Right from the start- teach your dancers always to stay about four counts behind your calling.

It doesn't take too much effort to learn to call for all levels of dancers, and keeping your dancers happy is the caller's prime concern. You'll be a better caller for being progressive, because in motion that which stands still is actually moving backwards. Time waits for no man. Start right out with a variety of material. You'll be a better caller and it will enable the square dance movement to stay alive.

Taken from LES GOTCHER'S TEXTBOOK OF AMERICAN SQUARE DANCING, 1961

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