

Improving the ECD Open Band Experience

by Robert Reichert, Asheville, NC

Pop quiz: Why is it easier to put together a successful open band for a contra dance, than an open band for an English country dance? Because contra dances are not danced to specific tunes — unlike English country dance. In my opinion, contra dance musicians in an open band play the standard contra repertoire known to all the musicians; consequently, a contra open band has only to come together as an ensemble, without the complexity of learning new contra tunes. In an open band, familiarity with the tunes matters a lot to amateur musicians of various skills who have never played together.

I recently attended a dance camp that included an evening of English country dance for open-mic callers and an open band. That is, the callers and the band members were amateurs getting together for a single dance, and the band members had never played together. The open-mic callers chose about a dozen tunes and provided the sheet music to each unique English dance a few days before the dance. The open-mic callers understand that they are learning their craft, but they are less aware of the identical situation among the open band musicians. It is a challenge for amateur musicians to learn so many new pieces to be played at dance tempo in such a short time.

I played the violin for 10 years with Marshall Barron's English band in New Haven, so I have played a lot of English tunes, but the open mic callers chose tunes that I had never played (with two exceptions). In order to play these new tunes at dance tempo with some degree of musicality, I would need to practice solo two hours a day, plus daily ensemble practice. When? I would have to miss the dance classes that I came to the dance camp to enjoy.

A successful English open band plays common "core" tunes, so the challenge for the musicians is to play together with musicality, and does not include the challenge of learning all new tunes. We amateur musicians want to be successful, and I could tell the situation was a recipe for disappointment, so one practice session with the open band was enough for me. Later, I learned another musician left the open band for the same reasons.

That open-mic callers assume English open bands are composed of musicians who can, with very limited

practice time, play new tunes at dance tempo with unfamiliar musicians, is not limited to this recent



experience, and motivated me to write this article. I attended a dance week in Kentucky a few years ago, and the same thing happened at the English open-mic, open band. The open-mic callers were unaware of the difficulties for the musicians of both learning new tunes and playing with unfamiliar musicians. The musicians were asked to play all new tunes; very quickly, the open band dwindled from over twenty musicians to just five. After the few of us remaining musicians insisted that the open-mic dances be familiar "core" tunes, one of the dancers approached me and asked, "Why is the band so much better today?" I didn't answer her question.

Here is my suggestion to improve the English open-mic, open band experience: Ask that the open-mic callers choose all (or almost all) traditional "core" English dance standards from *The Barnes Book of English Country Dance Tunes, Volume 1* (available at cdss.org/store). While I don't think that my concern over dance/tune selection occurs with every open band among musicians who have never played together, I do think that open-mic callers should be sensitive to this concern, and select their dances with greater consideration for the musicians' available time and skill. The open mic callers will, at some point in their calling, need to learn to call the core tunes, and the open band could devote limited practice time to learning to play as an ensemble instead of learning unfamiliar tunes. Better sounding music from happy musicians for traditional English dances is a good thing. Save the hottest new tunes and dances for "real" bands that can devote practice time to your new favorites, and learn your calling skills at open-mic/open band events with traditional, "core" English dances.

Robert Reichert has been playing fiddle for contra dances and English dances for many years, and hopes to get better at both. He recently moved from Hartford, CT, to Asheville, NC.