

Community Dance Contras

Prepared for Community Dance Leaders Seminar in Sparks, Nevada, April 2023
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What are Contras?

Contra Dances are a family of dances that generally begin with several partner pairs arranged in a formation composed of two parallel lines. Some are danced in a big double circle, which can also be thought of as two parallel lines curved around to create a circle.

Their history goes back to at least the 1600s when *The English Dancing Master* by John Playford was published in London. That book contains dances for proper “longways lines for six to as many as will”.

Modern contras typically have a repeating dance figure designed for 64 counts of music, which matches the standard music phrasing of eight groups of eight counts. Each repeat of the figure changes the location of each partner pair with respect to the other partner pairs.

Contras are ideally suited to the Community Dance environment for several reasons:

- Easily adjustable to include as many partner pairs as desirable
- Most of the action involves only two or four dancers
- Partners stay together but each pair dances with many other pairs
- The 64-count figure typically is walked and taught before the dance begins

Whole Set Contras

The simplest versions are Whole Set Contras danced in Proper Lines. This means that one partner pair stands at the top of the hall facing the caller and music. The next pair lines up behind them and so on for “as many as will”. Then partners turn to face each other. The choreography usually begins with some actions between the two partners. The figure will end with some action that moves the top couple to the other end of the long line, which is known as a “whole set progression”. (For example, the top couple struts down the center to the foot.)

FOLLOW THE LEADER (with numerous variations)

Formation: Proper contra lines, partners facing

Music: “Aunt May’s Canadian Jig” or any 64-count music with clear 8-beat phrases

1-8 Forward and Back (optional hop with a “hey”, or clap own or partners hands on 4);

9-16 Switch places with Partner; (see note)

17-24 Forward and Back;

25-32 Switch places with Partner;

33-40 All face up, top two dancers turn out and lead their line down the outside;

41-64 Leaders meet and make an arch at the bottom. All the rest go below the leaders and come through the arch and up the hall with a new top couple. Leaders stay at foot.

Note: Switch places can be a Pass Thru and U-Turn Back, or turn half by the right and then turn half by the left, or connect both hands and turn Singe Circle left halfway both times.

Promenade Variation: After all face up, another option is for the top couple to lead a Promenade to their left. They can make the arch at the bottom or they can simply go all the way around and then attach themselves to the end of the Promenade leaving a new top two.

Sicilian Circles

If there are at least 10 partner pairs, then the next formation to consider is a Sicilian Circle. Make one big circle of partner pairs all facing in. Then have each couple turn to their right to stand one behind another around the circle. Designate one pair to turn around as a couple and face the couple behind them. Then have every other couple do the same. This works best with an even number of couples, but it is possible to have one pair of phantoms.

WIZARD SICILIAN

(This is one of several similar dances using Circles, Dosados and Stars.)

Formation: Sicilian Circle (or Alternate Duple)

Music: "Wizard on the Hill", Chinook 052 or other 64-count music with clear 8-count phrases

1-8 Circle Left;
9-16 Circle Right;
17-24 Ladies Dosado (or Dancers on the right turn by the right);
25-32 Gents Dosado (or Dancers on the left turn by the left);

33-40 All four Star Right (finger tips up or join hands across);
41-48 Star Left;
49-56 Those facing Dosado;
57-64 Pass Thru, on to the next and Bow.

Note: If the dancers are slow to form the stars, allow 12 beats each and skip the last Dosado.

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Triplets

Triplets are contras specifically designed for six dancers. They usually begin from two facing lines of three dancers each with partners facing each other. Prepared callers always have some Triplets ready to use when the number of dancers is less than expected.

MEGUNTICOOK REEL TRIPLET ("Great Swells of the Sea"-- Camden Hills in Maine)

Originally a Triple, modified to be a Triplet by Dottie Welch

Formation: Proper Triplet (partners facing, ladies in the left line and gents in the right line)

Music: "Quigley's Reel and Southerners Hornpipe" on Southerners Plus Two

1-8 Top couple Cross Over (Pass Thru) and go down the far outside to the foot;
9-16 Into the center and meet your own; Allemande Right with your partner;
17-24 Allemande Left with the couple above; Allemande Right with your own;
25-32 Allemande Left with the next above; Allemande Right to original place at the top;

33-40 All Six Circle Left;
41-48 Circle Right back to place;
49-56 Top couple go down the center (4 steps), turn alone and come back up;
57-64 Top couple go down outside to the foot position.

Note: This is a nice reverse version of the "Reel" in the Virginia Reel. During the "Reel", the dancer from the right-hand line should be turning the dancers in the left-hand line and vice versa (Gents turn Ladies and Ladies turn Gents).

Duples (The basic dance unit is two couples.)

Usually the two long lines are organized into groups of four dancers who dance together for 64 counts. Traditionally these dances include calls where either the Gents or the Ladies are designated as being active. Currently contra leaders are searching for ways to adjust the terms and the choreography to better accommodate the reality of our times.

Set up the lines with partners facing across. Say “take hands four from the top” which means the top four dancers make a circle of four. Then the next group of four does the same, and so on all down the line. A spare couple at the end is okay, just face up and be patient through one figure. In each group of four the two dancers nearest the top are designated as “ones” and the others are “twos”. If it applies, put the lady on the right side of the gent.

Each time through the figure the “ones” will move down the set to meet a new pair and the “twos” will move up the set to meet a new pair. Partner pairs maintain their number except when they arrive at the end of the line. When there is no one to dance with, they “cross” to put the lady on the right and face up. Their number changes while they have half a minute to catch their breath. The simplest duple contra figures are those where mostly the “ones” face down the set and the “twos” face up the set. Accordingly, this is a good place to begin.

CALLISON HALL FOR COMMUNITY DANCE

By Dottie Welch

Formation: Alternate Duple, begin facing up or down

Music: “Callison Hall Jig”, Lloyd Shaw

1-8 Neighbors join both hands for Heel and Toe out and in; (begin with outside foot)

9-16 Do it again; (heel, toe, side, close, side out; heel, toe, side, close, side in)

17-24 Same two dancers Dosado;

25-32 Pass Thru and Face In and make long lines;

33-40 Long Lines Forward and Back;

41-48 Again Forward and Back (note the person beside you who will be your new neighbor);

49-56 Same four Star Right;

57-64 Star Left to new Neighbor; (“ones” facing down, “twos” facing up)

ASPEN AND SPRUCE

By Dottie Welch, August 2012, Prince Albert National Park, Saskatchewan

Formation: Alternate Duple, begin facing up or down

Music: “New Waterloo Reel” on Caledonian Ball

1-8 (New 4) Star Right; (at bottom end be ready to move ahead of the pack)

9-16 Star Left;

17-24 Circle Left;

25-32 Circle Right (couple two release hands to allow adjustment into a line facing down);

33-40 Ones step between twos and all face down, Line of Four Go Down eight steps;

41-48 Turn Alone and Come Back;

49-56 Cast Off 3/4 (slowly) (centers move forward, ends pivot);

57-64 Long Lines Forward and each dancer Face a New Neighbor.

Things to think about when choosing or creating a contra

- **Is at least some of the choreography forgiving?**
Circle Left followed by Circle Right is forgiving because it doesn't matter how far the dancers actually Circle. Circle Left alone is unforgiving because the dancers must get all the way around in the time allotted (usually eight counts).
- **Is the choreography gender specific?**
"Ladies Chain" and "Right and Left Thru" are defined with gender specific roles. If used for "over and back". Consider replacing them with Circles or Stars.
- **What is the situation regarding Swing?**
Swing as we commonly dance it has gender specific roles. Swing can be dizzying and disorienting for new dancers. Most modern contra dancers expect to have two swings (one with partner and one with neighbor) in every contra figure.

The following two contras are appropriate for dancers attending a community dance for the first time where they will be mixed with more experienced contra dancers.

ESSEX REEL

By Tony Parkes

Formation: Alternate Duple, begin facing up or down

Music: "Fancy, Quindaro, Scotch Hornpipes" on Any Jig or Reel CD

- 1-8 With your Neighbor Dosado; (cross at the ends)
- 9-16 Same lady Swing;
- 17-24 Put the lady on the right, Lines of Four go Down;
- 25-32 Turn as a Couple (California Twirl or Wheel Around), Come Back;
- 33-40 Left end pull it in and all four Circle Left; (technically Bend the Line then Circle)
- 41-48 Circle Right;
- 49-56 Make a Right-Hand Star;
- 57-64 Star Left to a new Neighbor.

Note: Gents going down the hall (ones) will swing once or twice around.
Gents coming up the hall (twos) will swing once and a half around.

AIRPANTS VARIATION

Original "Airlants" by Lisa Greenleaf

Formation: Alternate Duple, begin facing up or down

Music: "Mad River, Lake Erie, Hey Little Girl, Do What" on Portland Selection 2 CD

- 1-16 Neighbor Balance (4) and Long Swing (12);
- 17-24 (End with the "ones" below the "twos"), Long Lines Forward and Back;
- 25-32 Couples Circle Left 3 places; (ends with "ones" in left line and "twos" in right line)
- 33-48 Partner Balance (4) and Long Swing (12);
- 49-56 Couples Circle Left 3 places; (ends with all dancers where they started the figure)
- 57-64 (Now facing up and down) Balance Four and Pass Thru.
(Hold the Circle to do the Balance as a step forward and touch, step back and touch.)