

Do We Appreciate Our Musicians?

The phrase “music is the stimulus of the dance” was coined by Jean Milligan a long time ago. Interestingly, it means different things to different people. There are those dancers who notice the individual tunes and appreciate both the rhythm and melody that is incorporated into the movements of the dance. Others appreciate the overall effect and rely on the music to give them their timing in the dance, but unfortunately, there are some who just rely on the beat, and even then fail to dance with the music. With a lack of competent musicians in many areas, recorded music is often all that is available for the weekly class and regular socials.

The annual dance or major event will warrant a band. There can sometimes be a lack of appreciation of the contribution that live music can play in a social situation. In Scotland many are fortunate to have a band at many of their functions, and yet, one notices the musicians are often taken for granted by many dancers as though they were not actually present – as is the case of CD music.

When we arrange for a band to come and play for a country dance, we expect many things, but do we consider their needs and commitment? How long is the engagement? Do we really consider the travelling time, which can be considerable, compared with the actual playing time? While some musicians do make a livelihood out of playing, the majority do it as a part-time job. Who would play for four hours and travel for six hours for £120 - £140? The accordion may have cost in excess of £4000 to buy, never mind the cost of amplification and other equipment that is brought along. The time given to practising at some stage in the musician’s life to acquire the playing skill is a large commitment in time. The hospitality offered by some branches is excellent, but many a band will have tales to tell of how they had to go and find fish and chips prior to the start of the dance. Is the band asked if they would like to share supper with some members and made to feel at home? Again their experiences include the occasions when they are they set apart from the party and left to sit alone.

What about the dance programme? Some bands that have regular engagements obviously have music previously used to hand. However, there will have been at some point, an appreciable amount of time given to preparation. For example: finding the original tune, checking the number of chords, the number of bars, the number of times through, matching alternative tunes to the original and making sure members of the band have the arrangement to play the same chords in the rhythm section. Then there are those requests for the local dance or unpublished dance with its own unknown tune. More often than not, our secretaries write off to the band confirming an engagement giving the date and place, and later send a list of dances leaving the bandleader to do all the spadework. Besides the instructions to the venue, the general arrangements and a meal etc. it is very helpful if the list of dances has a reference indicating their source, number of bars, how many times through etc, and for those local unpublished dances the preferred tune, even the offer to assist if there are any problems in finding the tune, helps. It is also useful for the band to know in advance whether there will be a grand march and the format of the closing part of the dance – they only know what to expect if we advise them.

The actual playing of tunes for a dance is no easy task except for the well-experienced musician. There are many tunes that are quite difficult to play on a keyboard as opposed to the fiddle and vice versa. It is always fair to start the evening with something that is not going to be a great challenge at the beginning of the programme. Most musicians would prefer to start the evening with jig tunes, so they get themselves played in and in the mood. Criticism direct from dancers to the band about certain tunes or the tempo is no way to improve the services of a band. It is very easy to lose count or the barring in some tunes – particularly if the melody is only two four-bar phrases. If the band is eight bars out, the only way to assist is for the MC to tell the leader just prior to the start of next time through that the dance begins with the next phrase. While there are bandleaders who think they know what is required, few are dancers and some are reluctant to take advice. It should be up to the MC to make a request for the tempo to be adjusted so as to suit the conditions of the floor or the dancers. The MC has a very important task in keeping the band happy. Such things as the arrangement for the introduction for each dance should be discussed before the start so that it is clear whether the dances are announced first or given eight bars introduction as the signal to take the floor. The provision of liquid refreshment is sometimes neglected particularly by an MC who is worried about his/her recaps. MCs should take control of the encores so that the programme can be finished. He or she might also give a quiet reminder to the leader about two chords, or 40 bars, or other features of a certain dance that can be helpful. Most bands hate listening to long-winded recaps as it dampens the spirit of the evening. Though recaps are desirable they should be slick and brief. Adjusting the programme as time becomes short should always be done after consulting the musicians and telling the dancers, as should the addition of any extras.

A most misunderstood issue at a dance is the interaction of the band and the dancers. Often a particular set of tunes will set off a rapport between dancers and the band, but if that does not happen, it is up to the MC to start the reaction. In Scotland one can go all evening without the musicians' efforts being mentioned.

How encouraging it is to the musicians to have some appreciation during the evening in addition to the usual vote of thanks at the end. For those having danced in various countries it is interesting to note the reaction of dancers to the music. At Pinewoods Camp, America, one cannot help but see the appreciation for the musicians after every dance – the applause is resounding. It is not for an encore – that depends on the dancers raising their hand with the forefinger in the air to say, "Once more please". One wishes we saw more widespread appreciation of the music, for we cannot perform without it.

Having a band for a function is quite an expense. However, if one considers what a clubber, a golfer or a theatregoer will pay for an outing, a country dance is a very cheap form of entertainment. What is more, we expect the band to be good. Every musician has to start somewhere and those branches and clubs that encourage less experienced musicians to play for some classes or socials are helping to train our future musicians. We have a responsibility to help musicians gain experience. There are probably plenty of musicians, but few who can meet the standard of playing the correct tune at the right tempo in the style we wish. Many youngsters who start the violin give up as the challenge of classical playing becomes too demanding. Yet we fail to encourage them to transfer to folk and dance music,

which might be more feasible if they can develop the style and spirit. To some extent, we have been conditioned by the CD to expect perfection all the time!

Now what about the class musician? Only a few are able to secure the services of such a resource either because of availability or cost. Playing for a class is a demanding task and requires considerable confidence. Instrumentalists, particularly fiddle players, may learn their skill in two different ways. Those who learn by the traditional classical route are often less able to read music by sight because they seek such perfection in playing the notes. In many cases the ability to reach the desired tempo for some of the running reels proves a problem. On the other hand those who learn to play by rote find they have a limited repertoire and that provides them with insufficient alternative tunes to play in the initial stages of learning. What is crucial to learning to play is the opportunity to play for dancing even if only for part of an evening. So it is up to dancers to bear with them in the initial stages and for someone to give encouragement and help in achieving the sound we like best. A well-known fiddle teacher in the States has a fairly large school of young pupils. When they reach a certain level of competence they are introduced to Scottish tunes. If they take a liking to them, they are encouraged to play more and eventually given the option of taking a seat in the band for part of the evening, on condition they go on the dance floor for the rest of the evening. Isn't that great – musicians with a knowledge of the dancing!

What do we like and how do we help? Most of us in the UK like the accordion as part of the band. On the other side of the Atlantic the fiddle is much more in favour. Though some are content to dance to a large group, the idea of a stramash to others is that of a ragged sound. A neat small group is traditionally six. At today's prices we more frequently have bands of three or four players and the benefit of midi units to provide some of the base or rhythm. One will notice that the best bands never have more than two players on the melody line since it is difficult to keep the clarity and crisp sound in larger groups. Of course the rest of the band is so important in keeping the strong rhythm we like for our dancing. Training of musicians at music workshops is fine if the emphasis is on solo or small group playing. The stramash work only allows the weaker players to hide behind the rest and they never improve to the level we would expect in a dancing situation.

So let's not rely on the few dancers who show their appreciation for our music but inspire all dancers to show more appreciation, and in order to provide for the future, encourage our branch members to be on the look-out for possible musical talent, help new musicians to start, and really appreciate those who play for our dancing.

*Contributed by Peter Clark, who has tried a hand at playing.
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