

Live Music for Early Dance

*In the January 2018 edition of the EDC Circular, our Chairman Bill Tuck published an article on **Live Music for Early Dance**, under his oft-used pseudonym of "Your Roving Reporter". A number of members' responses (solicited by our editor Junella McKay) were printed after it, at least in part. Here is the whole correspondence received by EDC on this important topic. Bill's article is reprinted here for easy reference.*

Response from Derek Guyatt, 16/11/2017

Hello Junella,

Thank you for sending me this [preliminary copy]. Bill and you have made some excellent points.

I'm not sure if we would really recognise any of these problems in Herts Early Dance. We have an excellent band of enthusiastic amateur musicians who are happy to play for free at our regular meetings and at performances, and who are much appreciated by the dancers. And I'm sure there are other early dance clubs that can say the same.

When I'm not playing the lute for early dance, one of my other interests is playing the melodeon for Morris dancers. As with other Morris sides, the dancers always perform and rehearse to live music, and do not pay their musicians.

So, the question is, why do some clubs experience the problems that Bill has referred to while others don't? I'm not sure if I know the answer to this. One factor that might be relevant is that our musicians are an integral part of the club; all are members and several have served on the committee. It is not a matter of bringing in musicians from outside to play when required.

You might like to involve Peter Barnard and Andy Richards in the discussion.

Best regards,

Derek

Response from Harriet Cox, 18/11/2017

Hello Junella,

Bill does answer several of his questions himself, though it appears it is not universal that musicians don't play regularly at meetings - lucky Herts!

I also attend regular Morris rehearsals, where we always dance to live music, but this is partly because the music is - let's be honest - fairly straight-forward for amateur musicians, and all in a similar style, whereas our historical dance weekly sessions may take us from the 15th to 19th centuries. Not only would that be a challenge for the instrument(s) - even an electronic keyboard has quite big limitations - but the music would also need hugely time-consuming weekly planning and quite possibly adapting.

We did consider having live music at this year's EDC festival, but the cost for a musician to play for just a few minutes included not only the festival, but accommodation and so on as well. So indeed yes practical considerations do play their part (next year in 2019 we will have lots of live music because as hosts in Norwich we can call on local musicians).

It is very true that playing for dancing is not at all easy (I know, I try to do it sometimes); dancers tend to need a faster tempo than may be comfortable, and our musicians need to be accomplished sight readers, sympathetic re tempi and adept at navigating awkward repeats, da capos etc. It is far

easier to try to dance than it is to try to play an instrument (except perhaps the ukulele - but then who wants to dance to a ukulele?). Many - most? - of us in the EDC are amateur dancers, for better or worse, but the music requires professionals, or at the very least, extremely competent amateurs.

However, I absolutely believe in aiming to perform to the public with live music, every time, as what is a dance without the music? So although it does mean our fees will be higher, we do try to convince a possible 'client' that it is well worth the extra expense, and that they will only be getting half the experience if we use recorded music. Inevitably this does happen on occasion, sadly.

I am a YouTube fan, and on spending many an idle moment clicking through the 'recommended' videos, it is noticeable that while the dance interpretations may differ, sometimes quite wildly, the music one hears is probably a familiar recorded version.

I did give a - probably similar! - reply to the discussion last time, so please don't feel you need to add my comments again! But I'm grateful you have included me in the conversation, thank you.

Best wishes

Harriet

Response from Robin Benie 21/11/2017

Hi Folks

Tricky one this.

If you are lucky enough to have gifted amateurs at your disposal, flexible and willing to learn, then you are truly fortunate. You can make the music and the dance work together as they were meant to.

For the rest of the time either economics or the standard of playing dictates the use of recordings - even though many of them require the liberal use of computer software to amend tempi, repeats etc. or to add intros.

Economics:- once you work out what a professional musician needs to earn to avoid starvation you quickly see why working with the pros is a rare treat. And they aren't always that good. They can (and do) turn up unprepared, play their own arrangements and in other ways make life difficult for dancers.

Standards:- We're fortunate that many country dance bands are much more sympathetic to our 17th and 18th century country dances than "proper" musicians can be, but the complex rhythms and structures of the 16th and especially the 15th century Italian dances provide serious challenges to many amateurs.

On a more positive note, and given that there is a recognised field for professional baroque musicians, we have the likes of Mary Collins giving music students a thorough grounding in baroque dance. Her book, **A Plaine & Easie Introduction to Baroque Dance & the Performance of its Music**, is coming out soon.

There is, however, a fundamental problem for us dancers, and it's back to economics. Once a band is good enough to fill a hall for a music concert, adding dance reduces the fees available to the musicians. I'm afraid that for most of us, and for most of the time, recordings are the only way - unless you have the gifted amateurs I mentioned above.

Cheers,

Robin

Response from Harriet after reading Robin Benie's response above

Hello again, with a further couple of comments, in response to Robin's. In defense of the professional musicians. I suspect that the arrangements they use or have devised themselves are conceived as concert pieces, not for dancing, and so it does require diplomatic and careful pre-planning and discussion between your top dance boss and the band. Unless the players are a dance band or have played for ballet, they are unlikely ever to have experienced supporting dancers, as Bill has already noted, so it can be quite a steep learning curve.

A further, sad, thought is that the public at large, and children in particular, are hearing less and less classical music in their everyday lives, so that the strange and exotic aspects of, particularly, early music are increasingly unfamiliar. How to get Renaissance music and dance into primary schools when the national curriculum now stops at 1066? There's a challenge!

Best wishes

Harriet

Response from Robert Huggett 25/11/2017

Hi,

Over the years Renaissance Footnotes have performed on 274 days (that I have records of), 25 to recordings and 249 to live music. If you count performances, then the imbalance is even more marked as usually when we have musicians we are giving multiple performances in a day. Performances to recordings tend to be one-off.

We seldom have much choice over what music we get. We use professionals when the client can afford it, amateurs as and when we can get them and as a last resort we play the music ourselves or use recordings.

Over the years we have worked with a wide range of musicians: professionals, amateur consorts and those of us within the group that can play an instrument. Of those 3 cases the last represents desperation because the musicians within the group also happen to be the some of the best dancers, so when they are playing the music it substantially weakens the dance team. Also we're not that great as musicians – on a good day with familiar music we'd count as competent amateurs. However, the plus side is that when we do this, we get as many rehearsals as we want and the musicians understand exactly what is needed of them (even if they can't actually do it).

We use professional musicians whenever we can. The problem with professionals that there is hardly ever enough money for rehearsals. So although they are individually highly competent, they may be sight-reading and they may never or seldom have played together as a group. When we are performing for a weekend with 3 or 4 sets a day, this isn't too much of an issue because although the 1st set or 2 might be a bit shaky thereafter things tended to settle in and run pretty smoothly. On the handful of occasions that we have actually had adequate rehearsal time with a professional band, the results have always been excellent. As far as I can remember almost all of the occasions we have used professional musicians at least one member of the band had prior experience of playing for dancing, often of playing for us. The one exception I can call to mind was one of those lucky occasions when we got adequate rehearsal time.

Amateurs are harder to generalise about, but overall I would say our experiences have been good. We have worked with a huge range; several amateur consorts with professional leaders, a good well-established recorder group, and local early music groups of a range of abilities. In some cases the results can be as good as a scratch grouping of professionals because they are used to working together and often they are happy to rehearse together with the dancers. If rehearsal together isn't an option then we've had good results from sending the musicians the practice recordings that we are working to for them to listen to, sending them the arrangements that we want them to use (or use as a starting point), and on occasion by having one of us sit in or "conduct" each piece on the day.

I think that one advantage our group does have in this area is that we have several people in the group who are adequate musicians and so we can read music and talk to musicians in their own language and explain in familiar (to them) terms what it is we want. I think a group that lacks that capability will find working with live music a great deal harder.

Recordings can be excellent; usually they represent a well-rehearsed band playing something as well as they are able. The problem with recordings is they are inflexible and if they don't fit what you want you either can't use them or you have a lot of work ahead of you cutting and splicing or speeding up/slowing down. Also they need equipment to play them on, and circumstances can conspire to make the use of electric gadgets difficult, dangerous or undesirable. Generally speaking, a real musician can work just about anywhere (even if persuading them to do so may be tricky). In terms of quality of performance our best results have been with a professional band that we have had adequate rehearsals with (no surprise there), next best I would say are recordings, again no real surprise here. The recordings we choose are usually of a high quality and we can practice with them as much as we want and they play the music exactly the same way every time.

For our group I would say the key to a good performance is adequate rehearsals. It is not just about consistency, it is about confidence and to my mind performing is very much about confidence. If you dance with confidence and assurance, then you can get away with murder and still look better than someone who is nervously perfect. If the dancers know that they are going to get the right number of repeats at the right speed and that they are going to be able to hear the beat, then they approach the dance with confidence and an audience will see that and assume that whatever they do is intentional. If they have never heard this band play this piece and they are worried about the speed or the clarity or the repeat scheme then that nervousness will be picked up by the audience who will assume that the dancers don't know what they're doing and will see "mistakes" even where they don't exist.

Given an equal amount of rehearsal time the professional is clearly preferable, but given a choice between professionals and no rehearsals and competent amateurs and adequate rehearsal time I'd probably choose the amateurs.

It also helps to have realistic expectations about what is possible. Some dance music, particularly the C15th stuff is complex with very short sections, frequent changes of measure and tempo and irregular bar lengths. Pieces like that are only viable if you can be sure that the band has adequate time to prepare them and you are going to get a joint rehearsal. Otherwise it is safer to pick items that are more conventional. Some pieces simply won't fit the instruments available, so you need to make sure that the band leader at least has sight of all of your music well in advance. We once did 2 days of performing late C16th dances where the only musician we had was a bagpiper. Luckily he was a very good one and cooperative to boot so we managed to find enough material for 3 different sets.

I think that's more than enough, so I'll stop there.

Robert

Response from Anne Deller 25/11/2017

Hi all

I have been reading these exchanges with interest - thank you Junella for setting us off! It seems to me that we are at turning point in early dance music. As I understand it, the revival in early music as a genre began last century. At first it was the re-discovery of the music itself, then came the creation of re-production instruments to re-create the right sound. Then more research into the social context and finally - and perhaps through that - a realisation that when the name of a piece of music refers to a dance it probably means something and the nature of that dance should inform the way the music is played.

As Robin has mentioned, Mary Collins has been working on this for many years, and from my conversations with her it seems to me that whereas 15 years ago this was still a niche approach, in recent years this wish to understand the dance and its relation to music seems to have acquired a new energy. Richard Dwilt at the Conservatoire in Cologne gets it - and Mary teaches there fairly regularly. The Royal Academy get it and have classes in it. Mary is certainly busier than ever - now spreading the word in Ireland working with musicians there. Hopefully, the book Mary is working on with Rachel Brown and Adrian Butterfield will provide a further impetus and make the information more readily accessible. In my limited experience young musicians who are working in early music are interested in understanding dance music and the techniques used to bring it to life e.g. Lullyan bowing.

Robert makes the point that dancers and musicians often speak different languages. Gone are the days when the dancing master also played the music for the class or even composed the tunes. If we can both learn to speak each other's language or find a middle ground for effective communication, then one hopes that the issues that so often arise - where the musicians don't really understand what is needed and "grow up" learning to play one way when dancers actually need it another. Having said that this has to be a two-way street. We as dancers don't know it all, and maybe sometimes we are a bit stuck in our ways and need to re-assess the music. Of course the musicians will prepare music for concert conditions, but does that always make it wrong? I for one don't want to feel that I am dancing to "dumbed down" music - I want the music to inspire and challenge me - within reason!

And then we come to economics. Robin is so right - finding tame musicians can be hard and expensive. Robert and I have been lucky over the years - often through our re-enactment background - to find musicians to work with who are also prepared to dress up when required! If you find some that are interested, then they need to be encouraged. We may be asking them to step out of their comfort zone, but in moving away from recorded music we as dancers are doing likewise and frankly we are more exposed. The audience will spot us messing up in a way they won't with the music. If both the dancers and the musicians step into that creative space where both are challenged but driven by the music and are able to share that joy of just being 2 parts of a greater whole, then that is very special.

Anne

Barbara Segal

Dancing both expresses and plays with music, so the feeling and character of the music is very important for dancing. It must inspire and have passion. Whether it comes from a CD or is played live is less important, unless live music is an intrinsic part of the event.

Barbara