

General Information

I suppose that the first piece of general advice would be that there are no hard or fast rules, what works for one may not work for all. That seems to be the one bit of advice that comes out of every calling workshop I've ever been to. There are however some basic requirements of a good caller, some technical (that you call things at the right point in the music, you can explain things in away others can understand). Some are a matter of presentation and style (getting people involved and up dancing, keeping things moving, and above all giving people a fun night).

Getting people into sets

At a ceilidh club or festival this is not that challenging, people have come to dance, they want to dance, all you have to do is tell people what set types to get into, you have to tell people a few times because not everybody notices the first time but it's not that difficult. Weddings, parties and other social events with ceilidhs can be a lot more challenging from this point of view. Firstly they will for the most part have no idea what a longways set of 4 is, secondly many of them will not want to dance. That is the part where you come in, normally if you've been booked for a social occasion the person who's having it wants you there and thus probably likes the idea of dancing, so talking to them in advance and asking them to get up for the first dance is a good idea (this works particularly well at weddings as the Bride and Groom are normally expected to take the first dance). Then it kind of comes down to style and presentation getting people to enjoy the dance and have fun (fun is the key word here, it's someone's social event; they don't have to get the dances perfect just enjoy them, nobody likes the folk police).

Walkthroughs

The walkthrough is where you teach the dance, exactly what you say in the walkthrough depends on your crowd so you can't reuse the same patter every time (even if it makes life easier). Normally you're aiming your walkthrough at the set that looks as if they understand things the least (normally the set furthest away from you in the dark corner near the bar), watch the crowd as you do the walkthrough and look for confused people. If your explanation does not seem to be working try finding a way to re-phrase it, rather than repeating it in with an increasingly louder voice. With a non-ceilidh audience you can't rely on them knowing what any of the figures are (yes even right hand star), I normally introduce the figure by name followed by the description, as the night goes on the amount of description begins to reduce as the audience learns which names go with which actions. I have also tended to find that simpler explanations are normally more readily understood than complex more exact instructions (this as also been noted in workshops so hopefully it's not a comment on my ability to give exact instructions but you never know) as people can fill in the fine details themselves as the dance goes on.

Band communication

For the audience to have a great night music is the key, while bad calling can really ruin a good night, great calling is nothing without good music. So dealing with the band is one of the most important tasks you've got, if you can get them enjoying themselves you can get them to play their socks off and give the audience a great night. Some basic bits of advice for dealing with the band follows.

Help the band in with their P.A. and help them set up, it's a lot work but it's only fair, and the band will appreciate it.

Find out if the band has any tunes they like to start with, and end with, get an idea of the tunes they really like because they are normally the tunes the band put most enthusiasm into.

Don't get the band to play tunes they are not that sure about doing or don't like, if that means you can't do a certain dance then so be it.

Arrange your signals with the band in advance. Find out how many times before the end of the dance that the band want to be signalled. Also try to let them know how many times though the dance you intend to do, and even alter it if the arrangement calls for it.

Calling during the dance

When I said before that there are no hard and fast rules there is one exception and it's this. When calling during the dance you have to call at the right times, basically you have to call enough in advance of where the figures should change so people have time to react to what you just said. Some people find this a bit unnatural when they call their first few dances (or at least I did, fortunately someone was kind enough to point it out to me straight away so I did not continue doing too long, thanks Sue Diamond).

Microphones

The microphone is one of the caller's main tools, there is some often repeated advice which is buy the best quality microphone you can afford (even if the person in the shop says you're only talking and thus don't need a good mic, don't listen). The shure SM58 seems to be the standard mic of choice (it's the one I have), it has also been mentioned a number of times that the AKG C1000S is a very good mic for female callers. However there are two camps when it comes to mics, those that like radio mics, and those that don't. The argument tends to go as follows, radio mics allow you to get down amongst the crowd, help out among the the sets, some callers like this ability. The other side of the argument is that callers with radio mics do get off the stage, this is disconcerting for the audience as there is a voice with no body, also when on the floor the caller can only see the sets near them, there are a lot of others sets they can't see. As best as I can gather the anti-radio mic camp appears to contain the largest number of callers and is also where I stand. I also have my own take on this argument, which you can feel free to take with a pinch of salt. Callers who largely call for social events (weddings, parties etc.) tend to like radio mics and I can see why, there is normally a very limited number of sets (3-4) so the caller can see most of what goes on and most people can see them. With the radio mic it is easier to create a connection with the crowd as there is not the physical distance involved. For callers who work largely with a larger crowd, ceilidh series, or festivals, you can't see what is going on in most sets from the floor, as a caller you should be keeping an eye on all the sets not just working with one or two. It's also disconcerting for the audience if the caller keeps vanishing. So my summary is this: radio mics for weddings etc. good, for calling at a ceilidh series bad. That having been said I don't use a radio mic, when I do the odd wedding gig I still prefer to live on the stage and not go wandering in the crowd.

There are are few bits of good advice for radio mic users though, always have spare batteries no matter how certain you are that the ones in the mic are fine. Carry a spear cabled mic as at some venues, and with certain bands your radio mic might pick-up interference. When you buy a radio mic pick one that has more than one channel so you can move to a different channel if someone in the band is on the same channel as you. Just because you can get off the stage and call does not mean you have to (Martin Harvey has a radio mic but he stays more or less firmly rooted on the stage).

Choice of material

The general advice is that it depends on your audience, different dances suit different crowds, also different dances suit different callers and different bands. The previous statement if very helpful in some ways, is also completely useless if you're trying to work out what dances you should call yourself. Some dances are obviously more difficult than others so you can match the difficulty of your dance to the crowd. Familiarity with any dance you call is essential, if you don't know the dance how can you teach it to another. Many a workshop has recommended that you only call dances you've danced, and while that represents the best option it can become impractical as your calling career develops and you call more and dance less and less. This means running though the dance in your head repeatedly trying out the dance from different positions both the men's and the women's. Once you feel you know the dance inside-out it's probably ready to be called.

Matching your choice of dances on the night to the tunes the band loves the most is normally a good plan (see the band communication section), this means having a number of dances you can draw from, in normal circumstances you will never get though more than twenty or so dances in a night.

Conclusion

In conclusion I know this document might not be so useful to a very experienced caller, but I hope it will be useful to a lot of people getting into calling. There is no doubt there are bits of this document you don't agree with and some you do, if you have any points you wish to add please feel free to e-mail me as I intend to annotate this document with other people's contributed comments.