

STAGE 2 : THE IDIOM OF COTSWOLD MORRIS MUSIC

This note makes the assumption that the topic matters. Many of the points made are about small effects, hence they are easily overlooked, yet the consequences to the dancing can be dramatic.

It is normal for English folk dancers to learn from the example of a role model and seldom to intellectualise about it as explained by Douglas Kennedy, but in the interplay of music and dance it can be important that at times some on both sides understand what they are trying to do, as no one now is within a rich tradition which would make that unimportant.

The Requirement

Playing for the Cotswold morris is not the same as for Sing Songs, Country Dance, North West, Border, or other seasonal dances, because the idiom is one of jumps and capers and large, musically irregular, stretched actions. Anything less is a performance constraint. Traditional players, like Bertie Clarke at Bampton, recognised there was a distinct idiom for the morris which was different from their other repertoire. Musicians, whether they are or have been dancers or not, ought to be sympathetic to the nuances of movement. Often, unfortunately, the weak musicians were also the poorer dancers, and thus have a double handicap. Because of previous dance experience some dancers follow the rhythm of the music without thought, whereas others can generate the rhythm of movement from within themselves. Whether musicians also play for other groups with different needs does not matter, as long as they do not bring inappropriate habits to a Cotswold side, which they often do.

Stage 2 of musicianship starts when the instrument player can stand up and play the melodies with the proper repeats, but is still not good to dance to, because the rhythmic structure provided does not closely fit to the practiced movements of the performers. The dancers have a greater collective experience than the musician and can feel what they need, although they are seldom able to explain it to the player. However there cannot be good dancing without good music, at least not on a regular basis. Unfortunately the dancers will eventually adjust to what is provided and this usually brings the level of performance down. That then loses the appeal of the morris to some members of the club and they give up or move on.

The proper task of the Cotswold Morris Musician is to fit to the movements of the dance, not vice versa, if the dancing is to be natural and not to appear constrained. The musician plays to the dancers, not the dancers to follow the musician. This is self evident in corner dances and jigs with slow capers. The arrogant musician who knows "better" and insists on how things will be played without regard to the dance does a disservice. The musician has a responsibility to the dancers, it is not the easy option. It is perhaps little to ask that a musician learns to play by ear some 12 to 20 short tunes in a manner such that they fit the dances. For a typical one this is a basic pattern of only 32 different beats (2 x 8 bars repeated), and the total active repertoire is probably only about 500 beats (16 dances).

The Dance

Gravity is asymmetric, thus it takes the dancer longer to rise up than it takes to fall, and the natural dance rhythm is "broken" (in 4/4) and has a "lilt" (in 6/8). Playing evenly, as melodies are often written down, is lifeless, the constraint on the dancers' movements removes contrasts and stresses, often reduces dancing to mere running. Having dance "by the yard" is boring. But "even" playing can be used for effect in short stretches where appropriate to the dance. There are sections in some dances where it is important. Jumps and Capers take longer, if they are to appear to be higher, they require more effort than normal "stepping", and the additional height requires the note to be stretched. This is obvious from Newton's Laws of Motion. Making the effort the same throughout, thus having apogee always at the same height, removes the point of the changing steps. The underlying driving pulse is essential but does not override.

The speed of the morris is on the slow side because of the large physical movements, but not to be so slow just to reduce the effort involved. In general it is always a little slower than the musician feels comfortable with, if they have been playing for other idioms, or by themselves, and they have to work at making it sound rhythmical and exciting. It is a skill that has to be developed. The musician must remember that they are putting in rather little physical effort

compared to the dancers, so have to "hang back". The dancers need to be given "air" for full expression and not be rushed. Note that bigger people usually do not jump so high, so a "larger" set will dance a little faster!

Dancers should make large movements, and be aware that in copying others the natural tendency is to reduce the size of an action, hence the value of occasionally using a practice mirror or an equivalent. The dancers must feel comfortable, but the dancing must neither be too weak nor too stressful, or it loses the audience interest. The morris has a jokey reputation because it so often deserved it.

The Idiom

Hornpipes and other Country Dance rhythms have the objective of giving personal pleasure to the dancers by imposing constraints within which they are to move. Here the band leads the dancers. Country Dancers enjoy unfamiliarity, either from "new" dances or by meeting new tunes. The speed is for "foot-tapping" excitement, but is not too demanding on the dancers who move smoothly. By comparison playing for singing is much slower, it lets the singer get the full value of a brief performance. Ideally an accompaniment has to fit or enhance the rhythm of the words as intended by the writer. It may be noticed that traditional carols do tend to be very dancable, whereas Victorian church carols do not.

Jigs (in 6/8) are played slower than hornpipes, because dancers achieve more height to its broken rhythm. True polkas and marches are special rhythms which are not properly Cotswold Morris because they constrain in the wrong way, and the use of such melodies requires the tunes to be played in a more Cotswold Morris manner. How much better Bampton dances are when the melody is played in a more jiggy fashion.

The stress in the classic Cotswold dances is on the "strong" beats, when the major effort to push the body up starts. Not many tunes outside of the morris are suitable, as anyone who has tried to find more modern material will have noticed. However "single-step" traditions such as Bampton, which have been performed through the 20th century, do have an "off-beat" emphasis. The ability to put more effort into a hop also occurs in the hop of the double step. The last beat of the bar is stretched, this gives some of the excitement found in of the polka rhythm. Note that polkas are properly played as a series of two bar phrases, because in the original form this represented a complete body rotation in the couple social dance.

The hop is different from a step, it emphasises the off beat, whether in a polka, schottische or hornpipe. Having a left or right foot in-the-air-lead also has an effect, as most dancers start by pushing off with their stronger right foot to land on their left foot, which is why soldiers and the morris traditionally had a left foot lead. Those morris traditions which are now danced off the other foot, are due to mistakes by collectors. Unfortunately the convention is to refer to the foot in the air, which is only waved around, instead of the supporting foot which actually does all the work.

The strength of a step and its direction of movement determines the precise timing. Also important is whether the emphasis is on an "up" or "down" body movement. It is found that during a warm up exercise period the playing has to reflect the strength, and the time the movement takes, which depends on its direction. Backsteps are different because there is not a strong push up on the main beat, but a strong sink on the off beat. Because of the changes in direction and the need therefore to decelerate and accelerate, which take effort and time, dances tend to be in two bar sections.

Musical stress is achieved by being staccato, not by volume or broadening notes. Every step is subtly different, although the music, being two dimensional (timing and stress), cannot always distinguish. Stopping and starting travelling or changing the direction, as at the halfway and end of half-figures, requires a little longer to accelerate into motion and these notes need to be stretched. The most noticeable time is the moving off from the bars of stationary chorus when dancers were upright and have to tilt into the direction of off before they can move, or even just off from a vertical jump. They have to start falling over to move, so as to get their centre of gravity outside of their support. Not recognising this encourages dancers to speed up stick tapping to gain the necessary time. Stick choruses should not be rushed through nor rushed out. Dancers must learn to make larger movements to fill in the time.

Boxes have to play from the bellows for punch. The morris needs sharp edges to the front of notes, what is called "attack", easy for most other instruments.

Groups

The playing for morris at festivals is poor, just when sides might be expected to be making the best impression. Why doesn't it matter to them? Do the clubs/squires/foremen know what is wanted? Why do they tolerate vast assemblies of instruments, many of limited experience, that blur the rhythms and phrasing. A band, of necessity, must have a leader, who should be listened to and followed while playing. Leaders also should listen to the rest and are properly concerned about the balance of the sound. Making the lead musician play to dominate also spoils the result and draws attention from the dance to the sound. Playing in a band is cooperative, not competitive.

The traditional 19th century morris musicians each had their own individual melody line for the common tunes, partly to enable them to provide what was needed for the particular group for which they were playing. Then as now no two sets were exactly the same. There was no tradition of massed playing, and it first appeared hesitantly at Ring Meetings for massed dances only. Massed playing requires the musicians to play much more stacatto, so as not to extend overall the resultant notes that the dancers and audience hear, or to blur the pulse of the music. Individuals do not have to play so that they can hear themselves clearly around what the others do, but they have to blend.

Traditions

Each "tradition" is different. Many teams run the styles together to produce an overall house style.

There is a significant difference between playing for spring capers and plain capers because the emphasis in the movements are not the same. Spring capers have a drive off the first push and the music suspends until the dancers land, plain capers have an off beat as the free leg kicks.

Each dance and its tune has its own features that have to be learnt.

It should be remembered that all morris dancers and musicians have a responsibility to the morris past, present and future.