

## Underpinning: accompanying English Country Dance teaching

Liz Snowdon, April 2007

Underpinning is the art of playing along with the teaching of an English Country Dance. When it is done well, underpinning adds a second voice to the teaching, introducing the tune, the mood and the tempo of the dance. Poorly done, it pulls the caller into teaching faster than he/she desires and confuses the dancers.

In English dance there is a saying: “The music will tell you.” If we don’t remember how the dance goes, just play the music and the dancers will start doing the correct moves. The music is so carefully paired with the movements in most English dances that the musical phrase almost screams the directions to the dancer. Can’t remember the name of a tune? Listen to the music and while the movements come to you so will the dance name. Because the tune and the movements in the dance are so closely paired, underpinning has to be carefully done if done at all.

If you would like to provide underpinning for the teaching of English dance, keep in mind several things:

- Check in with the caller to see if he/she would like to have it done. Some callers like to provide their own underpinning by humming along with their teaching.
- Pick one band member to do the underpinning for a dance. Two players are usually not successful.
- Know how the dance goes. Playing along with the teaching requires that you know if the little section being taught is a two, four or eight-bar phrase. If you don’t know, it is better to stop.
- Try to play the underpinning at the actual tempo of the dance to be done.
- Be at one with the caller. Have a concentrated awareness of the caller’s rate of speed. Callers pace their teaching in different ways. Some like to blast through the directions; some like to have pauses after the tiniest bit of teaching. The pace of the teaching will depend on the skill level of the group that evening. NEVER PUSH THE TEACHING. If you are playing into the next phrase, it forces dancers and caller into the next direction. It can be very frustrating for the caller. If the caller breathes, you should breathe. If the caller pauses to emphasize or think, you should pause. If the caller slows their speaking, look for a stopping point.
- Concentration. To be at one with the caller’s teaching requires no distractions for the musician doing the underpinning. You cannot concentrate enough to be at one with the caller if your band is chatting, tuning or deciding arrangements.
- STOP! When the caller signals, you should stop. If a section of the dance is too confusing or filled with “meanwhile” figures, stop. If you lose track of where you are in the dance, stop. Underpinning is a helpful tool, but it is much better not to have it than to have it done incorrectly. When underpinning is about to become a distraction to the teaching, stop.
- Avoid playing parts of the tune not being taught at the moment. If someone in the band plays a bit of the tune to practice a tricky section while the dance is being taught, the dancers hear it like a second caller yelling out a second set of directions. Remember: “The music will tell you.” Practice silently or before the teaching begins.