

The MC's Duties

This list comes from my having been MC at a variety of types of events, and having forgotten at least one of the following suggestions each time. It spans weddings, ballroom dances and other one-night stands, and Scottish and English country dance parties. Obviously, not all suggestions apply in every situation.

This tries to cover all the things that might fall into your lap. If you are lucky, many of them will have been assigned to the event organizers or the bandleader, etc. To do a really thorough job, though, you might want to check each of these, to verify who owns it. These items are in no particular order. I welcome additions and corrections, and suggestions for how to organize them. Thanks to Gene Bissell, Dottie Carr, Lyle Ramshaw and Jo Hamilton for their help.

Direct the Grand March. If there is a Marshall, this is his job. If it is a masked ball, tell people when to remove their masks (wait long enough to provide some mystery, but not so long that people suffocate).

Celebrate the occasion—remind people why they're there (if you give any sort of background, be sure of your facts). Make the dancers feel welcome, show them your love and enthusiasm. This is done largely by being comfortable yourself, and then keeping your voice pleasant and your pace unhurried. Set an example of dress and manners.

Choose tempi (the bandleader may own this).

At SCD events we often play the first 8 bars of the tune before forming sets. This has three effects:

- It lets the dancers know that it is now OK to form sets (and scolds the people who have already formed sets).
- It sets the tune in their minds, to reinforce which dance this is, and to provide a framework into which the briefing will fit.
- It interrupts the band in the midst of preparing for the next dance. Or, if they were already prepared and were taking a breather, it means they don't get one.

Be mindful of all these effects when deciding whether to ask for 8 bars—the trade-offs suggest that it's less appropriate for less formal events. An alternative is to let people form sets, and while they are doing that, have just one instrument play the melody (whatever amount the musician thinks appropriate). This is commonly done at ECD events, and seems to capture much of the good and little of the bad.

Decide when the dancers are ready and tell the bandleader. You can ask for more dancers as necessary, move sets, etc. At Scottish dances it is quite permissible to ask dancers to dance in 3- or 5-couple sets, but be merciful: long, fast dances in which everyone dances

all the time are taxing in 3-couple sets. In 5-couple sets, the 4th and 5th couples should dance once and to the bottom (or once and stay in 2nd place); in 3-couple sets, remind the dancers that they can wait out a round or two if they wish. If a dance requires a fixed number of couples you may have to apologize to a short set and ask them to sit down. If that dance is encored, you might ask people to volunteer to give up their places (actually, you can ask for this before any encore). All this implies that you need to know the structure of every dance on the program.

Talk the dances through (this may be someone else's job—if so, introduce that person).

A party is not the time to teach ballroom manners, but you can and should nag people pleasantly about changing partners, leaving the floor between dances, etc.

Declare the start and end of breaks. The event organizers may decide where the breaks will be and how long, or they may leave this up to you. Be sure the band knows, and round them up at the end of each break. It's nice to let the dancers know how long the breaks will be.

Pace the evening: stick to the schedule, (you may be responsible for making the schedule, too—ask the event chair), choose the space between dances, length of breaks, cut or pad the program as needed, etc. You can shorten a 2-couple strathspey by dancing in 3-couple sets (6 times through), but you should arrange this possibility with the band and the organizers beforehand. One guideline is 11 minutes per dance (this shortens the space around strathspeys, which seems to work fine). I measured the time to run the 1991 Valentine's (SCD) Ball at 12.5 minutes per 8x32 quick-time dance, plus breaks (I assumed that strathspeys ran twice as long, that a 4x encore was half a dance, etc.). English dances have much more variety, and pacing them is beyond the scope of this note. However, be aware that you decide how long the longways dances will run. If you need to keep a triple-minor dance brief and the hall won't permit short sets, you can divide them in the middle. Sets should be no shorter than six couples.

Decide quickly—before the sets disperse—whether to encore a dance. This depends on the applause (its volume, and the speed with which it dies down), the length of the dance (think twice before encoring a 48-bar reel early in the evening), and the tightness of your schedule. Be conservative: although people get unhappy if they want an encore and don't get one, it's much worse if they don't want an encore and do get one. Also, it's easier to add an extra late in the evening than to cut a dance. Think three or four times before encoring two dances in a row. The bandleader may think that deciding about encores is his/her prerogative—ask. Decide also how many times to play an encore (3, 4, 6, times, etc. Lyle Ramshaw has some interesting ideas in the *Reel & Strathspey*, Vol 24, Number 5). If the dance begins with two chords, you probably want the encore to begin with only one chord. If you're using recorded music, you're stuck with 2 chords, and you'll need to tell the dancers (don't send them back; just let them know that they'll be getting 2 chords).

If there will be something unusual about the forming of sets (threesomes, ladies choice, etc.) let the dancers know well beforehand. On the printed program is a great place, or

just as the previous dance is breaking up. If you wait until you would normally ask people to take partners, some will have already and they'll be annoyed. You're right and they're wrong, but annoying them does not improve the spirit of the evening.

Be the liaison between everyone else and the band (tempi, when to start, specials like "Happy Birthday," etc.), and the hall staff (temperature, lights, bathrooms, ...). You may also decide on your own that the floor is too slippery, the room too warm, etc., and tell the appropriate people. Pamper the band: refreshments when they arrive and during breaks; a place to change; see that the PA works; be sure they have enough chairs. All these jobs may belong to someone else.

Make verbal thank-you's and other announcements (written thank-you's, including one to the MC, are the responsibility of the event organizer). At a formal event, all announcements should go through you. At an informal one you can let people make their own announcements. In either case, you should decide when in the evening to do each one. Usually thank-you's happen early in the last set, and the band is thanked late in the last set. Usually you introduce the bandleader, who introduces the band. You need to find out beforehand what announcements are to be made, who needs to be thanked and how their names are pronounced. Have the names written down, large enough so you can read them easily, in the order in which you thank people. It's surprisingly hard to remember things when you're at the microphone. If other people are making announcements, let them know when you want them. Thank the event chairman. Someone should thank you, but don't be surprised or disappointed if that doesn't happen. Sometimes it means you have done a good job. The MC is rarely paid.

If there is a power failure, have people remain calm and stay where they are. If there is an evacuation procedure, the authorities will take care of it. If not, you can ask someone to lead singing until it comes back. I don't know how to help a large crowd find their way out in the dark.

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