

San Francisco Branch Teachers' Committee

Guidelines for Ball and Party Programs

Revised and Approved September 20, 2025

These guidelines are offered to assist teachers, musicians, and event committees in creating programs for balls and other types of Scottish Country Dance events. The intent is to produce programs that are balanced, enjoyable, and exciting.

At the direction of the Teachers' Committee at its meeting on September 16, 2000, the former version of this document, dated January 4, 2001, was submitted by a subcommittee composed of Coletta Busse, Bruce Herbold, Andy Imbrie, Paula Jacobson, Susie Langdon Kass, and Alan Twhigg.

This new revision was completed by Sara Gratiot, Bruce Herbold, and Kathy Jorgensen. Comments and suggestions from Armin Busse, Juliet Davoren, Linda Henderson, Don MacQueen, Trina Merriman, David Newitt, Alan Twhigg, and Tom Ward were incorporated. The revised document includes Andy Imbrie's revised Dance Program Selection from the Musician's Point of View dated January 16, 2025.

Part of the mission of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society is to preserve historical dances, of which the society has published more than 200. However, since the 1950s, thousands of new dances in Scottish style have been published. Therefore, our dance programs should draw from both historical and modern sources.

This discussion has four sections:

- General Program Guidelines
- SF Branch Annual Events
- Monthly Party Programs
- Dance Program Selection from the Musician's Point of View (by Andy Imbrie)

General Program Guidelines

Committees

The Teachers' Committee, usually at its January meeting, selects a Monthly Party Program Continuity Person and a Ball Program Continuity Person, who are responsible for ensuring that these guidelines are followed. At the January meeting, the Teachers' Committee also forms Programming Subcommittees. The Monthly Party program committees each develop programs for two months: October & November, December & January, March & April, and May & June. The Valentine's Ball, Jean Patrick Memorial Dance, and the Kim McGarrity Memorial Ball each have their own committee.

For Monthly Party programs, each subcommittee consists of the Monthly Party Program Continuity Person plus two other teachers. The Monthly Party Program Continuity Person handles the meeting logistics, communicates the results to the editor of the Reel and Strathspeyer (R&S), and posts the programs onto the Branch website. The R&S is a quarterly publication published on or about the first of January, April, July, and October. The October, November, and December Monthly Party programs are due to the editor by September 1. The January and March programs are due by December 1, and the April, May, and June programs are due by March 1.

For balls and other special events, the subcommittee consists of two teachers and the Ball Program Continuity Person. Two additional participants should be invited to the initial meeting: a musician (either a representative of the band scheduled to play for the event or the current Branch Music Coordinator or delegate) and a representative from the event organizing committee. The Ball Program Continuity Person is responsible for arranging meeting(s) and communicating inputs and results.

Meetings should be scheduled with enough lead time so all the participants can attend. Meetings in person allow easy discussion and the ability to walk through dances, but Zoom meetings have also been successful. On no account should a program for a special event be published without approval from both a musicians' representative and the event organizing committee.

If possible, schedule the program meeting with enough lead time to create the program, put it aside for a couple of days, and then review it before publication. A fresh look can spot hidden difficulties, resolve knotty dilemmas, etc.

Program Content

Every dance program should include the following:

- Dances that are known to the committee members. At least one member should have actually danced a proposed dance. If a dance is unfamiliar to most, take a break from the meeting and dance or walk it through, with ghosts if necessary.
- A variety of different formations and steps which are balanced throughout the program. Repeated or similar formations should be separated, with other dances in between, as should dances with a lot of slip step or pas de basque.
- Representative formations such as Allemande, some kind of Chain formation, Hands across, Hands round, Lead down the middle and up, Pousette in both quick time and strathspey, Reel of three, Reel of four, Rights and lefts, Set to and turn corners, Set to corners and partner, and Turn corners and partner.
- Mostly 8×32 dances with a 2-couple or 3-couple progression. Use variety as a spice. Some variants might include one or two long dances; at most three set dances using sets of three, four, or five couples; at most one medley, one square, one round-the-room or up-and-down-the-hall dance; one dance with highland steps. No more than two or three of these variants should appear on any program.
- Dances at varying levels of difficulty B, BI, I, IA, A (see below) and strenuousness, as appropriate to the intended audience. Again, balance the levels so that basic and advanced dances are

sprinkled throughout the evening. Bear in mind dances that are physically and mentally stimulating and those that emphasize teamwork. A typical 15-dance program might be expected to have a mix of 5 basic, 7 intermediate, and 3 advanced dances.

- Balance of jigs, reels, and strathspeys. It is better to have more reels than jigs. A 15-dance program typically has 6 strathspeys, 5 reels, and 4 jigs. Vary the musical styles (more on this topic under Dance Program Selection from the Musician's Point of View).
- Two-thirds of the program from RSCDS published dances. (Theme programs may be an exception to this rule.)
- The San Francisco Branch maintains a list of Core dances, identified in a column on the San Francisco dance database. See section on page 8, A Quick Guide to the San Francisco Branch Dance Database. These dances contain a good blend of historical dances and more modern dances, all with demonstrated popularity over time. They include classic dances that represent the steps and formations every dancer needs. The Core dances provide good teaching tools for all the common formations, and they are dances that a dancer is likely to encounter on programs anywhere in the world. In addition, the list attempts to mirror the percentages of J, S, R and B, I, A dances on typical San Francisco Branch programs. Maintaining this substantial group of dances generally results in no dance returning to monthly party programs more often than every three to five years.

Levels of difficulty of dances

Difficulty of dances is a subjective judgment; consideration should be given to individual formations, transitions between them, and the overall structure of the dance. All dances done in the San Francisco Branch since 1994 are listed in the San Francisco Repertoire database, and most have a level of difficulty identified. These are **Basic**, **Basic Intermediate**, **Intermediate**, **Intermediate Advanced**, and **Advanced**.

Basic dances contain only basic formations done in the normal way, such as Advance and retire, Allemande, Arches, Back to back, Figure of eight, Grand chain, Hands across, Hands round, Ladies' and Men's chain, Lead down the middle and up, Petronella turn, Poussette (in reel and jig time), Promenade, Reels of three, Reels of four, Rights and lefts for two couples, Setting in lines, Set to and turn corners, Turns, and Turn corners and partner.

Intermediate dances may contain variants of basic formations or unusual transitions between basic formations. They may contain intermediate formations done in the normal way, such as Corners pass and turn, Double figures of eight, Half double figures of eight, Double triangles, Espagnole, Knot, Petronella in tandem, Poussette (in strathspey time), Reel of three in tandem, (including with a change in lead), Rights and lefts for three couples, Rondel, Set and link, Set and rotate, Set to corners and partner, and Underarm turns that are unusual or difficult to perform.

Advanced dances may contain variants of intermediate formations or unusual transitions between formations. They may contain advanced formations such as Bourrel, Crown triangles, Half rights and lefts on the diagonal, La Baratte, Petronella set and link, Rose Progression, Schiehallion reels, Set and cast away (Best Set in the Hall formation), Spurtle, Tourbillon, and Tournée. Some, such as Spiral, Spoke, and Targe, are considered Advanced largely because they appear infrequently and will need to be taught each time they appear.

When a long sequence of movements not defined as a formation is part of a dance, it may be helpful to consider which level the entire sequence would fit into if labeled as a formation.

A dance that has considerable variation in entry, exit, or orientation could move up, for example, from B to BI or from I to IA. Formations or movements that appear only rarely could also move a dance up in level of difficulty because the formation will have to be newly taught each time it does appear. A significant number of non-standard elements could make an Intermediate dance Advanced.

Choice and Sequencing of Dances

Most SF Branch programs consist of between 15 and 18 dances divided into three approximately equal sets by intermissions. Each committee should establish at the outset of the meeting how many dances are to be on the program, if there is any question.

When making this decision, bear these factors in mind:

- Conditions that might affect participants' energy level, such as accompanying workshops
- Likely number of encores
- If the hall is known, any factors such as a curfew hour that might affect program length, a hard floor that doesn't take kindly to heavy pas de basque that might affect the choice of dances, or an odd shape that won't permit round-the-room dances
- Grand marches, waltzes, and other couples' dances should not be included in the total that makes up the "dance program" but should factor into the time estimate if they are to be part of the evening.
- If the program cannot be divided equally into three sets, make the last set shorter. Even if the total is divisible by three, a shorter last set might be preferable, depending on other factors; for example, an 18-dance program might be divided into 6-7-5 to accommodate an extra strathspey in the second set and a shortened last set.
- Choose and order the dances to build the energy level and excitement in a series of peaks through the evening.
- Each set should vary the musical type, for example JSJSR or JRSJSR.
- Set dances and 2-couple dances should usually be limited to no more than three on a 15-dance program, possibly more on a longer program. Set dances run the risk of excluding too many people when there are not enough dancers for a full set. Quick time 2-couple dances are often more strenuous and are danced three times by each lead couple. Set dance strathspeys come in two styles: some, such as Culla Bay, are very similar from each position; others, such as MacDonald of the Isles, are quite different from each position and are more likely to be encored. If an encore is likely, the band may choose to play it twice through from the outset. These are factors to consider in placing set dances and 2-couple dances on a program.

- The first dance in each set should be light in weight, from both a dancing and musical perspective: less strenuous/complex, mostly skip change of step, and definitely quick time: a jig or possibly a quarter-note (single) reel. The first dance of the evening, in particular, should exemplify these characteristics: preferably an easy 8×32 jig with a 3-couple progression and minimal pas de basque or slip step. Avoid starting the evening with a round-the-room dance, since they are quite strenuous, although starting a later set with one is fine.
- Preferably the first strathspey of the evening should have a strong traditional tune. Avoid putting 2-couple strathspeys in the last set. For programming purposes, medleys take the place of strathspeys.
- The middle of each set, and particularly the midpoint of the evening, can be a focal point for a featured dance. This could be a long or complex dance, a locally composed dance, or a dance reflecting the theme for the evening.
- The last set can be a good placement for a short dance, such as a 3-couple set strathspey or something danced once through without a progression. Bear in mind that these dances often get encored. A 3×32 strathspey will still be a bit shorter than average if dancers encore it to 6×32, but a 4×32 reel will be just as long as one that started out 8×32, and most 4×32 dances are more strenuous than average.
- Since dancers may be tiring both physically and mentally by the end of the program, especially demanding dances should be avoided in the last set, except for an exciting final dance.
- The last dance of each set, and particularly the final dance of the evening, should be a driving reel with exciting music. The final dance should be an 8×32 reel with a 3-couple progression, accessible to most or all participants. To avoid a letdown for any dancers, the final dance should provide a significant amount of dancing for the supporting couples. The highly inclusive circle (hands round) can be a good choice for ending a final dance.

SF Branch Annual Events

The San Francisco Branch currently holds three special events on an annual basis: The Jean Patrick Memorial Dance, The Kim McGarrity Memorial Ball at Asilomar, and The Valentine's Ball. Each of these events has its own considerations from a programming point of view, discussed in the sections that follow.

First, here are some points that pertain to all special-event programs as opposed to monthly parties and other dances. (While the Jean Patrick Memorial Dance is not a formal ball in terms of dress and other details, it is similar to the two balls from a programming point of view.)

- Consult the event organizing committee for any special themes, anniversaries, etc. that should be reflected in the dances chosen for the program.

- Consult a band representative, if the band has been chosen, for any particular dances they recommend (or recommend against). Sometimes a band has a hot arrangement they would very much like to play.
- Think about the likely participants—will there be a lot of out-of-towners, beginners, or casual dancers who don't attend classes very often? Will there be reviews or practices dedicated to this program beforehand?

Jean Patrick Memorial Dance

This dance coincides with the Pleasanton Highland Games and kicks off the fall dance season of classes. Its program should align to the following special criteria:

- Many dancers and dance classes take the summer off, so participants may be rusty. There is typically greater attendance by visitors and occasional dancers than at other Branch events. Therefore, this program should not introduce new or unusual dances. Most dances should be old favorites or have appeared on the previous year's programs.
- A large number of Sacramento dancers usually attend, and Jean Patrick founded the Sacramento Branch. Check with local teachers to see what they've had on programs during the previous year.
- Jean Patrick herself loved strong strathspeys. A particular favorite reel of hers was None So Pretty.
- Many people have been performing at the Games during the day or will be doing so the next day; some haven't been dancing regularly during the summer months. It also can be quite warm Labor Day weekend. These factors speak to making the program a bit less strenuous than usual.
- New beginners aren't likely to dance at this event, so limit the extremely simple dances that would cater to them.

Kim McGarrity Memorial Ball

This ball accompanies the Branch dance weekend; all participants attend the full weekend and reside on site. Its special criteria are as follows:

- The program is published well in advance; there is lots of time for participants to prepare, and there are dedicated practices before the weekend as well as afternoon ball review classes during the weekend. All participants have been dancing for at least a year. These factors suggest a bit more freedom in including some complexity and an unusual dance or two.
- A lot of out-of-towners attend, so if unusual or local dances are on the program, make sure the descriptions are clear and available.
- Hall space is constrained, so avoid dances that need a lot of room or travel outside the set, particularly in the first two-thirds of the evening.

- It may be wise to limit encores, since people have been dancing all weekend and may have reduced stamina. Whereas in the past we were not limited to an ending time, we now are held to a strict time to be cleaned up and out of the hall. This may also require judicious use of encores.
- Include some basic dances, but not the most basic, simple dances that cater to novice dancers who've attended classes for only a few months.
- Consult with musicians about Kim's original tunes or arrangements they might wish to include.

Valentine's Ball

This is a "free-standing" ball (not accompanied by any other event). Most attendees are local dancers, but some don't attend classes regularly. The following criteria apply:

- This is likely the most elegant event on the Branch calendar. Most people associate strathspeys with elegance; consider including an extra one by having a seven-dance set. If including 2-couple strathspeys, think about whether they show well if danced eight times through, so the whole hall is moving together.
- Physically challenging dances may conflict with formal attire and the feeling of elegance.
- Depending on the facility used for this event, space may or may not be limited.
- Since this may be the first formal event attended by new dancers, one-third of the program should be accessible to them, including the first and last dances of the evening.

Monthly Party Programs

Monthly Parties in the SF Branch are a special case because there are several specific rules governing dance selection on these programs. Try to adhere to the general guidelines given in the first section when creating Monthly Party programs, but at times it will be necessary to compromise and bend those rules a bit. While the committees should endeavor to make these programs social and enjoyable, they also serve as part of the teaching syllabus of the Branch.

Structure and Requirements

A Monthly Party program consists of 15 dances, arranged in three sets of five each. Generally, each set consists of the pattern QSQSQ, where Q is quick time (reel or jig) and S is strathspey. It is preferable to start with jigs, finish with reels, and maintain an overall balance. Programs have a total of 6 strathspeys, 5 reels, and 4 jigs. Since each monthly program will have five new dances, two should be strathspeys and three should be quick time.

The aim is to have five basic-level dances, three advanced, and seven intermediate. The three advanced dances should each be in separate sets, and the five basic dances should be similarly dispersed throughout the evening so that beginners do not get left out for more than two dances.

Monthly Party programs should draw on the Core Repertoire for roughly half of the dances on the program. If half of the dances on a Monthly Party are drawn from the Core Repertoire, all Core Repertoire dances will be repeated about every five years. More popular dances will usually be done more often, but no dance should be repeated on Monthly Parties sooner than three years after its last appearance.

Monthly Party programs maintain continuity by cycling the content from month to month so that dances appear for three consecutive months. Thus, each month, a program will have five new dances, five that have appeared once before, and five that have appeared on the previous two parties. The Monthly Party Program Continuity Person is responsible for maintaining this formula by identifying which five dances rotate off the program each month, what levels of dances are leaving, and which standard formations have departed with them.

Monthly Party programs should not anticipate novel or special dances that are going to be on the Asilomar or Valentine's programs, but those Ball programs provide excellent fodder for the subsequent monthly parties.

Monthly Party programs – Goals at a glance – for a 15-dance program

4 jigs, 5 reels, 6 strathspeys

5 basic, 7 intermediate, 3 advanced

1/3 of the dances (5) new to the rotation

1/2 of the dances (7 or 8) from the Core Repertoire

2/3 of the dances (10) from RSCDS sources

A Quick Guide to the San Francisco Branch Dance Database

The Core column indicates dances that are part of the current Core Repertoire.

Dances from RSCDS publications can be determined from the Source column.

The History column is justified on the right to make recent appearances visible. To see the entire history, extend the width of the History column.

The Level column reflects the consensus of a review by Branch teachers. As each dance is reviewed, it is shown in blue.

Dance Program Selection from the Musician's Point of View

-- By Andy Imbrie, revised 1-16-2025

It has been my experience, as both a dancer and a musician, that the type and order of dances on a program can make a significant difference in the overall enjoyment and excitement level of a dance evening. Of course, there are many factors to be considered when planning a dance program, including program length, difficulty, variety of formations, familiarity, and so on. I would suggest that the evening's music is no less important a consideration and that the music for each dance should play an important role in the selection and placement of dances on a program.

Based on this premise, I have made a list of recommendations which program devisors may wish to consider when planning a dance evening. However, before providing these recommendations, a few definitions are required.

Most dances have a suggested or signature tune that goes with the dance. Many bands will use this tune for the first (and often last) rounds of the dance and choose other similar tunes to play as alternates: this is called an "arrangement" for the dance.

Most dances can be categorized by their signature tunes as follows:

1. "Driving Reels": musically exciting reels with lots of notes (e.g., Mrs MacLeod, The Deil among the Tailors, The Montgomeries' Rant)
2. "Quarter-Note Reels": (e.g., Bratach Bana, Let's Have a Ceilidh, The Peat Fire Flame, The Irish Rover)
3. "Moderate Reels": neither driving nor quarter-note reels (e.g., Corn Rigs, Red House)
4. "Hornpipes": are played just like reels, can fall within any of the three categories above, and have a characteristic flow and cadence. (Note that outside of the SCD world, hornpipes are played differently.)
5. "Strong Strathspeys": strong, driving strathspeys (e.g., Monymusk, John McAlpin, The Sauchie Haugh, Dalkeith's Strathspey)
6. "Lyrical Strathspeys": strathspeys derived from song tunes or slow airs (e.g., Miss Gibson's Strathspey, Seann Triubhas Willichan, The Saint John River)
7. "Highland Strathspeys": Highland dance or Cape Breton style; not suitable for most SCD unless there are Highland steps (e.g., The Glasgow Highlanders)
8. "Moderate Strathspeys": (e.g., Miss Milligan's Strathspey)

Jigs can also be divided into categories, but this is less important for the purposes of program planning.

So, armed with these definitions, the following are some suggested guidelines for considering music in program planning:

1. Most importantly, consult with the band on the program; the band leader (or a delegate) should participate in the planning process if at all possible.
 2. In the San Francisco Branch of the RSCDS, the breaks in the program are typically organized so that there are no more than 7 dances in a set (e.g., 10–14 dances: 2 sets, 1 break; 15–20 dances: 3 sets, 2 breaks). A typical 15-dance program would have 5 dances in each set (5-5-5); often an 18-dance program is organized 6-7-5 (but 6 in each set is also done). [Note that other areas often have longer sets with only one (presumably longer) break in the middle.]
 3. End each set with a “Driving Reel”; if possible, these should be the band’s favorite show-stopping arrangements! Do not end sets with strathspeys. It is sometimes acceptable to end a set with a jig, but this is usually a musical letdown, and I would advise against it. In my opinion, the very last dance of the evening **must** be a driving, show-stopping reel.
 4. Start the first set with a jig (this is always easier for the musicians to warm up with and usually easier for the dancers as well).
 5. Start the second and third sets with a jig if possible. It is acceptable to start the second or third set with a reel (preferably a quarter-note reel), but usually not both. Do not start sets with a strathspey.
 6. The entire program should be balanced in terms of number of jigs, reels, and strathspeys; try to have roughly one-third of the program for each. Do not have more jigs than reels on a program; however, it is acceptable (even encouraged) to have more strathspeys than reels or jigs. For example, a typical 15-dance program might contain 5 reels, 4 jigs, and 6 strathspeys with this arrangement: first set: J,S,J,S,R; second set: J,S,R,S,R; third set: J,S,R,S,R.
 7. Do not place two jigs, strathspeys, or reels together unless separated by one of the breaks.
 8. Limit “Quarter-Note Reels” on any program to one, or two at the most (these reels tend to be less exciting).
 9. Limit “Hornpipes” to one, or two at the most (variety is important).
 10. Try to have one “Lyrical Strathspey” on the program, but no more than two (a lyrical strathspey is a wonderful addition to a program but is not musically a strathspey and does not drive the dance like a strathspey).
 11. If there are uneven numbers of dances in each set, the last set should be shortest. Similarly, if there are shorter dances on the program (e.g., 3× through or 4× through dances), they work best nearer the end of the evening. Longer dances (e.g., 8×40 or 8×48) work best earlier in the evening.
- I hope this set of guidelines will prove useful to dance program devisors. Of course, nothing is set in stone, but I have found by long experience that if these guidelines are followed, the musical experience of the evening is significantly enhanced.