

Singing Call Adaptation

by Tim Marriner

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Often times a caller will practice a singing call by mimicking what is being presented by the recording artist. Cue sheets often provide the calls and the lyrics. While this is an effective way to learn the tune, it might not be the best way to present the song to live dancers.

A recording artist tries to capture the essence of the original tune while featuring their best vocal performance. They try to use the phrasing of the music to fit in both the lyrics and the calls. Sometimes this can be difficult. That is often why many recording artist default to the same old tried and true sequences. They want the caller using the song to feel comfortable calling their tune, much like wearing an old pair of shoes. As a result, many singing calls being presented use the same routine figures. In the square dance recording industry many recording artist feel the presenting caller should use their own material anyway, so why bother providing much variety; after all, if the material presented on the vocal is too difficult for the average dancer, the average caller might not purchase the tune. That is why I suggest listening to the music first when deciding to purchase a new song, then the vocal only if necessary. Don't let the choreographic content sway you against the tune, luring you into thinking your group of dancers would never be able to dance that way. In reality, the material being presented provides you a suggested approach. There really is no such thing as a singing call that is Basic, Mainstream, Plus or Advanced when the material is interchangeable. Callers must learn how to adapt a singing calls choreographic content to achieve higher rates of dancer success.

Callers have been long taught to sing to the music but some have forgotten how to call to the dancers. Callers must be aware of how well the dancers are executing the material being presented. To do that, they must watch the floor; not a cue sheet or a computer screen. Cue sheets should be used as a reference, not a solid read. Watch the dancers on the floor. Do they look rushed or unable to keep up? Are they breaking down on a particular dance action that could be timed out better? Can anything be adjusted time wise or choreographically that will allow them to achieve success? Good callers know how to make minor adjustments on the fly to achieve a higher rate of dancer success. Sometimes it is as simple as leaving out a Dosado in a sequence. Other times, more drastic choreographic change is needed. So

many variables exist that factor a dancers' ability to achieve success on the dance floor. Watching is the first step in correcting the problem.

Most current singing calls are written with corner progressions that fit a 64 beat phrase usually repeated 7 times. Opener, Middle, and Closer sequences do not progress the partners but the Figures do. Most singing calls also offer a brief introduction and a closing tag. Some may offer extended tags. Most singing calls are all instrumentals but a few offer backup vocals or added harmony. Some singing calls utilize a key change or two to energize the dance floor. It is imperative for a caller to become completely familiar with the music before they try using it at a dance.

From time to time it does become necessary to change the offered material. A good sequence allows the dancers enough time to execute the commands, returning the anchored dancers to a home position, leading into the next sequence, without stopping. In my opinion, a stoppage of 4 or more beats is excessive. Newer dancers often need more reaction time and execution time, so this will vary.

There are many reasons one would need to adjust the offered sequence. The choreography offered might be utilizing a different Program of dance. The figured offered might be too difficult for the dancers present. The sequence offered does not comfortably fit the phrase of the music. The sequence offered might not time out properly due to the inability of a dancer. The conditions of the floor, room, or costuming might hinder proper dance time. Occasionally, a delivered sequence might not offer good body flow or might not work out all together. Often times a sequence is over used and needs to be altered to provide more variety. When teaching a certain call, it may need to be featured in order to enhance learning. Sometimes a caller is forced to modify the sequence due to a miss cue with the calls, needing to scramble to repair the mistake. Occasionally, a caller might want to offer something different to enhance a showmanship quality of the song. More often a change is needed just to keep the dancers moving in a more relaxed pattern. Whatever the reason, a caller needs to learn how to adjust a sequence on the fly and all the factors that offer greater success.

Unfortunately there are sequences that are regularly used that create a lot of dancer stoppage. For example, a common Opener used in many singing calls is: Sides Face Grand Square followed by Allemande Left & Weave,

then Swing & Promenade. When danced properly the Grand Square takes 32 beats of music to dance, returning the dancers back home. The Allemande Left and Weave, takes about 12 beats to perform leaving the dancers on the opposite side of the square. The Swing and Promenade takes up another 12 beats. Collectively the choreography content totals 56 beats of music, leaving the dancers standing at home at least 8 beats of music, 4 beats more if the next commands are “Hey now those heads...”. Stoppage is not dancing and should be held to a minimum. So, how could the sequence be adjusted for improvement? Try Promenading the Boys or Girls once around in the center instead of the Allemande Left and Weave, then Swing and Promenade and the sequence times out to 64 beats. Push checkers through the various singing call figures you use along with a current timing chart to determine if a sequence times out well or not.

Another item to be aware of when adjusting singing call sequences is the quadrant of the square. If imaginary lines were drawn between the corners of the square an “X” would be formed. The norm for numbering the couples in a square starting at the bottom of this “X” and working counter clockwise is 1, 2, 3, & 4. Couple 3 is in the North quadrant of the square. Couple 2 is in the East. Couple 1 is in the South and Couple 4 is in the West. This imaginary layout is what I refer to as the Square Grid. Applying this knowledge while analyzing a sequence is helpful especially where the partner progressions take place, usually in the form of a Swing. For example, in the sequence Heads Square Thru, Dosado, Swing Thru, Boys Run, Ferris Wheel, Double Pass Thru, Track Two, Swing & Promenade; the Corner Swing action takes place in the NE quadrant of the set providing for an 8 beat Promenade to return home. This too has the dancers standing at home for 8 beats. The fix for this is not as easy as in the prior example. Have all 4 Couples Promenade $\frac{1}{2}$, first, followed by a shorter equivalent for Square Thru such as Touch $\frac{1}{4}$, Center Boys Run, then eliminate the Dosado followed by the rest of the sequence. The resulting Swing will be in the normal SW quadrant of the square resulting in a full 16 beat Promenade home.

Occasionally the sequence provided does not flow well, phrase well, or time very well such as Heads Star Thru, Pass Thru, Star Thru, Pass Thru, Couples Hinge, Half Tag, All 8 Circulate, Boys Run, 8 Chain 5, Swing & Promenade. The fix for this is quite simple really; replace the whole thing!

By utilizing available timing charts one can replace calls or write new figures for singing calls. By adding up total the timing of calls used and tracking the positioning upon the imaginary square grid, improved sequences can be written. Sometimes singing call figures can be swapped with routines from other singing calls. Phrasing the figures and calls to fit the music melody is sometimes tricky. There really isn't a magical formula that accomplishes this task. Trial and error is usually the only way to determine what fits. Generally you should allow 48 beats of music for choreography and the remaining 16 beats to sing the song lyrics. If you choose to sight call these short sequences, a caller must be able to resolve to corners very quickly. I would not recommend this be done by a novice or the faint of heart. The more familiar you are with the music the more control you will have feeling the need to finish the sequence.

Another question asked is how often one should change a singing call figure. The answer to this question is as many times as necessary to provide better dancing. If a sequence really fits the music well and provides a good sense of dance, there might not be a need to change it at all; ever. Singing calls are not really meant to be choreographic challenges, otherwise you could just do another patten. Some recording artist offer suggested choreographic sequences as a means to provide callers workshop material for dancers. This may be fine to use after working the material prior to the singing call. Timing could still be an issue. Good judgment often is learned as a result of poor judgment. More often, you have probably puzzled the dancers enough. Singing calls can provide a better opportunity for a caller to show off their singing abilities and allows the dancers time to really enjoy smooth flowing figures that fit the metering and phrase of a great piece of music. It is the tune dancers sing along with and hum all the way home.

Keep a watchful eye on the dancers to ensure they are able to enjoy such pleasures, not standing still, broken down, unable to keep up. Memorize equivalents and modules or sight sequences that can replace or be inserted into a sequence, adjusting to the dancers abilities to provide the best possible dancing experience. With a little practice, you too can learn how to adapt sequences in singing calls, as necessary, to provide dancers greater enjoyment.