

RSCDS Teachers Newsletter – Winter 2022

Teaching at the Autumn Gathering 2022 by Kate Gentles

I was both delighted to be asked to teach on the Sunday morning at the Autumn Gathering and daunted by the prospect – probably in equal measure!

Overall approach

The first question was approximately how many people were there likely to be and what was the level. The advice I was given was that it was a large class, upwards of 50 people, and the level ranged from intermediate to very advanced. The other suggestion was that the Sunday morning class should be slightly less technique-y than the Saturday class.

The immediate thought was to do less familiar dances, possibly from the Imperial books, so I tested out some of the dances on my regular class. The other, early, idea was to teach the Highland Schottische pousette, as a formation that is not often done.

Choice of dances

In slight opposition to my plan, I was also asked to teach one or more of the “Dancing through the decades” that were the subject of the talk immediately preceding the class – the majority of which make it regularly onto programmes. So I chose the one dance that was less familiar to me, although no doubt frequently used by those who teach children: *The Old Man of Storr* from the children’s book. The challenge in an hour and a half is getting through more than two dances in sufficient detail, so I decided to use it as part of the warm-up.

With a sizeable class, it made sense to start with a warm-up that did not require organising dancers into sets, so I settled on individually walking to reel time, before doing some stretches and then moving on to walk, then gently dance through *The Old Man of Storr*.

I really dislike finishing with a strathspey, so of the two main dances I chose to teach, I wanted to do the strathspey first. For the Highland Schottische pousette, there were two possible dances: *The Trysting Place* and *Double Eighty*. In the end, I selected *The Trysting Place* from book 35 for a number of reasons: it is a two-couple dance and so there is time to teach it from both positions; it is more versatile in terms of sets; and it also has set and link, a formation that it is always useful to revisit in order to improve its flow.

The three fast-time dances I considered were *Miss Nellie Wemyss*, *A Jig for Heather* and *Heads and Tails*. I rejected *Miss Nellie Wemyss* as being too challenging for intermediate dancers to dance well within the time – particularly the covering in the first 4 bars and the very fast set and cast to finish facing first corners. A significant focus of both of the others was a slightly unusual balance in line formation, but I decided that *A Jig for Heather* would be within the grasp of all levels of dancer, whilst being sufficiently unusual to be of interest to more advanced dancers. *Heads and Tails* has more scope for getting lost!

The class and reflection

The room was wide and not very long, so the challenge was being heard on all sides. There was a platform, so for much of the class I used that to be heard more easily, but it did limit

my ability to wander around the class like I usually do. In hindsight, it would have been easier with a head mic.

The warm-up went smoothly enough, apart from the problem of being heard as I warmed up with the class – I use that warm-up pretty much every week with my regular class, so I knew that it worked. *The Old Man of Storr* was straightforward, although there were a lot of teaching points I could have made more of, such as curving into the hands across and not cutting any corners.

Although step practice was not the focus of the class, we did need to cover Highland Schottische setting, which was not familiar to everyone. Once I managed to demonstrate correctly (after a false start!), we concentrated on the correct sequence of foot positions, rather than the niceties of precision, since what they needed to be able to do was dance with a partner, both going in the same direction at the same time! Due to the shape of the hall, I also asked a regular member of my class to demonstrate in front of half the class while I did the other half. That way, most people could see the step being danced in front of them.

Most of our time was spent on the Highland Schottische pousette, although we did spend a little time on set and link, emphasising the fact that both couples move forwards together at the start of the link before the right-hand person casts. We could have danced the dance in two-couple sets, i.e. just twice through, but if time allows I prefer people to be able to dance the formations we have worked on more than once in each position. So we danced *The Trysting Place* six times through in three-couple sets.

The greatest challenge in *A Jig for Heather* is the first 12 bars, so we spent some time on this. It only involves the first two couples, so I had considered doing this in two-couple sets, but decided against it as for less experienced dancers constant chopping and changing between two couples and three couples could be confusing. However, since it took a while for all sets to understand these bars, the third couple were standing doing nothing for some time, so another time I would teach the first half of the dance in two-couple sets and then move to three-couple sets for learning the whole dance. I had also thought of it as a dance of two halves, and so didn't spend any time on the transition from the first half to the second half, which is slightly tricky, so another time I would explicitly cover moving from the circle to the reel. Due to time constraints, we did only dance it in three-couple sets, requiring a tweak to the last 2 bars.

In summary, I was happy with my dance choices for a mixed ability class and thought that most of the teaching worked, but felt that another time I would approach parts of *A Jig for Heather* differently.