

# Contra Minutiae for Fence Sitters and the Inquisitive

Rob Conboy, Aug 2019

We dance to live music, usually old-time folk instrumentals played on acoustic instruments. It is energetic and often has Celtic roots, with the fiddle often the lead instrument. Most of the musicians are extraordinarily talented. The dance figures fit the musical phrases, making it easier to know when to do things and where to be.

Unlike dancing in a bar or nightclub, no alcohol is served and brown bagging is rare. Drugs, including marijuana, are not part of the scene, even where legal. Everyone participates together to weave the tapestry of the dance, creating an atmosphere of cooperation and acceptance that lowers social barriers—which is one of contra's attractions.

In the beginning you might become overwhelmed and need to stop after just a few dances. That's normal; so is getting dizzy (eye contact helps quell that). With a little practice you'll get less dizzy and gain more stamina. Because callers usually choose dances with a progressing level of complexity, you'll be introduced to new figures as you become ready. Part of the fun is feeling yourself improve. This is only the beginning. With continued practice, something magical soon starts happening: time stops, you float through the figures, hypnotically moving with the music while enchanted by the connections with the other dancers. You may gain a deeper understanding of the shared camaraderie here.

Sitters may have an easier time getting a partner by stepping into the crowd the moment a dance has ended. Traditionally you find a new partner between dances, but partners may dance together as much as they like. Women ask men as often as men ask women. It's also perfectly fine to request or accept a dance with someone of the same sex, and many do. While the traditional partner roles have the lady standing to the right of the gent, they are just dance positions. You may dance either. You may find it easier to become fully comfortable dancing in one role before switching. Role choice affects which gender you're likely to encounter more. Switching shows you a different perspective.

A small but growing number of organizations host dances where the role terms are gender-neutral. The dance roles are named, for example, ravens and larks instead of ladies and gents—lark for left, raven for right. Dancing this way shifts the social dynamics slightly, and that difference is important to some. Neutral-role dances are increasingly popular, and they often draw a more diverse crowd who may be younger on average. You might notice more exuberance, colorful dress, and pageantry at these dances.

Dancing has great health benefits for all, but especially for the aging. It's a tonic for feeling good while it strengthens and tones the body. Endorphins flow. Because each dance has you memorize and execute a different sequence of movements, it sharpens the mind while improving coordination and balance. Dancing regularly can improve sleep and give a lasting boost to mood and mental health. The dance community hosts a social environment that fosters making friends. Dancing can even help reduce risk of developing dementia. This is great cardiovascular exercise. Depending on the level of exertion, you'll burn a conservative estimate of three to five hundred extra calories, perhaps more, during a full evening of fun and frolic.

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