

Invitation to the Dance

Thirty Years of Playing For English Country Dancing, From Church Basements To Ballrooms

By Jonathan Jensen

Even if you've never heard of English country dancing, you've probably seen it - that is, if you've watched a ballroom scene from one of those Jane Austen movies. This form of communal dance in which sets of couples move to the prompting of a caller had its genesis in the late Elizabethan era, and eventually led to such American offshoots as square dancing and New England contradance. Revived in the U.K. in the early 20th century, English country dance has been growing in popularity on this continent over the last few decades. Baltimore is only one of dozens of American and Canadian cities where one can participate in regular ECD sessions with live musicians. I arrived at the Baltimore Symphony just as the local dance group was getting established, and for the last 30+ years playing for dances has become practically my second career, as well as providing me with an international circle of friends and introducing me to my wife.

Soon after I joined the BSO as a bassist in 1983 I was approached by violinist Wayne Taylor who had been playing folk music with his wife Marty, a music teacher who played flute and concertina. Wayne enjoyed playing fiddle tunes on mandolin and banjo as well as violin, and when he discovered I played piano by ear he suggested I join the Taylors to form a trio. After a few practice sessions we played for our first English country dance in January of 1984. We billed ourselves as "Devil Among the Taylors" after the title of a well-known fiddle tune. I was taken with the beautiful, centuries-old melodies that accompanied the dances (some composed by Henry Purcell), and enjoyed applying my knowledge of classical music to dress them up with appropriate harmonies and melodic variations.

The Baltimore ECD community at that time was small but enthusiastic. Other such dance groups had formed elsewhere, and before long our trio was called on to play for dances, workshops and balls in such places as Williamsburg, VA, Washington D.C. and New York City. I also began writing tunes in the style of the traditional tunes we played, and dance instructors began devising dance steps to go with them.

1990 was a significant year for me in at least two ways. In April I married Lynn Williams, a Baltimore Sun journalist I had met at the weekly Baltimore dance. She tells me I was too engrossed in the music to notice her at first, but I eventually made up for lost time.

Then in August I was hired for the first time to play at Pinewoods Camp, the oldest folk dance camp in the nation. Set between two scenic ponds near Plymouth, MA, Pinewoods is renowned for its history, rustic charm and the celebrated dance teachers and musicians who have done stints there. At Pinewoods I made lasting connections with the wider dance community and felt as though I had truly “arrived”, in the same way that joining the BSO heralded my arrival in the orchestral world. Since that summer I have made nineteen return visits to Pinewoods in addition to many other dance camps and festivals.

Another stage in this second career was reached in 2002, when a group I performed with was hired to play for dancing at a 16th century manor in the English countryside. A dance enthusiast who worked as a travel agent had begun putting together vacation packages for Americans who wanted to spend a week dancing and sightseeing at exotic locales. On the last night of this trip we were bused into London where the participants got to dance with their British counterparts in the city where much of the historic repertoire was created. For me this was just as exciting as the BSO’s London performances of 1987 and 2001. More recently this same group got to play for a week of dance, culture and cuisine in Florence, Italy, ending with a fancy dress ball in a spectacular ballroom.

The printed collections of English country dances from the 17th and 18th centuries are rich and varied, and these old classics made up the bulk of our repertoire when I started playing, with only a few 20th century creations sprinkled in the mix. The years since then have seen an explosion of new dances in this genre, and I’m pleased to have played a part in this. At last count, at least fourteen choreographers have written some sixty dances to tunes of mine. Many of these remain obscure, but a fair number have entered the canon and show up regularly at dances and balls. The dance “Candles In The Dark” to my tune of the same name can be seen in eleven YouTube videos, including one shot in Russia. I love it when people from Vancouver, London or Sydney, Australia tell me they enjoy dancing to my music.

Today my activities as a dance musician continue unabated, limited only by the small number of weekends available in the BSO schedule to play for major dance events. I bring a toolbox full of whistles, recorders and ocarinas to play in addition

to the piano. The weekly Baltimore English country dance takes place on Monday nights from 8 to 10:30 at St. Mark's on-the-Hill Episcopal Church in Pikesville. New dancers are welcome and I invite readers to come out and discover this timeless art form. In these strident times it is especially gratifying to take part in an activity that combines socializing across classes and creeds, graceful movement and transportingly beautiful music. The caller teaches all of the figures involved, and each dance is walked through step by step before being done to music. More information and a monthly roster of musicians and callers can be found at the Baltimore Folk Music Society Website. <http://www.bfms.org/mondayDance.php> See you at the dance!

See a montage of several dances being done along with some history of the genre and several dancers' personal testimonials.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuTvGvzheGU>

Last night of the 2014 English Dance Week in Florence. Elegantly-attired dancers stroll along the River Arno on their way to the grand St. Regis Hotel ballroom, where they can be seen in a sequence of dances. From 1:01 to 1:11 my wife Lynn is seen sporting a dazzling headdress and dancing with Ken McFarland, organizer of the week. My fellow musicians and I are heard but not seen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gml0LgJoSzc>

"Candles In The Dark" being danced at Fandango, an annual weekend event in Atlanta. Music by Bare Necessities.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-dXxYqKmUI>