

## RECORDING STEP-DANCING

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In The Morris Book, part 4 (1911), Cecil Sharp refers to step-dance as

the most popular folk-dance at the present time ... a standing proof of the capacity of the village dancer to create and execute extremely complex and intricate movements.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1971) defines it as:

A dance in which steps are emphasized rather than gesture or posture; especially: a solo dance characterized by clogging, tapping, brushing or kicking.

So we see that for the collector it is the steps themselves which are the 'extremely complex and intricate movements' described by Sharp and present one of the greatest challenges to the British traditional dance collector. Who took up that challenge? Sharp didn't, Karpeles didn't. Not until the 1950s and 1960s was a serious attempt made to seek out and record step-dancing, with the greatest collector, Tom Flett, providing a climate of interest in which Julian Pilling and Pat Tracey could work.<sup>2</sup> Since then we have seen the springing up of clubs and groups within the folk revival, formed to learn and perform clog dances. There must be over a hundred such clubs at present.<sup>3</sup> If it was an easy task to notate step-dancing, then we would have more than a handful of collectors to whom we could refer.

So what are the difficulties of researching into step-dancing? I want to raise, in the short time allotted to me, questions concerned with the special difficulties of documenting the step-dance performance itself.

What factors affect the dance dynamics? Firstly, it requires fitness and practice and, because it is about nifty footwork, step-dancers tend to lose the ability to execute the intricate steps with increased age. Furthermore, there is a tendency for this effect to be noticed earlier than with other dance forms. Secondly, of the total number of step-dancers in an area, only a few stand out as real virtuosi. The evidence concerning dancing teachers<sup>4</sup> shows that it is these few good dancers who both perpetuate and promulgate the tradition.

So the ability of the dancer is crucial - not just her or his present state of fitness but the level of accomplishment when in her or his prime. In your trawl of an area when following up every lead and talking with each informant, how can you make a judgement about which of the dancers are the few fine exponents, who can act as benchmarks by which to compare other informants and so build up a complete picture necessary when interpreting the information. There is another reason for locating the fine exponents. The more skilled the dancer was, the more easily he or she is likely to overcome the dual problems of memory and motorskills - that is, to be able to recall the steps and perform them. Having identified the fine exponents and gathered all the information, how do you separate out from a performance those aspects which are personal and individual to a performer, and those which are typical or characteristic of a group of performers?

I differentiate between two types of step-dancing: fixed phrased step-dancing and free phrased or improvised step-dancing. On the one hand, we have dancing which fits into 8-bar phrases of music. This is generally a sequence or repetition of sequences forming the 'step' itself for 6 bars and a finish of 2 bars, sometimes called a

'break' or a 'shuffle off'. Most clog dancing is of this type. On the other hand, we have free form or free phrased stepping. This is an improvisation of patterns or motifs combined into sequences which in turn are fitted together to give a unique performance. The dancer may acknowledge ends of phrases in the music but the dance is not broken up into convenient chunks or steps of equal length.

There are three layers of investigation when noting a particular performance:

1. identifying and recognising the patterns or motifs,
2. identifying the phrasing - the combination of motifs, and
3. identifying the factors involved in the aesthetics of the performance.

How do you deal with each of these stages in the two types of step-dancing? In both cases, identifying patterns requires us to see the dance many times. Repetition taxes the patience, stamina and health of the informant, especially if they are elderly and out of practice. How can this be overcome? Well, filming can help. By this, I mean cheap filming: home movie, 8 mm or video (not 16 mm which has a different function) and, in the case of free phrased dancing, it may be that only filming provides the level of exposure necessary for identification of the motifs.

Now let us look at the second layer - identifying phrasing. In fixed phrased dancing, clearly the predetermined phrasing and the repetition within the 8-bar structure help enormously with the first two layers. We already have our framework and, furthermore, the combinations tend to be limited to four or five types. But with free phrased or improvised step-dancing, we do not have the 8-bar structure to help us. Each performance is unique, an action replay is not possible except with the aid of film. Granted, a free phrased dancer will have free phrased favourite combinations

of motifs. By careful observation, you may identify certain combinations which occur more frequently but that is all and, again, this presupposes the exposure to many different performances in time which in turn relies on fit, active informants. Any proper analysis of combinations must rely on film.

And the third layer of investigation - the aesthetics of performance? Well, with fixed phrased clog-dancing, film, used alongside the other techniques of the fieldworker make this possible (although actually, it is rarely done) but once again it becomes much more difficult with free phrased stepping where the number of contextual variables acting on the length of performance, variety and intricacy of steps, creativity and inventiveness are much greater. One such factor which may operate in a social situation amongst certain step-dancers (notably Dick Hewitt, one of the finest step-dancers, with a reputation to maintain)<sup>5</sup> is a competitive force. How can the fieldworker control these variables in order to carry out a full analysis?

In discussing the layers of investigation, I have suggested film as an answer. I believe that it is vital in gaining a full analysis; but I should mention that film creates its own problems. On the whole, people are very wary of cameras and not least the fieldworker. The atmosphere of trust and ease can be damaged with the tension which accompanies filming equipment and it can affect the performance. Certainly we have not managed to be at home with technical equipment in this situation which may surprise some of you who know of our work in 16 mm archive records. So how can film be used without detriment to relationships, quality and quantity of information? The second point to make about film is its tendency to be regarded as a 'one-off' process. Yet for an analysis of aesthetics and, in the case of free phrased dancing-combinations, one needs film of several different performances in time. How can you collect film of several performances?<sup>6</sup> If the informant is in his or her own home, no longer performing in a social setting, the

task of simply creating an atmosphere conducive to any stepping may be difficult.

To summarise the problems in recording step-dancing then:

1. the physical fitness, state of practice, and ability to recall of the informant, all states which may decrease with age;
2. the identification of the fine exponent, determination of the individual and the typical;
3. the need for repeated exposure to the dance and the problems associated with actual repetition or film;
4. the creation of an atmosphere conducive to stepping with practical considerations of floor, footwear and music, and
5. the control of the contextual variables to assist a full analysis.

These problems increase when studying free form or improvised step-dancing.

#### NOTES

1. Second edition (London: Novello), reprinted (Wakefield: E. P. Publishing, 1975), p. 10. My thanks to Dr Ian Dunmur for providing the quotation and to Peter Clifton for commenting on the draft.
2. For selected and published material see: J. F. and T. M. Flett, Traditional Dancing in Scotland (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964); J. F. and

T. M. Flett, Traditional Step Dancing in Lakeland (London: English Folk Dance and Song Society, 1979); Julian Pillilng, 'The Lancashire Clog Dance', Folk Music Journal, 1, no. 3 (1967), 158-99.

3. For a list of groups and their current repertory see the magazine, Instep nos 17 and 18, available from Chris Metherell, 15 Wolveleigh Terrace, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1UP.
4. For a discussion of dancing teachers, see above books by J. F. and T. M. Flett.
5. For a description of Norfolk step-dancing, see Peter Clifton and Ann-Marie Hulme, 'Solo Step Dancing Within Living Memory in North Norfolk', Traditional Dance, 1 (1982), 29 - 58.
6. At the 1985 Traditional Dance Conference, Roy Dommett offered copies of a pamphlet to participants, which gave practical tips based on his extensive experience of filming traditional dancing.