

Factors affecting tempo

(Please note – I don't recall where this article came from. I didn't write it. But it seemed worthy of inclusion! - Lynne)

I saved the best for last. Everyone seems to be an expert on this topic! I've found however that the more one analyses it, the less it can be resolved into black-and-white. The only real rule seems to be to try and play at tempos which are the most comfortable to the greatest number of people at the time and place in question. Beyond that, everything is variable, and I'll try to explain why.

First off, there are of course absolute limits to tempos, governed by the laws of gravity and the limits of agility of the human being. One day we'll no doubt read in the Guinness Book of MOON Records that the record number of high cuts by a Highland Dancer is 25, but not on Earth I fear! It's difficult to dance the RSCDS Reel and Jig steps outside of 112-122 beats per minute, and Strathspeys outside the range 55-65 beats per minute.

Within this range, VERY small differences in measurement of tempo can seem like enormous barriers to optimum performance of the step technique. The bad news is that there are many other factors which can affect one's technique, and the good news is that minor variations in tempo can compensate for this, restoring the optimum for the prevailing conditions. Some of the contributing factors I have identified over the years are as follows:-

Resilience of the floor. A springy wooden floor causes the dancer to jump higher (for the same effort expended) than a hard concrete one. The higher up in the air you go, the longer it takes to come down, therefore the music should be played slower for the same effect than on a hard floor. (The dancer will think it's the same speed as on his regular hard floor, but it will actually be very slightly slower).

Size of the crowd. Dancers on a crowded floor instinctively take smaller steps, and therefore again return to ground zero sooner than if they had lots of elbow room. Play the music a bit quicker in a crowded room.

Start of the programme. Very few dancers do warm-ups at social functions. Don't let yourself get sued for a pulled hamstring (or worse) because you played the first couple of dances ever-so-slightly-too-fast.

Technique level of the dancers. Technically 'good' dancers prefer to dance strathspeys slower than novices, and reels/jigs a bit quicker. It's actually a matter of confidence level.

Age group. It catches up with all of us, and is no reflection, but as we eventually lose our strength and control we can't dance as slowly as before. Plastic hips have been known to cancel this one out though!

Licensed function. Yup, booze relaxes us and loosens our inhibitions. Uptight dancers tend to dance more deliberately. Accelerate the music in proportion to the level of blood in the dancers' alcohol stream.

Stickiness of the floor. A slippery floor makes people careful about how they place their feet. Slower music compensates for this.

'Lift' of the music. The very best music motivates and inspires dancers, and releases adrenaline. If as a musician or SCDJ you can create this mood, be prepared to cater to a room full of 'Generals' who will want to Dance Till Dawn.... and you can play at whatever tempos the traffic will bear!