

## Playing for SCD Classes

Dancers and musicians are often curious about what it takes to “play for class.” This article explores the knowledge and technical abilities that can make it happen successfully.

The first requirement is Confidence. Dancers need a strong and steady beat, so confident playing is a must. Musicians coming from the comparative safety of a band environment may initially feel rather exposed when playing solo or with (say) an piano accompaniment, so the new class musician must put that aside and project his/her confident inner self!

Next, is the ability to play simple tunes at dance speed. Technical command of your instrument is of key importance here. You don't need to be able to play every tune in the book: to begin with, it's preferable to stick to simple tunes (minims and crotchets), rather than stumbling through a difficult lead tune (the “signature” tune for the dance). But the music does have to be at the right speed for dancing.

The musician needs a good repertoire of jigs, reels and strathspeys, and also some marches and waltzes. So fluent music reading skills are essential. In any 2-hour class or club night, a musician may need to play 20 or more tunes. These need to be at one's fingertips, as the musician responds instantly to the tutor's instruction.

When a musician is present, a tutor usually initiates dancing with the phrase “Ready – And”. The musician then plays (in time) a long lead note to provide a confident lead in for the dancers. Although this sounds complicated, in practice most musicians master this skill readily.

So much for practical skills. How about knowledge?

Basic experience in SCD helps the class musician enormously. Familiarity with the specialised vocabulary helps follow what the class is learning, and knowing what it feels like to dance basic steps and formations will help guide the choice of tunes to support step and formation practice. You don't have to be an expert, just understand what is happening on the floor.

Where to from here? If you are interested in playing for dancing at your club, have a word with your tutor and see if s/he is amenable. You could start by just playing for a warmup march and a waltz for stretches. Once everyone is comfortable, try playing for one dance in the evening.

And it's always a good idea to go on a course. Earlier this year, I attended a week-long “Playing for Class” course at the St Andrew's Summer School, taught by the current Music Director, Ian Muir. It was intense but very rewarding. The NZ Summer School also offers music courses. This year there is a “Teachers and Musicians” course, and the musician side of this will be taught by Ian Muir. There is also a “band” class in the afternoons. Both are a great way to expand your experience as a SCD musician and have a great deal of fun!

Any questions? Feel free to get in touch: [music@dancescottish.org.nz](mailto:music@dancescottish.org.nz)

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