

Valley Contra Dance (VCD): What to Expect

VCD welcomes all comers to our 2nd and 4th Saturday evening dance in Bethlehem (and occasional 5th Saturday). Depending on the season and weather, the crowd varies from 40 to 100 dancers. We draw from a wide range of ages, many of our regular dancers being between 35 and 60. We're a mixture of families, couples, and singles who come from all over eastern Pennsylvania and neighboring states.

Contra dancing is an American folk art and recreation that descended from the country dancing of England, France, Scotland, and Ireland in colonial times. You dance with a partner in a formation of two long lines that are opposite/facing/contra. As in square dancing, the moves are called aloud by a caller. Many of the moves, or figures, occur in square dancing, too (like allemandes, stars, and partner swings).

Unlike square dances, we make it easy for newcomers to take part, change partners from dance to dance (so you don't have to bring a partner), always have live music, and dance relatively long individual dance numbers - usually 7 to 9 minutes each at about 120 steps a minute. Except that we ask you to wear shoes that won't punish a good wood floor, we don't have a dress code.

Contra music is lively, consisting mainly of march tempos, polkas, and the Celtic sounds of jigs and reels. We finish the first and second half with a waltz and usually start the second half with a swing or folk dance number. As forms of dance go, contra dancing is easy for a beginner to enjoy. There are no special steps; you just walk in time to the music. That may sound too simple, but there's an energizing physical flow from figure to figure within a dance number. We employ professional musicians and callers who come from as far as Ohio, North Carolina, and New England. The admission (\$12 for non-members; \$5 for students) pays for the expenses of the hall, callers, and bands.

Taking part provides different rewards; some people like the music the best, some the flow, some the exercise, some the sociability, some the Sufi-like "getting into the zone," and some the pot luck food at intermission. For experienced contra dancers, the sense of community is a special reward.

As the arts go, contra dancing is not cool; it's down to earth. The scene is free of career networking, marketing, social climbing, intense singles cruising, and religious or political evangelizing. Folks leave their issues at home and come just to be sociable and enjoy dancing. The setting is smoke- and alcohol-free, but not for reasons of ideology. Afterward, some of us get together at a local restaurant for a snack and a drink.

We welcome newcomers and beginners, remembering that we once took the plunge into this unfamiliar scene. The pace is brisk, but each evening starts with an introductory lesson, then each dance number is practiced before it's done at full pace with music and the guidance of the caller. Tell your partners that you're new at this and they'll be helpful.

For directions, contact information, and some photos, check out our web site: www.valleycontradance.org. Videos of contra dancing abound on-line, but remember that the dancers you're watching have had the introductory lesson already as well as practice on the dance they are showing you. Also, many of the videos omit the caller's voice. You'll be dancing like that in no time