Running a Virtual Folk Dance Event – Notes from the Door County Virtual Festival discussion
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Initial Discussion Outline

John wants to engage participants in a lively discussion with the notion that an exchange of information, ideas and feedback will help all groups improve their preparation, planning and delivery of virtual dance events.

I. Technology host/co-host equipment/technology
- participant equipment/technology
- Internet connectivity/capacity

II. ZOOM settings level of service
- host/co-host/dance leader set-up
- Waiting Room (pros/cons)
- In-session monitoring
- Recording the session (pros/cons
- Sharing computer sound versus playing music on a separate device

III. Session Protocol Mute all (mute all/don't allow unmute, all unmute for feedback)
- Shared video (pros/cons)
- Chat (any time/anyone, not during teaching, designated times)
- Monitoring chat for feedback, alerting host/teacher to problems
- Unmuted audio time for participants to greet each other (yes/no, when/how long)
- Making technical adjustments during the session

IV. Teaching/Leading Dance Practices Playing sample of music prior to teaching/demonstrating a dance (pros/cons)
- Teaching/demonstrating with back to camera (pros/cons)
- Dance complexity/familiarity Only teach fairly familiar or uncomplicated ones as complicated doesn't work via virtual
- Teach some new things as folks want to expand their repetoire
- Don't be afraid of teaching something complex, we're all old dance hands
- Amount of time spent teaching (keep it short, provide pointers on style, teach slow/long enough to be sure)
- Seeking/using feedback during the teaching
- What teaching? Just play dances and lead them.

<u>**John's Session Notes & Afterthoughts**</u>

Lessons learned from conducting or participating in virtual folk dance sessions over the past 4 months can be grouped into three general areas:

1.   **Technology**
2.   **Session Procedures/Practices**
3.   **Teaching**

I. TECHNOLOGY

Holding virtual dance sessions that have little to no problems with sound quality, synchronization between music and video, and uninterrupted video and sound depends upon having reliable service from both ZOOM and all the participants' Internet service providers, having sufficient wireless router bandwidth within the homes of hosts and participants, and keeping other applications from conflicting with or taking precedence over the Zoom connection.

Internet service provider and ZOOM

There is little that most of us can do about shortcomings that result from the action or inaction of these businesses other than to send in complaints. That actually has worked as millions of people have let both ZOOM and Internet service providers know that they are dissatisfied with the quality of service and demand changes. ZOOM has made numerous improvements during the past 4-5 months to deal with the tremendous increase in use of its products. Similarly, local Internet service providers have responded to user complaints as everyone is on the Internet more heavily.

That said, from time to time, load demands on local Internet service providers will result in temporary interruptions in the broadcasting of music and video during dance sessions despite hosts and participants making as many improvements as are possible in the home.

What can I do?

Based on my experience problems with sound, video, and synchronization mostly have to do with the distance from your wireless router in your house to the room in which your are dancing and/or the technology of the wireless adapter in the device you are using for the Zoom session.

In general there are three ways to address this kind of problem:

1.   **Move the laptop/computer/Ipad into the same room as the wireless router.**
 a)   This is why some folks are dancing in their bedrooms vice their living room or basement where there is more room. The closer your device is to the router, the stronger and more reliable is the signal between the two devices.
 b)   If you can dance in the same room as the router, you can get an even better connection if you can bring your laptop close enough to the router to connect the two devices using an ethernet cable instead of relying on the wireless connection. An ethernet cable has plugs on each end that look somewhat like wires used to connect landline phones to the wall plug but are thicker. Ethernet connections give the maximum bandwidth and speed that you are getting from your Internet service provider. By contrast, event the best wireless connection will not be close to ethernet speed and reliability of connection.

c)   For example, when Sheila and I watch Cathy Springer's Thursday night sessions or some of the Stockton workshops, we dance in our spare bedroom where we have the Verizon FIOS router connected to our desktop computer via a 6 foot ethernet cable which provides the fastest connection possible.

1. **If you can't dance in the room with the router, bring the signal to where you are dancing.**
   a) **Buy a long ethernet cable to run from your home router to your laptop in the room where you want to dance** - This is what several of our group's hosts/cohosts did, running the cable 50 feet from their upstairs to their living room.
   b) **Buy a more modern wireless adapter for your laptop** - This is what I did

   Most current routers in the home broadcast on two different frequency ranges: 2GHz and 5GHz (Don't confuse as 2G and 5G which refer to cell phone technology generations).

   The wireless adapters built into laptops that are more than 3-4 years old usually could not use the 5GHz frequency. These older adapters can only use the 2GHz frequency which doesn't have the bandwidth necessary for good Zoom connections. Also many other devices in the home also use this 2GHz frequency range, such as wireless telephones, remote controls, etc. creating potential interference with your router's signal. I use two laptops during my virtual sessions, the one with the older adapter uses the 2GHz signal and I frequently see time lags in its presentation or synchronization problems.

   With a more modern wireless adapter, I am able to use the router's 5GHz frequency, giving me a signal with sufficient bandwidth to simultaneously send and receive the Zoom session's music and video with less interference from other devices. I seldom experience any time lags or synchronization problems with this connection.

   3 Reduce the demands on your laptop/device.
   Zoom sessions are very demanding on your laptop's processing capabilities. You should close all other applications other than your anti-virus/firewall once you have the Zoom session started. This includes closing your web browser and email program once you have established your Zoom connection.
   During some of our earliest virtual dance sessions, my laptop kept interrupting my music because it wanted to tell me that I had a new email, new Facebook message, or an update to one of my applications or Windows was now available. By closing the browser and email and all other applications except my anti-virus/firewall, I stopped getting those notices and the interruptions.

   4 Host/Co-Hosts/Presenters should compare music presentation programs to determine which one provides the best service on their individual set-up.
   For the past 10+ years I have been using the program Muzikman to adding to, sorting, and playing my dance music. When I first began Zoom virtual sessions, I would experience unpredictable stoppages where my music simply halted for 1-2 seconds and then restarted at exactly the spot where it had stopped. This would occur several times during an evening. My co-hosts used I-Tunes or Groove to play their dance music and did not experience anything similar. I have not switched to importing my music into Groove and no longer experience the music stoppages which tells me that there was some incompatibility between Muzikman and Zoom. I have not yet tried Windows Media Player to see if it has any compatibility problems with Zoom.

5. **Participants should use whichever device they own that has the largest screen that they can place in a dance-able area**. Trying to learn a new dance while watching it on a cell phone or Ipad will be more difficult than watching that same dance on a laptop with a large screen, a desktop, or from an HDMI connection to your TV.

II. SESSION PROCEDURES/PRACTICES

Each group has the freedom to decide how it wants to control access, share responsibility, and manage in-session activities. Here are some options/observations:

1.   Recurring Zoom link versus Temporary Zoom links
 a)   For security reasons, Zoom is moving towards requiring all sessions to have password control. That means if the link is a static one that is posted on a website, the group will need a way to communicate the password to its members.
 b)   Our group has chosen to use an email alias in which all addressees are put into the blind courtesy copy line of the email to receive a weekly notice with the link to that week's Zoom session. The password is built into the Zoom hyperlink that changes each week.
2.   Waiting Rooms
 a)   Pros – the host/co-host must admit each person who tries to join the Zoom session thus making certain that only known individuals can get in
 b)   Cons – requires someone in the group to serve as the "gate guard" and to periodically check to make sure latecomers are admitted
3.   Co-hosting versus Spotlighting
 a)   Co-hosts have access to session controls similar to those of the host, such as the ability to mute/unmute, spotlight for everyone, etc. and can share music with everyone and teach/lead dances
 b)   Spotlighted individuals do not have session controls but can play music to be heard by all and teach/lead dances. A spotlighted individual depends on a host/co-host to spotlight them and to mute all others.
4.   Sharing computer sound versus playing music on a separate device
 a)   Sharing computer audio provides the best sound quality during a Zoom session. This may require the individual who is sharing the music to be made a co-host for that segment of the session.
 b)   Some people do not have their music on the device they use for the Zoom video, so they play their music on a different device and rely on the microphone in their Zoom-connected device to pick up the sound and broadcast it. The quality of this sound will depend upon the sensitivity of the microphone and the internal sound processing of the broadcasting device.
5.   Feedback during the session
 a)   What appears to be the best method is for each session to have a co-host who monitors the session for any quality problems and also monitors the chat for any feedback or questions and then relays that verbally to the teacher/dance leader at an appropriate moment.
 b)   By keeping everyone else muted and requiring that all questions come via chat versus allowing anyone to break in with a verbal comment, keeps interruptions to a minimum while still insuring the host gets important information.
6.   If important information is placed in the chat by the host/co-host, such as the playlist, it will need to be reposted later on as participants can only see chats going forward from the moment they logged in.

III. TEACHING

1.   Teachers should spend the majority of the time demonstrating steps with their back to the camera as this allow viewers to copy movements without having to figure out right and left movements

2.   Teachers must ensure their feet are in view of the camera at all times. This may involve using a separate plug-in camera, raising the laptop to a higher position in the room, and/or marking the floor space to indicate the edges of the viewable area.

3.   Some leaders use a wireless microphone to ensure they are being heard while their backs are to the camera, others simply use loud, clear voices and/or turn around for verbal explanations.

4.   Teachers need to check out their visual appearance prior to the session to maximize the visibility of their movements, e.g. wearing light apparel against a dark background and vice versa, wearing different colored socks or shoes with different markings on them to help viewers determine right from left, find ways to get as close to the camera as possible while still keeping their feet and body visible

5.   I recommend teachers play a sample of the music prior to teaching a dance. Most dancers I know learn step patterns better if they are already associating the steps with the speed and/or feel of the dance music.

6.   Choices of dance familiarity, complexity, and/or difficulty vary by group and by group leaders. Some groups only want to dance what they already know while others want to experience many new dances to add to their existing repertoire. Some groups like to spend a significant portion of their sessions in teaching while others want to play one familiar dance after another to maximize the amount of time participants are dancing versus watching. Some dancers find it nearly impossible to pick up something complex via Zoom while others can learn this way. My only advise for this area is for hosts/leaders to get a sense of what their participants like/want and to take it into consideration as they plan their events.

I hope the Door County discussion was useful and that others find this list of some help. I'm not an expert on the technology (e.g. wireless microphones and remote cameras) and I'm learning along with others about the best Zoom settings and most effective virtual teaching methods. Perhaps in another six months, we can collectively revise this list with improved recommendations.