Calling Online

Lockdowns all over the world made square dancing impossible at first. However, some of the restrictions have been lifted and certain areas allow for limited dancing experience now. One of the popular formats is two-couple dancing (if four people are allowed to meet or if four family members want to dance together). In order to make dancing possible for several groups at the same time, the calls can be broadcast via services like Zoom and lots of people can connect from their homes.

I did some calling online in the past but never felt enough pressure to summarize my experience in an article—after talking to lots of callers about this "deviation" of mine, I came to a conclusion that very few of them, if any, would be willing to try calling this way. However, many of them are likely to have changed their attitude recently so I decided to describe how I do it, hoping that someone will find the information useful.

Hardware

I think it is good to use a set-up that is as similar to real-life calling as possible. Therefore, I use my MA-150 even though amplification is not needed—it serves as a mixer for microphone and music signal. Any other suitable mixer can be used instead.

I use my laptop for playing music and for the online communication; however, any other suitable device can be used. The built-in sound card of the computer should be sufficient but I use an external USB card. The main reason is that my laptop is not equipped with separate connectors for input and output while the external sound card is.

Dancers are usually glad if they can see the caller (although they hardly have time to look) so you will probably use a web camera even though it is not really necessary (moreover, the video signal consumes some bandwidth). Most laptops have a built-in one but an external web camera can be used, too. Several years ago, I encountered problems with an external web camera equipped with its own microphone because it was not possible to switch to another microphone while still using the camera. If this happens to you, try to get a camera without a microphone.

Software

I use SquareView for playing my music. No special configuration is necessary, everything works as usual—and the same should apply to any other application that you are used to. If you do not like the sound that you achieve by using the knobs on the MA-150, you can use the built-in equalizer in the application (**View** $\rightarrow$ **Music Equalizer** in SquareView) or in the sound settings of the operating system of your computer.

The communication software (Zoom, Skype, Jitsi or any other) does not require any special settings either.

If you want to record your calling (voice and music), I recommend Audacity. However, do not forget that the more applications you are using, the more problems can occur and the more system resources of the computer are consumed.

In each application that you are using, make sure that the input and output of the sound card is selected as the application input and output device.

Connecting the MA-150

Now we need to connect the computer to the MA-150 so let us take a look at the MA-150 connectors that we will use:

- **MIC** (input): Connect the microphone in the usual way (if you have the Hilton cable, you can connect the remote control and use it normally, too).

- **AUX** (input): Connect the sound card output so that music gets from the computer to the MA-150.

- **LOW** (output on the back): Connect the sound card input so that the output signal (music mixed with your voice) gets from the MA-150 to the computer in order to be broadcast. You will need a cable that you probably do not use normally.

- **SPEAKERS** or **HIGH** (output on the back): You can connect a speaker so that you can hear the output (especially music) as you are used to. The output does not have to (and should not) be loud at all. You can also use headphones instead of the speaker— however, bear in mind that this is a monaural output so unless you have a suitable adapter, you will only hear the sound in one ear; moreover, there is a lot of constant hiss coming from the MA-150 and it is quite loud which gets annoying soon.

Do not forget that the volume and other parameters of the output are controlled on the MA-150, not on the computer! Although you can balance your voice with music and feel that it sounds normal, I recommend to ask the dancers whether the sound is good on their side, too (so that the music is not too loud, the voice stands out and can be understood well).

Problems and Hints

Web cameras are designed to work primarily on short distance. As a result, the further the dancers are from the camera, the less recognizable they are for the caller (especially when they are moving). Quite often, it is difficult even to determine who boys and girls are, let alone to match original partners if resolving by sight. Different colors of clothes are about the only help and having to bring dancers close to the camera just to check who they actually are is rather impractical.

No matter what the quality of the connection is, there is always some delay between the call that the caller gives and the reaction of dancers. It is quite difficult to call with good timing because the movements of dancers cannot be used as the indicator of the call being completed. If you do not have the feel for the timing of each call, the dancing is likely to be less than smooth.

The amount of interactivity is much smaller than in real-life calling. If a problem occurs (someone makes a mistake or just does not understand what the caller said), fixing it is much more complicated: the dancers do not see who the caller is looking at, and one can hardly address particular dancers.

When dancers stop moving suddenly, it may have many reasons. Did they miss a call? Did someone break down? Was there a connection hiccup? The more stops occur, the less fun the dancing is so the caller should (at least in my opinion) really focus on smooth choreography and clear enunciation in order to avoid any stops resulting from the calling.

If several groups that do not see each other are dancing at the same time, it does not make much sense to stop and try to fix one of them because the others will not understand what is going on. It is usually better to resolve quickly and let everyone start again.

I wish you good luck with calling online if you decide to try it!