

An Overview of
Mental Image
Choreographic Management

by Don Beck

Is it a myth, or can you really ad-lib choreography, and then successfully resolve without being dependent on actual dancers?

There are several methods of choreographic management. One of them is Mental Image. There are several approaches to calling Mental Image. Here is an overview of the one that I use, the one I wrote about in the book “Out of Sight,” that will hopefully give you an idea of whether it is worth it for you to take the time to learn the system.

When you first hear the term Mental Image, you might think that it’s about following an entire square in your head; wouldn’t that be great if you could. Actually, because of symmetry, just like a sight caller only has to follow four dancers, an exceptional person might be able to do this. I can’t! I can’t even follow two!

Mental Image requires that you *FOLLOW ONE AND ONLY ONE ACTIVE DANCER!*

To successfully resolve a square, the FASR has to be correct, that is the Formation, Arrangement, Sequence, and Relationship.

As with any other system, the mental image caller has to keep track of the Formation to know what calls or modules can be called next, e.g. are they in lines, waves, etc. And as with any other system, the caller has to keep track of the Arrangement, i.e. which dancers started in the traditional men’s positions and which started in the traditional women’s positions.

The beauty of mental image is that you do not have to worry about the S and the R. They take care of themselves.

Although you are not allowed the freedom that a Sight Caller has to call what you want, where you want to, and when you want to; there are many advantages to the Mental Image method.

- You can freewheel much more than a module caller can, i.e. make up choreographic sequences on the fly.
- Unlike a Module Caller, you don’t have to memorize lots of modules to continue to provide variety to your dancers.
- Unlike a Sight Caller, you don’t have to memorize who started with whom, every tip. This is especially useful when you call for a group you don’t know, who, on top of that, are all wearing their club costume.
- You are not dependent on your key square(s), so if they make a mistake, you can still resolve successfully for the rest of the squares.

- You can watch the entire floor, not just a key square, to help with timing, ability, etc.
- If you choose to ad-lib your singing call figures, you don't have to memorize a new corner every sequence.
- Although you will tend to use sequences that are closer to Standard Applications, this can be a big advantage when trying to control the difficulty of your choreography, and especially useful when teaching or calling an SSD dance.

So what's the catch? Yes there's a catch, there are two other things that you have to keep track of, but the beauty of the system is that these things, unlike Sequence and Relationship, do not change with every call. You can control when and where they change, so again, as you are calling, you only have to track the Formation, Arrangement, and where an Active Dancer is in that F&A.

Here's a brief look at what those two additional things are. One is which calls change temporary partners, and the other is the location of a spot on the floor where the active dancer has to be for a successful resolve.

First, changing partners; it's probably obvious that some calls change partners and some don't, for example Ladies Chain changes partners but Right and Left Thru doesn't. Which ones do and which ones don't, however, is not as obvious for all calls. This is something you have to learn about each call before you can start using the system. Calls that eXchange partners are called X-type calls; calls that don't are called O-type calls. In fact, you only have to memorize which calls are Xs. O's have zerO effect on whether you can resolve or not. They are just calls to help you move the Active Dancer around.

The second thing you have to know is that in order to resolve the square, i.e. to be able to call a successful Allemande Left or Grand Right and Left, all you have to do is dance the Active Dancer to a known Spot on the floor, and the other seven dancers will automatically be in the correct place without your having to have followed any of them.

The beauty of this Spot is, that if you choose, it doesn't move, so you don't have any additional thing to follow while calling. But, if you choose, you can move that spot to a new place on the grid, for variety, and leave it there until you are ready to resolve; and then dance your active dancer to that new spot. It's as simple as that!

Now getting back to the X-type calls, Every time you call one, you have to call another one to cancel its effect. All Xs have to be cancelled, if you want to resolve when the active dancer is on his or her spot.

It's obvious that if you call Ladies Chain, an X, another Ladies Chain will cancel its effect, but the beauty of the system is that any, let me repeat, *any* X can be used to cancel the effect of any other X.

I won't get into details now, but Spot moving is dependent on where the Xs are cancelled. Briefly, if you call a cancelling X in the same location as the original X, i.e. with the active dancer in the middle of the square or on the right or left, the Spot does not move. If you cancel

the X in a different location, the Spot moves, and there are general rules that explain where it moves to.

It is also interesting to note that you can choose any dancer to be your active dancer. That includes someone dancing in either the traditional man's position or the woman's. No matter who your active dancer is, X-Type calls are still X-type calls, and all the rules for moving (or not moving) the Allemande Spot are the same.

Learning to use this method of choreographic management is not particularly easy, but sort of like learning to square dance, if done step by step, with lots of practice along the way, it is very easy to use once learned. One approach to learning to use the system is to learn while teaching a beginners class, i.e. learning to use one call at a time, just as the dancers are learning them.

Knowledge of this system also gives the caller who uses a different system, a better insight as to what is actually happening in the square.

In summary, Mental Image provides the ability to add variety to your choreography; much more variety than Modules do, although not nearly as much as Sight. You must follow the Formation and Arrangement of the square, just as both the module caller and the sight caller must, but you do not have to memorize any sequences, nor do you have to memorize who started with whom, each and every tip. And you are not dependent on a key square; if they make a mistake, you can still accurately resolve. You don't have to follow either Sequence or Relationship. You must learn which calls exchange partners and be sure to cancel the effect of every one of these that you call by calling any other one, and you then just have to move the one active dancer that you have been following, to a given spot on the floor, to resolve the square.

Again, you just have to follow one and only one active dancer in the square; be aware of a spot on the floor that rarely moves, and only does when you plan a move for it, and then dance that active dancer to that spot. Without doing anything else, all other seven dancers will take care of themselves. It's not a myth, and many, many callers use this technique.