
A further look at the Nancy Basse Dances

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Introduction

The seven Nancy Basse Dances are of special interest because they are the earliest known dances from France for which we have a record of the step-sequence (c. 1445) and because they are broadly contemporary with the earliest recorded phase of Basse Danze in north Italy, as represented by Domenico's treatise (also conjecturally dated c. 1445). Their special position in the history of dance in France is emphasized by the fact that the next relevant document, the Basse Dance collection of Margaret of Austria (Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, MS 9085), may be as much as half a century later (Hertz 1963, Dixon 1986/7).

The Nancy dances were recently discussed in this journal by Peggy Dixon in a review of Basse Dance source material (Dixon 1986/7). A particularly welcome feature of her article was a transcription of the relevant text whose readings improved both on those of the original publication by Vallet de Viriville (1859) and on those of the normally impeccable Crane (1968); this was backed up by a photograph of the actual manuscript, leaving no further doubts on the matter. In her discussion Dixon stressed on what a slender basis our understanding of such a text must rest and characteristically explored a number of alternative interpretations of different aspects of the dances. Still other possibilities exist, however, and it seems worthwhile to look at these dances again from other angles to broaden the discussion still further.

The date of the manuscript

Before attempting to analyse the dances we should re-examine the date assigned to the manuscript in which they have been recorded. This was determined with great precision (most probably between 26 April and 29 May, and certainly no later than 16 August, 1445) by Vallet de Viriville (1859), with further amplification from Crane (1968) and Dixon (1986/7).

In summary, the argument runs as follows. Jean of Orléans, Count of Angoulême, wrote down the details of these dances in a book of his sometime after his release from imprisonment by the English on 31 March 1445. The titles of the dances incorporate the names of five historical personages (plus 'ma dame de facon', who is unidentified) who were all present at the residence of René, Duke of Anjou, in Nancy when Jean arrived there, probably on 26 April. It is known that the entertainments provided for the royal and noble company included dancing. The principal guest was Charles VII, king of France, who moved on to Châlons-sur-Marne with most of the party, arriving on 29 May. It is not known if Jean went to Châlons as well, or not, but a *terminus ante quem* for the dancing he recorded is given by the death of Margaret, the dauphin's wife, on 16 August.

The reader should not be too dazzled by the minutely researched historical detail presented in support of this thesis. To begin with, the titles of the dances contain the names of four (not six) persons, of whom one is an unknown quantity. The Basse Dances *de bourgogne* and *de bourbon* may well have been so called in allusion to specific dukes of Burgundy and Bourbon, but the connexion is too tenuous and uncertain to permit the deduction that these persons were actually present with others on some occasion that the dances were performed. In any case, we do not know if dances carried the

names of certain ladies because those ladies composed them, or commissioned them, or performed them on some occasion, or enjoyed watching them, or received their dedication for some other reason. There is no reason to suggest that this group of dances was performed together by, or in the presence (or indeed the lifetime) of, the persons named and that Jean was there to see it. At heart, the argument is as full of holes as a colander. All we can legitimately infer is that these dances were current when Jean wrote them down.

To get some idea when that might have been, we need to study Jean himself, not the various royal ladies. At the time of his release Jean had been in captivity in England for over 32 years, so he was thoroughly out of touch with the French court. He must have been interested in dancing, otherwise why write down the dances that we are now studying? His first opportunity to observe the conduct of the French royal court was at Nancy, and we are assured that dancing was one of its pastimes at that time. We cannot know if he wrote down the details of these dances during his time at Nancy, or at some other time later on, but Nancy does seem a very probable occasion. So, ironically, we have come back to where we started, but we can now accept the conclusion with greater confidence, given that its credibility is no longer undermined by spurious precision.

The text

It will be convenient for the reader to have the relevant text reprinted. The manuscript is in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fonds français 5699 (formerly 10279). We retain the original spelling and punctuation, except that abbreviations are expanded, the added letters being printed in *italic*. We follow Dixon in using a 'Z' to represent the symbol for *reprise/desmarche*. But the original lineation has not been reproduced (it can be found in Dixon 1986/7). The attempt is made instead to divide the dances into their constituent *mesures*. These are defined by a terminal *congé* or, where that seems to have been omitted, by a sequence of *reprises*. The purpose of this is to make the structure of the dances more explicit and to show how far the *mesures* do or do not echo one another.

basse dance de bourgogne

ijj s v d iij s a coste droit iij Z.j conge
ijj s j d iij s a coste droit iij Z j congie

de la royne de cessile

ijj s iijj d j sault auaunt.j d a senestre iij s a destre iij Z
ijj s i d iij s recules.iij Z j conge

de bourbon

ijj s ij d.ij d j sault j conge
ijj s a destre vne leuee iij s j d.iij s recules.iij Z ij conges

de ma dame de kalabre

iiij s & iij saulz iiij d.ij s recules ij Z j conge
ijj s.j sault du pie droit.ij conges

ma dame la daufine

ijj d.ij dd iij pas menus recules.ij leuees iiij s iij saulz.ij congies

ma dame de facon

ijj s j d iij pas menus.j leuee.j congie
iiij d iij saulz j d a senestre.iij s a destre.iij Z.ij conges

falet

j congie iij pas s iij pas doubles iij pas a coste ij reprises
de pas sangles deus pas d iij pas s arriere.j congie

It is generally agreed that these dance notes were written down by Jean himself. The text is carefully written, in the sense that the letters are mostly well made, but there seem to be some errors. In *falet*, for example, there are *iij pas a coste*, but it is not noted whether the steps are *sangles* or *doubles* nor if they should go to the left side or to the right. We may guess that the missing epithets were omitted in error.

Other probable errors or omissions are more speculative, because they are suggested by observed similarities between the dances; these similarities are real enough, but we do not have a large enough sample to judge if recurring patterns should be seen as optional or obligatory. *Ma dame la daufine*, for example, is the only dance not to begin with a group of (usually three) singles; it would be attractive (though not necessarily correct) to emend the initial group of *iij d* to *iij s*, especially as this would also eliminate the unexpected sequence of *ij dd* coming immediately next to *iij d*. So, too, in *ma dame de facon* we might suspect that the second *mesure* should have begun with a group of singles, mistakenly omitted. In *falet* we should expect to see three *reprises* between the three backwards singles and the final *congé*; and in [*basse dance*] *de la royne de cession* and in *falet* we might have expected a *congé* after the first set of *reprises*. Conversely, in [*basse dance*] *de bourbon* the sequence *ij d* is repeated; this may be a legitimate part of the dance, but we are bound to have a suspicion that this is an example of dittography (i.e. writing something down twice in error).

It looks as if *falet* is a later addition, not written down on the same occasion as the other six dances. Certainly, the quality of the ink appears to be different. It is marked out from the other dances by a number of other peculiarities: the dance is prefaced by a *congé*; the terminology is different; the conventions for writing it down are also different; there are several probable or possible omissions (as noted in the preceding paragraph) and an apparent mis-spelling (*de* for *deus*). The fact that the step-sequence for this dance is indented in relation to the others seems indeed more likely to be because it was written down on some other occasion than because an unknown person called *Falet* was of inferior rank to the persons whose names are attached to the earlier dances (as suggested by Vallet de Viriville, quoted by Dixon 1986/7).

Commentary

The first question is: are these all Basse Dances?

Only the *basse dance de bourgogne* has the actual words *basse dance* in its title, but these words must clearly also be supplied to complete the titles of the next three dances, all of which begin with the preposition *de* (cf Crane 1968). And if these three are *Basse Dances*, there is no reason to exclude the three that follow them.

The *basse dance de bourgogne*

There is a marked contrast between the *basse dance de bourgogne*, which already exhibits the tightly organized structure familiar from a mass of later examples (Wilson 1984/5), and the other six dances, which appear to be much freer in their form and include steps such as *levées* and *saults* which are conspicuous by their absence in the later sources. The name *basse dance de bourgogne* must surely be significant: the Basse Dance tradition that became predominant in

France in the second half of the fifteenth century was a specifically Burgundian tradition; but another tradition is represented here by the other six dances.

It is the obvious link between the *basse dance de bourgogne* and the later Basse Dances that clarifies some of the conventions being used in the present manuscript, as Dixon rightly remarked. Thus *iij s* can be read as 'three singles' and *iij Z* as 'three *reprises*'. The only features that would look out of place in a later context are the absence of an initial *révérence* and *branle* (perhaps taken as read) and the treatment of the singles, grouped here in threes and sometimes made to one side.

Two alternative ways of dancing the singles are possible; both are rhythmically interesting and, as far as I can see from the evidence of this dance alone, equally likely. The first is to treat them as triplets, putting three instead of two in the time of a breve, making a hemiola (cf Wilson 1984/5). The other is to give them their standard timing and to let the succeeding doubles run across the normal rhythm until this is restored by the second set of singles. This second solution is closely paralleled in contemporary Italian Basse Danze – where triplets are rare but are nevertheless suspected in a *bassa danza francese*, *Borges* (Wilson 1992, 83). (In discussing the other six dances I shall be led to opt for the second alternative.)

If the normal rule of alternating feet applies, the singles made to the right side begin and end with the left foot. While there is nothing technically difficult about interpolating a series of sideways singles with the right foot, it seems more likely that the body is turned and these steps are taken going forwards towards the right-hand wall. (A similar conclusion will be reached below in relation to the other six dances.) On either interpretation these singles *à costé droit* introduce an element of the unexpected into this dance that is conspicuously lacking from examples later in the century.

The other six Nancy dances

If we turn to the other six dances, the sense of liveliness and of variety is much stronger. They mostly fall into two *mesures*, which often contain singles, doubles, *reprises* and one or two *congés* in that order; but nothing is immutable, steps may be taken to the side or the rear, and the plain steps are set off by *levées* and *saults*.

It will assist analysis if we can make some assumptions about which feet are used to make the steps. We need not doubt that the dances start with the left foot and use alternate feet, when possible, thereafter. There is enough similarity to the step-sequences of Burgundian Basse Dance also to suggest that the last step before a *congé* should have been made on the right foot and so to work back from there, allotting alternate feet. Doubtful steps in the middle of a dance can then be assessed in relation both to what goes before and to what follows.

Let us look at each of the steps in turn.

Singles (*pas sangles* in *falet*) are found in twos, threes or fours, but most often in threes. Instead of going forwards, they may also be made to the left or right, or going backwards (*reculés*). In two dances there are also groups of three *pas menus* (little steps), going forwards in *ma dame de facon*, but going backwards in *ma dame la daufine*. *Pas menus* are presumably smaller than normal singles, or at any rate quicker, but (in the context of a Basse Dance with music believed to be in triple time) they are unlikely to be reduced to one half.

More plausible would be to suggest that they represent triplets, taking two minims each, leaving the true singles to maintain their proper timing of three minims each. We have already noted that in a conventional Basse Dance tune this would cause the steps to run across the rhythm of the tenor, from mid-note to mid-note, as is often done in Italian Basse Danze. The question of how (i.e. where in the dance) the normal rhythm was restored is one that must be delayed until we have taken a look at *levées* and *saults*. (Alternatively, it is possible that these six dances were performed to music that was **not** defined by a sequence of breves, but corresponded closely to the phrasing of the step-sequence.)

Doubles are found singly and in groups of two to four. They usually go forwards but may also be taken to the side. There is no example of a double going backwards, unless the abbreviation *dd* in *ma dame la daufine* is to be understood as *double desmarchant* (as found later in *La danse de cleues*, but there abbreviated to *d'* – see Crane, no 41). These steps are followed by three *pas menus reculés*, which would (on this interpretation) take the dancers back virtually to their starting position, with an interesting change of rhythm on the *pas menus*. The inconsistency of terminology, however, with the two *doubles desmarchants* immediately followed by three *pas menus reculés*, appears unlikely and it is probably better to suppose that *dd* (if not merely indicating ‘doubles’ after a group of three singles, as conjecturally restored above) means ‘pairs of doubles’, i.e. *ij dd.* = two pairs of doubles. Being distinct from plain doubles, these pairs of doubles might perhaps have been made on the same foot. In other words, three ordinary doubles on alternate feet would be followed by two doubles on the right foot, then two doubles on the left. If all these steps were done to the standard timing of one breve each, the only variation introduced into a sequence of seven doubles would be the change of foot on the end of nos 4 and 6. It is worth considering if the Italian timing could have been used here, whereby two doubles on the same foot occupied 1½ breves (9 minims). On that interpretation the sequence of three ordinary doubles and the sequence of two pairs of doubles on the same foot would each have taken 3 breves, so emphasizing that the latter were an elegant variation on the former. It is evident, however, that there are many solutions possible here.

Both singles and doubles could be made to the side. Singles are in groups of three made to the right side and assumed to start with the left foot; doubles are singletons made to the left side and assumed to start with the right foot. A possible exception to this general rule is implied in *falet*, where three undefined *pas* must surely be singles but ought to begin with the right foot and so perhaps were made towards the left side. The pattern found in these dances agrees with that in *basse dance de bourgogne* and tends to the same conclusion, namely that the steps were made facing towards the side wall. Furthermore, if the steps had been made sideways, as in Arbeau’s *Branles* (Arbeau 1588), how would a double then have differed from two singles? In a *Branle* the division into single and double steps is made explicit by the direction of movement, alternately left and right, but there is no hint of such alternation here; on the contrary, in two of the dances a double to the left appears to be balanced by three singles to the right, which would thus need to travel all in the same direction in order to do so. I again conclude that these steps were made facing towards the side.

The other regular steps are the *reprise* and the *congé*. *Reprises* are all in groups of three, except in [*basse dance*] *de ma dame de kalabre*, whose first *mesure* appears preoccupied with even numbers (like the second *mesure* of *Joyus asspor* in the *Salisbury Catholicon* – see Hartz 1964, Appendix IV). *Congés* usually close individual *mesures* and always close the dance. In final position the *congé* may be doubled (again anticipating a number of dances in the *Salisbury Catholicon*).

That leaves the *levée* and the *sault*. Dixon observes that we know next to nothing about how these were done, which is true enough, and warns us not to assume automatically that they actually occurred in the positions in which we see them in the sequence of steps as written down. After all, if they were not true steps but mere ornaments, they would have had to be done in conjunction with the steps immediately preceding. This is a possibility that deserves consideration; nevertheless there is no hint in the manuscript that *levées* and *saults* are not full steps within a straightforward sequence. Our understanding of the text is not derived solely from later sources in which *levées* and *saults* do not occur; it is derived from reading the text itself. [*Basse dance*] *de ma dame de kalabre* begins with the sequence *iiij s & iij saulz*, about whose meaning we could reasonably speculate; but nowhere else is there any written link, such as the prepositions *avec* or *à*, between *levées* or *saults* and the steps preceding. It is true that what we are reading is the notes made by someone for his own use and therefore only to be understood as he intended, according to his rules; but experience also shows us that even notes of this kind need to be explicit if they are not to be misunderstood later on. It is thus not unlikely that *levées* and *saults* were full steps, and it is worth considering how such steps might have been done.

Levée should mean a ‘rising’ or ‘raising’. It occurs singly in [*basse dance*] *de bourbon* and *ma dame de facon* and as a pair in *ma dame la daufine*. If it is the equivalent of a step, it could well be the raising of one foot forward, repeated with the other foot when there are two together. In other words, forward motion would cease, but a kind of feigned step would be made on the spot. On this interpretation the foot to be raised would normally be the one left free at the end of the preceding step, as if it were now beginning to make a single but had thought better of it. This agrees well enough with the sequences we have: the right foot would have been raised in the two dances where there is a single *levée*; the left and right successively in *ma dame la daufine*.

Saults (jumps) present more of a problem, because the word is so general in its meaning. A *sault* could be a hop on one foot, a spring from one foot to the other, or a jump made on both feet. It occurs singly in [*basse dance*] *de la royne de cession*, where it is made *auant* (forwards), in [*basse dance*] *de ma dame de kalabre*, where it involves the right foot, and in [*basse dance*] *de bourbon*. Groups of three *saults* are found in [*basse dance*] *de ma dame de kalabre*, *ma dame la daufine* and *ma dame de facon*. It is difficult to imagine groups of three *saults* in a Basse Dance involving anything other than springing from foot to foot, presumably with the other leg extended forwards, as in Arbeau’s *pied en l’air* (Arbeau 1588). When a step of this kind is done on its own, it becomes a hop. If Arbeau is anything to go by, the essential thing is that the foot raised last is the one needed to make the next step; the foot you begin with may be either the free foot or not, whichever is going to achieve the proper ending. This sort of

variation is certainly present here. In [*basse dance*] *de ma dame de kalabre* and in *ma dame la daufine* the free (left) foot would be the one raised first, whereas in *ma dame de facon* it would be the other foot (the right). Similarly, when a single *sault* is made before a *congé*, we should expect the left foot to be raised, and this is confirmed in [*basse dance*] *de ma dame de kalabre* where it says *sault du pie droit* (hop on the right foot). In one case this is the free foot; in the other, not.

When *levées* or *saults* occur singly, they can hardly take less time than a *pas sangle* (single). For *levées* this accords with the suggestion that these were, in effect, feigned singles. Two *levées* would take the time of a double. When we come to groups of three *saults*, a similar timing seems a little less likely; what is perfectly acceptable for one *sault* (or even for a pair, if there had been any) seems quite ponderous for a sequence of three. It is thus possible that in groups of three the *saults* become triplets, each one occupying two minims.

These notions on timing, that *levées* and single *saults* each take half the time of a double, but that three *saults* together take the whole time of a double, can be tested in relation to the earlier supposition that singles (in whatever numbers) also each take half the time of a double. This last proposition carries with it the consequence that every group of three singles should be followed by an odd number of singles or their equivalent to restore the normal rhythm. We have already seen that in *basse dance de bourgogne* a second group of three singles could balance the opening group of three singles in each of the two *mesures*. Similar patterns occur in the other six dances, but not with complete consistency, as we shall see. Rules can be invented to cover all eventualities, but the critical reader will perceive that this involves piling one supposition on another to the point where the whole structure may be judged to be unstable.

Let us nevertheless take each dance in turn.

[Basse dance] de la royne de cessile

In the first *mesure*, *ijj s* are later followed by *j sault auant*, but there are then *ijj s a destre*. Two alternative solutions suggest themselves. (i) The two groups of singles balance each other, while the *sault* is incorporated into the end of the fourth double, continuing its forward movement. (ii) The *ijj s a destre* are equivalent in time, as they appear to be in space, to the *j d a senestre* preceding them. In other words, in this specific context they become triplets, contrasting in their rhythmic pattern with the preceeding double: when moving to the left, three steps are made on counts 1, 3 and 4, but when moving to the right, they are made on counts 1, 3 and 5. This combination of a double to the left with three singles to the right recurs in *ma dame de facon*.

In the second *mesure*, *ijj s* are followed by *iii s recules*.

[Basse dance] de bourbon

In the first *mesure*, *ijj s* are followed by *j sault*.

In the second *mesure*, *ijj s a destre* are followed by *vne leuee*, and *ijj s* by *ijj s recules*.

[Basse dance] de ma dame de kalabre

In the first *mesure* there are *ijj saulz* and they are not balanced by an odd number of singles or their equivalent.

In the second *mesure*, *ijj s* are followed by *j sault du pie droit*.

Ma dame la daufine

This appears to be composed in a single *mesure*. If the opening *ijj d* are emended to *ijj s*, there is nothing to balance

them but *ijj saulz* near the end. On the other hand, if the *ijj d* are allowed to stand, the *ijj saulz* will fit into the time of a double. The two alternatives cover all eventualities, allowing no positive inference.

Ma dame de facon

In the first *mesure*, *ijj s* are followed by *j leuee*. In the second *mesure*, there are *ijj saulz* and also the combination of *j d a senestre* with *ijj s a destre*. It is also possible that a number of singles (either odd or even) has dropped out at the beginning of the *mesure*. The alternatives will cover any combination of theories, allowing no firm inference.

Falet

In the first *mesure*, *ijj pas s* are followed by *ijj pas [s] a coste [senestre]*. (The latter are not juxtaposed to a double going towards the other side wall, so there is no reason here to invoke a special timing.)

In the second *mesure*, *ijj pas s arriere* have nothing to balance them. Perhaps other steps have fallen out besides the postulated *ijj Z*, or perhaps one of the numerals is incorrect; but these conjectures, however plausible, are still desperate expedients.

It will be seen that the foregoing analysis is not fully conclusive, though I can claim that, on the whole, the various suggestions I have put forward about the timing of steps work together pretty well. Nevertheless, to achieve this, I have been led to introduce a special timing when a double towards one side is followed by three singles towards the other, and to suppose that the text of *Falet* is less than reliable (a view for which there is already much evidence).

These conclusions can readily be avoided by making different basic assumptions. If groups of three singles and of three *saults* are all taken to be triplets, the structure of the dances is greatly simplified. The only question then is how to accommodate three examples of *j sault* and two of *j leuee* within the standard Basse Dance structure. Or is it wrong to be thinking of a standard Basse Dance structure at all?

Conclusion

The details of how to do the steps in the Nancy dances can only be speculative, but it is still clear that they preserve a distinct tradition of Basse Dance, closer to that of north Italy than the Basse Dances of Burgundy. How close they come to Italy is again a matter of interpretation. The following steps or movements are found in Italian fifteenth-century dances, though not always as early as Domenico's treatise: groups of three (but not four) singles, groups of two and four doubles, doubles made on the same foot, a double made in file towards the side wall, singles and smaller steps going backwards, groups of four *continenze* (equivalent to doubled *congés*). There is not a complete correspondence in the repertoire of steps (nor should we expect there to be), and how particular steps should be realized is debatable, in Italy as well as in France. But they do seem to have in common a taste for experimentation and a relish of the unexpected. It is particularly valuable to have the *basse dance de bourgogne* and the other six dances together in the same document, to show that what we might term the Nancy tradition and the Burgundian tradition existed side by side, though at this date even the Burgundian tradition seems more relaxed than it was to be later in the century.

It would be particularly welcome if musicologists could

identify contemporary music to which any of these dances could be performed in reconstruction. This task is made somewhat less exacting by the number of alternative interpretations and emendations presented both here and in Dixon's 1986/7 paper, which afford some degree of latitude in the length and phrasing of the dances.

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