

**TAKING THE MEASURE OF DANCE STEPS 1650–1700,
THROUGH THE PUBLICATIONS OF JOHN PLAYFORD**

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DANCE IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY EUROPE

Between 1600 and 1700 dancing in Europe underwent a transition from one system to another: a fact which is deduced from the documents relating to dance that cluster at either end of the century. However, the scarcity of dance sources for the years in between severely restricts our understanding of the process or timing of change. For this reason, amongst others, Playford's *English Dancing Master* of 1651 is a highly significant historical document in European dance history. This paper proposes to explore the information available in this source on changing practices across the seventeenth century.

The differences between dance *c.* 1600 and dance *c.* 1700 concern most dimensions of social and theatre dance: the step vocabulary, both in terms of technique and terminology; the presentation of the body; the dance forms; the use of space; the relationship between step and music. Of these, the change in the latter can be explored through Playford's careful matching of dance instruction to music.

This paper also seeks to emphasise the significance in a British and European context of the fundamental shift in a dancer's response to music under discussion, and to propose a more suitable terminology for use by dance historians. Dance *c.* 1600 is commonly labelled 'Late Renaissance dance'. Dance *c.* 1700 is commonly called 'Baroque dance'. Both labels are drawn from Art and Music history, and are more expedient than useful, as well as implying stylistic differences only. I would prefer to characterise dance *c.* 1550–*c.* 1650 as Early Modern and dance *c.* 1650–*c.* 1750 as Modern, and will use these terms in this paper. This is in line with scholars of other disciplines such as English Language, Literature and History (McArthur¹, Wrightson² *inter alia*), who also propose a major shift in thought, sensibility and practice across the seventeenth century, resulting in a largely modern culture by 1700.

'A MEASURED PACE'

As a framework to the examination of the Playford documents, let us briefly establish the conventions of the step and music relationship at either end of the century. Our knowledge of this *c.* 1600 derives from the dance treatises of Arbeau³, Caroso⁴ and Negri⁵ in which information on dance steps and dances is supported by printed music. Through the process of reconstruction, a consistent pattern emerges, which is borne out by the few theoretical writings on the subject. The sketchier information for England demonstrates a consistency with the Continent. The main sources of information here are the six manuscripts relating to dancing at the Inns of Court dated *c.* 1570–*c.* 1672⁶, which form a close connection in time and context with *The English Dancing Master*, and Thomas Morley's *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* of 1597⁷.

The fundamental step of *c.* 1600 was the double step, comprising three paces and a closure. The step was varied in subtle ways, relating to the dance rhythm, to produce the different *seguiti* of Italy and the *branle*, *pavan*, *almain* and *courante doubles* of France and England. The double step was completed by bringing both feet together to take the weight of the body, or, in *almain*, *branle* and the *seguiti*, by pausing on one foot while the other is

raised or resting on the ground without taking weight, maintaining a centred posture. As the double steps belong to duple metre, the four actions of three steps and a closure are evenly paced. The double step fits the musical strain in an unvarying way, which is best expressed as four doubles to the common eight bar strain, or one double to two bars. Music notation and printing conventions, along with modern editorial practice can obscure this fact, but dancers of the time listened to the music, so that the whole strain with its subsidiary phrases was the important structure, rather than any written sub-division of barring. The primacy of the ear was emphasised by Thomas Campion⁸, poet and composer of dance music:

The eare is a rationall sence, and a chief judge of proportion...⁹

Thomas Morley advised the use of semibreves or pairs of minims in composing dance music, which accords with the practice of both the Inns of Court manuscripts of c. 1672 and that of Playford 1651, where the use of semibreves equates with the later division into bars.

The double step, with its firm closure of one minim's duration, marked out time and space in physical, visual and aural terms. It was a highly-valued aesthetic in social and theatrical dance, representing heavenly harmony in the most perfect form. The term 'measure' was used by dance writers and poets to identify this constant. According to Francis Bacon:

Dance is a measured pace, as verse is a measured speech.¹⁰

or John Davies:

Where time the measure of all moving is,
And Dancing is a moving all in measure.¹¹

'UN PAS COULANT'

By 1700 a different system was in place. French and English documents, both in prose and dance notation, reveal a new step vocabulary and technique. The core step remains the unit of three paces, with which travelling passages can be conveniently executed with alternation of the leading foot. This step is the pas de bourée or fleuret, which can be danced to all the duple and triple metres of the time. When the three paces are completed, the free foot is carried through the neutral position in first, without taking weight, ready for the first pace of the next fleuret. Unlike the double step, there is no firm closure, but rather an impulse on the first step of the three. The writers of the time focus their attention on the three paces, with little comment on the passing position. Tomlinson writes:

A Bourée or Fleuret, as I have observed, consists only of three plain, streight Steps; but a Movement is added to the first of them.¹²

Rameau notes the flowing dynamic of the step, which does not emphasise the last of the three paces:

...et comme ce pas est un pas coulant, c'est pourquoi son dernier pas ne doit pas être marqué si fort.¹³

The fleuret can be described as a propulsive step with a sense of forward momentum, rather than a measured step with a sense of closure.

It is also executed within one bar, rather than two, so that eight fleurets are completed within the standard eight bar strain. Only two minims are used in duple metre, rather than

four, leaving only a crotchet beat for the suspended action between the three paces, which in itself lightens the sense of completion. In compound duple metre, the fleuret is not evenly paced, acquiring a shorter second step to fit into one bar of six crotchets. In triple metre, there is no beat on which to pause, so the three steps develop a more marked propulsive quality.

The fleuret, completed in one bar of music and with a greater sense of onward flow belongs to the Modern period, and shares these characteristics with dance steps in use today. The double step in two bars with its measuring closure belongs to a more remote past: the Early Modern period.

THE DOUBLE OF 1651

The term ‘double’ is a commonplace of the early editions of *The Dancing Master*, whereas later editions rarely mention particular steps. However, Feuillet in 1706¹⁴ states that the fleuret can be used in country dances and Essex reiterates this in 1710¹⁵. This information accords with the indisputable fact of the supremacy at the time of the Modern French style in England. So are there signs of change in the sole document relating to the mid-point of the century?

The English Dancing Master of 1651 includes a brief note on the steps, as part of the key to the symbols:

A Double is foure steps forward or back, closing both feet.

A Single is two steps, closing both feet.¹⁶

Despite some ambiguity, the description is of the Early Modern step of three paces and a closure. (Stating four steps rather than three may relate to another discussion about the courante step as described by Arbeau. This would not undermine the argument here.) Aided by the layout of the dance instructions in relation to the music, it is easy to see that this double is danced to two semibreves, that is two bars of music. It follows that four doubles are performed to an eight bar strain, and that often such a strain is composed of two bar subsidiary phrases to match each double step. The sense of closure and hence the measuring out of the music in physical, visual and audible dimensions belongs entirely to the Early Modern world of dance aesthetics.

Eighty percent of the dance descriptions published in 1651, use the term ‘double’, and these doubles consistently use two bars. The remaining 20% do not appear to form a separate category (with the possible exception of *Prince Rupert's March*) and certainly can be readily danced with the double. Of the tunes to which the country dances are set in 1651, all are in duple or compound duple metre, so the double is evenly-paced in all the dances. Tunes in compound duple metre dominate the collection in a ratio of 2:1, which is the rhythm of the courante. This accords with Thomas Morley's account of 1597:

Like unto this (but more light) be the voltes and courantes, which being both of a measure are notwithstanding danced after sundry fashions, the volte rising and leaping, the courante trevising and running, in which measure also our country dance is made, though it be danced after another form than any of the former.¹⁷

Here he is alluding to the special position of the country dance in the European repertoire as being composed of figures. These require a dancer to cover a specific distance within the musical strain. The measured double of the pavan and almain with the restrained decorum of the age is not conducive to covering ground, and is clearly inadequate for the completion

of many figures in the dances of 1651. However, when the double is hopped, as in the courante step and the hopped variants of the almain and branle, the distance covered can be doubled without losing decorum. If a literal measure is taken, then the pavan double of three walking paces and a closure covers approximately four feet, whilst the hopped double of three skips and a jump can cover eight feet. This is sufficient to complete all the figures of dances in *The English Dancing Master* of 1651, including such challenging passages as the single hay in two doubles of *Maiden Lane*. Morley's word 'trevising', meaning 'to cross and recross', links in to this key activity of dancing figures, whilst a contemporary definition (1616): 'to move the feet with proportion, as in dancing'¹⁸ confirms the notion of the measured step as intrinsic to the country dance of 1651.

SIGNS OF CHANGE

All the evidence in the 1651 edition indicates a dance system belonging entirely to the Early Modern period, so we need to examine later editions for signs of a transition to the Modern French style. The fact that the description of the double and single step is reprinted unaltered (albeit bowdlerised later) is unhelpful, and one indication of the deeply conservative nature of the publications, and their lack of sophistication as dance documents. Editions 2–11, covering the years 1652–1703¹⁹ were surveyed, to bring the study up to the period when the French style was well-established in English culture. Attention was paid to new dances added to each edition. From this survey significant patterns emerged, which are summarised below.

1. Disappearance of the term 'double'

From the fifth edition of 1675, no new dance instructions contain the term 'double'.

2. Changes to the country dance structure

- i. At the same time, all new dances are longways for as many as will. No more new dances appear for four, six, or eight dancers or in squares and circles. (With the one exception of *Green Stockens* longways for 8.)
- ii. The triple formula of leading, siding and arming now comes under pressure, making a last appearance in the sixth edition of 1679.
- iii. The triple formula is essentially an honouring process, and a new alternative formula is devised for some longways dances added to the third edition of 1665. Varied combinations of honours, leading to the Presence, setting and arming are given as the opening to a longways dance. These formulae are best performed with a double step to fit the music, although no clear instruction is given. This alternative formula runs alongside the triple formula in the new dances in the third and fourth editions of 1665 and 1670, and continues into the fifth and sixth editions of 1675 and 1679, when the triple formula has disappeared from new dances. This phenomenon seems essentially a transitional device, fulfilling the ceremony of the triple formula in the context of a longways dance for as many as will.
- iv. A significant number of dances from 1651 are dropped from the editions of 1690–1698 by Henry Playford. This seems to indicate that the dances are no longer of interest to his clientele.

3. A case-study

It is interesting to see the changes exemplified in a pair of dances composed to the same tune. These are *The Maid in the Moon* (fourth edition 1670) and *Valentine's Day* (sixth edition 1679). *The Maid in the Moon* as a round for six, with the triple formula of leading, siding and arming, and employing the term 'double' is an Early Modern dance. *Valentine's Day* as a longways for as many as will, with an alternative honouring formula and no mention of the double is more Modern. Concordances to *Valentine's Day* in Lorin and Feuillet show the use of French steps and the fleuret of one bar for the figures of the dance. The two dances were published together in the editions of 1679 and 1686, after which *Maid in the Moon* was left out.²⁰

4. French metres in *The Dancing Master*

Early indications of the employment of French dance tunes in England are provided by the supplement of French dance tunes added to the third edition of 1665 comprising gavottes, bourées and the triple-time courante, followed by an advertisement for *Apollo's Banquet* in the seventh edition of 1686. Country dances in French metres appear in the eighth edition of 1690 (e.g. *A Paspe*, *A New Rigadoon*, *Mr. Lane's Minuet* and *A New Bourée*). Further exemplars appear from time to time in editions up to 1701, then disappear in editions up to and including 1728. These provide clear indication of the acceptance of French elements into the English dance form.

5. Appearance of British triple-time metres

The possibility that the change from performing a travelling step in two bars to a step in one bar was part of a wider trend than merely a surrender to French fashion, led me to consider the use of British triple time metres in the country dance, in contrast to the earlier dominance of the duple metres.

The first lone appearance of a triple-time hornpipe is in the third edition of 1665; others follow from the sixth edition of 1679 onwards, along with the triple time jig today called the slip-jig. This is contemporary with the other changes outlined above.

The Early Modern double with its four strong beats cannot be used for the three strong beats of the triple-time strains. (Although it can be adapted for six minim beats as in the galliard.) So the use of triple-time tunes in hornpipe and slip-jig for country dances may have assisted the use of the fleuret. This does not preclude the use of native steps in jigs and hornpipes for which only sketchy evidence remains. It is worth noting here that the compound duple metre of the Modern era is no longer the courante but the jig, a dance metre thoroughly embedded in popular British culture.

6. English dances in other sources

- i. The dances recorded by Lorin²¹ in 1686 demonstrate his notion that the French repertoire of steps, including the fleuret and pas de bourée, were suitable for the country dance. He may, of course, have substituted these steps for his French clientele.
- ii. The concordances in Playford's editions to the dances recorded by Lorin are found between 1675 and 1698. As Lorin claims to have observed the dances in England, this gives a putative early date of 1675 for the first sighting of French steps in the country dance repertoire.

- iii. Concordances for the country dances published by Feuillet range between 1670 and 1690. Although we do not know how Feuillet acquired his information, this provides evidence of the French style being associated with the English country dance from 1670. Moreover, *La Nouvelle Figure* includes one variant of the alternative honouring formula of the period 1665–1679.
- iv. The later two Inns of Courts manuscripts of Mr. Butler Buggins of the Inner Temple were probably compiled between 1672 and 1675, and the dance information of the second manuscript is matched with music. This shows that the double step is still being performed to two groups of two semibreves (or bars), in full agreement with Morley’s description of 1597.

FINDINGS

If the above information is collated into a chart, then it becomes apparent that transition starts in the decade of 1670–1679, and is resolved across the decade 1680–1689.

Information on the double step itself runs out from the third edition of 1675. It would be naive to propose that the step was not still in use, just because the publisher does not mention it. It was still required by the older dances that were continuously reprinted and formed the bulk of each new edition. Even the new dances can be performed with the double step: *Valentine’s Day* for example, is readily danced with the Early Modern double. There must have been several years of overlap between the old and new way. However, the circumstantial evidence for the assimilation of the Modern French method by 1690 is strong.

It is clear that *The English Dancing Master* of 1651 and *The Dancing Master* of 1652 are documents recording unchanged Early Modern dance practice. Small changes begin to occur with the third edition of 1665, with a significant clustering of changes between 1670 and 1690. This might be explained in terms of the effects of political instability in the 1640s and 1650s leading to cultural stagnation, with a fashionable lead given by the restored monarch from 1660, and a fuller acceptance of French technique achieved by 1690.

Such findings may come as no surprise to those who work with reconstructing the country dance as a historical form. They can now be confident in using the measured double in dances from 1651, 1652 and new dances using the term in editions up to 1675. The music edition by Jeremy Barlow²² facilitates the identification of these, and has been of great assistance in preparing this paper. The fleuret can be considered for new dances added to collections from 1675, and with absolute confidence for dances from 1690 onwards, as the transition from Early Modern to Modern was accomplished.

The subject cannot be closed without acknowledging a deliberate omission to the discussion so far. While Feuillet and Essex note the use of the pas de bourée, they insist that demi-contretemps or ‘little hoppes are more in fashion’²³. This needs to be now set beside the findings above that the hopped double is necessary for most figures of the Early Modern country dance. It seems then that the skipped step is much more important to the country dance than we have been prepared to accept, either in its measured form of the courante double or in its unmeasured form of demi-contretemps. It also makes plain an interesting degree of continuity alongside change. As we contemplate the necessity for a far greater aerobic dimension to our execution of the seventeenth century country dance, Playford’s dedication to the ‘sweet and *ayry* Activity’ of the young gentlemen of the Inns of Court takes on its true significance.

SIGNS OF CHANGE 1650 - 1710

Decade	1650	1660	1670	1680	1690	1700	1710
Feature							
1. Use of the term 'double'	_____			75			
2. Longways dances only			75	_____			
3. Triple honours formula	_____			70			
4. Alternative honours formula		65	_____		79		
5. Dropping of many 1651 dances					90	_____98	
6. <i>Maid in the Moon</i>			70	_____			90
7. <i>Valentine's Day</i>				79	_____		
8. French metre dances					90	_____01	
9. Hornpipes and slip-jigs		65		79	_____		
10. Lorin: visit and manuscript				80	_____85		
11. Lorin & Feuillet dances in Playford			70	_____			98
12. Inns of Court mss.	_____			72			

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