

**On Common Ground 3: John Playford and the English Dancing Master, 1651**

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**COUNTRY DANCING IN THE FRENCH STYLE  
AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The objective of this paper is to give an illustration of how Playford<sup>1</sup> country dances might have been danced in England at the beginning of the eighteenth century using French steps.

This paper was particularly designed for those who are not familiar with the French Baroque dance repertoire. The dance steps and style were illustrated by members of Greensleeves. I wish to thank Alan & Brenda Hartley-Smith, Christine Bailey, Anne Parkinson, Pauline Duncan-Austwick and Paul Kent for their performance; and Paul Kent for the step demonstration, and the musical arrangements and recordings.

**COUNTRY DANCING IN FRANCE**

During the second half of the of the seventeenth century, French dancing masters took certain English country dances for their own use. Dezais<sup>2</sup> published a collection of contradances in 1712, in which he says, (translation) :

‘The contradances are certain dance sequences which can be repeated over and over again, and which are done by however many people are present at an Assembly. This type of dance was invented by the English and it is from them that it spread to all other nations of Europe with the result that various people, well-versed in the dance have composed new ones and have worked in the same style.’

Dezais goes on to list dance titles and the composers of dances in his collection and finishes by saying of the dances :

‘The others came to me from England and have been composed by people whose names are unknown to me’

Most of these other titles are recognisable as dances from the Playford collections. Dezais finishes his introduction :

‘I would have recalled here the rules of choreography, but they are explained in depth in Monsieur Feuillet’s *Recueil des Contradances*. There you will find an ample explanation of everything relating to various figures of the dance, the different dispositions of the feet, hands and arms, and general discussions of all kind of steps which are used in the contradances’

**Feuillet’s writings.**

In 1700, Raoul-Auger Feuillet published his *Choreographie*<sup>3</sup> ‘or the art of describing the dance by characters, figures and demonstrative signs, from which one easily learns in the same way all sorts of dances.’ This is a most important document as it made possible the recording, in full, of dance steps and movements, by the use of symbols and lines. However, to realise these symbols from the page, it is necessary to refer to the descriptive dance manuals, especially *Le Maitre à danser*<sup>4</sup> by Pierre Rameau published in Paris in 1725.

Feuillet's notation was firstly used to record ballroom dances, but in 1706 he published his *Recüeil de Contredances*<sup>5</sup> using a simplified form of the notation. In the introduction he says, and I quote from the translation by Essex<sup>6</sup>:

‘Advice concerning the steps that best suit with Country Dances.  
The most ordinary steps in Country Dances (those excepted that are upon Minuet  
Airs) are steps of Gavot, drive sideways, Bourrée steps, and some small Jumps  
forward of either Foot in a hopping manner ; or little hopps in all round Figures.  
And as it is ordinary that every figure of a dance ends at every cadence or end of  
the Aire, it will be proper to make a small Jump upon both Feet.  
In all figures that go forwards and backward, or backwards and forwards, you  
must always make Gavot steps.  
In all figures that go sideways you must always drive sideways  
When it will be required to make other steps such as Rigadoon steps, balancés,  
etc., they shall be marked upon the figures.’

## **DEMONSTRATION OF COMMONLY USED STEPS**

### **Travelling steps**

The bourrée is the primary travelling step in contradances. It is a composed step with 3 foot placements and a rise and fall. It uses 1 bar of music.

The gavot step is a hop, followed by 2 steps and then a little jump bringing feet together. This takes 2 bars of music.

### **Setting steps**

The rigaudon has the same rhythm as the gavot step but is done on the spot.

The balancé is a single step made to the side, normally in pairs, to right and left.

### **Hopping steps**

The little hops and drives sideways both have 2 steps to a bar and finish with a small jump, called an assemblé. It should be noted that the hops occur on the down beat, not the upbeat as in skips.

The steps were demonstrated in Common Time, but the same steps are used in Compound Duple, and Triple Time. The Minuet, however, has its own step.

### **Minuet steps**

These consist of four foot placements in a count of six and each minuet step, therefore, begins on the right foot. One minuet step takes 2 bars of 3/4 music or 1 bar of 6/4. Examples of minuet steps moving forwards, backwards and sideways were shown.

## **FRENCH CONTREDANCES**

In the French Contredances the floor track is shown in the diagrams, which means that many points which are not explicit in Playford dances are here defined, such as which shoulder to meet when performing the ‘siding’ figure, which shoulder to pass when crossing, when to make a polite turn, and which way to turn single.

The notation shows what step to use when ‘setting’ or ‘footing’, when to hold hands, whether one or two hands, for how long, and which hands to clap. Example of this notation is given in figure 1.

The figure consists of four panels, each showing a musical staff and a corresponding dance diagram. The panels are arranged in a 2x2 grid.

- Top-left panel:** Musical staff labeled "100 la Valantine. Pag. 19°". Below the staff is "Fig. 1.ere". The diagram shows two vertical paths of dancers, each starting with a 'D' and ending with a 'P'. Arrows indicate the direction of movement.
- Top-right panel:** Musical staff labeled "la Valantine 101". Below the staff is "Fig. 2.". The diagram shows two horizontal paths of dancers, each starting with a 'D' and ending with a 'P'. Arrows indicate the direction of movement.
- Bottom-left panel:** Musical staff labeled "102 la Valantine.". Below the staff is "Fig. 3.". The diagram shows two paths of dancers that cross each other in a figure-eight pattern, starting with 'D' and ending with 'P'.
- Bottom-right panel:** Musical staff labeled "la Valantine 103". Below the staff is "Fig. 4.". The diagram shows two paths of dancers that cross each other in a more complex pattern, starting with 'D' and ending with 'P'.

Figure 1. Contredance notation  
Notation for La Valantine in Feuillet's *Receuil de Contredance*

The following three examples of French Contredances were demonstrated by the dance group Greensleeves.

### **La Valantine, Feuillet 1706**

Both music and choreography closely follow that of the Playford dance *Valentine's day* which first occurs in the supplement to 6<sup>th</sup> edition of 1679.

This dance was shown commencing with full honours to the presence and partners.

### **La Gentilly, Dezais 1712**

In this dance two different setting steps are used at the same time, it being specified that the 1<sup>st</sup> couple do the balancé whilst the 2<sup>nd</sup> couple rigaudon, and vice versa.

### **La Baptistine, Dezais 1712**

This interpretation uses the little hops rather than bourrée steps for the all round turns, giving a lively characteristic to the dance.

## **ENGLISH COUNTRY DANCES**

Why use the French steps and style in English country dances? That there was knowledge of the French style in London is clear from the translations into English of the French dance texts. Feuillet's *Choregraphie* 1700 was translated by John Weaver<sup>7</sup> in 1706. From Feuillet's *Receuil de Contredances*, the figures, steps, and manner of performing were translated by John Essex in 1710, who used this system to describe his own collection of country dances. Rameau's treatise *Maitre à Danser* published in Paris in 1725, was translated by Essex<sup>8</sup> in London in 1728. Contemporary with Rameau, Kellom Tomlinson in England wrote his full treatise on step performance, *The Art of Dancing*,<sup>9</sup> in 1724, although it was not published until 1735.

The Playford collections show French influence towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century; French titles appear in the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> editions, for example, where one finds *Rigadoon*, *Passepied*, *Mr Lane's Minuet*, and *The New Bourée*. Though Playford generally provides little information about the steps to be used, there are some clues, and indeed some quite specific requirements, such as in the case of Minuets where one is expected to do the minuet step.

The following four dances have been selected from the Playford collections and interpreted for performance in the French style.

### **The More the Merrier, Playford 9<sup>th</sup> edition (9A) 1696**

This dance has simple floor patterns and shows the use of the bourée step and the gavot step.

### **Rigadoon, Playford 14<sup>th</sup> edition 1709 ( first appeared in 7<sup>th</sup> edition (7C) 1689 )**

Dezais's collection includes a dance entitled Rigaudon d'Angleterre, which uses the same tune and slightly different choreography. Hence, I've used this as a guide when selecting steps to put in the Playford version. A facsimile of the Playford dance is given in figure 2, and a full description of the dance in figure 3.

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Rigadoon. *Longways for as many as will.*



The two w. fall back, and the two men fall back at the same time, then all four meet, and hands a-cross half round, and fall back again, then all four meet, and hands a-cross, and go half round into their places.

The 1. and 2. man set, the w. do the like, then the 2. man cast off into the 2. w. place, and the 1. man cast off into the 1. w. place, then the two w. set and do the like, then both cl. turn their own Partners, and the 1. cl. cast off and set to their Partners and turn their own Partners again, then the 1. man set to the 2. man, and the 1. w. to the 2. w. then all four meet and clap hands, and hands quite round.

Figure 2. Country dance notation  
*The Dancing Master*, Playford 14th Edition, 1709

**Mr Lane's Trumpet Minuet, Playford 9<sup>th</sup> edition (9A) 1696**

This is one of the earliest minuets recorded in the Playford collection. It is specified that it is to be danced with the minuet step.

**Prince George's Birthday, Dancing Master Vol. II 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1713<sup>10</sup>**

Here the Courante step is used<sup>11</sup>. Although not specified for this dance in the text, another triple-time dance, Lady Mary's Courant in 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the Dancing Master Vol II states: 'This Dance should be done with the Courant Step if the Company can do it.' For the setting step in Prince George's Birthday I have selected the bourée en place.

**CONCLUSION**

This demonstration has given some insight into the possibility of incorporating the French style into Playford dances, and will, I hope, encourage others to enjoy Playford dances in this way.

**RIGADOON Playford 14<sup>th</sup> edition, 1709****Longways for as many as will**

	Bars**	Figure	Steps
A1	1-2	Two men & two women fall back on sides	gavot step
	3-4	Come forward to meet all four in a star	bourée steps
	5-6	Right hands across half round	bourée steps
	7-8	Cast left into places*	bourée steps
A2	1-2	Two men & two women fall back on sides	gavot step
	3-4	Come forward to meet all four in a star	bourée steps
	5-6	Right hands across half round	bourée steps
	7-8	Cast left into places*	bourée steps
B	1-2	Two men face and set to right and to left	balancé
	3-4	Two women face and set to right and to left	balancé
	5-6	Men cast away from each other into partners' places, while women cross into mens' places	bourée steps
	7-8	Women face and set to right and to left	balancé
	9-10	Men face and set to right and to left	balancé
	11-12	Women cast away from each other, while men move across, all returning to their original places	bourée steps
C1	1-4	Two men make two hand turn clockwise, while two women do likewise*	bourée steps
C2	1-4	Partners make two hand turn clockwise	bourée steps
D1	1-2	1 <sup>st</sup> couple cast into 2 <sup>nd</sup> place	bourée steps
	3-4	1 <sup>st</sup> couple set	rigaudon
	5-8	1 <sup>st</sup> couple two hand turn clockwise, finishing facing 2 <sup>nd</sup> couple	bourée steps
D2	1-2	1 <sup>st</sup> man set to 2 <sup>nd</sup> man, 1 <sup>st</sup> woman set to 2 <sup>nd</sup> woman	rigaudon
	3-4	All four meet and clap	gavot step
	5-8	Four hands circle once round to progressed places	drives sideways & assemble

\* Dance figures added to fill the music.

\*\* Bars counted from modern transcription. Playford has bars of double this length and shifted bar lines, which follows the Louis Couperin<sup>10</sup> original.

**Figure 3. Rigadoon: a realisation of a Playford dance in the French style**

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