

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

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LORIN AND PLAYFORD: CONNECTIONS AND DISPARITIES

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In the late 1680s the dancing master A[ndré] Lorin produced two manuscripts which were kept in the French royal library and are now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. They are the first evidence of the importation to the continent of the fashionable country dances of England. The first manuscript, the *Livre de Contredance présenté Au Roy*, MS fr. 1697, is dated 1685; the second, *La Contredance du Roy, Présenté A Sa Majesté*, MS fr. 1698, carries two dates: 1688 and 1721 (1688 the date of the dedication to Louis XIV, and 1721 the date of a subsequent rededication to Louis XV).

The first manuscript contains a manual on country dancing and notations of thirteen contredances, nine of them concordant with dances in John Playford's seventh edition of *The Dancing Master* of 1686; (another, Irish Gigue, is probably of British provenance); it is this manuscript that concerns us here. The second manuscript contains a second edition of Lorin's manual of instructions and just one contredance from the first manuscript, "Christchurch Bells," which gives in far greater detail than before four complete runthroughs of the first dance; it is dedicated in both manuscripts to Louis XIV, and the second version is completed with lovely illustrations of the precise order of bowing before and after the dance.

Both manuscripts are, according to Lorin himself, the direct result of Louis XIV's specific request that Lorin go to England to bring back the most beautiful country dances he can find. That all the dances in the first manuscript were dedicated to members of Louis' private circle proves that, just as in England a century earlier, they were considered appropriate to be danced by French royalty and the highest-ranking nobility.

Unlike all the known English sources of country dance prior to 1700, however, Lorin's manuscripts include designated steps; their abbreviations here designate twelve specific step-patterns that are also basic to the Feuillet/Beauchamps notation of 1700 (e.g., *pas de bourée*). The lecture/workshop's purpose, in part, was to answer a key question resulting from this fact: "What do the manuscripts of the 1680s tell us about how the English performed country dances?"

With copies of Lorin's version of "Christchurch Bells" in hand, then, the class learned the chief elements of the notation, and attempted to put the designated steps into the figures of the first part of the dance. A small demonstration group showed how attractive the dance could be with those steps.

I then discussed the bad news that Lorin tells us that he added the steps to the dances, because the "English do the steps they please," improvising in this regard, and the result is not to French taste. It would appear, then, that Lorin's more specific notation does not add to our knowledge of what English country dances were like in England in 1685. That Lorin says the English "do steps" does not, in fact, tell us what steps they do nor how to do them.

¹ Julia Sutton is editor-in-chief of a publication project which is nearing completion, a facsimile reprint of the original MS 1697 of the Bibliothèque Nationale, with scholarly commentaries, a full transcription and translation of the original, and bibliography. Her collaborators are Christine Helwig, Kitty Keller, Leonore Loft, Carol Marsh, Maureen Needham, and Francis Worrell. The work she presents here incorporates some of their findings. Publication will be by Pendragon Press.

We may infer that the large number of the English nobility at the time of the Restoration who had been reared in France and trained by French dancing masters knew French steps; just how and whether they transferred them to English dance remains unknown.

I then summarized the great significance, in other respects, of Lorin's manuscripts in dance history.

1. The manuscripts are the very first written evidence we have marking the beginning of the importation of country dances from England to the continent by order of Louis XIV; Louis himself, in fact, eager for more of the dances which had been introduced to his court by Mr. Isaac a few years earlier, placed this 'new' style of dance on the continent of Europe. The contredance and its descendants (such as the quadrille) then rode in on a wave of popularity that persisted for two centuries.
2. The manuscripts are written in a notation that is the first known version of what is now called Feuillet-Beauchamps notation: it has the same layout on the page (squares or oblongs containing diagrams of the paths of the dance), the same conflation of elements so that the reader may see how music and dance go together, the same step vocabulary (the step-pattern abbreviations given directly below the notes to which they apply). Still to come, however, are the signs that show the direction of the body and the steps, the signs for the dancers' genders, and signs for the step-patterns which show exactly what the feet do. These technical improvements were apparently developed between 1688 and 1700, when the finished notation appears in Feuillet.
3. In the first manuscript, all three dances that are not concordant with English sources call for pas de menuet. This is the first reference to the standard minuet step-pattern in a dance source. One of the three dances, in fact, Menuet Anglois, is the first choreography entitled minuet that we have. That it is a menuet contredancé rather than a danse à deux (i.e., it is danced progressively in country dance position, with lines of gentlemen and ladies facing each other rather than as a solo couple dance) suggests that this type of minuet came into existence at least as early as the solo couple version (in fact, we have no solo couple version prior to this dance). It must be pointed out, nevertheless, that none of the three dances resembles the 18th c. minuet in its figures, even though the latter uses standard figures of a 16th-c. balletto in a standard sequence.
4. The first manuscript, finally, contains the first known dances specifically composed for children. The Menuet Anglois is for the four-year-old duc de Bourgogne, grandson of Louis XIV. There is little doubt that Lorin, at least, took it for granted that the little duc would perform this dance with all due manners, surrounded by his grandfather's relatives and friends. The choreography clearly demonstrates the importance attached to observing a little prince, and the absolute necessity of his showing social graces and excellent manners at court at an early age. In addition, in the first manuscript the Contredanse Nouvelle was dedicated to the 10-year-old Elizabeth-Charlotte, daughter of Prince Philippe, brother of Louis XIV, and his second wife Elizabeth-Charlotte of Bavaria.

In the case of both these choreographies, Lorin has clearly attempted to keep them quite simple.

Throughout his collection Lorin does not mention Playford nor any English dancing master. It does seem, however, that he might have made steady use of the directions from Playford's editions of *The Dancing Master* (1651 to 1728). The dances concordant with those in Playford are recognizably close to their models, but not necessarily identical to

them. It is clear that if he used Playford Lorin made ‘improvements’ as he saw fit. A very good example of such deliberate improvement occurs in “Christchurch Bells”, the second half of strain A, when Lorin changes the leading person from Gentleman 2 (in Playford) to Lady 1. He does not speak of this, nor call attention to it in any way. The change could be due to his wish to follow protocol more sedulously than Playford: that is, to honor Lady 1 rather than Gentleman 2 immediately after having honored Gentleman 1, for it is the first couple who summon the others to dance! Would a mere matter of protocol require that he change the dance? Yes indeed! In Playford’s version, the following sections of the dance are not clearly correlated with the music, but Lorin obviously does not follow Lorin’s lead here.

8*

Strain A^{<1,2>}

1. *Country Dance for His Majesty:*

Diagram 1

Diagram 2

Diagram 3

Diagram 4

⁽¹⁾ This line of notation is for Diagram 4.