

Dancing the Barbarian

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Introduction

The sources for Il Canario present this dance in a variety of ways. Caroso and Negri make it a conventional couple dance in the noble style, while for Arbeau it is predominantly a masquerade number and Lupi offers a solo Canario. Steps for the Canario are unique to the dance: Caroso links them to dancing in the Canary Islands, while Arbeau writes of stamping and scraping steps as if killing a spider. This workshop will explore the possible ethnic origins of the Canario. Was it linked to the canary Isles? Was it Spanish? It will also investigate the dance in the context of the exotic or forbidden. Was there a connection with the Renaissance idea of the “Barbarian”?

Arbeau and The Canary

Our earliest known description of the dance is in the *Orchesographie* of 1589 in which Arbeau confidently asserts the theatrical nature and context of the dance:

“it derives from a ballet composed for a masquerade in which the dancers were dressed as kings and queens of Mauretania, or else like savages in feathers dyed to many a hue”.¹

Arbeau’s dancers present a common pattern of a man and his partner alternating passages, advancing and retreating but he is keen to stress their execution as “strange and fantastic with a strong barbaric flavour”.² Steps include heel and toe beats, stamps and the *Ru de Vache* (an embryonic *Fioretto a piedi pari* or a *Rigadon*) which he notes is rarely used except in The Canary. He offers an even more flamboyant variation in which

“one can make a very high greve and finish it by scraping the foot backwards along the ground as if one were treading down spittle or killing a spider”.³

Such imagery could not fail to inspire dramatic display in the most reluctant performer.

Caroso and Negri and Il Canario

At the end of the 16th century Caroso and Negri offer versions of the dance which echo the basic pattern of advance and retreat but the variations or mutanze become increasingly complex. They are choreographed primarily for the ballroom, presenting a vibrant and challenging display between the sexes. Both treatises continually stress the need for pavoneggiarsi, for graceful rising and lowering of the body, of nimble agile steps all created through subtle elegant use of the body. Advice on execution is diplomatically suggested through avoidance of bad habits. Caroso frequently advocates the avoidance of “brutta usando” that is, clumsy or ugly footwork. But his instructions for Il Canario require a unique execution of steps. He employs specific verbs in their description and their titles to reinforce their dynamics; STRASSCIARE – to drag, dragging your feet, trail, trailing your heels; SCHIACCIARE – to squash, to mash, to crush, to stub out , to hammer, to strike. The basic *Seguito* is transformed by beats and stamps into a *Seguito Battuto*. The *Spezzato* becomes the *Spezzato Schisciato* which exchange lilting elegant steps for those formed by crushing, scraping and

dragging the feet. There is a suggestion Caroso met with resistance to this form of dancing. Instead of his polite request for good practice, he hints at exasperation

“ Et questi Seguiti si dimandano schisciati, perche nel fargli, sempre si schiano, o strascinano i piedi”.⁴

He demands the steps in the Canario are always to be done so. And although he does not give the imagery of a spider, his sixth and final mutanza in *Il Ballarino* contains a splendid finale, a battery of sliding, stamping and scraping with which to squash a very Italian tarantula.

Lupi and the solo Canario

This Canario is found in the treatise of Livio Lupi di Carravaggio presented to Don Geronimo del Carretto at the court of Palermo, Sicily in 1607 which was currently under Spanish occupation. Lupi does not provide a Canario for two but offers this one “for those wishing to dance a solo Canario”. By its very nature it is essentially for ultimate display, a single figure alone on the floor. Its inclusion with other dances suggests a non theatrical context. He assumes sufficient knowledge of its form, content and steps which echo those of Caroso. He is aware however of the need for a different sense of execution, a greater clarity of focus and spatial awareness in order to engage the audience. The dance begins and ends with a full *passeggio* circling the dance space and contains mutanze and ritirate. Interpretation could suggest the circling of the space between each of the mutanze as well as a grand finale. The whole offers an opportunity for a bravura display of steps and style. Solo dances were known in the ballroom repertoire, particularly in the Galliard which offered challenging variations for the aspiring male courtier. There is no mention of solo dances for the noble lady. This does not deny their capabilities but would have been a breach of social and cultural decorum. There is mention of a woman giving a solo display in mid 16th century Venice. A young “ballerina et saltarina” called La Ziralda was renowned for her “passi troppi veloce, salti troppo alti, passeggi virtuosistici e gagliarde indialvolte”. Such skilful speed, height and frenzied virtuosity are thought to be different to those advocated by Negri and Caroso and unlikely to have been displayed in the ballroom.⁵

The workshop

The workshop was intended to explore the material from the three different sources. I wanted the participants to bear several questions in mind during the session and in a final discussion:

- Was the Canario a celebration of the Spanish conquest of the Canary Islands? Although they had been for some time a mere stopping place for settlers and adventurers en route to Africa and the New World, by 1500 the Grand Canary along with Palma and Tenerife was secured for and colonised by the crown of Castile. Arbeau acknowledges this may be a possibility. Caroso is certain “che questo nome di canario, l’ha preso da quei che ballano in tal maniera nell’Isola del Canario”.⁶
- Was the dance a genuine attempt to record ethnic dancing? According to Vechellio the best dressed islander wore little more than a loin cloth and feathers. The rugged volcanic terrain and sandy shoreline does not seem conducive to beating and scraping steps.

- How Spanish was the Canario? Are there elements of today's Spanish dance that can be traced back that far? A Spanish dictionary of 1599 refers to little shells that were used to make a noise whilst dancing, or a clapping of hands on the shoes. Florio in 1598 refers to Castagnettes, little shells which make a noise with the fingers in dancing the Canaries. There is reference to the Canario, together with the Folia, Zarabanda and Villano being danced in a social and a performance context in the early 1600s.
- Arbeau stresses the foreign nature of the Canario. Caroso uses steps that are the antithesis of noble perfection. In the realisation of the Canario was there perhaps a manifestation of colonial "otherness"? Europeans were encountering new worlds and new races. In so doing they sought to define themselves by what they were not, not only in the written and spoken word but in public display and "theatrical spectacles of otherness".⁷ Were the Canary islanders regarded with a mix of "benign curiosity" and fear? Were their dances appropriated as such or were they danced to celebrate Spanish need for assertion of superiority over what Greenblatt defines as "emblems of despised otherness"?⁸

I was intrigued by a quotation in a recent history of Spanish dance, *The Bolero School*. Its author Marina Grut refers to a late 18th century book satirising the teaching and performance of the Bolero. She says:

"I recognise that the step known as *matar-la-arana* (killing the spider) may have come to us through the tongue-in-cheek corruption by Rodriguez Calderon in his book *Bolerologia*. He satirises many things in it. Eloy Pericet maintains that there is no such name for this step, but it is called *batararana*. Has this joke perhaps been handed down to posterity and been taken seriously?"

The *batararana* step is still danced today. It can be a free glissade travelling to a corner in which the first foot is released to point in front or in the Sevillanas as a *pas de bouree* ending with a dig of the foot in front. Each offers a more elegant end for a Spanish spider. And perhaps Calderon was closer to the origins of the Canario than he or later dancers realised.

References

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3. As above
4. Caroso, M.F. *Il Ballarino*. Venice, 1581. Facsimile Broude Brothers, New York, 1967.
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6. Caroso, M.F. *Nobilita di Dame*. Facsimile Arnaldo Forni Editore, 1980.
7. Greenblatt, S. (Editor) *The Norton Shakespeare*. Shakespeare's World in The General Introduction. W.W. Norton and Company, New York and London, 2008.
8. As above.
9. Grut, M. *The Bolero School*. Dance Books, London, 2002.