

## Bransles for display?

Ann & Paul Kent

### Introduction

Mention bransles to early dancers and they immediately think of the mimed bransles of Arbeau,<sup>1</sup> and perhaps an image of dancing on a village green. These simple dances are readily accessible, easily learnt, and are a useful introduction to early dance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We perceive these as being danced for the pleasure of doing them rather than as show pieces. Arbeau, however, also reports that all balls began with a suite of four simple bransles. This practice of commencing formal balls with bransles continued throughout the seventeenth century, as recounted by de Lauze,<sup>2</sup> Mersenne,<sup>3</sup> and later, Rameau,<sup>4</sup> who records that such was the practice throughout the reign of Louis XIV, and was still the established form in his day. The bransles documented by de Lauze are obviously more complex than those of Arbeau, though ambiguously described. Despite many other references to the dancing of bransles, there is a dearth of accurate choreographic descriptions. It was therefore of great interest when an anonymous manuscript, *Instruction pour dancer*,<sup>5</sup> was discovered by Uwe Schlottermüller in Darmstadt in 1994.

### Instruction pour dancer les dances cy après nommez

This manuscript has been dated to the first decade of the seventeenth century.

It contains sixteen named dances, but no music. However, Angene Feves, in her research into these dances, found an exact correlation with the titles of pieces in Praetorius' *Terpsichore*.<sup>6</sup> She established that the Duke of Brunswick had asked his dancing master, Anthoine Emeraud, to go to France and make a collection of choreographies and tunes of French dances. These melodies were then given to Praetorius who harmonised them, and produced instrumental settings which he subsequently included in his publication *Terpsichore* in 1612.

*Instruction pour dancer* contains a range of dances, including elementary bransles similar to those found in Arbeau, couple dances and set dances of varying complexity, and three suites of four bransles. Each of the four bransles has two parts, usually with internal repeats. They contain a variety of steps unknown in other sources, and have irregular patterns, or no obvious patterns at all.

### Les quatres bransles de la chappelle

For our workshop we chose this suite of bransles, which is atypically in triple time. With Praetorius' music it has been fairly easy to determine how long each step takes, but style and movement have of necessity been reconstructed from our knowledge and experience of dances from other sources.

The workshop, using our interpretation, gave all the participants opportunity to learn and perform this suite of bransles, and to watch a performance in order to judge whether this suite would have been primarily for display, or simply for participation.

At the conclusion, and bearing out our previous experience, the group found the bransles were very enjoyable to do, but not particularly exciting to watch. The opinion of a seventeenth-century audience, however, may have been quite different. Much concentration is

needed to memorize the sequences, and a significant amount of rehearsal is required before a performance may be given that appears appropriately effortless. This leads us to conclude that the suite was most likely used for display.

Participants appreciated the introduction to an unfamiliar manuscript, and several expressed an interest in taking this further.

Music for this suite of bransles is now commercially available on a CD.<sup>7</sup>

## References

1. Arbeau, Thoinot. *Orchésography*.(1589) translated by Mary Stewart Evans, new ed. J. Sutton. Dover, New York., 1967, pp 128–174.
2. DeLauze, François. *Apologie de la Dance* (1623). Minkoff, Geneva, 1977.
3. Mersenne, Marin. *Harmonie Universelle*. Paris, 1636.
4. Rameau, Pierre. *The Dancing Master* (1725) translated by Cecil Beaumont. Dance Books, Alton, 2003, p.38.
5. *Instruction pour dancer les dances cy après nommez*. Freiburg: fa-gisis, 2000.
6. Praetorius, Michael. *Terpsichore* (1612), hg. von Günter Oberst, (Gesamtausgabe der Musikalischen Werke von Michael Praetorius, XV). Möseler Verlag, Wolfenbüttel, 1960.
7. *Le Bal: Social Dances from the Early Baroque*, I Ciarlatani. 2008. Compact Disc. Christophorus – CHR77295.