

The Royal Danish Masquerade 1803

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In HM The Queen of Denmark's Library is kept a manuscript entitled: "Plan des Marches, Danses, Polonoise et Danse Guerriere, exécutées par toutes les Augustes Personnes de la Famille Royale à la Fête donnée le Vingt huit Fevrier 1803". The manuscript consists of 48 pages containing detailed description of the dances and music performed by members of the royal family and selected members of noble families as well as commoners to entertain the guests at a royal masquerade given by Crown Prince Frederik on behalf of his father, King Christian VII in 1803. The purpose of this short article is not only to tell about the masquerade and the dances, but also to explain the circumstances under which the entertainment was created.

I owe debt of gratitude to Her Majesty the Queen, who has been gracious to grant me permission to work with the manuscript and to teach the dances.

I should also thank Henning Urup, leader of The Danish Dance History Archive, who first drew my attention to this unique manuscript.

The royal family

In 1766 King Christian VII (1749–1766–1808) married Caroline Mathilde (1751–1775), the 15-year old sister of George III of England, and they had a son, Crown Prince Frederik, the later Frederik VI (1768–1808–1839). The king suffered from a mental disease, which increasingly made him unable to carry out his duties, and he did also not care much about his queen. The young queen lived a very lonely life in a cold atmosphere at court, especially because the king's stepmother Queen Juliane Marie (1729–1796), who wanted her own son to become king, was very hostile towards her. The king's doctor, Johan Friedrich Struensee (1737–1772), who came from Germany, was the only person the king trusted, and he therefore had an enormous influence on the king. In fact he ruled the kingdom through the king. The doctor and the young queen fell in love and they had a daughter, Louise Augusta (1771–1843).

Struensee had very modern political ideas, and during a masked ball in 1772 a group of conservative ministers, who had joined with the Queen Dowager Juliane Marie in a conspiracy against him, succeeded in having Struensee arrested and later beheaded. The poor young queen was expelled from Denmark and forced to leave her baby behind; although Struensee was generally known to be her father, the infant Louise Augusta was officially accepted as a princess. She and her older half-brother had a very close relationship, and they performed in the masquerade as the leading dancing couple.

The buildings

In the 1740's, the king's grandfather, Christian VI had the old castle of Copenhagen demolished and a modern palace called Christiansborg erected in its place. This palace was the largest in Northern Europe, and considered the most beautiful. It had a very large and richly decorated hall, well suited for splendid entertainments of royal proportions. Unfortunately, owing to a defective construction of the heating system, this wonderful palace burned down to the ground in 1794, so the royal family had to move.

In a new part of Copenhagen four noble families had built an extraordinary group of four mansions in the 1750's on the site of a small palace, which had also burned down as result of an accident with the light effects of a theatre production. The former palace was called Sophie Amalienborg after a queen, who was – incidentally – very fond of dancing. The new group of buildings, named Amalienborg after the former palace, was the only alternative as a residence in Copenhagen for the royal family after the fire of Christiansborg.

In 1795, the year following the fire of Christiansborg, Copenhagen was ravaged again by a great fire burning down more than half the city. The poor people who had lost their homes were permitted to move into the ruins of Christiansborg, and the royal family liked Amalienborg so much anyway, that they did not want to move out again, and Amalienborg has remained until today the home of the royal family. This explains why our royal palace does not have any rooms of proportions for royal entertainments. The largest room is situated in one of the houses formerly owned by Count Moltke, and even this room, which has remained unchanged since it was built, measures only 14 x 9½ meters. It was in this small room the entertainments at the royal masquerade of 1803 took place.

The masquerade, the dances and the manuscript

The masquerade was originally planned to take place on 28th February 1803, but as the cousin of the crown prince, Duke William Frederick of Gloucester, announced that he wished to visit Copenhagen by the end of March, and the royal family would have to arrange a party for him, it was decided to save money and postpone the masquerade to 28th March and let it be held in honour of the duke. More than 400 guests were invited, a mixed group consisting of the royal family, noblemen and commoners. The furniture were removed, and all the doors in the bel étage were taken away to make room for the many people.

Pierre Jean Laurent (1758–1831) was a son of a French ballet dancer, Pierre Laurent, who in 1752 had come to Copenhagen with his dance troupe and who later became dancing master at court. The young Pierre Jean was sent to France to study with Noverre, and he became the leading grotesque dancer in Paris. In 1800 he returned to Copenhagen, where he became a ballet master, and he created several French-style ballets for the royal ballet. However, he was always overshadowed by the competing ballet master Vincenzo Galeotti (1733–1816), whose Italian-style ballets were very popular. So it was a great opportunity for Laurent, when he was asked to choreograph for the royal masquerade.

As inspiration for the entertainments Laurent had chosen a theme from one of his own ballets, “Sigrid” from 1802, which was based on a legend from the Viking age. The individual dances in the entertainment carry the names of the characters in the ballet. The original ballet had music by Claus Schall (1757–1835), but Laurent, who was also educated as musician, used Schall's music only for two dances, a march and a polonaise, and composed the rest of the music himself. The manuscript contains only the tunes and the somewhat awkward bass lines.

The dances in the manuscript are notated in words and in diagrams beautifully coloured by hand. The men are represented by three-cornered hats with dashing feathers, the ladies by the then fashionable headdress turbans.

When the entertainment began, the strings of the orchestra sat along one side of the room. Playing the march from “Sigrid”, the woodwinds and the brass entered the room followed by the dancers led by the crown prince and his sister. In the first set of four couples

six of the dancers were members of the royal family. Then came a second set of four couples formed by members of noble families and commoners. Last came 16 supernumeraries. All were dressed in richly decorated costumes made for the occasion. The dancers arranged themselves in two square sets on the floor. As the room is indeed very small, it is hard to see how there could possibly have been room for the many onlookers; certainly not everybody would have been able to see the entertainment.

In the two sets the dancers performed the first three of seven dances. The two groups then danced together in a figured polonaise, by the end of which they again formed the two square sets and danced the four last dances. After that the supernumeraries gave swords and shields to the men in the two sets, during the “Bruit de Guerre” the two groups of men challenged each other, and in the following battle dance the men performed various series of blows and changed places in beautiful figures in between. The ladies danced around the fighting men, looking worried. The outcome of the battle was no surprise: the royal family won. However, just before the princes were going to kill the men, the princesses and the ladies rushed in and stopped them, and the whole dance sequence ended with reconciliation in a beautiful tableau. The whole entertainment seems to have lasted three quarters of an hour, and the king was present all the time, which was unusual.

The notation of the dances builds on the standard notation for French country dances set by de la Cuisse, however without the distinctive marks to identify each couple. The text explaining the various figures and steps is written close to each diagram. The whole entertainment can be seen as a pot-pourri of quadrilles with the polonaise inserted halfway, framed by the entry march and the final battle dance. The dances represent an interesting transition form between the cotillion and the quadrille. Each dance begins with a repeated figure done to the AA music; this figure can be seen as a remainder of the change, or verse, of the cotillion form. The chorus consists of a longer figure to the music BA, which is repeated four times, one for each couple to lead, which is the normal form of a quadrille. However, this form is seen in the repertoire of the French cotillions. If used in a regular cotillion, the same bit of choreography would be repeated 36 times, so the form was probably used in pot-pourris only.

The step repertoire is only slightly more complex than what was used in social dances of the period. The basic step is the demi-chassé with a jetté and an assemblé as we know it from quadrilles, but there are also many ballet-like steps like balotté, échapé, soubressaut, glissade, balloné and flicflac.

The dancers had practised quite a lot to learn this lengthy and complicated performance. During the last few weeks before the masquerade they had met with Laurent two or three times each week and practised three to four hours each time. They worked hard – someone noticed that the crown prince had been sweating heavily, which was very unusual for him.

The entertainment came out very successfully, and Louise Augusta who was married to the duke of Augustenborg in South Jutland, asked Laurent to make her a copy of the manuscript to bring back home. The original manuscript carries the date 28th February, i.e. before the performance date was changed, maybe even before Laurent had tried the dances out with dancers. It is interesting to see that he has copied text of the first manuscript exactly – even obvious errors have not been corrected. This could lead to the theory that Laurent had someone else do the copying. The style of the diagrams is somewhat different, but the hand writing is very similar to that of the original manuscript. Owing to the later wars between

Denmark and Germany, the second manuscript is today kept in Schleswig-Holsteinische Landesbibliothek in Kiel, Germany.

As far as we know, the entertainment was never performed again, until the Danish Dance History Archive led by Henning Urup made a reconstruction in 1996. The dances were researched and taught by himself, Flemming Ryberg, solo dancer from the Royal Danish Ballet and me, and it was danced by a group of dance students and amateur dancers. Unfortunately, the Queen could not attend the reconstruction of the great success of her ancestors.

At the DHDS conference one of the dances and the polonaise were taught.

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The content of the entertainment

- 1 Marche
- 2 1st dance: La Syvald
- 3 2nd dance: La Gunhild
- 4 3rd dance: La Sigrid
- 5 Polonaise
- 6 4th dance: L'Insegunde
- 7 5th dance: L'Othar
- 8 5th dance: La Svanvide
- 9 7th dance: La Thorkild
- 10 Bruit de Guerre
- 11 Danse Guerriere
- 12 Fanfare

The structure of the single dances

- A A Change
- B A Chorus, 1st Couple
- B A Chorus, 2nd Couple
- B A Chorus, 3rd Couple
- B A Chorus, 4th Couple