
Book Review

Tilden Russell and Dominique Bourassa, *The Menuet de la Cour*. Terpsichore. Tanzhistorische Studien. Band 4. Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim, 2007. ISBN 978-3-487-13264-8. 212 pp. 39.80 EUR

In this volume, Tilden Russell and Dominique Bourassa trace the history of one dance, the Menuet de la Cour, from its first appearance in an abbreviated form of notation around 1776 all the way to a 'Quadrille Minuet' which presents a much-altered version published as late as 1920. The ballroom duet is best known to most early dance practitioners in the form of Malpied's version of Gardel's choreography, published in Beauchamp-Feuillet notation around 1780, which is acknowledged as the most complete and authoritative. In all, Russell and Bourassa analyse, in great detail, some 45 successive versions of the Menuet de la Cour. They provide facsimile reproductions of a number of the sources, including Malpied's, transcribing others when they deem it more appropriate (or necessary) to do so.

The text begins with an introduction to the minuet in general and an outline of the performance history of the *Menuet de la Cour* (in its different manifestations) from the 1770s to 1953. The second chapter looks closely at the music, paying particular attention to the length of the B section – which in the original version has an unorthodox 19 bars, often lengthened in later arrangements to a more conventional 20 bars. (The 19-bar B section continues to perplex, at least for a few moments, many early dance and early music enthusiasts accustomed to the 2-bar minuet step). Chapter 3 takes a look at 'bibliographic and historiographic problems', addressing the problems of authorship, attribution and dating which affect the choreography and the music as well as the published versions. This chapter acts as an introduction to chapter 4 in which the surviving choreographies of the *Menuet de la Cour* are presented in chronological order 'with detailed commentary' (exactly as promised on p. 31). Chapter 4 occupies some 106 pages, fully half the volume. The text is rounded off with a series of tables, which trace the family relationships between the various versions and provide comparisons between their musical structures and step vocabularies. There is also a series of illustrations ranging from the late 1700s to the late 1800s.

I assume that one purpose of this book is to encourage fresh reconstructions of the various versions of the *Menuet de la Cour*. It is unfortunate, therefore, that so many of the facsimile pages have been reproduced on such a small scale. The Malpied notation, for example, is less than half the size of the original, making it uncomfortable to work with. This is the more regrettable since the authors make clear that in chapter 4 their aim is to emphasize certain aspects of the choreographies in place of 'a description of every step in its musical and spatial context' (p.32). It is a decision doubly difficult to understand, given their admission of a ready agreement in the course of writing to expand chapter 4 'to almost triple the combined length of all the other chapters' (p. xiv) thereby emphasising its importance.

This is very much a book for specialists. It appears to be aimed at scholars who are well-versed in dance or music over part or all of the 150 year period covered by the sources accorded 'detailed commentary'. As a specialist whose knowledge (and interest) is focussed around Malpied's notation of Gardel's choreography, I found much of the text hard going. This is not a book to read, but one to use in conjunction with other period sources for the purposes of research and reconstruction. The bibliography with which the volume ends is of broader interest than the topic of the book, although many of the titles listed will be accessible only to those scholars who are able to make regular use of research libraries. Russell and Bourassa have been fortunate to find a publisher willing to accommodate them without, apparently, insisting on a more general or even a more widely accessible text. The book's greatest value will lie in its ability to stimulate close engagement with these dances and generate dialogue around competing analyses and reconstructions of them. However, I fear that it cannot achieve this for many of the later versions of the *Menuet de la Cour*.

Moira Goff