

THE COUNTRY DANCES

ALAN SALTER

What is it that distinguishes social dances like the historical country dances from 'art' dances, for example contemporary theatrical works? Well, many things of course – the performers and places are different, the very words social and artistic presume a difference¹ in purpose, even admitting that these may draw on each other.

The intimate relationships of the early ballet to 18th century dance exemplifies how social dance elements may be adapted to artistic content and purpose: in the 17th century jig and masque illustrate transformations of the social. The art of dance in our present culture is largely independent of social forms, though it may draw on them for reasons of subject-matter trivial or substantial (e.g. scenes in ballets such as *Graduation Ball*; *The Shakers*; *The Big City*). This independence arises either through evolution or, in the case of the 'modern dance' styles, directly through a largely separate origin.

The 'art dance' is invented as a whole by its choreographer and may contain no move identical in another work. Often, of course, works share a common basis of 'technique' or there is deliberate use of, or allusion to, recognisable elements – but it is the principle that matters here. All the movements and their temporo-spatial relationship may be novel, the whole unique and expressive. By comparison, it may be felt, social dances are typically familiar in structure, even codified.

Historical dances may be said to be expressive but this is often to use the word in a rather different way. We might say that a 19th century polka expresses something of the enthusiasm of nationalism, but this is to see it in the light of knowledge outside the dance itself. There is nothing in the polka step as movement which is so expressive, though a knowledge of history and of related dance forms may enable us to make appropriate deductions even if we do not remember the contingent factors of its popularity. (In the general case that 'nothing' would be not overstatement but error, for movement content is not arbitrarily assigned to social labels; though the basis of the association is much less manifest than it is through the intention of the choreographed dance.)

Expression in its more homely sense related to the performer is sometimes implied in Playford's *English Dancing Master*, which contains a variety of kinds of dance and not only 'the country dances' (assuming these can be reasonably clearly defined). Included are dance games which only make sense if the dancers are adding some expression of their own – in *New Bo-Peep* partners 'peep' over each others shoulders presumably flirtatiously.

These general comments serve to introduce some thoughts about the study of historical dances. One aspect of this which has received deserved attention is the careful examination and appraisal of source material – textual, visual, musicological, notational – to reach the best possible reconstruction.

Dancers then and dancers now are, if in the same costume, roughly alike in their movement characteristics and we can to some extent correct for features we have good reason to believe different (whether such direct matters as pace, or more diffuse influences such as self-concept). These deliberate efforts are a further aspect which can supplement a sense of period style built up intuitively by such immersion in the period as can be contrived.

The dance itself also has to make some kind of sense in relation to contemporary forms and to dances believed related though anterior or posterior in time. Attempts to trace such relationships are always interesting – the small square for two couples has been seen as a foundation for Playford's dances and Wood² many years ago connected such dances as *Parson's Farewell* to the earlier *Anello*. Here deliberate analysis obviously helps and I will try and illustrate in a specific and simple way some earlier comments.³

Living dances are learned by some mixture of 'just picking it up as you go along' and teaching of varying formality. Teenagers learn, indeed create, disco styles and their rationale may be quite tacit. In learning historical dances one has the full benefit of hindsight and mere demonstration and copying is a weak procedure.⁴

Someone who 'knows all the steps' can sometimes be adequately instructed by merely naming them and hoping that such matters as the play of relationships and the very feel of the dance will be discovered in the doing. The dance of the first few editions of Playford (say 1650-1671), which I take as characteristic here, merges later into a more sophisticated and appearance-conscious repertoire for larger social assemblies. The earlier dances have a certain ease which suited for example 'domestic performance.'⁵ The appellation 'country' does not entail coarseness, and even at

court where the Restoration introduced some French dances these never supplanted the English forms – as Pepys records ‘then to country dances, the King leading the first, which he called for, which was, says he, “Cuckolds All Awry, the old dance of England”.’ For purposes of study not only ‘expressive’ features need to be clarified but also such basics as the movement content, the actual nature of the steps, and the dance structure.

A system for descriptive purposes (and here I am distinguishing ‘bringing under a description’ from what is better called ‘prescription’, stating how to do it) needs to meet certain criteria if it is to enable us to compare and contrast the variety of dances and discern processes of change. One cannot do this using a terminology appropriate to only one cluster of dances. The necessary means must be neutral, adequate and economical: that is, not in terms peculiar to any one style, able to be applied sufficiently to all dances, and not so laborious or eccentric as to be impractical.

So far as movement content goes there is probably no such thing as an ideal solution, labanalysis presently offering a reasonable and workable method. It is, interestingly, the more difficult cases that seem to provoke anything like such analysis in dance historical study. (Fig.1. Please treat all the figures as highly tentative and as organised in terms of concepts and not historical facts. For example where relationships are indicated no case is also presented for historical sequence.)

The attempt to make a plausible reconstruction of some dance mentioned in source material in passing comparison with better known dances may invite such thinking – or, to take an even more extreme case, the making of a ‘hypothetical construct’, a dance supposed to exist because such a ‘missing link’ would make historical sense.

Such cases are clearly difficult and the methods of reconstruction have not perhaps developed a discipline comparable, say, to an archaeologist’s approach to physical artifacts. Part of the trouble of course is the elusiveness of the dance material. Such writing as there is generally assumes all sorts of contemporary knowledge. That literary criticism became descriptive only after legislative and theoretical phases does not prevent us starting, in that case, from scratch with the texts themselves: but any similar approach to writing in dance further weakens the already doubtful capacity of words to convey movement.⁶

It is easy to find oneself studying language rather than dance – as the ‘hey’ leads one a winding figure around *raye*, *hey*, *hoy*, *faire la haie*, *hydeggy*, *hay-de-guize* and so on.

The matter of structure is perhaps rather easier. This aspect I would like to illustrate by referring to English ‘country dances’ of the 17th century, the Playford dances. In part this choice is purely accidental,⁷ but other reasons are more sensible. For one thing, Elizabeth’s ‘dancing English’ became, with the country dances, a substantial influence on the development of dance abroad – as Dean-Smith and Nicol put it ‘the products so crystallised needed only to be polished and multiplied for export.’⁸

An interesting question is how much this polishing, multiplying and writing down for publication may have promoted the other reason for selection here: that is, the relative similarity and orderliness of the structures of the dances.

At any rate these dances would seem to provide a good collection on which to make a study of structure and its variations. Certain kinds of variation are plausible in principle (substitution, deletion, repetition, sequence-changing etc.) and these and the ground plan itself could form the subject of a structural study.

To begin with basics. Almost all these dances are done with doubles as the building-brick (with some substitution, e.g. two simples in setting). So quantitatively they are multiples of 4. Typically doubles occur in groups of 4 (e.g. siding with partner then with opposite, 4 almain doubles to progress) so a typical dance is in multiples of 4 x 4.

Hunsdon House, a persistently published dance, has a chorus (4 doubles) which is equivalent for all four dancers, and this chorus being in a square has itself a four-fold symmetry. The intervening figures are all built of blocks of 4 doubles and spatial and temporal repetition quadruples this (first then second couples on one side of the square, repeat on other side): so such figures are 4 x 2 x 2. The whole dance, chorus and figures might be written $A B^1 A B^2 A B^3$.

Even this literal code is interesting because it is unbalanced (compare ABA) and is temporally ‘progressive’. Remembering that some country dances are called progressive because⁹ the action spreads through the company (spreading in the dimensions of time, space, dancers: Fig.2) it might seem that a characteristic structure is of alternating blocks, overallly progressive in some way.

In another dance, Mage on a Cree, the overall structure might be written $A^1 B^1 A^2 B^2 A^3 B^3$, both the A and B elements showing substitutability and contributing to a sense of progression. Partly this lies in the ‘dancer dimension’ for in B^1 and B^2 men and women dance in succession

whereas in B³ all dance continuously. But chiefly it lies in the movement itself. One aspect of the action seems to show augmentation throughout and that is what might be called turnyness, roundaboutness, circularity. (Fig.3)

Clearly study of structure cannot be pursued without the means of distinguishing contents. The various figures that are created on the basic quantitative unit of the double themselves can be seen as forming a related set with degrees and kinds of similarity in movement. The 'doubles to change places and return' idea, for example, is extended in the dance 'Picking of Sticks' to involve two couples, one common partner in effect carrying the movement further. (Fig.4)

In general the European social and folk dances do show clarity and regularity of structure. There has been, and is, dancing of which this is not true (medieval 'dance mania', dance within a 'gypsy' style, dramatic dance forms, free moving individuals like the 'Oss dancing with set groups, etc.) but of much dance it is the case. And such set forms obviously have an advantage in terms of historical survival. Regularisation is manifested in forms as diverse as basse dance and modern ballroom, and the tension between tradition and change which underlies it, and the tension between skill and informality, contribute to the maintenance of social dance as a whole.

How far then can the notion of a codified structure, even of an underlying central formula, be pushed? Its seeming inapplicability to the sophisticated 'art' dance may, contrarily, suggest its strength in the social field. Does it make any sense to envisage the country dances, for example, as variations around a single formula? It is not necessary that any single source dance exist (and in this case it seems most improbable, but there obviously can be cases in which a single dance, perhaps imported, gives rise to a family). The interest is conceptual rather than historical in the ordinary sense, for to understand such a formula and its variation would give a special kind of insight into the contemporary society.

This kind of approach of structural study has severe theoretical problems but some strengths.

Now I have been speaking as though these 17th century country dances were undoubted in their reconstructions and historically had unity of occurrence (time, place, group), which are rough assumptions.

When we are able to be more precise about such things, precisely then it is we become more interesting. What may be seen as a conceptual exercise, a classification of some use to the modern learner of the dances and pedagogically convenient, becomes then a possible instrument for comparative and developmental studies in dance history.

NOTES

The important qualifier on the figures in respect of their tentativeness and conceptual rather than historical base warrants repeating.

1. The historical distinction has often been less clear – Mabel Dolmetsch draws attention to the conveyance of 'an idea of the subtleties of style and histrionic effects which reveal (a dance's) individual character' (in *Dances of Spain and Italy*, p.xii, RKP, 1954). Again Shakespeare's Globe had a common audience with the bear-baiting next door.
2. Wood M. *The Country Dance before Playford*, J. Eng. Folk Dance & Song Soc. 1937.
3. Salter, A. *Some Concepts in Dance Historical Study*. J. Dolmetsch Hist. Dance Soc. 7 1977.
4. Feldtstein writing with eighteenth century earnestness on the minuet complains about dancing masters who educate 'through mere mechanics' – quoted in an article by Shirley Wynne (who suggests that the minuet contemporary with these country dances was lively dance but nevertheless exacting) in *Institute of Court Dances*, pub. CORD, USA, 1972.
5. Which phrase I have borrowed from Mr. Tom Cook of the EFDSS who kindly read and commented on a draft of this article. (See his article in *English Dance & Song* 42.1.1980)
6. See, for example, most modern criticism and review of dance which has conveyed scarcely at all the dance content (though there seems some current improvement). Regarding the role of notation Roderyk Lange's commentary on it in *The Laban Centenary Symposium Report* (ed. Salter, A., Laban Centre, 1980), and some other items therein, may be of interest.
7. In autumn 1979 I participated in the programme *Cuckolds All Awry* presented by Nonsuch under their director and teacher Peggy Dixon, to whom I am indebted.
8. Dean-Smith, M. & Nicol E. *The Dancing Master*, J.Eng. Folk Dance & Song Soc. IV.6. 1945.
9. Curt Sachs singles out as the distinctively pleasing character a combination of choral and couple dance features and diagrams the progress of entry in longways dances (*World History of the Dance*, Norton, 1963). The social consequences are of course splendid. (The dances I have concentrated on are rather low on 'idle time')
10. Wood, M. *More Historical Dances* (p.87), ISTD, 1956. Peggy Dixon and Madeleine Inglehearne worked backward from the minuet step to develop something that could have been a 'missing link' between a minuet

and a branle using a 4/4 rhythm. Fig.1 is mine but here is their statement of the constructed branle for information (though Peggy Dixon slightly modifies it in practice):

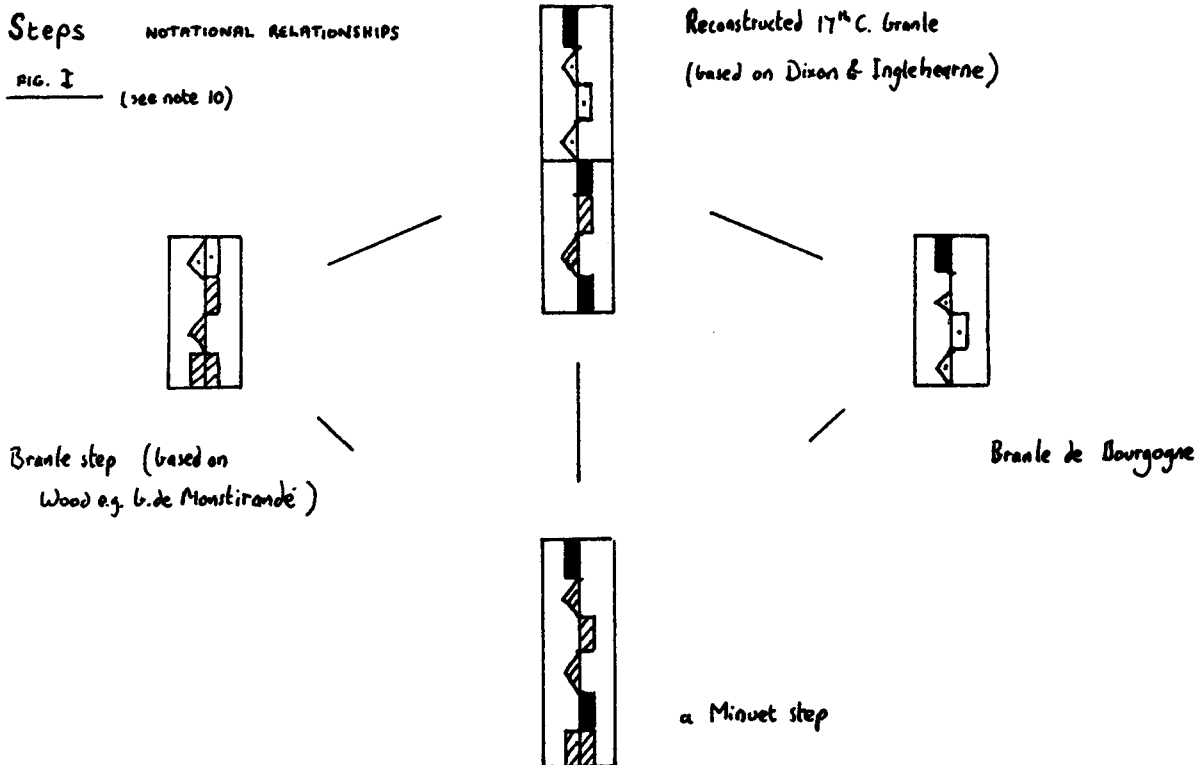
“Right ft phrase consists of,

- 1 Place rt.ft slightly in front of left and as close as you can get it (turn out of foot helps you to get it closer). Good, solid, heel-down step but come up onto ball of foot.
- 2 Step left, to 2nd position, still on ball of ft.
- 3 Bring up rt.ft slightly behind left and as close as poss.
- 4 Pause – dropping onto rt.heel.

Left foot phrase,

- 1 Step to 2nd position left, flat ft.
- 2 Close up rt. (as in ordinary branles).
- 3 Step to 2nd with left again.
- 4 Pause, doing a plie with weight on left ft, ready for repeat of 1st phrase.”

Finally two brief references may be made to the last issue of this Journal (No.9). Lillian and Julian Pilling comment on social and stylistic aspects of ‘country-dancing’ in their article The Rehabilitation of Andre Lorin. Anne Daye in her article Dances of the Courts of France 1400-1715 rightly objects to any evolution theory of dance history which postulates continuous ‘improvement’. My sense of ‘evolution’ (ref.3 above) is essentially value-neutral: the emphasis is on the dance rationale of dance history as distinct from idiosyncratic and external factors.



Dimensions of Repetitions

TENTATIVE NOTATION FOR TIME, SPACE, DANCERS e.g.

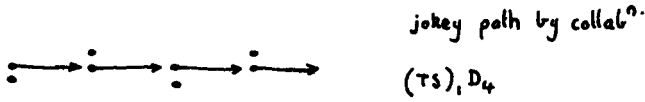
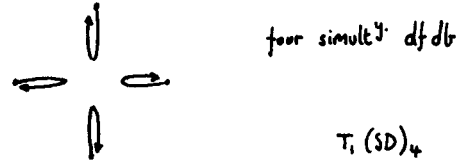
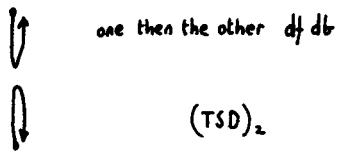
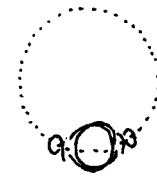
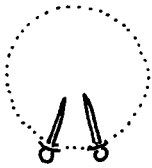


FIG. II

A' (doubles in and out, set and turn)

A² (siding, set and turn)

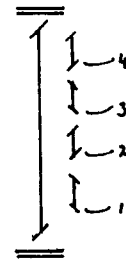
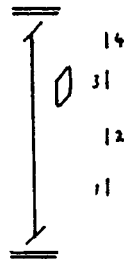
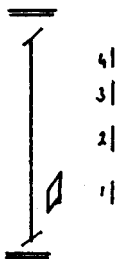
A³ (arming, set and turn)



B' (men, then women, walk in, walk around)

B² (men, then women, walk around in key)

B³ (men walk around in key-like figure turning with each woman)



(Where 1 2 3 4 are dancers of opp sex in order around circle. Timescale B³ diff.)

FIG. III

Mage on a Cree

CIRCULARITY IN FORMATION AND MOVEMENT

