
Baixa Dansa in the Kingdom of Catalonia and Aragon in the 15th century

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First References

Although documentation referring to *baixa dansa*^a in Catalonia does not appear to contain information relative to the originality of the repertory, it is of undoubted interest in that it establishes the earliest appearance of this type of dance in the Principality of Catalonia. The existence of the *baixa dansa* is confirmed, indirectly, in literary sources and in a single manuscript of the 15th century. Subsequent research may be able to verify and clarify the possible influence of French *basse danse* or Italian *bassa danza* with regard to the origins of the repertory, its transmission by the musicians and the dancing masters who played it and the characteristics of form and style which undoubtedly attended its performance in Catalan-Aragonese territories.

Francesch de la Via, a poet of Girona who lived in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, gives us in his works various references of extraordinary importance towards understanding the chronology of the *basse danse* on the 'European' continent. It is not known whether Francesch de la Via was actually born in Girona but he did make his home there and became a personality of some importance in the social life of the city. His book *La Senyora de Valor* [The Lady of Quality] contains many interesting references and comments on music and form.¹

In *La Senyora de Valor*, the term *Baxa dança* appears for the first time (as far as we know) in Catalonia; one of the earliest references to *baixa dansa*, *basse danse* or *bassa danza* within the ancient kingdoms and countries of the period. The text is dated 1406 and, in the opinion of scholars and transcribers of the works of Francesch de la Via, 'there is nothing to make us doubt the veracity of this author when he says that the action of *La Senyora de Valor* takes place in the year 1406, in the same period in which the poem appears to have been written'.²

[This extract describes a group of birds singing, one evening, in a garden near Girona. The parent birds sing first then stop to listen to their offspring:]

E sobre'l prat pausar
per (e)scoltar lur so.
E'l novelh auzelho
Qu esteron dins lo niu
Comensaren piu piu,
Amb laugeres passades
E'z amb plasens muntades
Affinaron lur votz;
Ez ab pauch instant totz
Començaren cantar,
Ladonchs van començar
Lo temps de baxa dança
D una cançó de França
Trop plasén per ausir:
'Je l'am, je vulh servir',
Ab molt gracios so;
E puy, ab gran raysó,
Feron lo segon temps,
Acordan tug ensemps

Qu auzel no'y desmantí.
Jur vos jamay ausí
So ten ben compassat,
E suy marevelhat
De l auzel qui ffrancès
Havion gent apres.³

And in the meadow we stopped
to listen to their song.
And the young birds
Which were in the nest
Began to sing 'cheep, cheep',
With lightsome passages
And with pleasant rising phrases
They tuned their voices;
And, in a few moments, they all
Began to sing,
And then they began
The measure of *baixa dansa*
From a chanson from France
Most pleasing to hear;
'I love her, I wish to serve',
Of most gracious sound;
And then, with great reason,
They made the second measure,
In concord all together
That no bird made a mistake.
I swear you never had heard
Sound so well measured
And I marvelled
At the birds which French
Had learnt so well.^b

It is interesting to note the comparison the author makes between the song of the birds and the sound (instrumental?) of the *baxa dança*, and the manner in which the birds begin first to 'tune up' and then to play; also that the poet makes concrete reference to '*lo temps de baxa dança*' (the measure of *baixa dansa*) and, later, to '*lo segon temps*' (the second measure) which has a different dynamic character. He cites, moreover, the name of the French song (not so far traced or identified). There are also other references throughout the work which suggest a '3-voice' polyphonic practice:

... a tres votz totz ensemps
ab tal compas e temps
ab cant contra tenor.⁴

... for three voices all together,
with such compass and measure
with *cantus contra tenor*.^c

Also within this text are the first instances in which the words *reverencia* and *continencia* appear, side by side, in association with recognised dance terminology, both these words being terms and movements relevant to all *basse dances*, in which they frequently appear in close conjunction, one after the other.

Joelta

... que perat va fare
... de l'ine so
... nouelz auz elho
Fueron d'pelo n'p
Comensaron y pu puo
Amb lauzeres passades
Ez amb plases mudades
Affmaron luz vots
Ez ab pauch iustant totz
Comentaron entoz
Ladouches van comencar
Lo temps de bayadanca
Duna canco de franca
Trop plasen per ansie
Je lam je vult serue
Amb molt gracios so
E pure ab gran raps
Feron lo segon temps
Acorday tug ensomps
A un pel nov des mant
Que vos ja may auq
So ten be compassat
E sin mareuclha
Del anz el qui frames
Gayon gent apres

Francesch de la Via, La Senyora de Valor, 1406, ms. no. 8, page 3 (recto)
Biblioteca Nacional de Catalunya, Barcelona

Troubadours of dance

Might it be feasible to assume a French provenance for the *baixa dansa* danced in the Principality during the 15th century? There is ample documentary evidence to show that Girona, a necessary transit point for those crossing the Pyrenees, was a centre for minstrels coming from abroad to serve in one court or another.⁵

Through these minstrels, in addition to their musical repertoire, were disseminated the new dance forms and dance repertoires in vogue at the courts. Already in the 14th century, itinerant musicians came to visit the royal houses of Peter IV, the Ceremonious, (1336–1387) and Elionor of Sicily. These musicians were also dance troubadours, who, like the jongleurs before them, sang poems, songs and dances. Among them was Andreu Gascó, troubadour at the court of the Count of Foix in January, 1367, who is recorded as having visited the court of Peter IV during that same year. Several years later, in 1372, he is known to have been paid five gold florins by Elionor of Sicily.⁵

Even closer relations with France were maintained during the reign of Peter IV's son and successor, Joan I (1350 – 1396), who *Havia muller francesa et tot era francès* – ‘had a French wife and everything was French’.⁴

It is possible that the *baixa dansa* already existed in the 14th century. There is no known reference to verify a dance of this name but the scenes of dancing described by Ramon Muntaner (1265–1336) in the *Chronica* (chapter CCXCVII) suggest the existence of choreographies as modern in their conception as those recorded, approximately a century later, by the great Domenico da Piacenza, maestro of the 15th century Italian dancing masters. Muntaner describes the feast held in honour of the coronation, in 1327, of Alfonso III of Catalonia and IV of Aragon in the following manner:

E lo senyor Infant en Pere, ab dos nobles qui ab ell se tenien ma per ma e ell el mig, vench primerament cantant una dança novella que ell hach feyta, e tots aquells qui aportaven los menjars respondien li...E com ell hach axi posada la primera vianda al dit senyor Rey e hach acabada la dança, ell se despuylla lo mantell e el cot que vestia ab pena d arminis de drap d aur e ab moltes perles e dona les a un jutglar, e tantost li n foren apareyllades unes altres riques que s vesti. E tota aytal horda tench a totes les viandes que s donaren a menjar, que a cascun menjar que porta deya una dança novella que ll mateix havia feyta, ehi dava lo vestit que vestia, cascu molt honrat. E donaren si bé X viandes.⁶

And the Infante Peter, with two nobles who went with him, hand in hand & he in the middle, came first, singing a new dance which he had made, and all those who brought the food answered him...⁶ And when he had thus placed the first dish before the said lord King and the dance being finished, he took off the mantle and the gown which he wore, with ermine tails, of cloth of gold & with many pearls & gave them to a jongleur & immediately were brought him other rich garments which he donned. & all this ceremony was made for all the dishes which were produced to eat, so that for each dish that was

brought he called a new dance that he himself had made, & he gave the garment he wore, each most honoured. And thus were well given 10 dishes.

In *Curial e Güelfa*, an anonymous romance from about 1456, there are some interesting references to the dance:

L'emperador lladoncs venc vers aquella part e manà que tothom s'apartàs e que dansassen. E així es féu; per què Curial, manant l'emperador, presa la duquessa delliure per la mà, e seguint los molts senyors e senyores, féu una *baixa dansa*, ab tanta gràcia e ab tan gran donari que açò fonc una gran maravella.

Après que foren dinats, los ministrers vengueren e començaren a sonar, e l'emperador pres l'emperadriu per la mà e tot rient comença una *baixa dança*, après dels quals seguiren molts, e en dançaren altres moltes.

Then the emperor came towards that area and ordered that everyone draw aside & that they dance. & thus it was done; so that Curial, obeying the emperor's command, took the duchess gently¹ by the hand, & many lords and ladies following them, & they did a *baixa dansa*, with so much grace & with such great elegance that that was a great wonder.

After they had dined, the minstrels came and began to play, the emperor took the empress by the hand & all smiles began a *baixa dansa*, after whom many followed, & they danced many more.

A verb corresponding to the action of dancing a basse dance is used expressly in the following extract:

... en lo plujós
temps enujós
ab moltes gales
feya fer sales
e bells convits
dies e nits
ab los grans fochs;
molt placents jochs,
bastir castells
per banastells,
moms e grans festes,
les dames prestes
al bel *triscar*
baxa dançar,
may hi fallien.⁷

... in the rainy
wearisome weather
with much pomp
he had [them] make feasts
and fine junketings
by day and night
with the great fires;
many pleasing games,
[and] build castles
with wickerwork,
mummings and great feasts,
the ladies ready
to weave [patterns] finely
'to basse-dance',
they never failed.⁸

The Cervera Manuscript

The earliest known Catalonian document to refer to the movements in the dance is the so-called Cervera Manuscript. It is dated 1496 and includes the choreographies of eleven different *baixes danses*. We are not here concerned with a description nor a transcription of this document which merits a full study; suffice it to note the concordances, in form and structure, between these choreographies in the Cervera manuscript and those known from the earliest collections of French *basses danses*.^b Similarities with the Italian form of *bassa danza* are not so clear and will require further study.

The particular and unique importance of this manuscript is that it uses a graphic notation to describe, or rather to represent, series of step sequences which are common to all basse dances and which are grouped in measures corresponding to the oldest known French or Burgundian tradition.

Nine of the choreographies are represented graphically by signs, the rest partly so, but with the signs alternating with descriptive verbal directions. The choreographic notation used in the Cervera Manuscript is unique and appears to be of a highly advanced conception. In the dance treatises known prior to this document, the sequence of the steps is represented by a series of initial letters, of the word or name of each step. Only the English treatise, *The maner of dauncynge of bace daunces...* (London, 1521), itself a translation by Robert Copland of an old French treatise of which all trace is now lost, makes use of one of these signs, which closely resembles the sign for the *represa* used in the Cervera manuscript.

It would seem possible that, in this earliest type of choreographic notation, graphic signs are correlated, graphically or pictorially, with spatial movement, with regard both to direction and to length – an abstract, as it were, of the shape of the step. It would not appear, however, that the majority of these signs were intended as arbitrary symbols, representative of the steps and sequences merely through convention.

I would propose that the sequence of signs be read as if in an *ascending, vertical column*, and from left to right where this would apply. From other documentary sources of the period, we can deduce that the realisation of the basic steps which results from attributing, to each 'segment', a displacement value and indication of direction for the body (whether that movement is basically frontal and forwards or made to the side) shows that these signs are schematic, like images of the movement.

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In addition to the five basic steps, a new element appears in these choreographies, reminiscent of the Italian

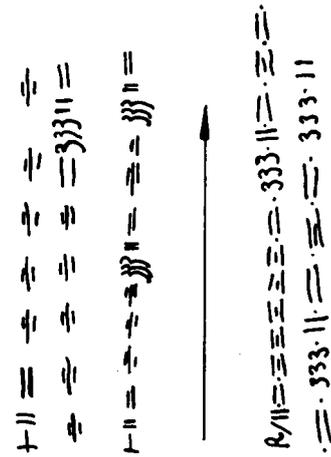


Figure A. Cervera MS (Fragment) Signs from Folio A (L); Folio B (R); here shown in vertical alignment

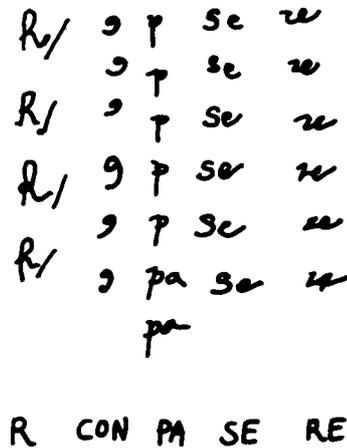


Figure B. Cervera MS (Fragment) Initial for *Reverència, continença, pas, seguit and represa*

Lagmada pa pa. se. voltar ...
LA GUIADA FFA (PA) (SE) VOLTAR ...

ap̃s tres passas anar vers la dama ab ...

APRES TRES PASSAS ANAR VERS LA DAMA AB ...

viralet ab reverencia et finis ...

VIRAJET AB REVERENCIA ET FINIS ...

Figure C. Cervera MS (Fragment) Words, Initials and graphic signs, side by side

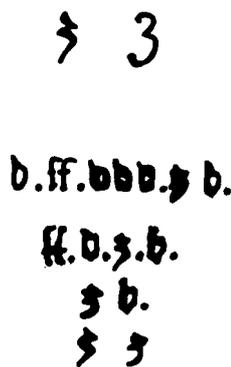


Figure D. The sign for the reprise as used by Copland in 'The Maner of Dauncinge of bace daunces' compared with that for the *represa* in the Cervera MS

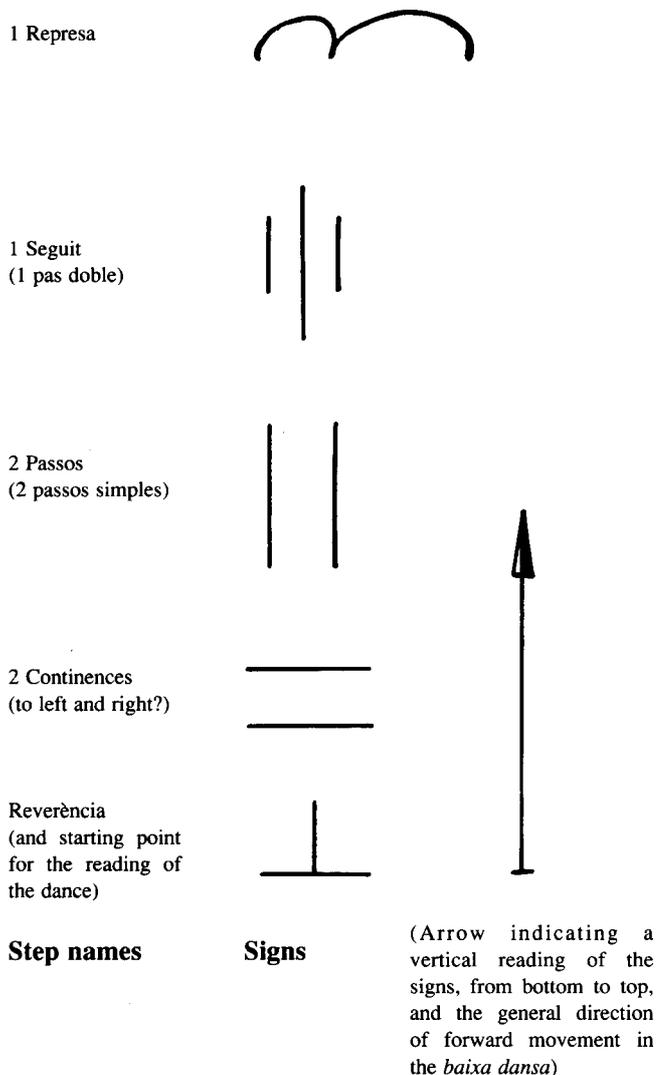


Figure E. Identification of the signs in the Cervera MS and the direction of reading

bassa danza, which necessitates the use of supplementary explanations, either narrative or descriptive in form. These interpolated words indicate different interpretations of forwards or backwards, movements for the man alone or the lady alone (whichever may be in the lead), or movements of separation.

Through internal comparison of elements within the manuscript and through external comparison with other documents, a positive identification can be arrived at of the signs and of the steps they represent. (e.g. *Reverência*, *continença*, *pas* and *seguit*, as steps akin to the *Reverence*, *branle*, *simple* and *double* of French or Burgundian *basse danse*.) The exception is the sign for the *represa*, the sense of which is less clear, even enigmatic, containing, as it does, a suggestion of repetition.

I believe that this sign could have had its origin in a process of assimilation (in the normal manner of writing words) of the abbreviation of the syllable *RE*, which appears to be used in conjunction with other elided words, within the same document. It is a matter, therefore, of a graphologic abbreviation sign being accepted as representative of the step called *re-p-re-sa*. In this case, the sign becomes independent of the word and is utilised between the abbreviations of the words for the other steps. (A similar example is the use of 9 to represent the *continença*.) For some paleographers this represents a rare use of a sign for a middle syllable ellision. Generally, only those abbreviations which represent the ellision of the final syllables of a word are accepted as having independent meaning. But, in *re-p-re-sa*, as in *re-ve-re-ncia*, the syllable 're' appears twice – at the beginning and in the middle of the word – and therefore, it may occasionally provide repetitive, even redundant, information. (see Fig. F) This interpretation may, however, support the vertical reading of the signs mentioned above.

Another possibility is that the sign is intended to indicate a realisation in two senses, both in direction and in length, as has been suggested previously. If this were so, might this imply a displacement, both sideways and vertically, twice, for each *represa*? Or could it simply be an arbitrary symbol, representative of the word, *represa*, without any connection with its spacial interpretation? There is, I believe, yet another possibility: that, when the sign appears above the written (but abbreviated) word for a reverence, the presence of the sign in that position indicates the possibility of a choice – either *represa* or *reverence* – perhaps making a turn or other movement. It might also be interpreted as indicating different options for the man and for the lady, simultaneously represented. Italian *bassa danza* is rich in such choreographic polyphony as, for example, when the man does one step having a total duration of two measures, while the lady may execute two steps of one measure each.

There is also the fact that the word *represa* is not found, in full, in written form in the Cervera manuscript. It only appears, a century later, in the Tarragó, or de l'Hospital, manuscript. Furthermore, there are clearly considerable stylistic differences between the step known as the *represa*, as it appears in the Italian *basse danze*, and the French *reprise* or *demarche*. Any reconstruction of a *baixa dança* from the Cervera manuscript will, therefore, have to take all these factors into account when attempting to resolve

this problem. Decisions will have to be made as to the level of interpretation: whether to interpret the word, the abbreviation of the word, the spatial design, or a mixture of them all.

Was there a tradition of choreographic notation in Catalonia?

In direct relationship to the signs found in the exceptional Cervera manuscript, we find, almost a century later, very similar signs (grouped lines, waves and initials) being used in the Tarragó manuscript, which dates from 1580. Only the first few dances (unfortunately incomplete because of the mutilation of the folio) could have been *baixes danses*. The remainder of the dances fall into the tradition and format of dances and steps of the 16th century, with equivalent or similar nomenclature to those in the dance treatises of Cesare Negri and Caroso. The Tarragó or de l'Hospital manuscript also contains terms proper to the *baixa dansa*, like *seguit* (sequence or double), *seguit trencat* (broken double), *continença*, *reverència*, *pas* (step) and *represa*.

I would also draw attention to the similarity in shape of the signs in the Cervera manuscript to those used in the de l'Hospital manuscript as a second, recognised stage of evolution and structural adaptation, which appear to derive or originate, in some way or other, from the particular type of notation which is exclusive to the dance known as the *contrapàs*, a dance which has come down to us only fragmentarily, through oral tradition or written diagrams and in which the signs and terminology used appear to be related to the type of notation found in the Cervera and Hospital manuscripts.

The printed and dated notations of *contrapàs* are generally from the middle of the 19th century, although it is highly probable that some were printed or known before that.

Studying these signs and the nomenclature of traditional steps⁹, we find a number of common elements (hatchings, lines of various lengths, dots, curves), in vertical disposition, to be read from top to bottom, in lines from left to right. I believe that these similarities cannot be attributed to chance but must be considered together with these remarkable, earlier documents that we have discussed.

The different structural characteristics of the dance known as the *contrapàs* to those of the *baixa dansa* could have motivated, in each case, the adaptation of already known signs and their functional arrangement in a manner appropriate to each; and, in the case of the *contrapàs*, also influenced the solutions utilised in the 'mapes' (notations) of the 'divinos' (traditional Catalan songs for Lent and Holy Week, of which the text usually relates the passion of Christ) for the long, short or Cerdanyan *contrapàs*. The earliest known documentary evidence of a dance called *contrapàs* comes from the year 1482.

Another type of traditional dance seems to have a more or less direct interrelationship with *baixa dansa*. There is documentary evidence from the year 1616 in Catalonia, for the *ball pla*^b as a specific dance type, although it was undoubtedly known and danced earlier under this or some other name. Musically as well as choreographically, a comparative analysis of the versions which have come

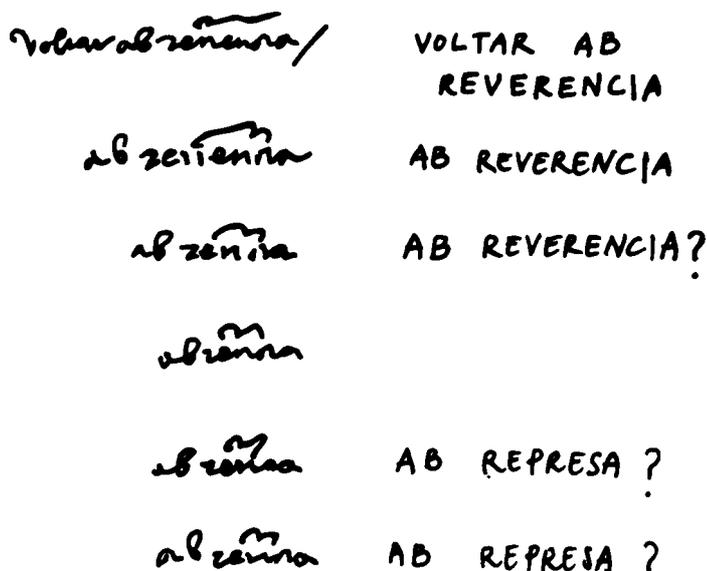


Figure F. Words in the Cervera MS which appear with the abbreviation 'RE'

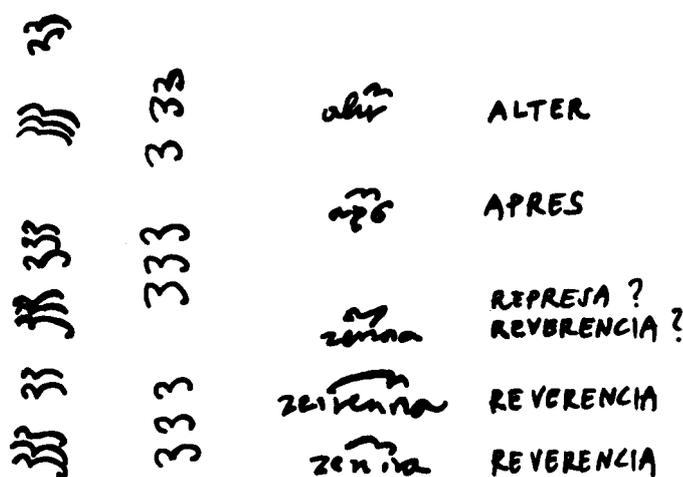


Figure G. Cervera MS: different versions of the sign for the represa or for the abbreviation 'RE'

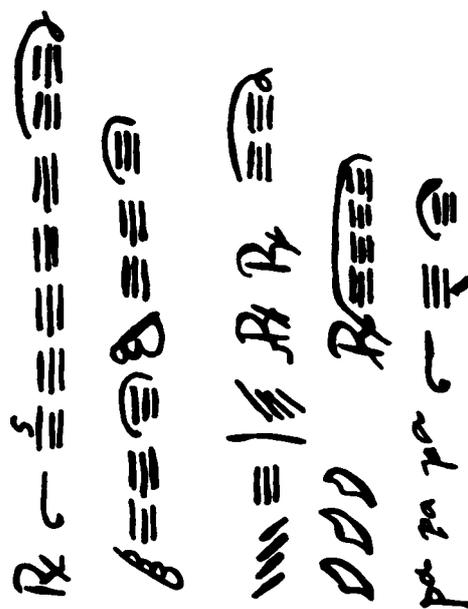


Figure H. Signs from the Tarragó MS, shown in vertical alignment

they did the *matachins*,
and other dances
wearing plumes of feathers
caps of scarlet
doing the *Sardana*
and the *Ball Pla*
all hand in hand.^h

Deeper and fuller investigation into the dance of Catalonia and the exhaustive study of documentary sources could permit the future development of an acceptable practical interpretation and realisation of some of the *baixes danses* given in the Cervera manuscript, with a minimum of conjecture and a maximum of well-grounded deduction.

In the mean time, we may conclude that the practice of the *baixa dansa* in the Kingdom of Catalonia and Aragon is confirmed through documentary evidence as having existed from the beginning of the 15th century (1406) and up to two centuries later. It is also highly probable that Catalonia has known a continuous tradition of graphic notation of dance, with particular and unique characteristics, and with successive adaptation for different types of dance, this notation being represented, at diverse stages of its development, in the Cervera manuscript, the Hospital manuscript and, most recently, in the notation of the *contrapàs*.

Footnotes

1. Francesch de la Via: *La Senyora de Valor*, 1406; ms. no. 8, Biblioteca Nacional de Catalunya, Barcelona.
2. Transcribed from Am. Pagès: *La poésie française en Catalogne du XIII à la fin du XV siècle*, Toulouse-Paris, 1936; and from M.C. Gómez Mutané: *La música en la Casa Real Catalano-Aragonesa, 1336–1442*. Antoni Bosch, editor; Vol 1. Barcelona, 1979.
3. F. de la Via: *La Senyora... op. cit.*
4. F. de la Via: *ibid.*
5. Gómez Mutané: *La música en la Casa... op. cit.*
6. Ramon Muntaner: *Chronica*, chapter CCXVII; published in G. Muntané: *La Música...*
7. Roig: *Spill*. from *l'Arxiu de Dansa de l'Esbart Català de Dansaires*, Barcelona, pp. 1474 ff.
8. Brussels Manuscript: '*dit des basses danses de la Bibliothèque de Bourgogne*'; Bibliothèque royale, no. 9085. Transcription: Ernest Closson: 1912. Facsimile: Minkoff Reprint, Geneva, 1976. and Michel Toulouse: *S'ensuit l'art et instruction de bien danser*, Paris, c. 1488. Reprint: Editions Minkoff, Geneva, 1985.
9. Vegis, Carles Mas: *Aproximació a la tècnica coreogràfica del Contrapàs*. Premi Nacional de Dansa 'Aureli Capmany', 1985; Institut del Teatre de la Diputació de Barcelona, ed. L'avenç, Barcelona, 1988.
10. Andreu Balaguer I Merino: *Lo carnestoltes*, Barcelona, 1616. Transcribed in *l'Arxiu de Dansa de l'Esbart Català de Dansaires*.

Notes on the translation

- a. In this article, the term 'basse dance' is written in the following ways in order to differentiate between the specific forms of that dance as they appear in each country:

basse dance used as a generic term and for the dance as it appears in England;

basse danse France and Burgundy;

bassa danza Italy;

baixa dansa Catalonian basse dance, as a generic term;

baxa dança *baixa dansa* of Aragon and Catalonia, as referred to in XVth century manuscripts, and used only in transcriptions from original texts.

- b. Line 20 – *desmantí* – an alternative meaning might be – to affirm the opposite.

Line 24–25 – *qui ffrancès Havion gent apres* – several different meanings arise from the various possible interpretations of these words:

ffrancès may refer to either the people or to the language;

apres although the natural, contextual meaning would seem to be 'learnt', this word might also be interpreted as 'near-by';

gent may again refer to the people or may be interpreted either as a qualification of the manner of the learning, e.g. 'nicely' – cf. Italian – *gentile*, or as a comment on the extent of that learning, e.g. 'so much' or 'so well'.

- c. The final line is a nice play on words. While the surface meaning refers to the *cantus*, the highest voice, singing an independent melody 'against' the lower *tenor* line, the three words actually indicate each of the three voices involved in the singing – the *cantus*, the *tenor* and the *contra-tenor*.

- d. Higiní Anglès: *Eiximenis i la musica del seu temps*, from *Estudis de literatura catalana*, I; Barcelona, 1962–1967.

- e. These responses take the form of verse and chorus.

- f. Line 6 – *delliure* – the meaning is uncertain and may be rendered as 'freely' or 'courteously'; an alternative interpretation may be to assume that it is the duchess who was free.

Line 9 – *donari* – a probable elision of two words, *donar* + *aire* (verb + noun), to create a noun signifying *aiere*, the Italian word signifying the quality of grace and elegance.

- g. Line 13 – *triscar* – similarity with the Italian verb *triscare* might suggest an interpretation associated with intrigue, which might, in turn, lead to an association with patterns in the dance.

Line 14 – *baxa dançar* – the deliberate creation of a verb from the noun.

- h. Dance types referred to:

Ball Cerdà: A folk dance found in several northern regions of Catalonia, especially around the Pyrenees. It is a collective dance for an unlimited number of couples, either hand in hand or alone. The main difference between the *ball pla* and the *ball cerdà* is that the latter contains an element of improvisation, both in its music and in its choreography, one couple at a time dancing in the middle of the circle.

Ball Pla: A collective folk dance found in northern areas of Catalonia. It is a couple dance for as many as will in a large circle and it is characterised by smooth stepping with no jumps. The music is in ternary measure. The second part of the dance is always *la*

corranda which has jumped steps and music in binary measure.

Contrapàs: A north Catalan folk dance of solemn character, which uses a variety of steps and a complex choreography. Both music and choreography are irregular and express an intimate relationship between the phrases of the melody, the choreographic sequences and the phrases of the ritual text or divino.

The second part of the *contrapàs* is the *sardana*.

Sardana: A north Catalan folk dance for as many as will, holding hands in a circle and using running and jumped steps in a sideways movement. The name is known from the 16th century.

Acknowledgements

This Article originally appeared as *La baixa dansa al regne de Catalunya i Aragó al segle XV* in 'Nassarre', *Revista Aragonesa de Musicologia*, [Aragonese Musicological Journal] IV, 1-2. Zaragoza, 1988, and is republished by permission of the Institución Fernando el Católico.

Translated from Catalan into English by Diana Cruickshank and Carles Mas.