

‘Sò ben mi chi ha buon tempo’ by Cesare Negri

David R. Wilson

Negri’s balletto ‘Sò ben mi chi ha buon tempo’ is deservedly popular for its lively music, its varied step-sequence and floor-pattern, and the opportunity it offers for a sung accompaniment. It is featured on at least four recordings issued in the last dozen years. At the same time, it has baffled virtually all British commentators who have sought to put forward a convincing reconstruction. The performing versions that have been current in recent years in Britain have been effectively based on the reconstruction by Mabel Dolmetsch, reproduced in the Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society notes for their summer school in 1977, *Court Dances of the Renaissance 1558–1625*. The problem with all these versions is that they are forced to assume that in the middle of Part 1 of the dance either Negri or his printer got muddled and described the dance ‘inside out’, substituting ‘back’ for ‘front’ and vice versa, and that Negri never noticed this in proof. A further difficulty is that Negri then required the dancing couple to return to their starting-point with the same steps as they used previously to get to their present position, but apparently sent them off in the opposite direction! (I am grateful to a referee for the assurance that Continental colleagues have not suffered from the same misunderstandings.)

At a seminar in 1986 organized by the Early Dance Circle Anne Daye presented a solution to this dilemma that respected Negri’s text. It has to be said that this was admired more for its ingenuity than for its resemblance to previously known patterns of 16th/17th-century dance and it cannot be said to have carried universal conviction.

As I hope to show in the present paper, the main problems encountered in reconstructing this dance are illusory. If the dancers do what Negri said, instead of what many people copying Dolmetsch seem to have thought he said, there is no difficulty in following his instructions to the letter.

The dance

Negri’s text for each section of the dance will be printed first; then a fairly literal translation; and finally my commentary, presenting my own view of how to reconstruct the steps and floor-pattern. Negri’s text is taken from the facsimile of Forni (Bologna, 1969), 222–4, and preserves the original abbreviations.

A key to these abbreviations, in the order in which they occur, is given below.

- .R. riverenza
- .R. ripresa
- .P. passo puntato
- .S. seguito ordinario
- .SP. fioretto spezzato (i.e. seguito spezzato, see Daye, 1986/7)
- .P. passo grave

BALLETTO SO BEN MI CHI HA BVON TEMPO

corretto dell’Autore si balla in due.

In gratia dell’Illustrissima Signora, la Signora Donna
Isabella Borromea
Contessa di San Secondo

BALLETTO: SO BEN MI CHI HA BVON TEMPO

revised by the Author (for two dancers)

By favour of the Most Illustrious Lady, Lady Dame
Isabella Borromea,
Countess of San Secondo

PRIMA PARTE.

Pigliano la mano volgendosi la faccia, come dimostra’l disegno, e fanno la .R. due .R. alla sinistra, & alla destra, due .P. e due .S. con esso piede andando innanzi à piè del ballo, e volgendo la dama all’incontro si lasciano, e fanno due doppi in .R. minuta vn col piè sinistro; il caualiero va innanzi, e la dama indietro; l’altro .R. si fa col piè destro, la dama vâ innanzi. il caualiero indietro fanno due fioretti. SP. & vn .S. col sinistro passando l’vno al luogo dell’altro, e volgendo alla detta mano; fanno le istesse .R. doppie col pie destro, e la dama va innanzi, e’l caualiero indietro esso vâ innanzi, & ella indietro; fanno li due .SP. & il .S. col detto piede, tornando al suo luogo, e volgendosi’l viso.

PART 1

They take hands, turning their faces towards each other (see figure), and make the *riverenza*; two *ripreses* to the left and to the right; two *passi puntati* and two *seguiti ordinarii*, [starting] with that [left] foot, advancing towards the foot of the dance; and turning the woman to face him, they drop hands. And they do two *doppi in ripresa minuta*: one with the left foot, with the man going towards the front and the woman towards the rear, and the other done with the right foot, with the woman going towards the front and the man towards the rear. They do two *fioretti* [i.e. *seguiti*] *spezzati* and one *seguito ordinario* [starting] with the left, passing into each other’s place and turning to the said [left] hand. They do the same *ripreses doppie* [starting] with the right foot (the lady goes towards the front and the man towards the rear, then he to the front and she to the rear); they do the two *fioretti spezzati* and one *seguito ordinario* [starting] with the said [right] foot, returning to their own places and turning their faces towards one another.

We take our leave of certain current versions even before the dance begins: *volgendosi la faccia* does not mean ‘turning themselves to face’ but ‘turning themselves in respect of the face’. The illustration cited shows the two dancers looking each other in the eye, with their bodies slightly angled in order to do so, but definitely not face to face, as now often performed. So the dance starts with them essentially facing the front. This agrees with the fact that they are holding inside hands while doing the two *ripreses*. These replace the more usual *continenze* after the opening *riverenza*. Negri’s punctuation seems to the modern eye to suggest making two *ripreses* to the left and then continuing with another two to the right, but this kind of over-punctuation is completely normal in the sixteenth-seventeenth century and is typical of Negri himself, both in general and in relation to pairs of *ripreses*. Unfortunately, there is in any case so much misplaced punctuation in Negri’s text that argument based upon that alone is bound to be inconclusive.

They then advance with two *puntati* and two *ordinarii*. During the second *ordinario* the man turns his partner to face him: he remains facing the front, while she comes round to face the rear. If Negri had wished them to face each other across the dance, he would have had them both turn into position. That this is not only the natural interpretation of Negri’s words but the correct one is confirmed by the fact that the subsequent difficulties with his text (mentioned above) simply disappear.

They now make two *doppii in riprese minute*. The track of the *doppii* is immediately recognisable as equivalent to 'siding' in English country dance, but as this is to be accomplished by what are effectively *riprese minu[i]te*, the body must be turned so as to lead with the left, and then with the right, shoulder. To make absolutely clear in what direction the *riprese* are taken, Negri is detailed and specific: the man goes to the front, then the back, while the woman goes to the back, then the front; in other words they both start off in the direction in which they are already facing. As to the actual step, the woman will do the *ripresa minuta*, which Negri says is for women only, so the man may possibly use the *ripresa minima*, which is more elegant for someone whose legs are showing. They cannot travel far, but they are momentarily face to face before returning to their places.

They change places on two *spezzati* and an *ordinario*, passing by the right shoulder and then turning to the left; then do the other half of the 'siding' movement. Again, Negri is careful to indicate in which direction they are both going, and his directions now make perfect sense. They return to their previous positions with the same steps as before, presumably passing by the left shoulder and turning right. Again they find themselves looking at each other, but as they were actually face to face before they changed places, they will be face to face again now.

SECONDA PARTE

Il Cauallero piglia la man sinistra della dama, e fanno due .P. e due .S. col piè sinistro, e tornano in capo del ballo, e volgendosi'l viso fanno all'incontro due .P. indietro, due fioretti gagliardi e tre .P. in saltino con esso piede il cauallero solo fa due .R. la dama fa altrettanto. poi piglia il braccio destro della dama, e fanno insieme due .SP. & vno .S. col sinistro attorno al la destra tornando al suo luogo. si lasciano e fanno due .SP. e vn .S. col piè destro intorno alla sinistra, la dama va à piè del ballo, & il cauallero resta a capo voltandosi à faccia à faccia.

PART 2

The man takes the woman's left hand and they do two *passi puntati* and two *seguiti ordinarii* and return to the head of the dance. And turning to look at one another, they do (facing each other) two *passi puntati* backwards, two *fioretti gagliardi* and three *passi in saltino*, [starting] with that [left] foot. The man on his own makes two *riprese*; the woman, as much. Then he takes the woman's right arm and together they do two *fioretti spezzati* and one *seguito ordinario* [starting] with the left [foot], circling right and returning to their own places. They let go and do two *fioretti spezzati* and one *seguito ordinario* curving left, with the woman going to the foot of the dance and the man remaining at the head, turning so as to end face to face.

When the man takes his partner's hand again, he could be about to lead either up or down the room. As they need now to return to the head of the dance from which they started, he will be using the two *puntati* principally to manoeuvre the pair of them into position side by side and facing in that direction; he himself should step to one side so that he can bring his partner forward beside him. They are now on the sides opposite to those on which they started, so the direction of the dance has temporarily been reversed.

At the end of the second *ordinario* they turn to look at each other, and this time it does mean that they are facing because

the next steps are done *incontro* (opposite one another). They back away on the *puntati* and come back together again on the *fioretti* and *passi in saltino*; then each does a pair of *riprese* in turn. Taking right arms, they circle all the way round back to place on a standard sequence of two *spezzati* and one *ordinario*. They let go and repeat the step sequence, but without taking arms, because they are going to separate, moving up and down the room to take up positions facing each other in readiness for the galliard section. As each dancer curves away to their left, they will pass each other by the right shoulder.

It may be noted that this final move is another place in which the new interpretation eases a slightly awkward manoeuvre. When the two dancers are understood to be still on the normal or proper side, they have to cast away from each other quite sharply in order to reach their new positions on a left-hand curve. While this is not wholly out of keeping with Negri's style, it can fairly be said that, when the two dancers have reversed their positions, their track towards the head and foot of the dance is more elegant and less forced.

TERZA PARTE

Mutazione della sonata in gagliarda

Il Cauallero fa cinque .P. della gagliarda; quattro volte fiancheggiando col piè sinistro, voltando sempre la faccia alla dama; la quale fa li medesimi cinque .P. che si sono fatti il cauallero fa due .P. & vna botta innanzi col sinistro, & la cadenza con esso piede si fanno due .P. indietro in saltino, & vna botta innanzi col destro, e la cadenza, & due battute ferme in saltino col detto piede, & la cadenza col sinistro. si fanno vna volta li cinque .P. con esso piede attorno alla destra, e la cadenza co'l detto piede. Questa mutanza è di 17.botte, & quattro tempi della gagliarda, si tornano à far col destro li .P. innanzi, & indietro come s'è fatto prima. questa mutanza è di botte 8. & di due tempi di gagliarda fanno insieme due volte i cinque .P. col sinistro passando l'vno al luogo dell'altro; e voltando alla detta mano riuolgendosi la faccia.

PART 3

Variation of the tune in galliard form

The man does *cinque passi* of the galliard four times, [starting] with the left foot, flankingly and always turning his face towards the woman. She does the same *cinque passi* as have just been done. The man makes two *passi* and a swing forwards [starting] with the left [foot], and the *cadenza* with that [left] foot; [then] are done two sprung *passi* backwards and a swing forwards, [starting] with the right [foot], and the *cadenza*; and two *battute* on the spot with a spring with the said [right] foot, and the *cadenza* with the left; then is done once the *cinque passi* with that [left] foot, circling to the right, and the *cadenza* with the said [left] foot. This variation has 17 movements, and 4 *tempi* of the galliard. Then come, for the second time but [starting] with the right [foot], the *passi* forward, and those back, as done previously. This variation has 8 movements and two *tempi* of galliard. Together they [now] do the *cinque passi* twice, [starting] with the left [foot], passing into one another's place and turning to the said [left] hand and turning back again to face.

This first galliard variation consists of the man, and then the woman, doing an introductory sequence of plain galliard; then the man does his solo; and then they counterpass. In Part 4 of the dance their roles will be reversed: the introductory sequences will be done by the woman first and the man second; then there will be the woman's solo (the same as the

man's); and then they will counterpass back to their original places.

The term *fiancheggiando* in Negri normally seems to mean sideways on. The stipulation that the man must only turn towards his partner (not away from her) makes it clear that he is doing his *cinque passi* alternately towards the left side and towards the right, in effect parading himself in front of her. It will be appropriate here to use what Negri called *i primi cinque passi, che si fanno andando innanzi* (the initial *cinque passi*, which are made going forwards). The essential feature is that these sinkapaces are completely plain, with left and right feet alternating in forward swings. (The detailed description in *Trattato Secondo, Regola VI*, is over condensed and appears contradictory, but the summary description in *Trattato Secondo, nona avvertimento*, makes its character plain.)

The solo variation presents us with a fundamental problem. According to Negri's explicit statement the first four *tempi* contain 17 *botte*, or individual movements – what in contemporary Britain would have been termed a 'trick of 17'; yet he only describes at most 16 movements. Either we do not properly understand his description of this variation, or he left something out, or else he simply could not count! After our success in restoring credibility to the earlier parts of the dance, it would be disappointing to conclude that the description of the galliard was unsatisfactory, so we had better examine all his statements with the utmost care.

The first *tempo* introduces a number of questions whose answers will have quite general implications. We have already identified *botta* as a general term for any step or movement of the galliard. When used to describe a particular movement, it refers to the most basic galliard action, namely a swing of the free leg forward or back. So when Negri describes 'two steps and a swing forward with the left', we find ourselves faced with two uncertainties. Does the word *innanzi* (forward) apply to the whole sequence, indicating forward travel, or simply to the *botta*, so as to mean a swing forward? And does 'with the left' mean, as it usually does, 'starting off with the left foot', or just that the *botta* is done with the left foot? Such uncertainties are not at all uncommon in Negri's writing, and the answer is usually the same: it does not actually matter because both interpretations are correct. When this is not the case, Negri takes care to specify the character of the individual step when he comes to it. So the sequence here is as follows:

- 1 Step on the L
- 2
- 3 Step on the R
- 4 Swing the L foot forward, while hopping on the R
- 5+6 L cadenza

The second *tempo* consists essentially of the same step sequence taken backwards, except that the two backward steps are made with a spring (and presumably the free foot pointed). Making the same assumptions about Negri's phraseology we get the following:

- 1 Spring back onto the R
- 2
- 3 Spring back onto the L
- 4 Swing the R foot forward higher, while hopping on the L
- 5+6 R cadenza

In the third *tempo* we have two *battute* incorporating a spring but done on the spot. Instructions for performing *battute* are not given in any of the fifty-five Rules of the second section of his book or in the twenty-five Rules of the third section, but are found in the fourth *avvertimento* opening the second section. The step does in any case incorporate a spring, but normally turns, so Negri seems to be saying here, 'Do these steps without turning, but with the spring as normal'. There is only room for the two steps described.

- 1+2 battuta with the R
- 3+4 battuta with the R
- 5+6 L cadenza

Even the fourth *tempo* presents a minor problem. What is the meaning of *esso piede*? Usually this expression refers back to the foot last mentioned, but in Part 1 of this very dance, where 'left' and 'right' occur in close proximity, *esso* is used to mean 'the former'. At the end of the third *tempo* of the galliard variation both feet are again referred to in close proximity, but only the left foot is named. In this context it seems more natural for *esso piede* (that foot) to refer back this named left foot rather than to the one previously mentioned only as 'the said foot'. So the *cinque passi* begin by hopping on the left and ends with a *cadenza* on the left foot. The first swing of the left leg should presumably be taken backwards this time, as in *Trattato Secondo, Regola X*.

The variation of 8 movements merely repeats the first two *tempi* of the variation of 17, but starting with the right foot. It also serves to confirm that the number of movements in those *tempi* has been given correctly, and that the mistake, whoever is making it, lies in *tempi* 3 and 4.

The counterpassing is straightforward. They should pass by the right shoulder and turn left into their partner's place, making *cinque passi contra passando* similar to that in the fourth *tempo* of the variation.

QVARTA PARTE

La dama sola fa quattro volti i cinque .P. il caualiero fa'l medemo ella fa la mutanza delle 17.botte, & quella d'otto botte; fanno insieme due volte icinque .P. come prima cambiando lugo, e voltandosi la faccia.

PART 4

The woman on her own does the *cinque passi* four times. The man does the same. She does the variation of 17 movements, and that of eight movements. Together they do the *cinque passi* twice to change place as before, turning to look at one another.

No comment required.

QVINTA PARTE

Mutatione della prima sonata

Il caualiero fa vn .P. innanzi col sinistro. la dama fa'l medesimo, egli ne fa vn'altra innanzi. essa fa'l medesimo. si pigliano amendue le mani, e fanno per fianco due .R. alla sinistra, & alla destra. lasciano le mani. poi battono insieme la man destra passando l'vno al luogo dell'altro con due .S. voltando alla sinistra. poi fanno due .SP. & vn .S. intorno alla detta mano due .SP. & vn .S. intorno alla destra. due .SP. e vn .S. contrapassando pigliano la man sinistra voltano attorno à essa mano, & fanno altre due .SP. si lasciano, e fanno il .S. il caualiero v' à pigliar la mano, & la dama in quello istesso tempo fa'l medesimo, voltandosi alla destra. si pigliano la mano, e fanno la .R. insieme, e finiscono gratiosamente'l ballo.

PART 5

Variation [consisting] of the first tune

The man does a *passo puntato* forward with the left [foot]; the woman does the same; he does another of them forward; she does the same. They take both hands and do two *riprese* sideways to the left and to the right; they drop hands; then they strike their right hands together, passing into one another's place with two *seguiti ordinarii*, turning to the left. Then they do two *fioretti spezzati* and one *seguito ordinario* circling to the said [left] hand; two *fioretti spezzati* and one *seguito ordinario* circling to the right; two *fioretti spezzati* and one *seguito ordinario* counterpassing. They take left hands and turn circling to that [left] hand and do two further *fioretti spezzati*; they let go and do the [remaining] *seguito ordinario* – the man goes to take hands again, while the woman does the same, turning to her right. They take hands and do their *rivrenza* together and so end the dance with grace.

The two dancers advance to meet with alternate *passi puntati*, first on the left foot and then presumably on the right. They take both hands, so the following *riprese* must be done on a curving track. It seems otiose to describe *riprese* as being made *per fianco*, so this phrase may not mean simply 'to the side', but 'on the diagonal'. When they cross into one another's place, they must pass by the right shoulder, having slapped right hands, but then turn back to the left, presumably ending facing, though this time Negri does not trouble to say so. From this point on, the steps consist of the same sequence repeated on alternate feet: two *spezzati* + one *ordinario*. The first time they both circle left, and the second they circle right, thereby making figures of eight in which they alternately turn towards and turn away from each other. The third time they cross back into their original places, presumably passing by the right shoulder and then turning left. They take hands and continue turning left on the two *spezzati* and then split: she casts back round her right shoulder, while he continues forwards round the circle to meet her and take inside hands for the final reverence.

It has to be admitted that the grammatical structure of the original text is as loose as the punctuation is perfunctory. It is a matter of individual interpretation which of the actions described are to be regarded as concurrent and which successive, and whether gerunds like *voltandosi* (near the end) should be applied to only one or to both dancers.

As reconstructed, this final manoeuvre has a certain brio that anticipates the conclusions of many Baroque couple dances; the two dancers should be sure to make the curves of their final *ordinario* as similar and balanced as they can.

Conclusions

The recognition of a form of siding in Part 1, even if it is a little disguised, is intriguing when we remember that Negri also featured a very clear instance of arming in 'Il Bianco Fiore'. The identification as siding must depend on our view of how that movement was actually done in English country dance; Negri's movement can only be compared to siding when this is done shoulder to shoulder. We cannot, of course, use Negri's version as an argument in favour of shoulder-to-shoulder siding, for the argument would then become circular. What we can say is that, if Negri intended his diminished reprises to be recognised as an elegant variation on normal siding, then normal siding must have been familiar in the genteel and noble society for whom he was catering. That, however, is a big 'if'; a style of dance using siding and arming is not otherwise known in sixteenth-century Italy.

As to Negri's competence as an author and proof-reader, this has for the most part been vindicated, but a substantial doubt remains in the galliard variation. However you interpret his text, on present evidence he stands convicted either of poor arithmetic or of careless writing. Since he clearly did know what he himself meant, it looks as if some muddle must have crept in while preparing the text for publication. That apart, and ignoring the usual execrable punctuation, Negri's language is carefully deployed. It is noticeable that wherever there is danger that he might be misinterpreted, because the dancers are asked to do something unusual, or because particular steps are not to be done on the foot last mentioned, he adds one or more words to remove all possibility of confusion. It is typical that, in describing the diminished reprises in Part 1, he was not content to say that the dancers do the same thing on the other foot, but spelled out his meaning in full detail. I find my opinion of Negri as an author considerably enhanced by studying this dance, and I am correspondingly embarrassed by his apparent error in the galliard. It would be nice to think that one day I shall see a new interpretation that removes this difficulty as well, but probably Negri simply made a mistake.

References

- Daye, A. (1986/7) The Problem of Negri's Term *fioretto spezzato*. *Historical Dance*, 2 (5), 36
- Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society (1977) *Court Dances of the Renaissance 1558–1625*
- Negri, C. (1602) *Le Gratie d'Amore* (Milano; facsimile, Bologna, 1969).