

## ROOTED IN THE RENAISSANCE

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### INTRODUCTION

In addressing the topic, On Common Ground, I propose to look at the basic step structure which seems to form the essential elements underlying all dance, or rather all social dance, as we understand it. These elements appear as two steps or step-sequences: the first, a single step, which may be taken with either foot and completed in either an open or a closed position but without further transference of weight; the second, a composite sequence, consisting of three separate, single steps, and, therefore, using one foot twice. This sequence, known by sixteenth century Italians as a *seguito*, is generally termed a double - possibly because it uses the same foot twice, more probably because it consistently uses twice as much music as a single step in the same rhythm. It too may be completed in several ways, none of which alters its basic three-step structure. That such singles and doubles form these basic ingredients is not surprising since we are blessed with two feet. What is intriguing is the many and varied guises in which these two steps appear - guises which serve to conceal but cannot deny the essential nature of the similarities. Of course, both technique and the manner of performance alter through-out the different periods - and I should in no way wish to belittle such differences, since in them, lies the intrinsic quality of each period's particular style - but perhaps by looking at the underlying sameness we may understand something more about these differences.

I have chosen to look at these two steps or step-sequences as they appear from the mid fifteenth century, the period of the earliest choreographies which can be re-constructed with some confidence, up to the early baroque period because, within that time-scale, the dance as we know it from original sources is largely the prerogative of the court and of the upper classes.

We may assume that much of the dance enjoyed by the populace at large - as country dance or folk dance - also employed the same single and double steps. However, the only choreographic evidence available to us for these dances not only derives from later periods (Arbeau's **Orchésographie** or Playford's **English Dancing Master**, for example) but is to some extent influenced by upper class usage of the dances these sources describe. The gloriously vivid portrayals of dance by painters such as Brueghel can in no way be taken to indicate what steps the dancers may have used. Likewise the fact that Hogarth or Rowlandson may show a line of dancers, at the precise moment of depiction, standing on different feet with different degrees of turn-out can only be taken as an indication that this may well have been the case, thereby reflecting not only the individual's place in society but also possibly their expertise in the dance.

### Historical Perspective

The work of dance historians is beset by two major problems, both problems of perspective. It is inevitable, living as we do in the late twentieth century, that all our thinking and being is coloured by recent developments in science and technology. We may wear with ease the dress of earlier periods, we may understand and appreciate the

modus vivendi of those who lived in the past but we must inevitably be affected, not only in body movement but, perhaps even more particularly, in our physical and mental attitudes, by the culture of our own day. Though not impossible, it is still difficult for us to appreciate fully the social corset of past ages, to understand the restrictions, and the freedoms, which ordered their lives - as it is hard for us to understand, for example, the shock of perceiving the world to be round rather than flat or the concept that the earth does, in fact, move round the sun. We may be glad that our practical experience of the dancing of past ages is one way in which to approach such understanding. Nevertheless, we must be aware of our inevitable limitations.

Even if we learn to perform dance to the satisfaction of members of an alien society, we cannot be sure that we understand them in the same way, because our bodies have been brought up in different environments, with different gestures and postures, so that we will even feel the same movements differently, and probably use slightly different muscles to achieve what appear to be the same results.<sup>1</sup>

The second problem of perspective arises from the tendency to equate progress through time with progress in both practical ability and technical skill - and, therefore, with cultural development; what Richard Ralph has termed "contemporary arrogance", the "subtly patronising view" -

... that Pre-Romantic dance is interesting as it approximates to later forms of the art ... To see dance history as a neatly pyramidal, evolutionary process is to be little the work of our predecessors beyond any justification: the truth is more ragged and opaque than that - and also less comfortable to ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

Although there may be a certain truth in this vision of the past, the emphasis on progressive development tends to obscure the successes of past cultures. It is strange to realise that we cannot move Stonehenge or that the techniques of wood preservation used in Norwegian Stave churches is no longer known to us.

The conviction that time brings improvement, that later or more recent is therefore better, is nothing new. In his *Nobiltà di Dame*, Caroso felt that he had attained a form of perfection, unrealised in his earlier *Il Ballarino*, by the re-organisation of form and pattern in the dances according to his rules of Perfect Theory (*perfetta Theorica*), a 'fundamental law of absolute symmetry' (Sutton<sup>3</sup>). Yet Caroso was later dismissed by Gennaro Magri as "so remote from our new style that he seems to know everything but the Dance, although we believe that he had attained merit and applause in his century".<sup>4</sup>

Much of our current thinking is tainted by the same somewhat complacent attitude. It has also been true in our thinking about dance. There is a certain belief that dance only merits attention once it has reached the theatre and become the prerogative of the professional. But this is to discredit the professionalism of the well-trained and often highly skilled amateur. Likewise it fails to recognise the importance and the significance of dance as an integral part of a cultured society - the court of Louis XIV being, perhaps, a major example of this. Lord Chesterfield might have despised dancing but admitted both the necessity of being proficient to succeed in society and the value afforded by

good training in producing a graceful manner in a healthy body.<sup>5</sup> Arbeau regarded dance as "essential to the well-ordering of society".<sup>6</sup> Magri considered it "the lathe upon which the human body is refined".<sup>7</sup>

By studying steps which are Rooted in the Renaissance, I hope to show that the same elements, the same essential structure of the single and double steps, provide the basic ingredients for all dance enjoyed in European society from the fifteenth century to the early eighteenth century - and indeed beyond.

Before looking at the steps themselves, it is perhaps worthwhile to mention briefly the first and most obvious difference between the dance of the three main periods under consideration: that which arises from the outward affect of dress and shoes. A corseted body cannot achieve the fluidity of movement available to the fifteenth century Italian dancer; the use of arms at the level of the upper torso and in opposition to the movement of the legs and feet likewise introduces new dimensions to the dance. To the courtly dancer of the renaissance, the specific use of the arms in a regulated manner did not form a significant aspect of the dance. It was enough that they should be graceful and not hang as if they were dead. Even as late as 1642, Navarro states "One should not twist and turn one's arms, but rather move them only slightly and with apparent negligence".<sup>8</sup> Likewise, it would be impossible to conceive of performing fifteenth century Italian steps in baroque heeled shoes, although comments in Caroso suggest that the use of platform soled shoes (*pianelle*) in dancing was not unknown in the late sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The presence of heels affects the posture. It will also affect the way in which the instep is used but need in no way preclude its use. Indeed, the baroque dancing masters stress the importance of a strong and supple instep.

### Artful Carelessness

Acrobatic movements, contortion in any shape or form, such as those seen in many early pictures, were strictly the province of the professional dancer. Excessive athletic prowess or over-elaborate movements of the feet have been consistently frowned upon - as may be seen in comments made by Castiglione<sup>10</sup> or by Weaver<sup>11</sup>.

The essence of courtly dance lay in moderation, in following the mean. To dance with a nonchalant demeanour, with restraint masking a degree of expertise, was the hall-mark of excellence. This call for moderation can be found in the writings of Domenico - *e nota che questa agilitade e mainera per niuno modo nole essere adoperata perli estremi. Ma tenere el mezo del tuo mouimento che non sia ni tropo ni poco*<sup>12</sup>, and in the Toulouse publication - *quant on la dance on va en pays sans soy demener*<sup>13</sup>. What Weaver termed "Artful Carelessness ... without a too curious and painful practising" or Navarro "a studied negligence".

### RENAISSANCE ROOTS

If we look at the step-vocabulary of fifteenth Italian *bassa danza*, we find five basic units - *Riverenza*, *continenza*, *sempio* (or single step) and *doppio* (or double step) and one (presumed) sideways movement, the *ripresa*. Unfortunately, there are no set step descriptions to accompany this step-vocabulary. To interpret them, we have to assemble

the not inconsiderable number of direct and indirect statements which can be found in the treatises and within the choreographies of individual dances. What emerges is fairly clear and strangely similar to the corresponding step-vocabulary, somewhat perplexingly described in the French/Burgundian texts where there is a parallel step-vocabulary - *Révérance, branle, simple, double* and *reprise*. [Fig. 1.]

### **SINGLE STEP - Fifteenth Century**

To look first at the correspondences and differences which occur in the performance of the single step. The French/Burgundian manuscripts describe the *simple* as a single step forwards, made either *en enclinant son corps* (Toulouse); or *en esleuant son corps* (Brussels). It would seem impossible to resolve the contradiction between these two versions. However, reference to comments in the Italian manuscripts on the manner of dancing *bassadanza*, where a preparatory rising *movimento* is made before the step, may suggest an answer. This *movimento* (movement) also involves a degree of turn in the body and bears some resemblance to the sixteenth century grace movement known as *pavoneggiarsi*, which is itself associated with a slight rising and lowering of the heels and is used as the concluding grace to a number of steps. Unfortunately, there are no specific descriptions of a *sempio* in the early Italian manuscripts to assist our interpretation.

That there may have been some slight variation in the performance of each of the two French *simples* is hinted at in the description of the second step of each pair as *petit*. There may also have been some difference between the basic Italian *sempio* and what the Giorgio<sup>14</sup> manuscript calls a *passo naturale* or natural step. Any such distinction, however, remains a matter of conjecture. Domenico does describe the nine essential steps and movements of *quattrocento* dance as *naturali*. He is, however, quite clear in stating that this should be interpreted as “happening on the down-beat” and not, therefore, implying simply what we would call natural movement.

Neither the Italian nor the French fifteenth century sources make any mention of a close associated with the single step. In *bassadanza misura*, these single steps are, in late twentieth century practice, generally taken as simple, open steps. The possibility of a close apparently only arises with the occasional addition of a *posada* or deliberate placing of the non-weight bearing foot.

Apart from rhythmic variation according to the tempo of the accompanying music, there remains unresolved the question whether these single steps were taken on the flat foot - perhaps rising through the instep as Domenico indicates for the *doppio* - or on the toe, as may be intended by Guglielmo's statement - *sorgere destramente nel battere du tempi*<sup>15</sup> - a description to which I will return when looking at the *doppio*. The French/Burgundian sources make no comment on this aspect of performance and current twentieth century practice varies in interpretation.

### **SINGLE STEP - Sixteenth Century**

There are, however, well-defined differences between the several sixteenth century versions of the single - *passi gravi, passi minimi*, and the elaborated *spezzati*. The nature

of the *passo puntato*, while it differs from that of the other single steps by the nature of its timing, is, nevertheless, also a single step with a deliberate use of a close. [Fig. 2.]

The *passo grave* and the *passi minimi* seem to be direct descendants of the *passo naturale* and the *sempio*, according to Domenico. Both are taken with the foot *spianato* (flat). In his second book, Caroso even renames the *passo grave* as a *passo naturale*, adding the curious- and possibly quite inaccurate - explanation “because Nature causes the baby to move - and walk - like that”. (Regola X)

The *spezzato* appears as an example of the gradual embellishment of steps which seems to occur as the focus of movement moves from the body to the footwork - a consequence, possibly, of the restrictions imposed by changes in dress from free-flowing to solidly boned and padded. The first step of the *spezzato* is taken on the flat foot, as in a *passo grave*, while the close specific to this step is adorned with a deliberate rise and fall. The *passo puntato*, on the other hand, as a sixteenth century version of a slow, closed single, must surely be a descendant of the *sempio* with *posada* and may, therefore, give some indication as to the possible timing and performance of that earlier movement.

### **DOUBLE STEP - Fifteenth Century**

The double in fifteenth century dance, both French/Burgundian and Italian, is clearly indicated, by both Domenico and Cornazano<sup>16</sup> (f. 10v), as a sequence involving three steps. Both French sources agree that, in performing the *double*, one should *elever son corps & marcher 3 pas en avant legierement*. The Italian treatises contain several partial descriptions of the *doppio* alongside those within the individual choreographies although it is unwise to assume that all these are inter-related. All are based on the same three-step construction. However, to complicate still further the ambiguities and the possibilities inherent in the realisation of these steps, the Italian *balli* are composed in any or all of four different musical rhythms or *misure*. *Doppii* occur in all of these *misure*, each of which brings to the *doppio* its own rhythmic variation and individual dance style. The embellishments which occur in the different tempi include a hop, a lilted step and an adornment known as a *frappamento*, the most probable interpretation of which involves a sub-division of the beat by repeated movements of the feet.

Descriptions given by Domenico and Guglielmo of the rise and fall which embellished the *doppio* appear to be quite contradictory and must, presumably, have affected the performance of the step itself. While Domenico advocates a slow rise and faster fall throughout the three steps following the preparatory *movimento*, a description reiterated by Cornazano, Guglielmo seems to suggest an entirely different version. In his chapter on *Aiere* (Air or lightness and grace) he writes that *aiere* is an act of *aieroso presenza* (airy presence) ... *mostrando con destrezza nel danzare un dolce & humanissimo rilevamento* (showing with dexterity in dancing a sweet and most gentle - cultured or even polished - rising up). (Pg: f. 8) One sentence later, he writes that “anyone dancing a *sempio* or a *doppio* ... must *fare alchuno aieroso relevamento & sorgere destramente nel battere di tempi* (lift the body lightly and rise up nimbly on the down-beat).

Might there be some correspondence between the *movimento* and the French ambiguity of *s'inclinant* or *s'levant*? Could there be a parallel between the *legierement* of the French texts and Guglielmo's *rilevamento*?<sup>0</sup>

It is small comfort to us that the performance of these steps was not regarded by the three Italian *maestri* as simply natural nor were they to be attempted by the inexperienced dancer, nor by people of lower social standing. We could wish that Cornazano were indeed available to show us what he meant by some of his descriptions since, as he himself admitted, *male si p(u)o esplicare sença essere presente a fargli fare* (f. 10v) - it is difficult to explain without being there to show you.

### **DOUBLE STEP - Sixteenth Century**

The descriptions of the *seguito ordinario* and *seguito semidoppio* found in the late sixteenth century dance treatises of Caroso and Negri<sup>17</sup> intriguingly show the same ambiguity. Caroso's descriptions of the *seguito ordinario* (Negri's *seguito grave*) clearly state that it should be performed on the toes (*in punta di piedi*). This sequence of three steps, made on the rise, followed by a lowering of the heels, parallels the earlier *doppio in bassadanza* as it may have been performed by Guglielmo.

However, the description of Caroso's *seguito semidoppio* (Negri's *seguito ordinario*) not only varies between the earlier **Il Ballarino** and the later **Nobiltà di Dame** but, in all three cases, is open to interpretation. In **Il Ballarino**, Caroso states that the first two steps of this *seguito* should be performed as *passi presti alle Cascarde*. This apparently clear instruction becomes less informative when one reads that these self-same *passi presti* are to be danced as *passi gravi* but more quickly. The Rule for *passi gravi* (Regola VII) makes no mention of moving on the toes and it is, therefore, generally accepted that the first two steps of the *seguito semidoppio* are to be made with the feet firmly on the floor. However, in the later **Nobiltà di Dame**, Caroso differentiates between the two *passi* which begin the *seguito semidoppio* by stating that the first should be made *in punta de piedi* - on the toes - but the second *spianato* - flat. Negri, who has taken his step-descriptions almost verbatim from **Il Ballarino**, adds to the confusion by stating that, for this *seguito*, which he calls *ordinario*, the two *passi* before the *spezzato* should be *come di sopra* - as above. Whether this instruction refers to the immediately preceding description of the *seguito grave* (Regola IX) or to the earlier description of *passi gravi nei balletti* (Regola V) can, perhaps, never be resolved. Once again, however, we have seen the opening step of the double danced either as a flat step or as a step on the toes, followed by a second step which is flat, the sequence being concluded with a *spezzato*.

That the step, by these later authors called a *doppio*, ends with a close (**Il Ballarino**: Regola XXII; **Le Gratie d'Amore**: Regola XVI) is curious in the light of the current acceptance of a fifteenth century style performed without a close. The steps for this are taken as *passi gravi*, that is flat, and the sequence is concluded with a rise and fall as the feet are joined together. Might this imply an evolution from the fifteenth century *doppio in quadernaria*? Other later versions of the *doppio* in **Nobiltà di Dame** offer altogether more complicated step-sequences, with the explanation that these are called *doppiii* because they have twice as many steps in them - six rather than merely three.

## BASIC BAROQUE

When we turn to the baroque step vocabulary, we find the same stress on the importance of good deportment and on an absence of affectation as has been marked throughout the renaissance periods. One crucial difference in dance style is, however, immediately noticeable: this is the use of the arms which, in the majority of the steps, are generally raised in opposition to the leading foot. The second major change lies in the manner of the preparation for each step. Instead of the fifteenth century *movimento* or the sixteenth century *pavoneggiarsi* (with the concluding rise and fall so dear to Caroso), both movements which involve a raising of the body, we find that the preparation and transference of weight on to the foot which will take the step is consistently made with the knees bent in a *plié*. This is an innovation and was still disapproved of, at least in Spain, in 1642 since, according to Navarro, "Bending one's leg is a very ugly thing wherever one is dancing; for it belongs only in ridiculous dances".<sup>18</sup>

The transfer through the *plié* is usually made onto the ball of the foot, the heel being off the ground. Weaver makes a comment that compares and contrasts interestingly with the renaissance description of the *passo grave*. "In Walking it was observ'd, That the Heel was always taken from the Floor first, and set down again first; but, in Dancing, it is Otherwise, and especially after a Sink, the Toe always comes to the Floor first."<sup>19</sup>

Tomlinson does suggest the possibility of the foot being flat on the floor while dancing. "It is, first of all, to be observed, that the Half Coupee ... is originally nothing more than a single Step ... with the additional Ornament of a Movement ... in Time to the Music ... whether upon the Toe or Heel".<sup>20</sup> It should be noted, however, that his diagrams always show the dancers with the weight on the toe and, of course, that they are wearing heeled shoes.

## SINGLE STEP and DOUBLE STEP - Baroque

That the *demi-coupé* is distantly related, as a version of the single step, to the older *sempio* is clear. Although the manner of performance has altered dramatically, the inherent structure, a single step, remains unchanged. Rameau's descriptions of the *temps de courante* or *pas grave*,<sup>21</sup> on the other hand, may bear little resemblance to those of the earlier *passi gravi* but the manner of performance - the step being taken on the toe - has some intriguing correspondence with the style implied by Guglielmo's "rising on the down-beat". Clear also is the family resemblance between the early *doppio* and later *seguito* and the *pas de bourrée* or *fleuret*. Rameau differentiates between these two forms of the double by stating that the third step of the *pas de bourrée* is to be made as a *demi-jeté*, whereas the *fleuret* has only the one movement. This titular distinction is not retained by Weaver, who differentiates between the simple *pas de bourrée* and a "*pas de bourrée* with a bound".<sup>22</sup> For Tomlinson, on the other hand, this bound is an additional, fourth step added to the double. Nevertheless, the family resemblance between the *doppio* according to Guglielmo, the *seguito ordinario* according to Caroso and the *pas de bourrée* shows a direct line of descent.

More intriguing correspondences may be attempted but are not open to conclusive interpretation. Among these are the possible connection between the sixteenth century *seguito finto*, which shows an obvious affinity to the *pas de bourrée emboîté*, and the fifteenth century *cambiamento* - which is, of course, never described. I would suggest that these are, in essence, the same step.

Strangely, the first appearance of a two-step sequence seems to lie in the baroque *coupé*, a step sequence which Rameau describes as a "*demi-coupé* and a *pas glissé*". However, fifteenth century French *basse danse* made consistent use of a pair of *simples*, where there was also a probable differentiation between the two steps. Although the style has, of course, altered, the ancestry is evident.

A quick glance at the fifteenth century *riprese* and sixteenth century *continenze* reveals a curious anomaly. The performance of the two steps seems to inter-change from one period to the other, the larger becoming the smaller and vice versa. As a movement made as a single step sideways, however, it finds a direct descendent in the baroque *balancé*.

More such similarities may be found in the shape of a composite step by comparing, for instance, the structure of the sixteenth century *sottopiede* with the later *jeté-chassé*; or, more fancifully, by drawing parallels between the fifteenth century *ripresa gallopata* (about which we know nothing other than its title), the sixteenth century *saffice*; or between the *destice* and the baroque *glissade* concluded with, for example, a *coupé avec ouverture de jambe* or "open *coupé*". One might then wonder whether the *chassés croisés* found in the nineteenth century quadrilles belong to the same family. Likewise, there is a close family relationship between the sixteenth century *fioretto* and the *assemblé-sissone*.

Although such comparisons as I have attempted here may well be "odorous", they may serve to show some aspects of underlying continuity in the basic structure of dance steps throughout the different periods. It may also be possible to derive a closer appreciation of the intrinsic qualities which distinguish the dance styles of these different periods from a recognition of the inherent similarities in their steps.



**Fig. 1 Step-Vocabulary - Renaissance**

<b>15th C. French / Burgundian</b>	<b>15th C. Italian</b>	<b>16th C. Italian</b>
Simple	Sempio	Passo grave minime (puntato)
Double	Doppio	Seguito ordinario / (Negri = grave) Seguito semi-doppio / (Negri = ordinario) Doppio (various forms)

**Fig. 2 - Step-Vocabulary - Renaissance - Baroque**

<b>15th C. Italian</b>	<b>16th C. Italian</b>	<b>Baroque French / English</b>
Sempio	Passo grave minime	pas grave (demi-coupé)
Doppio	Seguito ordinario / grave Seguito semi-doppio /  Seguito finto	fleuret pas de bourrée  pas de bourrée emboité
Reprise	Ripresa  Fioretto  Sottopiede  Saffice / Destice / Corinto	? balancé  (assemblée-sissone)  (jeté-chassé)  ? glissade

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