

WILL THE MUSIC TELL YOU WHAT TO DO?

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INTRODUCTION

Twenty-nine of the tunes included in the 1651 edition of *The English dancing master* [1] survived (not always continuously) to the eighteenth edition of *The dancing master* in c.1728 [2]. Some of the tunes have a well-documented history reaching back into the sixteenth century, and several appear in keyboard and lute sources in the early seventeenth century. During this period (late renaissance to mid-baroque) major changes took place in musical style and performance, but it is not clear to what extent these changes were reflected in the manner of playing music for country dances. This paper examines a few pieces of evidence for changes in performance practice and possible effects on dancers' perceptions of the music. It is suggested that our performance practice should take account of such changes where the evidence for them is strong. The examples are related to the musical elements of melody, rhythm and harmony (although this subdivision is artificial and should not be allowed to inhibit appreciation of the pieces as musical entities).

MELODY

Many of the tunes exhibit modal characteristics, but the extent of this is sometimes unclear because of the lack of consistent key signatures. (Sharp key signatures came into general use much later than those involving flats). There is also ambiguity over the treatment of leading notes and major/minor sixths in the context of *musica ficta*. In some cases key signatures or accidentals are introduced in later editions, but often it is not clear whether these are corrections, changes in fashion, or genuine alternatives which may have co-existed (as is clearly the case with traditional tunes such as *The Morpeth rant*, which has many current variants [3]). Some of the choices confronting the player are illustrated by *Millisons jegge* [4]:

The image displays eight variants of the melody 'Millisons jegge' from 1651, arranged in four rows. Each variant is written in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature. Variants A1, A2, and A3 are grouped together in the first row. Variants A4, B1, and B2 are in the second row, with A4 featuring first and second endings. Variants B3, B4, and B5 are in the third row. Variants B6, B7, and B8 are in the fourth row, with B8 also featuring first and second endings. The notation uses various accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals) and rests to indicate different melodic choices.

Millisons jegge (1651)

As it is presented in the first edition, without key signature, *Millisons jegge* appears to be in the Dorian mode, and the only accidental is the sharpened leading note in bar B8. Should we, by analogy, play a C# for the leading note in bar A4? The tune sounds logical and satisfying both ways, and without needing to worry about the C naturals in bars A2, B1 and B2. However, the situation is further complicated by the version in the third edition of 1665, where the key signature is one sharp (indicating F# throughout the tune). If we try to play the tune in this version, not only does it sound very different, but now the C naturals in bars A2 and A4 sound 'wrong' (mainly because they are an augmented fourth away from F#s in previous bars). If we play C#s in bars A2 and A4, what about the C naturals in bars B1 and B2? Although they sound logical as C naturals, they could also be played as C#s, thus placing the tune firmly in D major, despite the key signature. There is not enough evidence to decide whether the 'D major' version is a progression, reflecting a fashion for major keys, or whether it co-existed with the modal version. It might be suggested that the tune was always 'major', and that the key signature is simply missing in the 1651 version, but if that were the case it is hard to explain the notated C# in bar B8.

Black nag [5] also had a sharp key signature (one sharp in 1695; two sharps in 1703) added in its later appearances. The various versions present the player with choices similar to those outlined for *Millisons jegge*, but in the case of *Black nag* the 'D major' version is far easier to play on the violin, and this factor may also suggest an explanation for the modifications to the rhythm in the later editions. A comparison of the two versions shows the addition of an anacrusis, and significant alterations to bars A2, A3 and B7. In the 1665 version the long tied note in bar A2 interrupts the flow of the melody, a problem overcome by the more continuously flowing revision. Similarly the rather angular rhythm of bars A3 and B7 is replaced by a more flowing (but less distinctive) variant.



Black nag (1665)

The musical score for 'The galloping nag (1703)' is presented in four staves of music. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The first staff contains measures A1, A2, and A3. The second staff contains measures A4, B1, and B2, with a first ending bracket over A4 and a second ending bracket over B1. The third staff contains measures B3, B4, and B5. The fourth staff contains measures B6, B7, and B8, with a first ending bracket over B6 and a second ending bracket over B7.

The galloping nag (1703)

There is no point in looking for a 'correct' or 'definitive' version of a melody of this sort, but sometimes major errors can be detected, and performance should take account of these. For example, the 1670 version of *The maid in the moon*, if taken at face value, has a very strange sounding second part which starts in F and ends in G. One has heard bands attempt to play this version, and Barlow [6] suggests an editorial accidental to ease the pain. However, the writer suggests that the last four bars of the 1670 version (starting from the quavers in bar B6) were copied out a whole tone too high (possibly because the tune was being transposed during the editorial process). If this error is corrected the tune sounds logical and satisfying. Support for this correction is provided by later versions [7], which are not identical to *The maid in the moon* but which conform to the writer's interpretation of the last four bars of the tune.

The musical score for 'The maid in the moon (1670)' is presented in four staves of music. The key signature is one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 4/4. The first staff contains measures A1, A2, A3, and A4. The second staff contains measures B1, B2, and B3, with a first ending bracket over A4 and a second ending bracket over B1. The third staff contains measures B4, B5, B6, and B7. The fourth staff contains measures B8, B9, B10, and B11, with a first ending bracket over B8 and a second ending bracket over B9.

The maid in the moon (1670)

RHYTHM

In some cases a tune notated originally in simple duple time is transformed to compound duple time in later editions. It might be suggested that the 1679 version of *Under the greenwood tree* represents an attempt to notate a compound duple tune from a performance, and that the transcriber used simple duple time in error [8]. While this explanation is consistent with the melodic shapes of most bars, it does not account for the group of four quavers in bar B2.

Playford 1679

Under the greenwood tree (1679 and 1687)

In this case the responses of players and dancers to the 1687 (compound duple) version have been found to be very different from responses to the 1679 (simple duple) version. When questioned, a small group of dancers [9] felt more at ease with the compound duple version, which they described as 'more flowing' or 'more natural'. Significantly, they also felt that they danced better to that version. The writer finds

that when playing the violin it is easier to shape the phrases in the compound duple version. However, none of these responses invalidates the 1679 version. Perhaps we should beware of rejecting tune variants simply because they are not immediately attractive.

Evidence for the possible application of the convention of *notes inégales* is strong but not conclusive. The most common form of *notes inégales* was applied to groups of quavers moving mainly by step; the first note of each pair was lengthened and the second shortened to an extent which was left to the judgement of the performer, as explained by Michel de Saint Lambert in 1702:

'The equality of movement that we require in notes of the same value is not observed with eighth notes when there are several in a row. The practice is to make them alternately long and short, because this inequality gives them more grace ... When one must make the eighth or quarter notes unequal, it is a matter of taste to decide if they should be more or less unequal' [10].

Although sources differ on the extent to which it should be applied to non-French music, the dominant influence on the music of the court of Charles II was French, to the discomfort of composers such as Purcell who had broader perspectives. In a note to his Italian-influenced trio sonatas of 1683 he wrote, 'tis time now ... to loath the levity, and balladry of our neighbours' [11]. Although Purcell used *notes inégales* (usually notated as dotted) in his music, there is no mention of this convention in his instructional writing in the twelfth edition of *An introduction to the skill of music* [12]. In an annotation of about 1710 to a tract on rudiments Roger North makes it clear that a skilled player would make the music sound more lively by playing *notes inégales* although the music does not notate it ('tho' not expres't):

'But in short notes it gives a life and spirit to the stroke, and a good hand will often for that end use it, tho' not expres't. First it serves to imitate a sort of saltation, different from the walk of the music ... where the first example is a sort of dancing movement, and the other walking ... And next it gives a spirit to swift playing ... where the air is smarter, than if the notes were played plaine' [13].

Writing in about 1730, Michel Corrette makes a specific link between the convention of *notes inégales* and English country dances:

'The 6/4 is a measure of two uneven beats; it is used for the Loure in French music. The English compose many Vaudevilles, and Country-dances in this measure ... These airs ought to be played in a noble manner, marking the crotchets well; and making the quavers unequal two by two' [14].

Thus there is evidence to support the use of *notes inégales* when playing country dance tunes in a post-Restoration context, and it is possible that this is the reason for

the introduction of dotted rhythms in later versions of some tunes, for example *Irish trot*:

Playford 1651

Playford 1703

Irish trot (1651 and 1703)

(At this point some delegates were invited to take the floor and to step in time to two versions of *Cheshire rounds*, the first played as notated [15] and the second played with the quavers as *notes inégales*. Both in their movement responses and in their verbal evaluation afterwards it was clear that the dancers were influenced by the *notes inégales*, although opinion was divided about preferences.)

HARMONY

As Barlow [16] has pointed out, there is more evidence of ensembles playing for country dancing during the later part of the period, and some of the later tunes, especially those related to court and theatre dances, seem more in need of harmonic support than those in early editions. In the engraving which is the frontispiece to the eighteenth edition of c.1728 [17] the three musicians (playing violin, oboe and bassoon) are shown playing from music, implying that they are not simply doubling the tune. Present-day musicians need to consider how to harmonise country dance tunes in order to fit the historical and social context in which they are being played. Although provincial practice probably lagged behind current fashion, it is likely that dance music played for court and high society events would have responded rapidly to changes in taste.

During the period under consideration there were radical changes in the way in which musicians rationalised and taught harmonic method. These changes may be charted in instruction books such as Morley's *A plain and easy introduction to practical music* [18] and Playford's *An introduction to the skill of music* [19]. In Renaissance ensemble writing the bass tends to be one part among many, but in the Baroque style the bass becomes far more important, not only as the driving force of the harmony, but also as a well-shaped and logical melody in its own right, in Purcell's words: 'as Formal and Airy as the Treble will admit' [20]. No copy has been located of the basses advertised as available with the fifteenth edition of *The dancing master*

in 1713 [21], and it is tempting to hunt for basses in sources such as *The beggar's opera* [22]. However, Pepusch's hastily written basses were intended to support singing, not dancing, so they may not be good models. More flowing basses are to be found in dance music for the theatre, although even here they often behave awkwardly and break the rules. The style of the bass and consequently of the harmony, and particularly the rate of harmonic progression, can have a definite effect on the way the dancers respond to the music, although they may not be so conscious of this as they are of the rhythm and tempo. More detailed work is needed on this aspect of dance accompaniment.

It is a matter of dispute how long such Renaissance clichés as the chord on the flat seventh in a *major* key persisted during the 17th century in England. This type of progression is illustrated by Byrd's setting of *Sellinger's round* [23]:



Sellinger's round (final phrases, treble and bass only)

A number of tunes (for example: *Irish trot*, *Stingo/Cold and raw*) are modified in later editions of *The dancing master* so that the implied use of the chord on the flat seventh is replaced by a dominant chord. However, the use of the chord on the flat seventh is strongly implied in the later versions of *Picking of sticks*, and it turns up in the music for the dances with spits in Lambranzi's *New and curious school of theatrical dancing* of 1716 [24] (a tune very similar to *Red house* in Playford 1695), so it is possible that this harmonic progression survived in country dance music after it fell out of fashion in other instrumental music.

Examples such as this indicate that only by a detailed study of the tune variants and of changing musical fashions can one begin to develop appropriate accompaniments for country dances which are set in a particular period and context. Although this paper has included only a small number of examples, and has not dealt with important aspects such as ornamentation and tempo, perhaps it has indicated some directions for further work. Although the music does not tell you what to do, it does drop some strong hints.

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3. Seattle, M. (editor) *The Morpeth rant*. Blyth: Dragonfly Music, 1990.
4. All music examples in this paper are presented in modern notation to facilitate playing.
5. Later called *The galloping nag*.
6. Barlow, J. op. cit.
7. Titled *Valentine's day*.
8. An explanation suggested by Barlow for the earlier version of *Buff coat*.
9. Early Dance Circle country dance study day, Birmingham, 22 May 1993.
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16. *ibid.*
17. *ibid.*
18. Morley, T. *A plain and easy introduction to practical music*. 1597. Harman, R.A. (editor) London: Dent, 1952.
19. Playford, J. op. cit.
20. *ibid.*
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