

STYLE OR STYLUS? MR ISAAC'S DANCE NOTATORS IN THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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MR ISAAC'S DANCES

One of the most revered names in English choreography for the royal court during the reign of Queen Anne was that of Mr Isaac. Twenty two of his dances still survive in notated form, published between 1706 and 1716. Nineteen of them were apparently choreographed [1] as command-performance dances at Court, to celebrate the birthday of Queen Anne on 6th February each year, and some of them were also performed on stage [2].

None of Isaac's dances survive in his own hand; all twenty two extant notations are the work of other dancing-masters recording Isaac's choreography for publication. So our understanding today of Isaac's dances is of necessity influenced by the way in which those notators recorded his work, the extent to which they understood it, and their own reasons for publishing it.

We know that at least four different dancing-masters notated Isaac's works. They were John Weaver, P. Siris, Charles Delagarde, and Edmund Pemberton, and my concern today is with the first three of them.

Weaver was commissioned by Mr Isaac both to make an English translation of Feuillet's treatise on notation (which Weaver published as *Orchesography* in 1706) and to illustrate its virtues by publishing six of Isaac's own dances in notated form [3]. His interest in seeing Isaac's dances on sale therefore was partly to boost sales of his own book and partly because he was under the direct patronage of Isaac himself, at least until he left London in 1707.

Siris is chiefly remembered for his own translation of Feuillet's treatise, which came out (in a close and bitter race against Weaver) in 1706 as *The Art of Dancing*. In it Siris included his only known notation of an Isaac dance, *The Rigaudon*, which becomes very important to us because it provides an alternative version to Weaver's notation of the same dance. But the motive for its appearance may have been sheer rivalry with Weaver, and that may have influenced what each of them recorded.

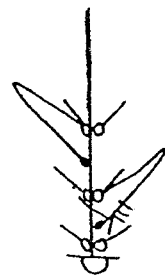
Delagarde notated four new Isaac dances, for the music publisher John Walsh, between 1708 and 1711. His interests in the dances were probably more as a dancer than a notator, since he actually performed one of them at Drury Lane (*The Saltarella* 1708), and states on the title-page of both that dance and its successor (*The Royal Portuguez* 1709) that his notations were "revised by the author" - ie by Isaac himself. It may well be therefore that Delagarde's work represents the closest we have to what Isaac actually created.

RIGAUDONS BY MR ISAAC

There is not time today to review all twenty two of Isaac's dances, so I'd like to concentrate on one type of dance notated by Weaver, Siris and Delagarde, and identified in their notations as rigaudons [4]. They were, respectively, *The Rigadoone*, *The Rigaudon*, and *The Rigadoon Royal*.

The musical characteristics of an eighteenth-century rigaudon are described [5] as being in duple or compound-duple metre, with a preliminary upbeat, and often consisting of repeated four, six or eight-bar phrases. The three surviving Isaac rigaudon notations all share these characteristics; in terms of dance steps and patterns however there seems little to distinguish them from some bourrées and gavottes.

It is a moot point whether the step known as a pas de rigaudon as notated by Feuillet (and described by one music historian as "one of his undecipherable hieroglyphs" [6]) was an essential characteristic of the dance. It occurs in many more dances than those called rigaudons: for example, in notations of Isaac dances alone, a pas de rigaudon occurs in five dances, only one of which (*The Rigadoon Royal*) identifies itself as a rigaudon [7]. Moreover, Feuillet's pas de rigaudon does not occur at all in either version of Isaac's *Rigadoone*, nor in Mr Holt's *Rigadon Renouvelle*, nor in the rigaudon section of Le Roussau's *The Dutches*, although the last does include a contretemps assemblé which may be regarded as a pas de rigaudon which travels [8].



Feuillet's pas de rigaudon therefore does not seem to be an essential component of a rigaudon. There is however another version of the step, described as a "Rigadoon step of two springs or a Sissonne" by Kellom Tomlinson and used by him in two of his own dances [9]. It is this version of the step which occurs in Isaac's *Rigadoone/Rigaudon*.

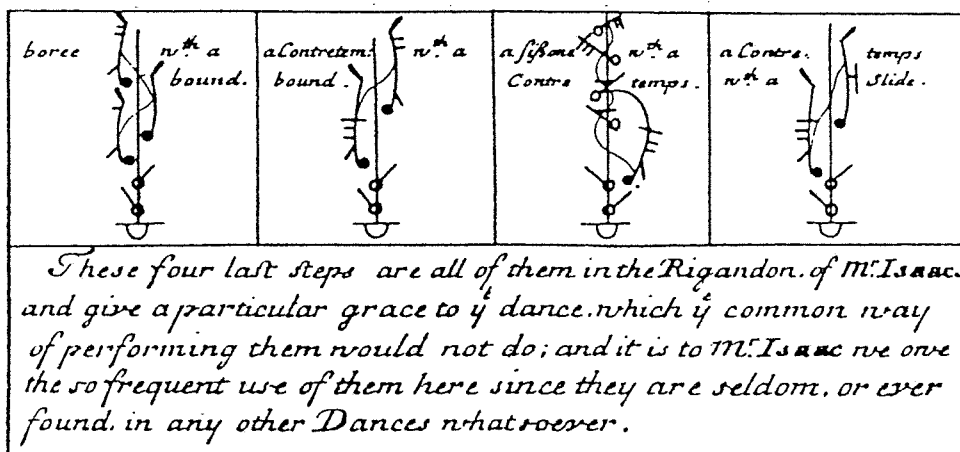
THE RIGADOONE AND THE RIGAUDON

The two variant versions of this dance by Isaac, Weaver's notation of *The Rigadoone* and Siris's of *The Rigaudon*, were both published in 1706 but may represent an older dance recollected and notated (differently) some time after its creation. The questions arise, which came first, and which most accurately reflects Isaac's original? Or did Isaac himself create a revised version of the dance?

Both are dances for a man and woman. Both consist of 80 measures or bars of music and steps, but Weaver's version is set to different music to Siris's. We don't know who wrote either version of the music. Both versions begin with an upbeat, and follow the musical form AABB in four and six-bar phrases respectively, played four times through. Both versions follow the normal baroque dance conventions of alternating mirror and axial symmetry.

On plate 42 of *Orchesography* (in the "Supplement of Steps") Weaver tabulates steps

not shown in Feuillet's treatise, four of which are "in the Rigaudon of M^r. Isaac's ... and seldom or ever found in any other dances whatsoever". The four in question are (i) borce with a bound (Rameau's true pas de bourrée), (ii) contretém with a bound (Rameau's contretemps à deux mouvements), (iii) sissone with a contretemps (Tomlinson's rigadon step of two springs), and (iv) contretemps with a slide.



from John Weaver, *Orchesography* (London, 1706), plate 42
(facsimile, Gregg International Publishers Ltd, 1971)

All four do appear in Isaac's *Rigadoone* as notated by Weaver, although the contretemps with a slide only occurs once and is lacking from Siris's version, so one wonders at Weaver's precise motive for including it. Nor is Weaver accurate in claiming that the steps rarely occur in other dances: if the notations are all accurate, the bourrée with a bound occurs in fifteen of Isaac's dances, the contretemps with a bound in all twenty two dances, and the sissonne with a contretemps in six dances [10]. Three of the four steps reappear in Isaac's *Rigadon Royal* of 1711, notated by Delagarde, and the first two steps (bourrée with a bound and contretemps with a bound) occur in many French and English notations of the time.

It seems to me that three characteristics of Isaac's choreography emerge from the notations, regardless of who notated them. They are present in nearly all Isaac's dances but particularly so in the rigaudons, and are his use of phrasing and sequences of steps; his often surprising changes of body direction; and his inclusion of brief passages of rhythmic complexity, often towards the end of the dance.

If Isaac's dances are analysed phrase by phrase some very interesting sequences of steps emerge. He seems to have been fascinated by contrasting symmetrically paired steps (steps or sequences of steps repeated on each foot), steps which repeat later on the same foot, and steps which do not repeat at all within the phrase, and this can be seen very clearly in the rigadon notations. For example, in plate 1 of *The Rigadoone/Rigaudon* [11] :-

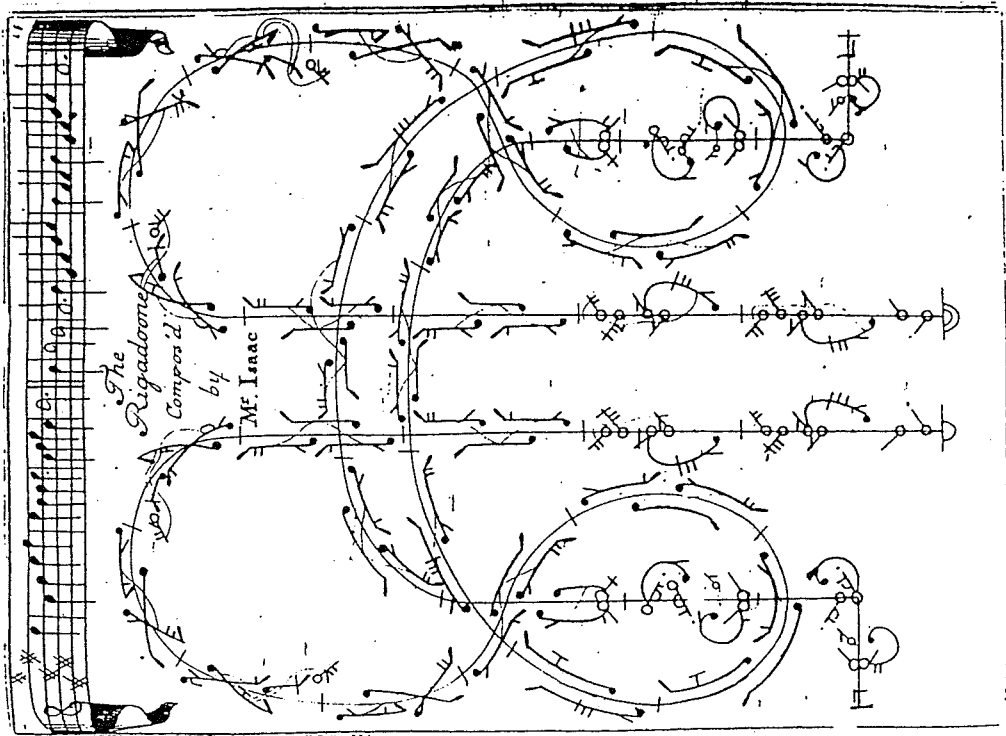
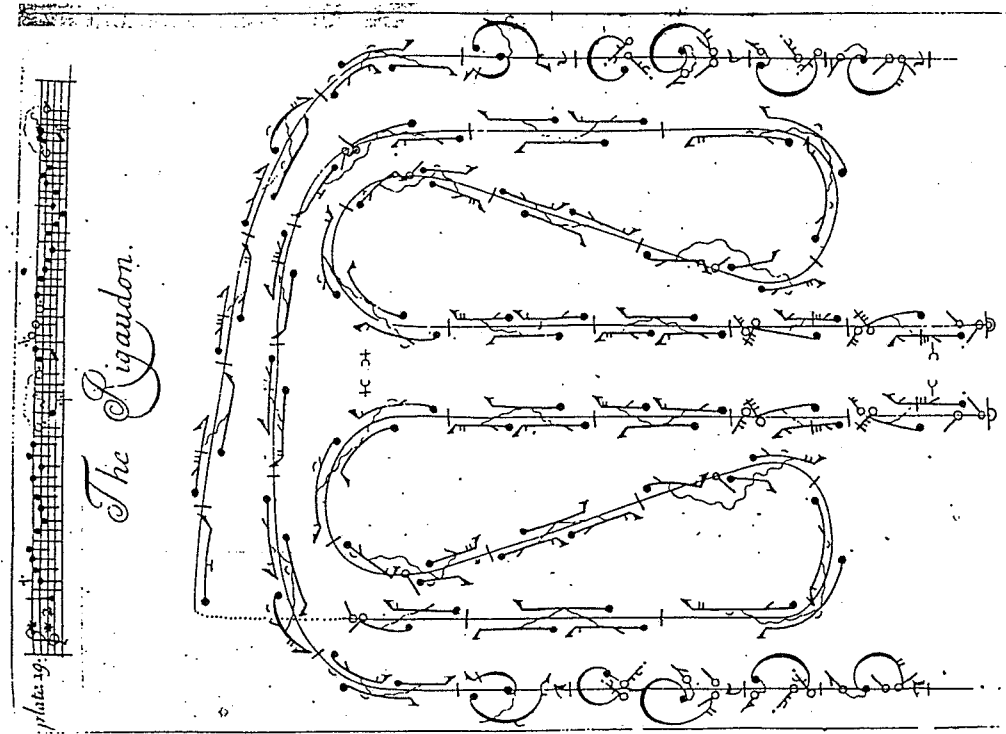


Figure 1
Weaver's notation of Isaac's *Rigadoone* 1706: plate 1
(By permission of The British Library)



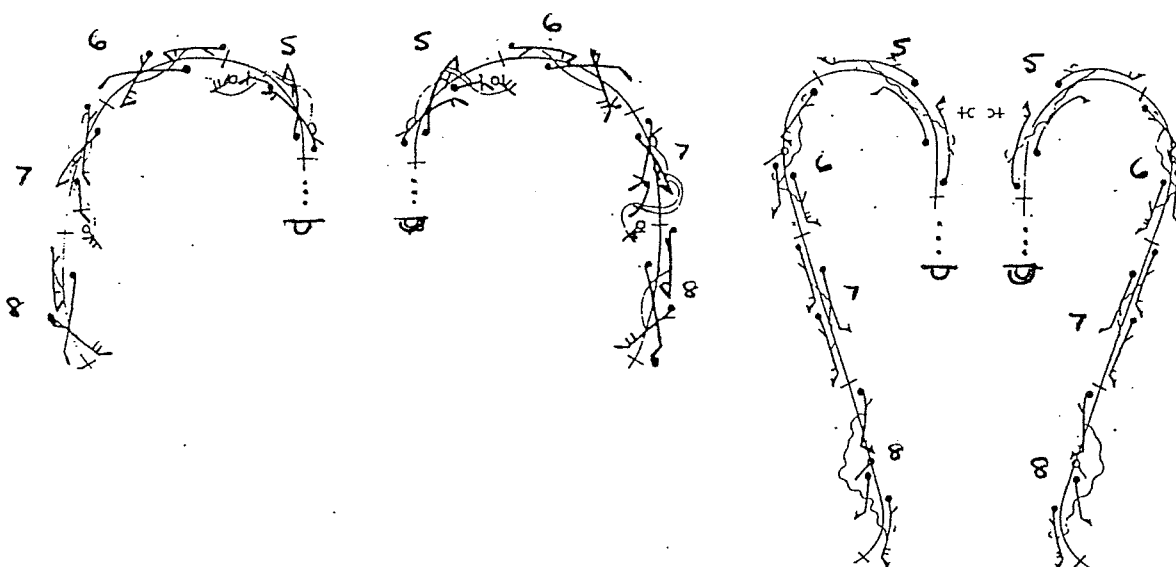
Siris's notation of Isaac's *Rigaudon* 1706: plate 1
(By permission of Trinity College, Dublin)

Phrase 1 (Bars 1-4, A music):

The steps are the same in both versions (see Figure 1). The dancers move forward with a pair of *sissonnes* with *contretemps* followed by a pair of *bourrées* with a bound. The overall impression is total symmetry - dancers moving in mirror image and the steps begun first on one foot, then on the other. In Siris's version the dancers hold inside hands for this passage.

Phrase 2 (bars 5-8, repeat of A music):

This starts to show some differences of steps and body directions, but not of step groupings within the phrase.



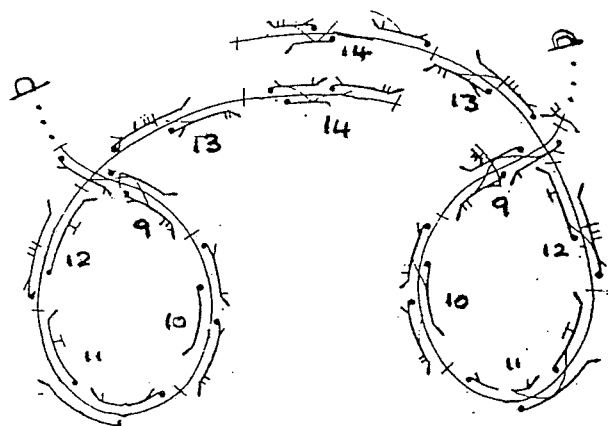
Bars 5-8: Weaver's notation

Bars 5-8: Siris's notation

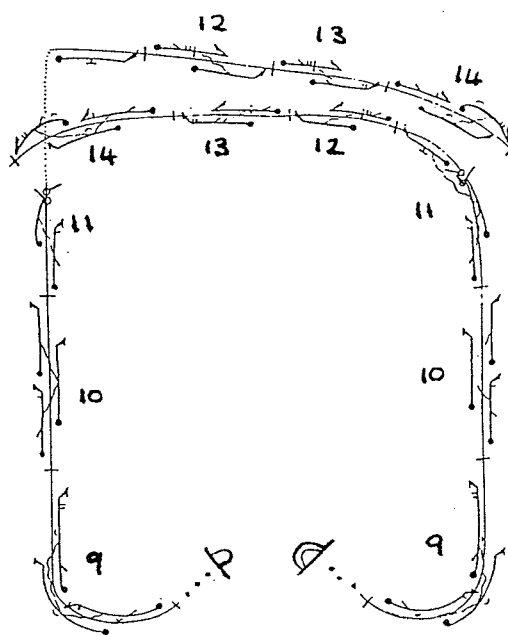
Weaver's version has the dancers suddenly turn their backs on the presence [12] and curve round with a sequence of steps which repeat on the same foot. Siris has the dancers just cast out with a simpler sequence of steps which nevertheless repeat on the same foot. Different steps, different body directions, but still in repeated 2-bar groupings.

Phrase 3 (bars 9-14, B music):

Both versions start the phrase with *bourrées* with a bound, and this seems to have been one of Isaac's favourite steps for beginning or ending a phrase.

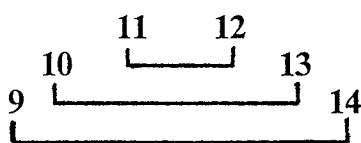


Bars 9-14: Weaver's notation

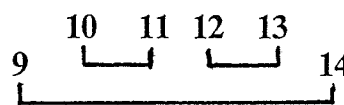


Bars 9-14: Siris's notation

Weaver's version has a pair of bourrées with a bound but, apart from these, every bar has a different step. It's a very pleasingly shaped phrase, with the step symmetry on bars 9 and 14 (bourrées with a bound), 10 and 13 (steps using slides), 11 and 12 (steps using bounds). Siris's version also begins and ends the phrase with bourrées with a bound but he groups the other steps differently so that the step symmetry is bars 9 and 14 (bourrées with a bound), 10 and 11 (variations on a pas de bourrée), 12 and 13 (variations on a contretemps). Again it is plausible as Isaac's choreography. The simple omission of a slide at the end of the contretemps in bar 12 completely alters the symmetry of this phrase, and might represent a different version by Isaac rather than just careless notating by Siris.

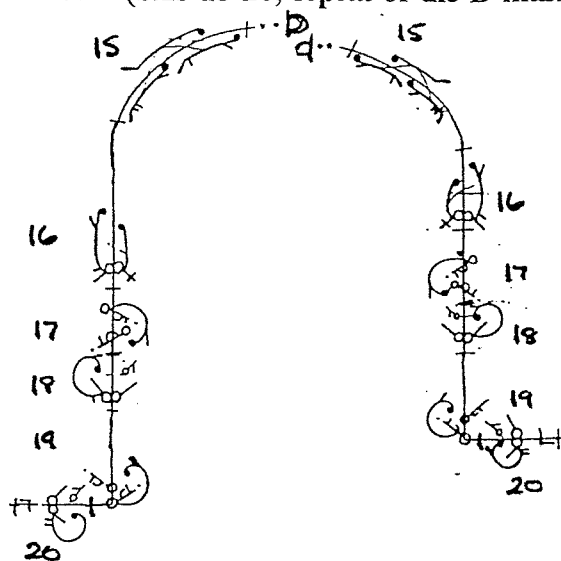


**Bars 9-14 step symmetry
(Weaver's notation)**

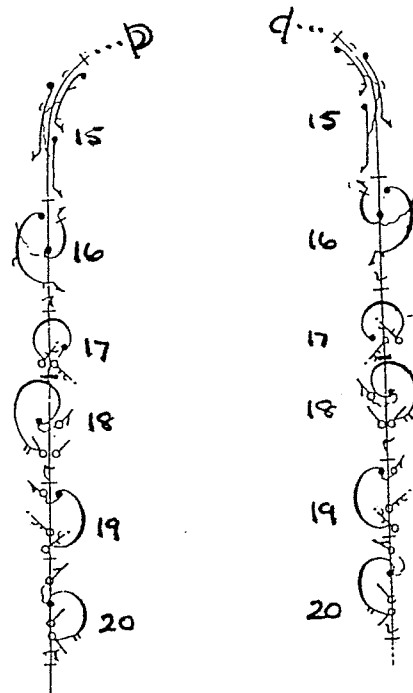


**Bars 9-14 step symmetry
(Siris's notation)**

Phrase 4 (bars 15-20, repeat of the B music):



Bars 15-20: Weaver's notation



Bars 15-20: Siris's notation

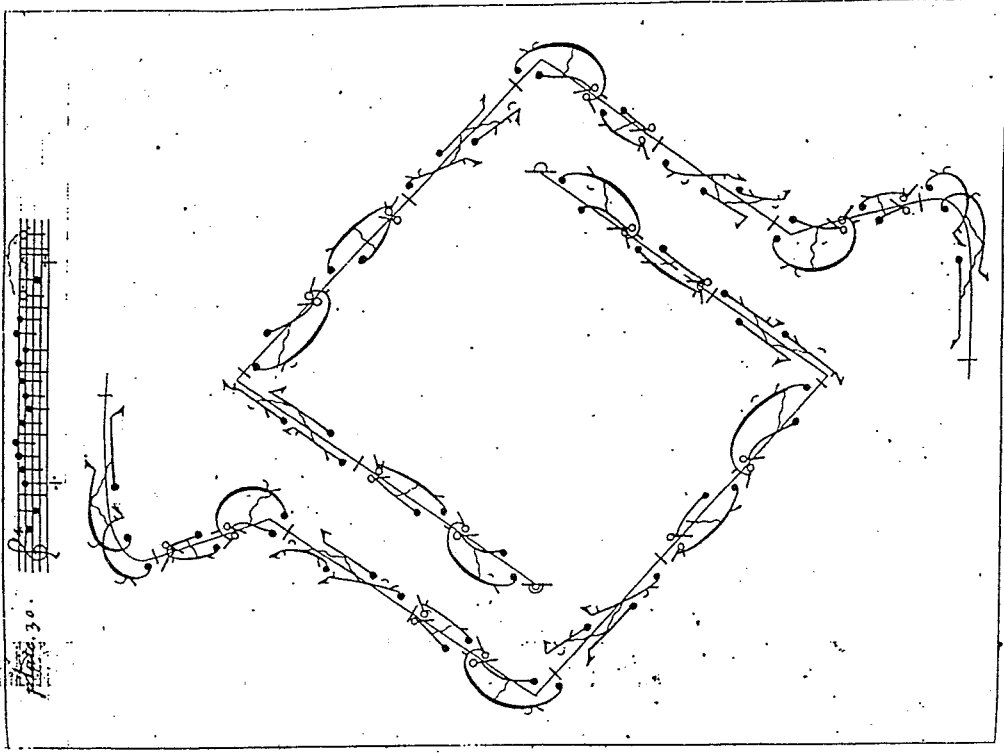
Weaver's version again begins the phrase with a bourrée with a bound, followed by a series of demicoupés, half turns and quarter turns, ending with assemblé and pause. Siris's version has pas de bourrée, coupé opening the raised leg, and then a repeated sequence of quarter turn, assemblé, pause. His version is the more predictable, whereas Weaver's avoids an exact repeat of either steps or rhythms at this point [13].

Plate 2 (Figure 2)

The finest example in *The Rigadoone* of Isaac's interest in changes of body direction is seen whenever the dancers work in axial symmetry to move round each other. In plate 2 for instance, Weaver notates a stunning use of a very precise box-pattern which winds up tighter and tighter: no wonder Kellom Tomlinson praised the "perfect square formation" made in this dance [14]. In order to make the pattern, Weaver has the dancers make exact quarter and half turns at certain points; Siris turns the track into a diamond pattern, and makes more use of subtle eighth-turns to achieve the changes in direction. These may well be his own free interpretation of Isaac's patterns, given that eighth-turns to make gradual curves are a strong characteristic of Siris's own compositions.

Plate 3 (Figure 3)

This plate begins with the same floor pattern in both versions - dancers moving sideways and looping round first to their left then to their right - but then they use different tracks to approach centre stage. This may have practical reasons: Weaver's version meets a problem on the diagonal approach because there is very little space to fit in the sequence of steps. Siris's version solves the problem by overshooting the diagonal, and the approach turns into a zigzag pattern along an axis up and down stage. Again, is this invention on Siris's part, or was it Isaac's original idea? Isaac used straight line and diagonal approaches in several of his dances; zigzag patterns also appear in his *Mimuet* (notated by Pemberton in 1711), although that was a solo.



Siris's notation of Isaac's *Rigaudon* 1706: plate 2
 (By permission of Trinity College, Dublin)

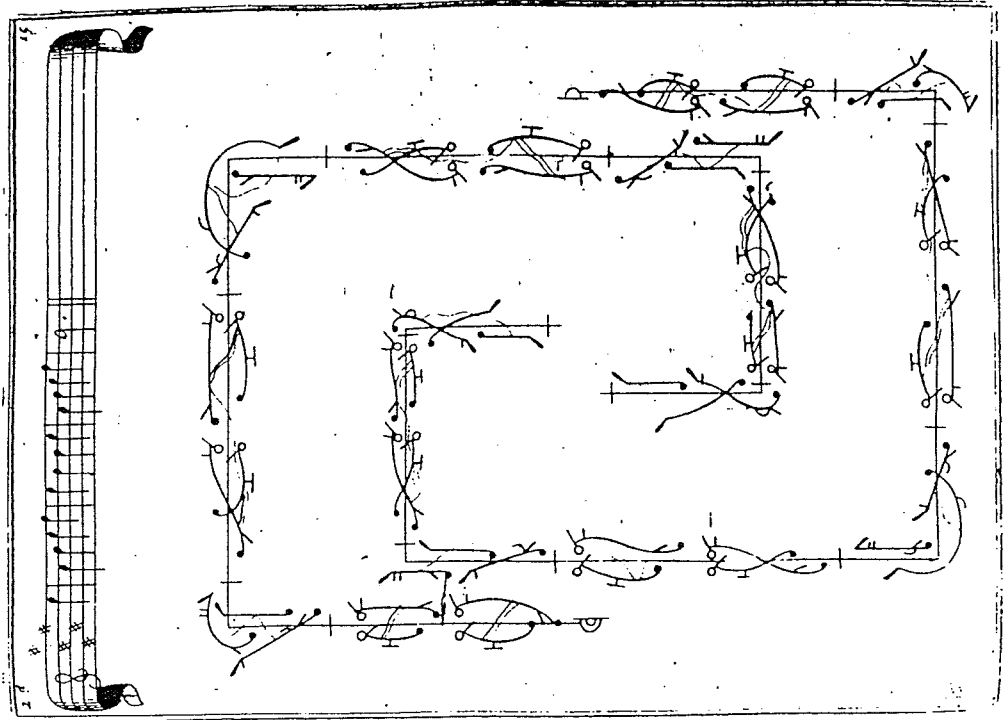


Figure 2
 Weaver's notation of Isaac's *Rigadoone* 1706: plate 2
 (By permission of The British Library)

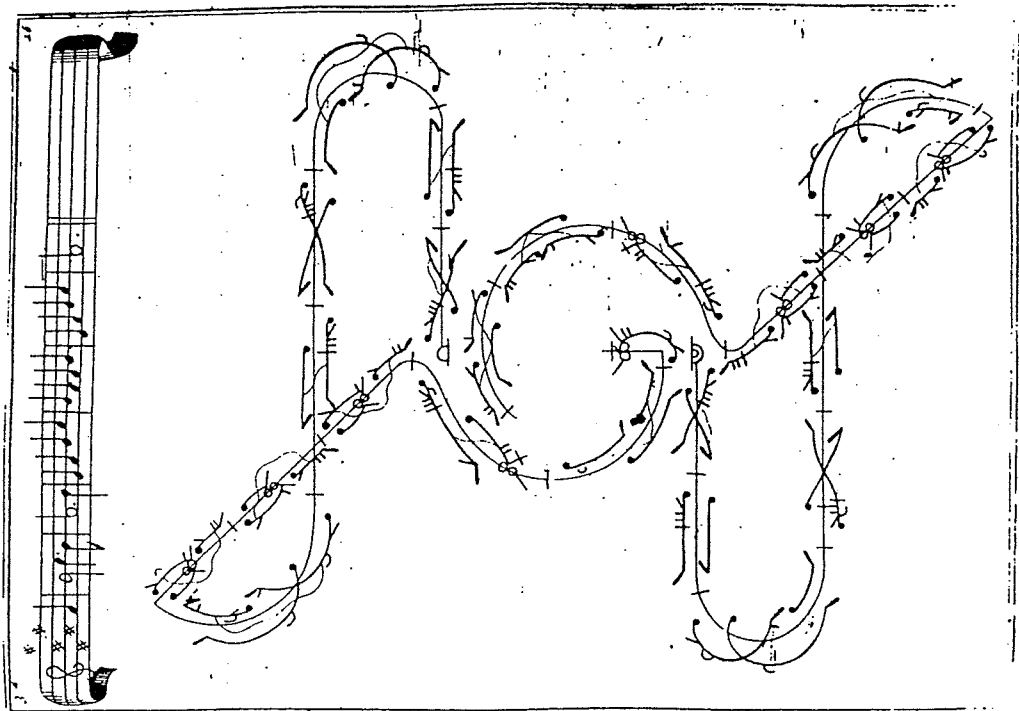
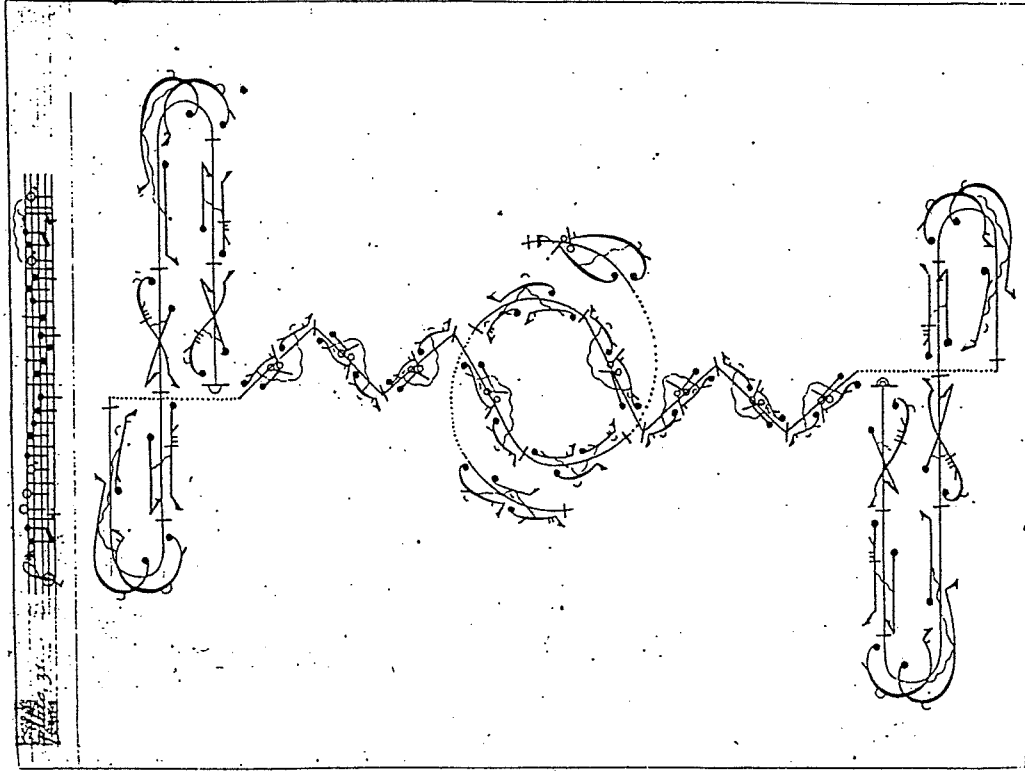


Figure 3
Weaver's notation of Isaac's *Rigadoone* 1706: plate 3
(By permission of The British Library)

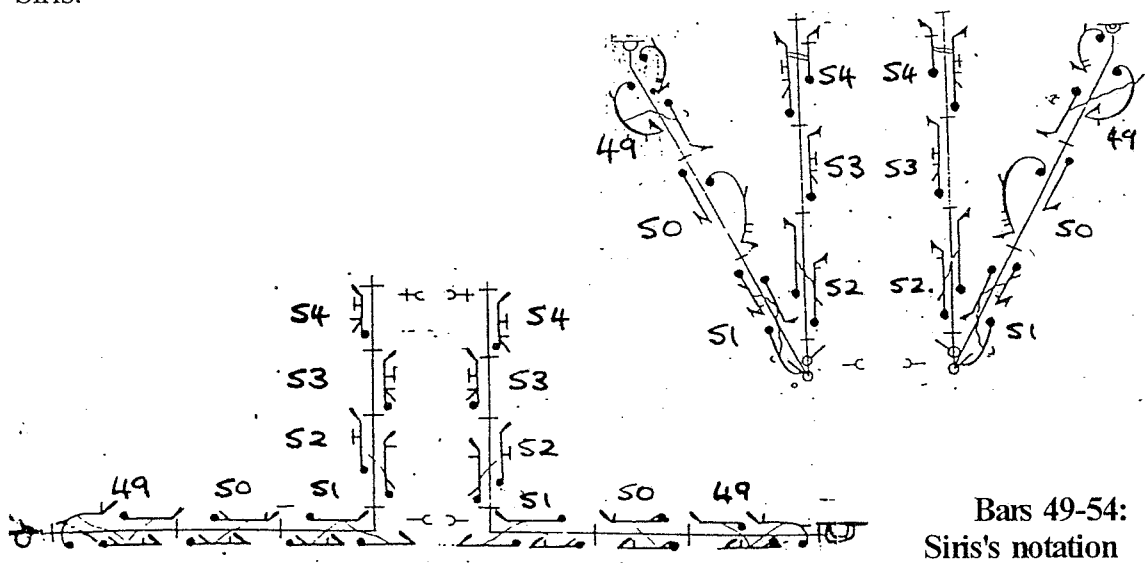


Siris's notation of Isaac's *Rigaudon* 1706: plate 3
(By permission of Trinity College, Dublin)

Plates 4 to the end

From this point onwards, half way through the dance, each version of the notation differs significantly until the last time through the music, when they become very similar [15].

Both versions begin plate 4 with the man turning on the spot while the woman circles round him; they then cross and travel downstage. At this point (bars 49-54) Weaver's version has the dancers moving sideways and then straight forward; Siris has each dancer travelling diagonally backwards and then straight forward. This is rare in other Isaac dances, and again one wonders whether this is a gratuitous alteration by Siris.



Bars 49-54: Weaver's notation

Bars 49-54:
Siris's notation

Weaver's version also seems more typical of Isaac's penchant for introducing a sequence of some complexity towards the end of the dance - here it becomes a game of step rhythms: pas de bourrée with an extra bend on the second step, coupé of two movements, pas de bourrée (all moving sideways), coupé with a slide (moving forwards), and two temps de courante [16].

The rest of the dance is very similar in both versions [17], so I'll move on now to the other surviving rigaudon of Mr Isaac.

ISAACS *RIGADOON ROYAL* 1711 [18] (Figure 4)

This is his royal birthday dance for 1711, the *Rigadoon Royal*, notated by Charles Delagarde and set to music by James Paisible which was also the tune of a song called "Ah Chloe when I prove my passion" [19]. How does this dance compare with the characteristics of the 1706 *Rigadoone*?

In musical terms, it follows an AABBAABB pattern of eight-bar phrases, to make the dance 64 bars long in total. It is in duple time, and begins with an upbeat. In choreographic terms, almost the first half of the dance (until halfway through the second B music repeat in plate 4) is in mirror symmetry; the second half of the dance



Figure 4 Delagarde's notation of Isaac's *Rigadoon Royal* 1711: plate 1
(By permission of The British Library)

is in axial symmetry but reverts to mirror symmetry for the final two bars. The second half of the dance begins with Feuillet's pas de rigaudon, and bourrées with a bound, contretemps with a bound and possibly one sissone with a contretemps (a rather ambiguous step for the man three bars from the end of the dance) appear as in Weaver's table 42 in *Orchesography*.

Delagarde's notation suggests however that by 1711 Isaac may have been using sequences of steps differently. He used fewer paired steps or repeats within phrases, but placed them between different phrases or in ornamented form between different sections of music. For example [and ignoring for the time being the different floortracks covered], in the opening bars of plate 2 (A music) we see pas de bourrée, coupé opening the raised leg, pas de bourrée, pas de bourrée. In the opening bars of plate 3 (B music) we see a variation on all this: bourrée with a bound, coupé jeté opening the leg, pas de bourrée, sissonne.

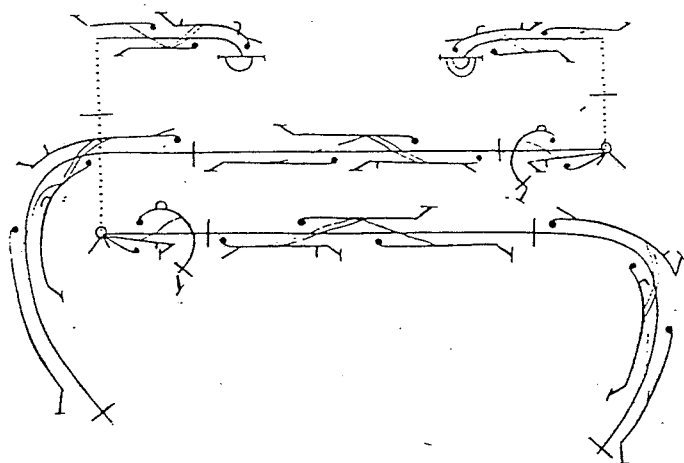


Plate 2 (bars 9-12)

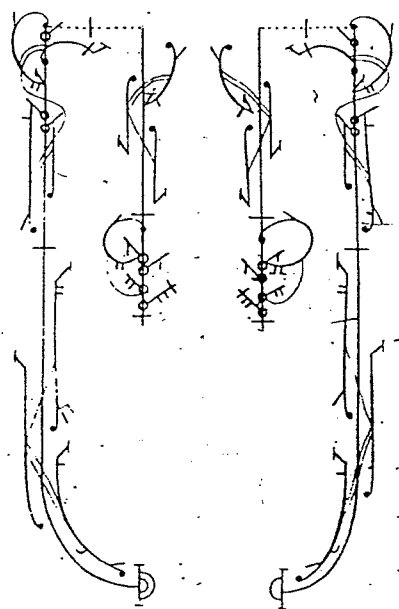
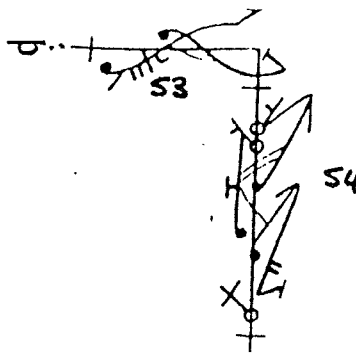


Plate 3 (bars 17-20)

Favourite steps to begin or end phrases are much the same as in the earlier *Rigadoone* - bourrées with a bound, contretemps with a bound, assemblés to first (often to end a phrase, and often followed by a one-beat pause). There are other favourite steps also - glissés, which occur in many Isaac dances, a pas de bourrée ouvert stepping onto the heel on the second step (found also in eight other Isaac dances), and ornamented coupés incorporating leg gestures (ronde de jambe, opening of the leg, pas tortillé, or beats on the ankle, which appear in nearly half of Isaac's dances). A rhythmically complex passage occurs at the beginning of the last plate.

Thus Delagarde's notating of the *Rigadoon Royal* seems a reasonable record of Isaac's dance; and yet there is one very strange step (bar 54, plate 7, both dancers) not found in quite that form anywhere else in Isaac's works, which suggests that Delagarde did not fully understand what he saw in this instance.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, baroque dance research is as much about history as about choreography, and like all historical evidence the dance notations have their own bias which the modern scholar and performer might keep in mind. We don't know how Mr Isaac's notators worked: was it from a memory (perhaps faulty) of seeing or doing the dance, or from watching Isaac teach the dance, or from a manuscript draft or verbal description supplied by Isaac? We don't know.

Weaver's notation of *The Rigadoone* in 1706 seems, by comparing it with other Isaac dances, to be closer to Isaac's likely original than Siris's version was, and yet Weaver's desire to make his book *Orchesography* a best-seller does seem to have influenced his assertions concerning some of Isaac's steps. Siris's own quirks are obvious in his notation of *The Rigaudon*, yet now and again that dance includes something which could be an alternative version by Isaac himself. Delagarde's notation of *The Rigadoon Royal* seems close to Isaac's likely original, when compared with other Isaac dances, and yet there is at least one step in it which Delagarde seems not to have understood, and so - from his notation - neither do we today.

There is much more work to be done on all this. It might seem an esoteric exercise to analyse Isaac's dances through the eyes of his notators, but I think it is valuable to do so if we wish to understand why Mr Isaac was respected so highly during his own lifetime. It also warns us that our own reconstructions can alter the original, and that no interpretation is definitive.

Notes

- 1 The claim that all nineteen were "New dances for Her Majestys BirthDay" was made only by the music publisher John Walsh, who issued and reissued Isaac's dances, with the same plates of notation but new title-pages, from c1708 until c1730. In fact it seems likely that several of the dances date from before Queen Anne's succession.
- 2 *The Saltarella* (Drury Lane, 21 February 1708), *The Union* (Drury Lane, 8 March and 3 April 1708) and, in King George I's reign, *The Friendship* (Lincoln's Inn Fields, 15 March 1715): E.L.Avery et al., *The London Stage 1660-1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960-1963) *passim*.

- 3 *A Collection of Ball-Dances perform'd at Court...All Compos'd by Mr Isaac, and Writ down in Characters, By John Weaver...London: Printed for the Author...1706.* Weaver also notated Isaac's new dance *The Union* for publication in 1707, and this too was reissued later by the music publishing firm of John Walsh. For facsimiles of these dance notations see R. Ralph, *The Life and Works of John Weaver* (London: Dance Books, 1985) pp 291-355.
- 4 English and French rigaudons, identified from their titles or music headings in the dance notations, are listed in M.E. Little and C.G. Marsh, *La Danse Noble: an inventory of dances and sources* (New York: Broude Bros Ltd, 1992). See also J. Shennan (editor) *A Workbook by Kellom Tomlinson* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1992) p.80 for a theatrical rigaudon by Kellom Tomlinson, 1716.
- 5 M.E. Little, article on the Rigaudon (in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*), which also notes the similarities between rigaudons and bourrées. For a discussion of the rigaudon as a generic dance form, see C.G. Marsh, *French Court Dance in England 1706-1740: a study of the sources* (unpublished PhD dissertation, City University of New York, 1985) pp 231-233.
- 6 V. Alford, The Rigaudon (in *Musical Quarterly* XXX.3, July 1944) p.282, referring presumably to Raoul-Auger Feuillet, *Chorégraphie* (Paris, 1700) p.76.
- 7 The other four are *The Spanheim* (c.1708 and earlier), *The Saltarella* (1708), *The Godolphin* (1714), and *The Morris* (1716). An argument could be made that *The Spanheim* is an early example of a compound-duple rigaudon, as it runs in eight and six-bar phrases and starts on an upbeat. The others are all in duple or compound-duple metre, do not start on an upbeat, and do not always have regular phrase patterns.
- 8 In French sources the pas de rigaudon occurs in all extant notations which identify themselves as rigaudons, apart from Balon's *Rigaudon* (published by Dezais in 1714); but it also appears in several forlanas, gavottes and bourrées.
- 9 Kellom Tomlinson, *The Art of Dancing* (London, 1735) pp 44-48; and his dances *The Submission* (1716), which also included a pas de rigaudon, and *The Address* (1719), which was clearly inspired by Isaac's *Rigadoone* and *Rigaudon Royal* in its steps and patterns. Neither this version nor Feuillet's version of the pas de rigaudon however occur in Balon's *Rigaudon* or Holt's *Rigadon Renouvelle*.
- 10 The exception is again the contretemps with a slide, which occurs in only two other Isaac dances: *The Britannia* (notated by Weaver, again for the 1706 collection) and *The Princess* (notator unknown, possibly Weaver. The first extant copy was issued c.1708 but the music had been published in Bray's *Country Dances* (which included three Isaac court dances) of 1699.
- 11 British Library Music Library h.993(13); and Trinity College Dublin Library S.gg.32. A facsimile of Weaver's notation is printed in Ralph, *op. cit.*, pp 296-301; Siris's notation is not available in published facsimile. The floortracks in Weaver's version of plate 1 bear a strong resemblance to those notated, again by Weaver for publication in 1706, for part of plate 3 of Isaac's *The Favorite* (see Ralph pp 296, 317), and this reiterates the question of the extent to which Weaver's notating style might have reflected or distorted Isaac's original choreography.

- 12 Several of Isaac's notated dances show quite quirky instances of a sudden change of direction: for example *The Rigadoon Royal*, *The Marlborough* and *The Northumberland* where the dancers, moving sideways, suddenly make a half turn, still travelling in the same direction.
- 13 Interestingly, both versions omit a barline at measure 17, and Weaver also omits one at measure 19.
- 14 Kellom Tomlinson, *The Art of Dancing* (London, 1735), p.56.
- 15 The notations also differ in layout: Weaver divides his notation into three plates (music AAB, BBA, BB), Siris divides his into four, to follow the musical structure AA, BB, AA, BB.
- 16 Siris's sequence - jeté coupé, step jeté, pas de bourrée (all travelling diagonally backwards) and then coupé and temps de courante coming forward - also becomes a game with the music if the dancers think of the first three bars just as six counts (ie ignore the barlines): that sequence then becomes jeté pas de bourrée twice. Compare with *The Richmond* (again notated by Weaver for publication in 1706) plate 6, in which certain steps also cross the barlines.
- 17 Both end with a final retreat, also found in four other notations of Isaac dances (*The Richmond*, *The Royal Portuguez*, *The Saltarella*, and *The Rondeau*), in which the man travels backwards leading the woman who travels forwards until she turns to face front at the very end. Together with *The Rigadoone/Rigaudon* these account for nearly a quarter of Isaac's extant notated dances.
- 18 British Library K.8.k.6; not available in published facsimile.
- 19 F. Cunningham Woods, A brief survey of the dances popular in England during the eighteenth century (in *Proceedings of the Musical Association XXII*, 1896) p.99.