

Traditional French Dances from the Baroque Period

Jørgen Schou-Pedersen

The known attempts on development of a dance notation system in the late 17th century all focus on the noble dance style. However, it is very unlikely, that other dance styles – such as traditional dances from earlier periods – should not have been known even at court. Once the Beauchamp system of notation had been invented and published¹, dancing masters might like to record not only the fashion dances of the period, but also traditional dances as well as new dances based on traditional dance styles and techniques. My idea has been to point out details in some notated dances from the baroque period which indicate links back to the earlier dances.

When we research and try to bring these dances to life, we have an obstacle in the fact that a very limited number of sources on dance technique are known from the late 17th and early 18th centuries, and that they focus on the noble style, in particular “Le Maître à danser” by Rameau². However, analyses of the structure of some selected dances may supply information which gives us a glimpse of the transition from the late renaissance style into early baroque style of dancing. I have chosen four choreographies as examples, but information may be found in other dances as well.

The first example is the opening figure of Lorin’s “Contredance Nouvelle”³. This opening figure forms a formal introduction, in which each couple in turn presents themselves to the onlookers using a step sequence shown in the following scheme.

The music is in compound duple meter. A step that takes one half bar of music and which has one transfer of weight is seen as a single step. A compound step that takes one bar of music and which has three transfers of weight stressing first and third transfer, which means that the step stresses the same foot twice, is seen as a double step.

In that way the step sequence can be seen as a simple pattern of single and double steps. The single steps have been varied by the different amount of energy and by the different directions. Apart from the extra double step in bar 8 and the fact that the pair of singles in bar 9 for some of the couples has been replaced by a double because they need to travel longer and must end on the other foot, this is a regular sequence of two singles and one double repeated, a well-known step pattern in choreographies back to the earliest dance sources known. This sequence is the basis of Arbeau’s processional pavan⁴, but it is also frequently used in the Italian *balletti*, in particular in opening sequences where, after the reverence, the dancers come forward to the centre of the room to do the figures. This is exactly the function of the opening figure of the “Contredance Nouvelle”. (The last three singles in bars 12–13 are only there for the dancers to get out of the way for the next couple, who by then have already begun their sequence.)

Contredance Nouvelle	Bar	Structural equivalent
Reverence, pas degagé	1	Reverence
2 pas jetté, pas de bourée	2–3	2 singles, double
2 pas simple, pas de bourée	4–5	2 singles, double
2 pas ballancé, 2 pas de bourée	6–8	2 singles, 2 doubles
2 pas simple, pas de bourée or 2 pas de bourée	9–10	2 singles, double or 2 doubles
Reverence, pas degagé	11	Reverence
2 pas simple, coupé assemblé	12–13	3 singles

Lorin provides very important information on the dance style of the period. Probably the most important statement is that the *pas de bourée* was done *à deux mouvements*⁵. This confirms the theory about the *pas de bourée* being a late double step, since the two *mouvements*, on the two beats of the bar, stress the same foot. The *contretemps* does not seem to have been an established step-unit yet, but we frequently find a similar sequence: One *pas sauté* (equivalent to one *demi contretemps*) followed by a *pas simple* (equivalent to one *demi coupé*). This means that the *contretemps* was also done *à deux mouvements*. In this period, the *pas de menuet* was done *à trois mouvements*, which can be confirmed by studying Favier's notation of "Le Mariage de la Grosse Cathos" in 1688⁶. This has led me to the conclusion that the dancing style at that date would have been softly undulating compared to the style in use around 1700.

The manuscript Ms.fr.14884⁷ contains a large number of fashion dances and even stage dances of which a number are titled "the old ones" such as "Le vieux passepiéd" and "La vieille mariée". The manuscript possibly dates shortly after 1710, and by then most of these dances were not very old, but just to distinguish them from newer choreographies given the same popular title, they became known as the "old" ones. Some of them however, seem to have roots further back, such as "Le vieux canary"⁸.

The music to "Le vieux canary" is in 3/4 meter and consists of two repeated eight-bar phrases. The whole tune is played three times. During the baroque period, canary music was normally written in 6/8 (or 6/4) meter with an upbeat, half a bar or sometimes less⁹. The dancers would not start until the first downbeat. Since the music to "Le vieux canary" is written in 3/4 meter, it is not clear, whether the first bar should be played as an upbeat or not. It is easy, though, to imagine the tune notated in a 6-beat rhythm, the first bar forming the upbeat which will make the cadence fall on a stressed bar. But nevertheless, the dance very clearly begins on the first bar similar to the much earlier canary choreographies, for example that by Fabritio Caroso¹⁰. So in that aspect "Le vieux canary" may reflect an earlier dance style.

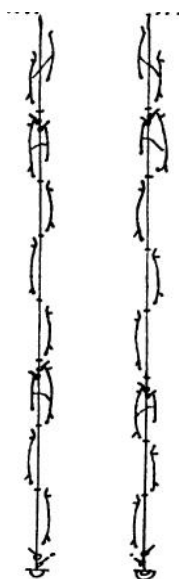


Figure 1. *Le vieux canary*, opening section

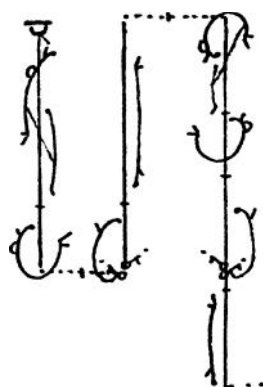


Figure 2. *Le vieux canary*, pivoting sequence



Figure 3. *Le Traquenar*, detail

Roughly, the choreography to the first phrase of the music forms a travelling figure, whereas the second accompanies stationary variations. The step sequence of the first phrase shown in Figure 1 has only very little resemblance with the step sequence of the travelling figures of the renaissance canario, but again we find the sequence of two singles and one double repeated so typical for renaissance dances. In the French terminology, the basic step sequence would read: two *demi coupés* and one *coupé* closing behind followed by one *demi coupé*, quite similar to Lorin's two *pas simple* and a *pas de bourée à deux mouvements* with the same high number of *mouvements*. Suppose the steps were performed with the movement quality described by Rameau, the high number of *mouvements* would inevitably slow the speed down. But since we know from music sources that the canary should be very quick and gay, I conclude, that the *mouvement* would have been smaller and lighter, possibly done with less braced knees.

In the third playing of the tune the step sequence is interestingly changed into one double followed by two singles and there has been added turns with a playful improvised character. The stationary variations do not include any of the stamping sequences characteristic of the renaissance canario, but they are very lively and folk-dance like, most of them quite unusual for the repertoire of the French ballroom dances.

The little pivoting figure in this dance shown in Figure 2 can be used to exemplify one of the experimental ways I have approached some unusual dances. I have a couple of times been lucky enough to have the opportunity to dance sequences from this dance before advanced baroque dancers and have them analyse and write the sequence down in Beauchamp notation.

[Here the step sequence was demonstrated.]

At first glance this sequence bears little resemblance to our usual understanding of baroque dance; but once it is broken down into details everything can be notated as steps from the usual repertoire. The sequence reads: One *coupé* with a turn on the first step, a *demi coupé* with a half turn, a *demi coupé* closing behind on toes, and a *demi coupé* forward. Done at a quick speed and with a playful movement quality, the steps melt into the pretty little pivoting sequence.

I believe this must have been how dancing masters of the early eighteenth century would occasionally have used the new notation system to record dances that already existed in tradition.

Another of the very interesting dances in the Ms.fr.14884 is called "Le Traquenar" by de Beaufort¹¹. The music is written in duple meter with a half bar upbeat. It consists of a four-bar phrase repeated and an eight-bar phrase repeated. The whole tune is played twice. As we found in "Le vieux canary", the dance starts on the upbeat, and all steps throughout the dance are notated across the bar lines as shown in Figure 3.

The most interesting feature of this dance is the step sequence performed to the first phrase of the music. The first plate of the dance is shown in Figure 4. Moving sideways left, as if they were dancing in a circle, both dancers repeat a sequence of one left *demi coupé*, one right *demi coupé* crossing in front and one *coupé* sideways left with a slide closing in first position. In the following scheme the *coupé* has been broken down to two movements.

This sequence seems to be equivalent to the double step as performed in the brawls described by Arbeau in 1588¹². The positions of the feet – specially the crossing in front on the second step – are similar to the beginning of "Le premier bransle" as described by de

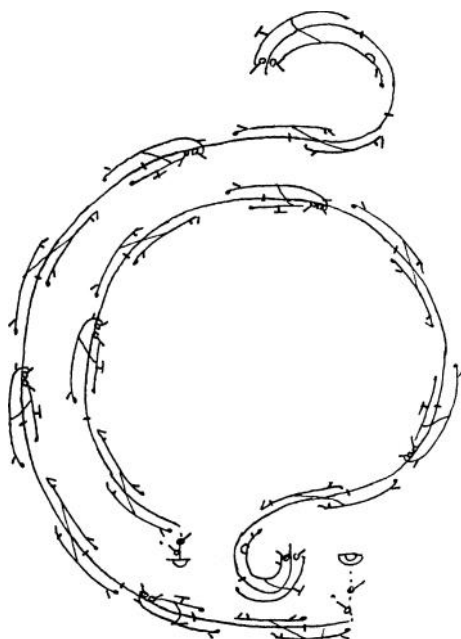


Figure 4. *Le Traquenar*, opening section

Lauze in 1623¹³, but in “Le Traquenar” there is far more vertical movement, like in “Le vieux Canary”.

The choreography to the second phrase of the music consists of relatively stationary variations going a little from side to side, or forwards and back, in much the same way as the second part of Arbeau’s brawls.

“Le Traquenar” was choreographed by de Beaufort, so it is not a traditional dance as such. One could well imagine that de Beaufort made this as a stage dance which should reflect traditional dancing. Performed as a traditional brawl, it would have been done by a line of dancers, but de Beaufort has arranged it for one couple starting and ending with their front to the onlookers, following the convention of ballroom and stage dances of the time. The idea that a newly choreographed stage dance should reflect traditional dancing could well be the same in “Le vieux canary”. These two dances are also found in a second source, Rés 934, in which they are listed next to each other¹⁴.

The most important source to throw light on how the traditional brawls were danced at court during the 18th century is the dance suite called “Les Petittes Danse” or “Les Tricotets”. It is found in an undated manuscript¹⁵, which also contains an early cotillion type of dance performed by Louis XV at the dauphin’s first marriage in 1745. The manuscript probably dates very shortly after this occasion¹⁶.

Le Traquenar	Beat	Arbeau
demi coupé L	1	pied gaulche largy
demi coupé R in front	2	pied droit approché
demi coupé L	3	pied gaulche largy
pas glissé R to 1 st position	4	pied droit ioinct

A printed version of this dance suite is found in “Chorégraphie” by Guillemain, from 1784, almost 40 years later than the manuscript¹⁷. This version of the dance suite is almost identical to the manuscript, so it is very likely that Guillemain knew the manuscript. A third source is a printed version by Malpied published around 1781¹⁸. Several details in Malpied’s version differs from the manuscript and the print by Guillemain.

Both notators seem to have had problems concerning directions, since the notation system had been created to notate dances with a strong relation to the rectangular room with a clear sense of directions. In these circular dances the front of the dance is always to the centre of the circle, a direction which often conflicts with the rectangular sheet of paper.

The dance suite consists of four dances and the tunes are all in duple meter.

The structure of the dances proves to be similar to most of Arbeau’s brawls, a standard introduction followed by a step sequence characteristic for the particular dance. Three of the dances in the suite have a first section, which consists of four doubles going alternating left and right, one has a repeated sequence of a double left and a single right. The second part of each dance consists of combinations of singles, doubles, and other steps and hops, many of which have concordances in the Arbeau dances.

But the style of the steps is quite different. Following the fashion of 18th century French country dancing, plain steps have been embellished with little hops as already mentioned by Feüillet in his 1706 collection of country dances¹⁹ and recorded in the notation of “Le Cotillon” 1705²⁰. The renaissance single step has turned into a *pas de sissonne* and the double step became two *demi contretemps* followed by a *pas de sissonne* (Figure 5). Guillemain, who probably copied the manuscript, kept this version of the double step in three of the four dances, but in the first dance he changed it into one *contretemps* followed by a *pas de sissonne*, a sequence which is closer to the gavotte step following the fashion of country dancing in the later part of the century. Malpied used the latter version of the double step in all of the dances.

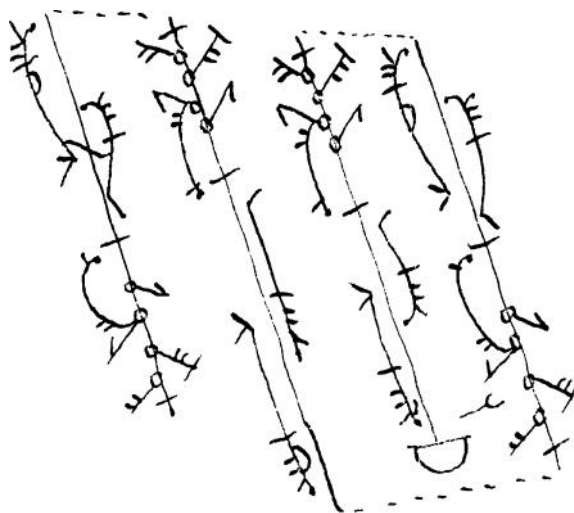


Figure 5. *Les Petittes Danse*,
four doubles

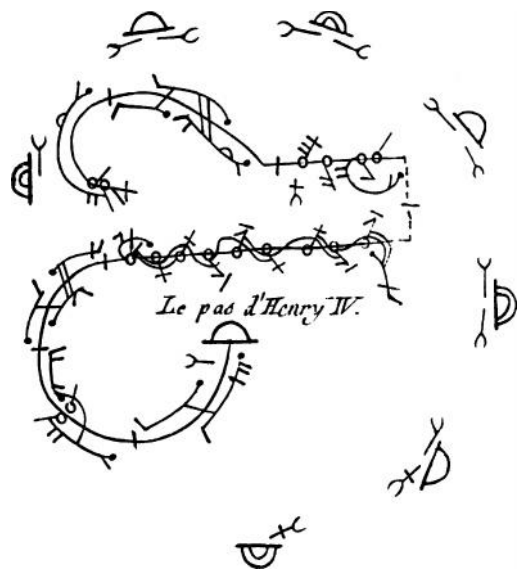


Figure 6. *Les Petittes Danse*,
Le pas d’Henry IV

Les Petittes danse, 3	Bars		Beat	Branle de Malte
	A	in a circle		
2 demi ct. L,R, pas de siss. L	1–2			
2 demi ct. R,L, pas de siss. R	3–4			
	B		A	
2 demi ct. L,R, pas de siss. L	1–2		1–4	double L
pas de siss. R	3		5–6	simple R
	C		B	
2 demi ct. L,R, pas de siss. L	1–2			
pas de siss. R, assemblé L	3–4			
2 jetté R,L	5	coming to	1–2	2 pied auancé L,R
pas de bourée R	6	the centre,	3–4	3 pied auancé L,R,L
pas de bourée emboîté L	7	then turning	5–6	pied auancé R, greve L
pas de bourée emboîté R	8	left back	7–8a	pied auancé L, greve R
pas de bourée L	9		8b–9	3 pied en l’air L,R,L
assemblé R	10		10	pieds ioincts

All sequences are repeated

Part of the third brawl of this suite is almost identical to Arbeau’s “Bransle de Malte”, but four doubles have been added as an extra introduction and a small step sequence has been inserted after the branle single sequence. The music is probably an early 18th century tune.

The tune to the fourth dance of the suite was written by François du Courroy (1549–1609). Arbeau used the same tune to the brawl “Cassandre”²¹ and there is a well-known song to the same popular tune: “Vive Henri IV”. In the manuscript, there is a short sequence of *chassé* steps in the last section of the dance. In Malpied’s version of the same dance this sequence has been replaced by a “Pas d’Henry IV”, which resembles renaissance variation technique such as the “drumming of the feet” (Figure 6). It is interesting that the later source with the most modern form of the double step is the source, in which this possibly very old step is found.

Analyses of elements like structure of step sequences, appearance of specific step types, and movement quality may give a hint about how earlier dance types and styles may still have been in use during the baroque period, even at court. The sources to a better understanding of transitions from one period into the next are often few, and it is my hope, that these observations may help filling one of the gaps.

Notes

1. Feüillet, R.-A. *Choregraphie*, Paris 1700, repr. New York 1968
2. Rameau, Pierre. *Le maître à danser*, Paris 1725, repr. New York 1967
3. Lorin, André. *Livre de contredance*, Paris [c.1685], op. 11
4. Arbeau, Thoinot. *Orchésographie* 1596 [1588], repr. Minkoff, Genève 1972, op. 29
5. Lorin, *op. cit.* 7
6. Harris-Warrick, R. and Marsh, C. *Musical theatre at the court of Louis XIV*, Cambridge 1994

See also Rameau 1725, p. 76–77. A study of the notated menuets indicates that the fashion of the pas de menuet changes from three to two *mouvements* around 1704. By then *pas de bourée* and contretemps of three *mouvements* are very rarely found.

7. Ms. Bibliothèque Nationale Ms.fr.14884
8. *ibid.* p. 159
9. Mather, Betty Bang. *Dance rhythms of the French Baroque*, Indianapolis 1987, p. 222
10. Caroso, F. *Il Ballarino*, Venetia 1581, repr. New York 1967, op. 179
11. Ms.fr.14884, p. 480
12. Arbeau, *op. cit.* 69
13. Lauze, François de. *Apologie de la danse*, [Paris] 1623, repr. Minkoff, Genève 1977, p. 38
14. Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque du Musée et de l'Opéra, Rés. 934, pp. 455 & 461
15. Ms. Bibliothèque de l'Opéra C. 3588
16. Lancelot, Francine. *La belle danse*, Paris 1996, p. 345
See also Guilcher, Jean-Michel. *La contredanse*, Paris 1969, p. 66
17. Guillemin, M. *Chorégraphie*, Paris 1784, p. 31
18. Malpied, M. *Danse de ville, les tricotets*, Paris [c.1781]
19. Feüillet, R.-A. *Recüeil de contredances*, Paris 1706, repr. New York 1968, p. [21]
20. Feüillet, R.-A. *III.e recüeil de dances de bal*, Paris 1705
21. Arbeau *op. cit.* 75

