

The Minuet in Denmark

Introduction to a workshop

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If you ask people in Denmark whether they know any minuets, many – even younger people – will be able to hum the tune of the minuet from “Elverhöi”, and even more will know the tune, but not relate it to anything but the many popular songs that were later set to the tune. Only very few will nowadays know anything about the choreography. It is my hope that after this workshop of about one and a half hours you will all be able not only to hum the tune, but also know how to do at least one version of this interesting choreography. At first I will try to put the minuet from “Elverhöi” into perspective by telling just a little about a few sources to enlighten the minuet in Denmark in the first third of the 19th century.

- A set of drawings by Pierre Jean Laurent.
- A dance manual by Jørgen Gad Lund.
- A village minuet in living tradition.
- The minuet from “Elverhöi” in two different versions.

The Danish dancing master Pierre Jean Laurent was born in Copenhagen in 1758. His father, who was dancing master at the court, originally came from France. Pierre Jean Laurent studied with Noverre in Paris, where he became a distinguished solo dancer, but he returned to Copenhagen to become dancing master at the Royal Theatre. He also choreographed court entertainments, such as the dances performed at the royal masquerade in 1803. The Copenhagen Theatre Museum keeps a small manuscript written by Pierre Jean Laurent entitled “Veiledning ved Undervisning i Menuetten” (“Guide when instructing the minuet”). The manuscript is undated, but remarks in the text date it with near certainty to 1816.

The 25 pages of text contain chiefly reflections of philosophical nature: There is no written description of how to dance the minuet at all, but the text is followed by 32 beautifully hand-coloured drawings, of which one is now missing, unfortunately. Each the drawing shows a couple dancing the minuet – flipping quickly through them all would, in theory, have the effect of seeing a film strip.



The drawings are quite primitive, and it is hard to reconstruct the dance sequence, as it is not always clear what exactly the dancers do; the source provides us with lots of useful information, though. Two details have been found particularly interesting in relation to the minuet from “Elverhöi”. The first is that the partners seem to change places passing by left shoulders and turning back to back at the same time as they pass on the diagonal. The other is that whereas they make a full turn when giving right hands, they seem only to meet and possibly balance, when giving left hands.

From Denmark, we have only a single written description of how to dance the minuet from the first third of the 19th century. This is written by Jørgen Gad Lund, who was born in 1797. As a young man he was employed at the Royal Theatre, presumably not as a dancer, though, even if he had taken dance lessons from Antoine Bournonville, August Bournonville’s father. Unfortunately, in 1820 Jørgen Gad Lund had a bad accident on stage, after which he had to quit the theatre. He then started to travel about as a dance teacher, and in 1823 he had a collection of fashion dances published. The book titled “Terpsichore” was published in revised edition in 1827 and 1833, each time supplemented with the latest fashion dances. In all editions, the ballroom minuet is described in detail, not as a fashion dance, as it was no longer in fashion, but rather as a useful way to learn deportment and good manners. Gad Lund’s minuet description is very similar to the minuet descriptions well-known from all over Europe of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

We may be used to think of the ballroom minuet as a dance for one couple only, but already in 1772 the German dancing master C. J. von Feldtenstein describes, how a minuet can easily be performed by several couples simultaneously, if the couples form in a column as in the English dances, and Danish sources from 1796 and onwards mention this as the usual practice. Laurent shows in his drawings the minuet clearly as a dance for one couple only, and Gad Lund also describes it for one couple, though he does mention, that it may be danced by more couples at the same time.

A traditional Danish minuet, the so-called “Randers Menuet” was still danced in a column formation, especially at weddings, in a very small area of Jutland as late as 1962. The dance follows the well-known social ritual of the minuet: The first couple only does a short introduction, then all couples do a number of Z figures, then partners give right hands, left hands, do some Z figures and take two hands to finish the minuet and start a waltz. When more couples dance the minuet simultaneously, there is a need to agree on the figures, so the leading man would give a sign when to change the figures. In 1980 The Danish Folklore Archive made a video recording of a group of elderly people, who still remembered how to do the traditional minuet, and that was actually the very last time it was danced as part of an unbroken tradition. I would like you to note that partners do not circle when giving hands, and you may also notice the body turns in the Z figures. These two elements also appear in the “Elverhöi” minuet.

(Presentation of a video recording of the “Randers Menuet”.)

In 1828 King Frederik VI ordered a play written for the celebration of his daughter Vilhelmine Marie’s wedding to the later King Frederik VII. Johan Ludvig Heiberg wrote the play “Elverhöi” (“Elf-Hill”), which became so popular that it has ever since been considered part of our national heritage. The music was written by Friedrich Kuhlau, and the dances were choreographed by solo dancer at the Royal Theatre, Poul Erik Funck, about whom very little is known.

In 1828 there was no tradition of notating choreographies at the Royal Theatre, so no original notation is known to exist. However, the dances from “Elverhöi”, and especially the minuet, were passed down from generation to generation of dancers, actors and even singers at the theatre as a national treasure, and it is believed that the minuet has remained unchanged since 1828. The play was always in the repertoire of the Royal Theatre until about 1970, but, of course, we cannot know for sure to what extent details may have been changed.

The plot of “Elverhöi” takes place in the second quarter of the 17th century, when nobody had yet heard of the minuet. The dance should be seen as a pastiche, associating to Denmark’s glorious past. The first scene of act V is set in a ballroom in a nobleman’s house, and when the curtain rises the ball is in progress, and two eight couple groups perform the minuet, an impressive spectacle.

Friedrich Kuhlau had chosen the well-known “Folie d’Espagne” music to accompany the main part of this dance, and this is probably the most important reason why this dance became particularly popular.

When the curtain rises, all dancers face the audience. They perform one reverence to the audience and one to their partner, whom they then face, the men face downstage and the ladies face upstage, the dancers forming columns across stage. Then another change-of-places figure has been inserted to arrange the dancers in columns along the stage like in the “Randers Menuet”. This was probably done to give a better perspective.

Now follows the so called “whole minuet”, which corresponds to the Z figure of the ballroom minuet. The “whole minuet” consists of a movement sideways to the right followed by a movement sideways to the left, equal to the end of one Z figure and the beginning of the next. The “whole minuet” is followed by a dos-à-dos figure, during which the partners change places, corresponding to the diagonal of the usual Z figure. In this dos-à-dos figure partners pass left shoulders, which is identical to the possible interpretation of the diagonal crossing in the Laurent minuet.

Surprisingly, there is no giving of right hands in the “Elverhöi” choreography, but after the “whole minuet” and the change of places the dancers organize themselves in a double line of men facing a double line of ladies, still along the stage, and they do the so-called “half minuet”, which is a movement sideways to the right only. They then meet and give left hands without turning, just balancing and returning to the double lines. This detail is also similar to the possible interpretation of the Laurent minuet. It is interesting to notice that even in the “Randers Menuet” partners do not circle either, they just balance.

After giving left hands the dancers start another “whole minuet”, but at the end of that, instead of changing places they give both hands and turn around to end in two moulinets. Here follows a figure, which has little to do with the minuet tradition: The ladies turn under the arm of the man, and with a left (!) minuet step they move on to the next man and repeat this figure till they are back with their own partner. Then, to conclude the dance, all dancers face the audience and repeat the opening reverences.

The steps used in the dance are very similar to the steps described by Jørgen Gad Lund, but there are more body turns like in the “Randers Menuet”, probably to make the dance more spectacular.

(Presentation of a video recording from a TV production from the late 1970s.)

This dance is not very difficult to do. Because the minuet from “Elverhöi” became so popular, there was a demand to bring it into the ballroom repertoire. The ballet master Hans Beck (1861–1952), who is best known to be the rescuer of the Bournonville tradition, modified the choreography slightly, so it could be danced by any number of couples. He left out the figures that require more couples and introduced right hand turns and a garland figure. He also turned some of the figures ninety degrees to give variety, so there is one whole minuet and one half minuet across the room and the same along the room. The style of this version of the dance is less spectacular than that of the stage version: Hans Beck omitted the body turns and used the cleaner style similar to the one described by Gad Lund.

This variation of the choreography was introduced in 1920 and to some degree remained in the ballroom repertoire till about 1960, when it had the status of a formal dance, like the Lancer’s Quadrille and the Française.

I hope this have given some idea of how the choreographed stage dance can be seen in relation to not only other stage dancing, but also to ballroom dancing and traditional folk dance. Also, how a stage dance that originally came from a traditional ballroom dance later again became a ballroom and almost a traditional dance.

(Workshop teaching the ballroom version and part of the stage version.)