

Spelling it out: Le Roussau's *The Montaigu*, 1720

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F. Le Roussau's manuscript *Collection of New Ball- and Stage Dances* was compiled in 1720 while he was working in London¹. The first dance in the manuscript is a duet for a man and woman, entitled *The Montaigu* and notated in the Beauchamp-Feuillet system of notation². It was probably designed to appeal to John, 2nd Duke of Montagu (1690–1749) as an actual or prospective patron.

John was the son of Ralph, 1st Duke of Montagu, who had been a member of the royal household under Charles II, Ambassador Extraordinary to the Court of Louis XIV in 1669 and again in 1677, and creator of the palatial Montagu House in Bloomsbury³. In 1709 John inherited as the 2nd Earl, and by that date was married to Mary Churchill, youngest daughter of the 1st Duke of Marlborough. He seems to have inherited not only his father's immense wealth but also his love of French culture and an interest in the theatre. He also had a whimsical sense of humour: his practical jokes included inviting visitors to his magnificent gardens and squirting them with water as they walked about, sprinkling itching powder into the beds of overnight guests, and providing distorting mirrors for guests to make them think they had drunk too much at dinner. As his mother-in-law, the acerbic Duchess of Marlborough (who banned him from visiting Blenheim after Marlborough's death) recorded later in his life, 'All his talents lie in things only natural in boys of fifteen years old, and he is about two and fifty'⁴. By the time of his death in 1749 he had also founded a hospital for aged cows and horses⁵, and was commonly thought to be the perpetrator of the Bottle Conjuror hoax at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, in which an advertisement claimed that a man would climb inside a quart bottle and sing some songs while inside it; the non-appearance of said man resulted in a riot and the introduction of a scene 'Harlequin escaped into a Bottle' into the Covent Garden pantomime of *Apollo and Daphne* later in the year⁶. All this frivolity however masked a much more serious side to his character, which exhibited itself in his work as a philanthropist, patron of the theatre, Freemason, and benevolent supporter of foreign refugees⁷.

In devising *The Montaigu*, Le Roussau no doubt intended the Duke to appreciate the joke of transforming one of the most revered of dance forms, a figured minuet, into letters which spelled out his name. In doing so however, Le Roussau set himself considerable challenges of space, steps, and symmetry, for inevitably he was trying to make a minuet do things that, as a dance form, it was never designed to do. The eight sections of the dance spell out the letters M-O-N-T-A-I-G-V (the letters U and V being interchangeable at this date). It is not known who composed the tune, which is written out along the top of the pages of dance notation, and it may be by Le Roussau himself; as yet no other source for the music has been identified.

The structure of the dance is as follows:

Letter(s)	Music/Dance type	Musical form
M	Menuet	32 bars, AABB in 8-bar phrases (ie 4-bar minuet phrases)
O, N	Gavotte	32 bars, CCDD in 8-bar phrases ⁸
T	Menuet	restatement of the first 32 bars, AABB
A, I	Trio	32 bars, EEFF in 8-bar phrases (ie 4-bar minuet phrases)
G, V	Menuet	restatement of the first 24 bars, AAB

The absence of a final 8-bar repeat of the last B section to end the whole dance seems odd, and makes a very abrupt ending if performed as written. Possibly Le Roussau originally intended the repeat for a ninth letter, a final E on the name, but eight bars of music is a very short section for such a letter and the choreography in any case comes to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the letter V. So it may be that in the end Le Roussau reserved the final music repeat to accommodate standard minuet *révérences* to partner and audience⁹.

The letters on the page: patterns

The idea of dancers tracing out the shapes of letters to form a name was not new in 1720. Examples of it may be seen in early seventeenth century Stuart Masques¹⁰, but the letter-dances presented there relied on a group of dancers standing or moving in one line to shape each letter. Le Roussau's concept over a hundred years later, of only two dancers marking out floor tracks which not only spelled out the letters of a name but also allowed the dancers to form the mirror and axial symmetries required by baroque dance, was highly unusual. But how to make the letters flow one from one another, when the restrictions of the dancing space mean that quite often the dancers simply end up in the wrong place to form the next letter? Le Roussau resolved this dilemma by altering the orientation of the letters, presenting some as written on the paper, others upside down, or back to front, or sideways on. Whether, as a dance, it worked for the audience is difficult to determine, and one suspects that its appeal lay in the design as seen on the page rather than in performance. Nevertheless, as a pictorial pun it is impressive, and imaginatively constructed.

It also provides a rare and fascinating glimpse of how Le Roussau, consciously or otherwise, addressed the extremely complex question of how audiences 'saw' notated dances in performance. Most dance notation systems seem to be designed almost entirely for practitioners, and it thus seems likely that by 1720 a notated dance, if performed, would have been watched by an audience many of whom would be well able to convert what they saw notated on the page to what they saw being danced in front of their eyes, as many early dance specialists today are able to do also. To them there was no difficulty in reading the Beauchamp-Feuillet notation on the page and seeing the dance rotated by 180 degrees in performance. But *The Montaigu* is much more complex, for Le Roussau's rotations of the images can be by 45, 90, or 180 degrees, the images are sometimes flipped over in reverse (when the two dancers are 'improper'), and occasionally the dancers differ in the steps or sequences of steps they perform. It is arguable that this was more than a pragmatic ploy to make the flow of lettering work, but in itself was setting up a series of intellectual games for those who wished to see them.

A closer analysis of the construction of *The Montaigu* indicates that the complexities were not just spatial, but extended to choices of steps and symmetries as well. Throughout all the minuet sections of this dance the symmetry shifts between irregular (typical in minuets) and mirror (or regular¹¹), the required shifts usually being achieved by one dancer transferring weight at the end of a step while the other dancer does not transfer weight. The steps of the minuet sections similarly shift between orthodox minuet steps and other steps in triple time.

The construction of *The Montaigu*

Section 1 (letter M: 32 bars of music/16 bars of minuet steps): to be conventional, a baroque dance should start upstage and travel forwards, which this does. Because it is a minuet, it

cannot start in mirror symmetry as many duets do, and instead it makes much use of irregular symmetry. The illusion of mirror symmetry however is retained in the floor tracks, for while the man marks out a capital letter M as it would be traced on the page, the woman traces her letter M in mirror image. They cross paths in the middle of the letter, so that the two Ms are intertwined.

Section 2 (letter O: 16 bars of duple-time gavotte): in this figure the dance form suddenly alters to a gavotte, as the dancers each trace a full circle travelling clockwise in the only occurrence of axial (circling) symmetry of the dance. On the page they look as if they form two independent and overlapping circles, but in reality they spiral inwards along one circular path divided into four quadrants (the first and second take them half way round the circle, the third and fourth tighten the circle on a smaller radius). Asymmetry is introduced in bars 9–12 by the man making two turning *pas de bourrée* while the woman stands still, and then waiting while she responds with two turning *pas de bourrée*.

Section 3 (letter N: another 16 bars of gavotte): still in gavotte, the dancers are now improper, the man being stage right and the woman stage left. She therefore now traces the letter N as it would be seen on the page, while the man traces it in mirror image; and, as in the first section, they cross over so that their lettering is intertwined. But this section is deceptive, in its use both of music and of space. The tune is in two 8-bar phrases, but because the letter N consists of three straight lines it does not divide neatly into 16 bars of music, and spatially the step phrases break down into 6 bars (to travel downstage), 6 bars (to travel upstage diagonally), and 4 bars (to travel downstage again). In spatial terms it is a cheat, since it must begin and end in the same place, with both dancers level, and this necessarily distorts the shape of the letter N. Moreover, there is asymmetry at the beginning of this section, with the two dancers simultaneously performing an inverted sequence of steps (the man dances two *contretemps* followed by two half-turn *pas assemblé* and *pas de sissonne*, while the woman dances two half-turn *pas assemblé* and *pas de sissonne* followed by two *contretemps*)¹². This is an extraordinary sequence during which both dancers face stage left for bars 1–2, both face stage right for bars 3–4, and both face each other for bars 5–6, and lends itself to various interpretations of mood in performance.

Section 4 (letter T: 32 bars of music/16 bars of minuet steps): this section opens with the dancers halfway downstage, the man on stage left and both facing downstage as befits the return to minuet form. It would be difficult in this location for the two dancers to trace the letter T moving directly downstage, because they do not have enough space, and Le Roussau resolves the difficulty by taking the letter T on a diagonal¹³. The symmetries shift from irregular (bars 1–8) to mirror (bars 9–24) and back to irregular (bars 25–32), and the dancers cross each other's path in the closing bars, to end 'improper'. As a spatial design and a use of unorthodox minuet steps and symmetries this figure is either very ingenious or dreadfully clumsy, depending on one's mood, but it is certainly unusual.

Section 5 (letter A: 24 bars of music/12 bars of minuet steps): The trio section of the minuet now begins, as the dancers form the letter A. This time the woman (who is upstage left) forms the letter as it appears on the page, while the man forms it in mirror image, and as before their two paths cross at the end of the letter. The section includes an ingenious pseudo-minuet step with six changes of weight, which allows both dancers to *look* as if they are doing an embellished *pas de menuet* on opposite feet when in fact they are making a sequence of *pas de*

The Montaigne

curve

2

This page contains a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "The Montaigne". On the left side, there is a vertical staff of music with a treble clef and a common time signature. The title "The Montaigne" is written vertically along this staff. Below the staff, the word "curve" is written. To the right of the staff, the musical notation is arranged in a large, circular shape, following the curve of the staff. The notation includes various notes, rests, and bar lines.

The Montaigne

inspired by

M^{rs} Roussin

musical

9

This page contains a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "The Montaigne". On the left side, there is a vertical staff of music with a treble clef and a common time signature. The title "The Montaigne" is written vertically along this staff. Below the staff, the words "inspired by" and "M^{rs} Roussin" are written. At the bottom left, the word "musical" is written. To the right of the staff, the musical notation is arranged in a zig-zag pattern, following the shape of the staff. The notation includes various notes, rests, and bar lines.

The Montaigne
meno mosso.

The Montaigne
3

6

no. Invocation

The image shows a handwritten musical score on page 6. On the left side, there is a single staff of music with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The notation includes various note values and rests. Above the staff, the text "no. Invocation" is written. To the right of this staff, there are two more staves, each containing musical notation with notes and rests, positioned vertically.

5

no. Invocation

The image shows a handwritten musical score on page 5. On the left side, there is a single staff of music with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The notation includes various note values and rests. Above the staff, the text "no. Invocation" is written. To the right of this staff, there is a large, complex diagram consisting of multiple staves of music arranged in a grid-like pattern, possibly representing a multi-measure rest or a complex rhythmic structure.

8°

The Montaigne

This musical score is titled "The Montaigne" and is marked with an 8°. It features a large, stylized 'X' shape formed by multiple musical staves. The staves are arranged in a crisscross pattern, with some staves running horizontally and others vertically. The music is written in a cursive, handwritten style. A large, decorative flourish resembling the word "Finis" is positioned to the right of the 'X'.

7

The Montaigne

This musical score is titled "The Montaigne" and is marked with a 7. It features a large, stylized 'S' shape formed by multiple musical staves. The staves are arranged in a curved, S-like pattern, with some staves running horizontally and others curving upwards and downwards. The music is written in a cursive, handwritten style.

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bourrée into *plié, pas jeté, step, pas jeté*. The symmetries alternate mirror (bars 1–4), irregular (bars 5–12), mirror (bars 13–16), irregular (bars 17–24), and thus do not accord with the regular 8-bar music strains.

Section 6 (letter I: 8 bars of music/4 bars of minuet steps): this section completes the trio, and copes with the difficulty caused by both dancers by now being far upstage and needing to come forward. Being a very simple figure, it sticks to pure minuet steps and irregular symmetry. It is the only part of the entire dance where the dancers take hands: another reminder of the formal ballroom minuet¹⁴.

Section 7 (letter G: 16 bars of music/8 bars of minuet steps): this section reverts to the original minuet music. The man traces an upside down form of the letter G¹⁵, while the woman moves in mirror image to that, and the two paths cross twice. The steps are orthodox minuet steps, as befits a restatement of the minuet theme, but the section ends with a series of *pas de bourrée* in mirror symmetry (bars 14–16) to cope with the rather tight patterning required to form the end of the letter.

Section 8 (letter V representing U: 8 bars of music/4 bars of minuet steps): Spatially this final section is quite clever, as the two dancers each form a letter V as viewed from the sides of the stage; but within that letter V four smaller Vs are also formed as viewed from both upstage and downstage. Thus, from whatever angle the audience considers this section, they see a series of letter Vs both separate and intertwined, large and small, as the dancers retreat upstage. The symmetries also shift half way through from irregular to mirror, as befits the ending of a danced duet at this date.

Steps, and rapport between the dancers

The step vocabulary of this dance is reasonably pure, and where Le Roussau uses either *pas de menuet* or the various grace steps which ornament minuets (such as *contretemps de menuet, pas balancé* etc.) he does not distort or alter them, except occasionally to amend the last transfer of weight in order to free the left foot. When one or both dancers have a step starting on the left foot, he simply employs triple-time steps that do not derive from minuet vocabulary¹⁶.

What makes this dance even more complex however is not just the choice of steps, the shifting symmetries, and the orientation of each letter form, but also the constant changes of body direction so that in marking out one straight line the dancers might at any moment be facing the audience or each other, or turning their backs on the audience or on each other (the letters T and A are particularly complex in this respect). This makes the dance complicated but also provides some glorious moments of intimate communication between the two dancers. These happen whenever the dancers' paths cross, whenever they face each other across the stage in the middle of a circling figure, and occasionally when they are side by side and wish to draw the audience's particular attention. An example which occurs when the dancers' paths cross, is the ornamented *pas de menuet* which they make towards each other just before crossing and moving away in the letter M (Section 1 bars 11–16). Another example comes in the letter A: *pas coupé* with opening of the leg and sink into *plié* followed by two rapid steps (to pass), and then *pas de menuet* turning to maintain the intimacy a little longer (Section 5 bars 19–22).

Several interesting moments are associated specifically with *pas balancé* when it occurs within a large circling figure, such as in the letters O and G, allowing the dancers to turn at one

point to face each other across the circle in acknowledgement or even collusion. Thus in the minuet section for the letter G they make a *contretemps de menuet* followed by an interrupted *pas balancé*, that is, they travel along the line of dance with the first *demi-coupé*, then pause, then turn sharply to face each other on the second *demi-coupé*, followed by another, eloquent, pause (Section 7 bars 5–8). In the gavotte section for the letter O they make a *pas coupé soutenue* to face and then two *contretemps battus*, after which the man makes two turning *pas de bourrée* while the woman stands still, and then himself stands still while the woman makes two turning *pas de bourrée* (Section 2 bars 6–12). The effect is private communication across the circle, after which the man seems to chase the woman round another quadrant of the circle.

There is another very satisfying moment which happens near the beginning of the letter M, and again near the end of the letter I, but instead of being something just between the dancers it opens out to include the audience. It consists of each dancer making *pas balancé* with two half turns. Both start on the right foot and both make a half turn anticlockwise to the left, but whereas the man makes his second half turn anticlockwise again, the woman makes her second half turn clockwise, transforming the whole thing into a *ronde de jambe* movement presented directly to the audience, before continuing with *contretemps de menuet* (Section 1 bars 3–6, and the last four bars of Section 6).

Conclusion and postscript

The Montaigu is a unique and extraordinary attempt by one dancing-master to design a minuet that was innovative in every respect, and the challenges posed by that aim are fascinating to work through. But a major question still remains: did all this ingenuity win the Duke of Montagu's patronage for Le Roussau? The fact that the manuscript *Collection* was never published perhaps counts against the idea of extensive patronage, but there are several clues which suggest that Le Roussau may have gained some limited patronage from the Duke, or at least some important contacts.

First, in late December 1720, the Little Theatre opened in the Haymarket. It had no licence, so for the first few years of its existence it ran short seasons of performances by foreign actors. The first to appear there, and throughout the early 1720s, was a company referred to by one contemporary as "The Duke of Montague's ... *french vermin*"¹⁷, namely, Francisque Moylin's Company of French Comedians, who put on their own brand of harlequinade pantomimes and entr'acte dancing, and who acknowledged the Duke of Montagu as their patron. Although there is no evidence of any connection between Le Roussau and this French troupe, he was by his own admission a noted dancing harlequin, and his famous *Chaconne for Arlequin* also appears in the manuscript *Collection*. It is thus possible that Le Roussau's subsequent engagements as an entr'acte dancer at the Little Theatre¹⁸ may reflect direct employment by the Duke.

Second, the Little Theatre was situated opposite the opera house, which in 1720 was still the King's Theatre, Haymarket. The driving force behind it was the Royal Academy of Music, founded the previous year with George Frederick Handel as Master of Music and Anthony L'Abbé as the resident choreographer¹⁹. They were answerable to a Governor and a Board of Directors, and in early 1720 the Duke of Montagu had become one of those Directors. The French dancers who appeared at the King's Theatre in 1719–20 were therefore very likely brought in by Anthony L'Abbé, and they included Antoine Dangeville from the Paris Opéra, whose work was known to Le Roussau and probably inspired some of Le Roussau's own

dances²⁰. L'Abbé himself also came to know Le Roussau well, for he commissioned him to publish his own collection of theatre dances, which Le Roussau completed a few years later²¹.

All this adds up to lot of coincidences, and it is possible that either the Duke of Montagu introduced Le Roussau to L'Abbé, or that L'Abbé introduced Le Roussau to the Duke. Either way, the introduction may have been helped along by the dances recorded in Le Roussau's *Collection*, so, perhaps in the end, spelling out *The Montaigu* did pay off, and brought Le Roussau important contacts and theatrical work in London for several years.

Notes

- 1 Edinburgh University Library Special Collections, Ms La.III.673. For a facsimile of the complete manuscript, with introduction and analytical notes, see Thorp, J. *Harlequin Dancing-Master: the career of F. Le Roussau* (forthcoming).
- 2 The dance was demonstrated at the conference, and I am grateful to Jed Wentz for playing the music for it, and also for helping to demonstrate some of the step sequences.
- 3 Later transformed into the British Museum.
- 4 King, W. (editor) *The Memoirs of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, together with her Characters of her Contemporaries*. London: Routledge & Sons, 1930, p. 304; Falk, B. *The Way of the Montagues*. London: Hutchinson, 1947, pp. 269–271.
- 5 At his country estate in Boughton, Northamptonshire. A codicil to his will also made legacies to his cats and dogs in the realisation that otherwise they would starve or be killed: Falk, *op. cit.*, p. 286.
- 6 *Factotum 37: Newsletter of the XVIIIth century STC*. London: British Library, September 1993, pp. 27–28. Paulson, R. *Hogarth*. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1991, vol. I p. 220. Falk, *op. cit.*, pp. 270–271.
- 7 Falk, *op. cit.*, p. 264.
- 8 But 8, 6 and 4-bar dance phrases: see the description under 'Section 3 (letter N)'.
9 An interesting question was raised at the conference as to whether the omission of the final repeat might have been part of the choreographic joke, but this seems unlikely either as a form of early eighteenth century humour (it seems more in character for a later era) or as a workable ending to a duet. Even at the end of L'Abbé's *Türkisch Dance* created at much same time as *The Montaigu*, the music and choreography both end abruptly but not at the expense of the musical structure.
- 10 For example, in the *Masque of Queenes* of 1609, in which Thomas Giles devised for the twelve ladies of the Court "theyr third daunce...graphically dispos'd into letters honouring the name of the sweet and ingenious Prince Charles": Ben Johnson, *The Masque of Queenes*, 1609, p. 20. Giles had devised a similar letter-dance for the performers in the masque *Hymenaei* in 1606: Walls, P. *Music in the English Courtly Masque 1604–1640*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 122.
- 11 So described by Raoul-Augere Feuillet in *Chorégraphie* (Paris, 1700), p. 92, and by John Weaver in *Orchesography* (London, 1706), p. 52.
- 12 A similar use of asymmetry occurs in Pecour's *La Matelotte Nouvelle*, published in Paris in 1720. The coincidence of publication date may be significant.
- 13 A very nice touch, which is not obviously apparent from the notation (and indeed is cropped on the woman's side) but becomes clear when this section is danced, is the small sequence of sideways steps at the upstage limit of the 'crossbar', which to the

audience sitting in front looks like another, tiny, version of a letter T as they would see it from the front (its own 'crossbar' consisting of *pas coupé*, close 5th into *plié*, and *demi-coupé*, first to one side then to other, like an ornate *révérence* to the audience: bars 15–20): it reminds the audience what this section is representing, and draws them into the dance again.

- 14 It is however quite difficult to start it close enough to take hands, and again the point that Le Roussau was making looks fine on the page if not in reality.
- 15 There is no choreographic reason for this upside-down track on the page, as the dancers face first out of and then into the centre of the circle, but it may be part of the joke for, taken together, the run of letters T, A&I, G and V represent a different orientation for each sequence as it appears on the page: T is diagonal, A&I (musically one sequence) are the right way round, G is upside down, and V is drawn sideways on.
- 16 In several places during the dance he makes use of a *contretemps de menuet* starting on the left foot and travelling backwards, but such a step also occurs in other dance types where it would be described as *demi-contretemps*, *contretemps ballonné* and could start on either foot.
- 17 Letter from Aaron Hill to John Rich, 9 September 1721: Milhous, J. & Hume, R. D. (editors) *Register of English Theatrical Documents 1660–1737*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, vol. 2 p. 646 no. 3070. Hill was trying to negotiate the hire of the Little Haymarket for his own company at the time.
- 18 According to *The London Stage*, Le Roussau performed *Pierrot courting a Bottle* at the Little Theatre Haymarket on 9 March 1724, and surely his *Chaconne for Arlequin* at other, unrecorded, times; and two of his child-scholars performed there at various times throughout 1723 and the first part of 1724.
- 19 L'Abbé's involvement seems to have ended after a year or so, when the huge budgets he put forward for a ballet company made the Academy realise that dance was too expensive an option, and probably helped push them further down the road of promoting purely Italian opera which at this date did not require an in-house dance company.
- 20 Thorp, J. Serious and comic dance in the work of F. Le Roussau, 1720. In: Okamoto, K. (compiler) *Structures and Metaphors in Baroque Dance: Proceedings of the Conference at the University of Surrey Roehampton, 2001*. Roehampton: University of Surrey Roehampton, 2001, p. 16.
- 21 *A New Collection of Dances...by Anthony L'Abbé* (London, c.1725). Le Roussau admitted in the preface that he had been commissioned by L'Abbé some years earlier to publish this work, but had been 'very tedious in the performance of my promise'. Thus the original commission probably went back to 1721, the date of the latest dances in the volume.