

# Theory and Practice in 15th-Century French Basse Danse

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## Introduction

This paper sets out to explore the structure of the 15th-century French basse danse.

The trouble is that few people alive today have ever danced more than just two or three examples, and these are usually selected to be as short and uncomplicated as possible, for fear of daunting or confusing students. Yet Crane (1968) lists the choreographies of 96 dances, of which at least 70 are certainly of the 15th century and in conventional basse danse form, with music (when this is provided) noted in even breves. The musicological problem of how to reconstruct this sort of music seems now to have been solved, but comparatively few of the 15th-century basses dances have yet been commercially recorded and so made generally available for dancing.

In default of practical experience, we tend to fall back on received doctrine. This may be summarized as follows:

Basses dances are composed of a number of **mesures**, each of which has a set pattern of steps in the following order: two singles, an odd number of doubles, an optional second pair of singles, an odd number of reprises, and a branle.

This doctrine was already current in the 15th-century and it has some validity as a general statement of the underlying pattern of the dance, but in practice the modifications and exceptions reduce the supposed rule to no better than a half-truth, certainly not to be taken literally.

In support of this assertion we shall examine the contents of the most remarkable of basse-danse sources, MS 9085 in the Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique in Brussels. The pages of this manuscript are of black-dyed parchment; the staves are ruled in gold, and the text and notes are written in silver. It can be shown that this is a very close copy of a lost (and presumably less splendid) original. The archetype must have been made in the period 1445-1496, the copy possibly later, but neither is closely datable (cf *Heartz 1964, 317-22, and Crane 1968, 4-7*).

Like some other sources of the time the manuscript begins with a theoretical treatise on the structure and steps of the basse danse. This is followed by the music and steps of 58 individual dances, 51 of which are basses dances of the conventional kind. When these dances are compared with the treatise in the same manuscript, it can be seen that theory and practice had already parted company in the later 15th-century.

In the following discussion the standard abbreviations for basse danse steps will be used: **b** = branle; **d** = double; **r** = desmarche = reprise; **s** = single.

## Theory

The treatise makes the following statements, presented here succinctly but without significant change from the original text.

Basse danse has three divisions, namely **grande mesure**, **moienne mesure**, and **petite mesure**.

The **grand mesure** opening the dance is done with **r b ss dddd ss rrr b**.

The **moienne mesure** is done with **ss ddd ss rrr b**. The **petite mesure** is done with **ss d ss rrr b**.

There are two modes of basses dances, namely **basse danse mineur** and **basse danse majeur**.

**Basse danse majeur** begins with basse danse, and on the first note, called **desmarche**, one makes reverence to the woman, inclining towards her, and this inclination should be done on the left foot.

**Basse danse mineur** begins with **pas de Breban**, and on the first note of the basse danse there is no reverence to the woman.

(Descriptions of the steps then follow, with incidental comments that singles are found only in pairs and doubles in odd numbers.)

There is a general rule of basses dances that first of all one makes **r**, then **b**, then **ss**, then the doubles, then **ss** if the **mesure** requires it, then the **desmarches**, then **b**.

**NB:** There is sometimes one **r**, but at others **rrr**.

Basse danse **mesures** can be classified as **très parfaites**, **plus que parfaites**, and **imparfaites**.

**Mesures très parfaites** have **ss** both before and after the doubles, and end **rrr b**. **Mesures plus que parfaites** are similar but end **r b**. **Mesures imparfaites** have **ss** before the doubles but not after, and end **rrr b**.

At the heart of the treatise is the 'general rule' to which all basses dances are expected to conform. This is accompanied by a twofold classification: first, in terms of the number of doubles, and secondly, in terms of the presence or absence of the second pair of singles, coupled with the number of reprises. This second classification really needs to be supplemented by a further degree of imperfection to allow for **mesures** ending with **r b**. If that supplement is made, we have a system for describing every combination of steps that is admissible under the 'general rule', of which there are twelve in all.

## Practice

It is time now to look at the 51 relevant dances in the manuscript and see how far they justify the theoretical scheme outlined above.

Our analysis presents data for a number of different features of the dances in addition to the classification of individual **mesures**. What appear to be scribal errors have been corrected in **Barbesieux** and **La basse danse du roy despaingne**. Each involves the alteration of one step and thus the character of one **mesure**; the figures below could thus be subject to slight modification but the general conclusions are unaffected.

- Number of different choreographies: 31
- Number of notes = steps in each dance: varies between 28 and 59. (For this purpose **ss** = **d** = **r** = **b** = one step.) The dances are listed in order of length by *Heartz (1964, Appendix I)*.

- Number of **mesures** in each dance:

4 <b>mesures</b> in	22 dances
5	13
6	9
3	6
7	1

- Sequence of **mesures**:

abab	in 11 dances
abac	7
abc	6
ababa	6
ababab	6
ababc	5
abcb	4
abcbc	2
ababac	1
ababc b	1
abacab	1
abababa	1

The basic pattern is for pairs of **mesures** to alternate, but this is often varied by the addition or substitution of a third **measure**, to ensure the desired number of steps. The third **measure**, occurs once only, but may come first, in the middle, or at the end. It is often closely related to one of the other **mesures**, eg by addition or subtraction of an opening phrase **ss d r**, or by omission of a second pair of singles to make a perfect **measure** imperfect.

The first of an alternating pair of **mesures** is usually (but not always) the longer.

e. Types of **mesures**:

ss	ddd	rrr	b	occurs	51	times		
ss	ddd	ss	rrr		38			
ss	d	r	d	r	33			
ss	dddd	rrr	b		29			
ss	d	ss	rrr	b	23			
ss	d	rrr	b		22			
ss	d	r	ss	ddd	ss	rrr	b	14
ss	ddd	ss	rrr	b	10			
ss	d	r	b		5			
ss	d	r	ss	ddd	rrr	b	4	
ss	d	r	ss	d	ss	rrr	b	2

There are 11 different types of **measure** in the manuscript, but only seven of them are to be found in the treatise. Of those described in the treatise, **mesures plus que parfaites** do not occur at all, and **mesures très parfaites** are described simply as **parfaites**. Thus, in ordinary usage the illogical degrees of perfection have been abandoned and **mesures** are classified as **parfaites** or **imparfaites** solely on the basis of the presence or absence of a second pair of singles.

The two commonest types of **measure** conform to the 'general rule of basses danses' presented in the treatise, but the next in order (with 33 examples) contains the sequence **d r d r** which is familiar from the **basse-danse commune** of Arbeau and other 16th-century basses danses. There is no hint in the treatise that such a sequence of steps was even possible in the 15th-century. Less frequently found but equally unexpected on the basis of the treatise are the three **mesures** prefixed by the sequence **ss d r**. This too is something that looks forward to the 16th-century, when **mesures** might be made up of as many as three such short

phrases each commonly (though not necessarily) opening with **ss**. At this stage the use of such a phrase is limited to extending a normal full **measure**, but the short phrase is nevertheless already in existence.

With two exceptions, we find that if the first **measure** of a dance is imperfect, all are imperfect. One exception is **Passe rose**, in which 28 steps are matched with only 27 notes; while it is possible that the error lies in the music (Crane 1968, 97), the discrepancy could be removed by dropping **ss** from the second **measure**, so making all three **mesures** imperfect. The other exception is **Joieusement**, in which four imperfect **mesures** are followed by, one that is perfect. Perfect **mesures** may be followed by, or alternate with, imperfect **mesures**.

### Conclusions

This study has deliberately omitted a number of dances that are obviously anomalous: those with a floor pattern, or with music in mensural notation, or with a section in **pas de Breban**. Yet, even allowing for these, the treatise at the beginning of Brussels 9085 proves to be an inadequate guide to the structure of the dances in the manuscript, giving a false impression of their conformity to a single pattern. The basse danse underwent considerable changes in the half-century from 1480 to 1530 both choreographically and musically, but this should be seen as a gradual process in which a number of stages are apparent (Heartz 1964). The contrast between '15th-century' and '16th-century' can be too strongly drawn if it conceals this transition, and it will be more useful to document the gradually changing **proportion** of various basse-danse features with time, proceeding from one surviving collection to another. It is hoped to make this the subject of a subsequent article. In the meantime we can note that the classic 15th-century dances already make use of some elements that will come to seem characteristic of the '16th-century' style.

### References

- Crane, F 1968 **Materials for the Study of the Fifteenth Century Basse Danse** (Musicological Studies vol 16).
- Heartz, D 1964 'The basse dance: its evolution circa 1450 to 1550', *Annales musicologiques* 6 (1958-63), 287-340.

