

# —Reflections on Basse Dance Source Material—

## A Dancer's Review

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This article is to be published in two parts. Unusually, however, it has been decided to publish Part II first, for its more immediate concern and for its relationship to other articles in this and the previous issue of this journal. Part I will be published in the next issue.

Part I introduces the ms Paris, Bib. Nat. f.fr5699, containing the so-called Nancy Basse Dances, discussing the background of the manuscript and its information content; reports on the ms Cervera, Archivio Historico, with its basse dance sequences given in notation symbols as well as in words and abbreviations; and makes mention of the ms in Salisbury Cathedral Library with its list of basse dance sequences on the flyleaf. Arguments for dating the Brussels MS and the Toulouze Incunabulum, and the importance of these documents as sources will also feature in the next issue and will be provided with genealogical tables.

### PART II

#### The Brussels MS and the Toulouze Incunabulum

Let us turn to the two most famous, and for dancers most useful sources, the manuscript in Brussels (*Bib. Roy. MS 9085*) and the printed book from the press of Michel Toulouze, now in London in the possession of the Royal College of Physicians. Both of these are now readily available in facsimile, the Brussels MS in a reproduction by Minkoff Reprint (Geneva, 1976) of Ernest Closson's *Le manuscrit dit des Basses Danses de la Bibliotheque de Bourgogne*, first published in Paris in 1912; and the Toulouze incunabulum in a reissue with additional material, transcription, and translation, by S.R. Publishers Ltd, (Wakefield, 1971) of Victor Scholderer's *L'Art et Instruction de Bien Dancer*, first published in London in 1936.

Both these books consist of a dissertation on the basse dance of approximately a thousand words, followed by some fifty to sixty dance sequences, each with its accompanying music and title. The text is near identical in the two books, the similarities and discrepancies being such that it is almost certain both were derived from a common source.

#### What these two sources tell us as dancers. What they say. And what they do not say.

To begin at the beginning, a phrase in the opening sentence reads '**il est a noter que**'. A. E. Lequet, the translator of Toulouze in the 1971 facsimile edition, gives this quite properly as 'it should be noted that', after which the bulk of the text concerns itself with reciting the principles of construction observed of basse dances and the nomenclature of their component parts. D. R. Wilson (1983)<sup>1</sup> has already invited us to take a look at the discrepancies between theory as outlined in the text, and practice represented by the choreographies.

My intention is to re-examine the wording of the texts, to discuss some of the constructions that may be, and have been, put upon it; and to question the foundations of some of the superstructures that have been built.

To take this phrase 'it should be noted that', my opinion is that it means simply 'please note', but it has come to be interpreted rather as 'you must'. The word 'rule' has crept into use, not as scientists use it for observed consistencies in behaviour, but as a decree that must not be violated. Mabel Dolmetsch, for instance, in *Dances of England and France 1450-1600* (London, 1949), refers to 'well defined and inexorable rules' being 'set forth';<sup>2</sup> and Ingrid Brainard, in *The Role of the Dancing Master in 15th Century*

*Courtly Society*, refers to 'the elaborate and well-thought-out system of theoretical rules and regulations governing the art of dancing in all aspects'.<sup>3</sup>

Does this matter? Is such a subtle difference really significant? Perhaps not among those of us who are acquainted with the material and the period. But a slight change in emphasis can become exaggerated in the course of successive reportages, till a wrong impression can be given.

Rules and regulations suggest a body, corporate or individual, to oversee them, an impression that would be quite wrong.

My next point is no mere academic quibble. It concerns the statement that it is called basse dance 'because it is played according to the major perfect and because', here we have the problems. The French reads '**quant on la danse on va en paix** (Brussels has **paix**, Toulouze has **pays**) **sans soy demener le plus gracieusement que on peult**'. But this can mean different things according to how one understands the words **paix/pays**. Spelling was not regulated at that time, so whichever way it is spelt it could mean either 'country' or 'peace'. The grouping of the words is the critical factor, and **there are no commas in either of the original sources**. So '**sans soy demener le plus gracieusement que on peult**' could be taken to mean:

— in country fashion (without comporting oneself as gracefully as one is able)

or

— in peace without bestirring oneself (as gracefully as one is able)

The second construction is favoured by Lequet,<sup>4</sup> with 'because it is danced serenely without gesticulation and is gracefully as possible'. Dolmetsch gives, 'because when one dances it, one goes serenely without extravagance of gesture, as gracefully as possible'<sup>5</sup>, Hertz paraphrases 'because it is danced serenely without gesticulation and as offers the direct translation, because 'one walks peacefully without great exertion, and as gracefully as possible'.<sup>6</sup> Hertz even omits the words '**sans soy demener**', his 'without great exertion', later, in arguing that 'When the basse dance was first encountered in the courtly society of the fifteenth century it was an extraordinarily light and graceful dance — '**on va le plus gracieusement que on peult**'.<sup>7</sup>

Hertz' earlier, fuller quote, was in support of an attempt to explain the reference to major perfect in the source, 'it is called basse dance because it is played according to the major perfect and...'. Hertz suggests that 'when played in **maier parfait** the music of the **basse dance** is adjusted to a tempo so that the steps may be light, yet unhurried, and above all graceful'.<sup>8</sup>

Graceful the basse dance may have been, but we are not told so unequivocally in the text.

Melusine Wood is the odd one out who favours the first of the two interpretations given above. She gives, in her *Historical Dances, 12th to 19th Century* (London, 1952), 'because when one dances it one goes in country fashion without bearing oneself as one might'.<sup>9</sup>

If the text is ambiguous in what it does tell us, there are also many things we should like to know that it does not mention at all.

We are not told that partners hold hands, let alone how they do so. Pictorial evidence suggests they hold hands,

provided it is a basse dance that is in the picture. But here we are at the mercy of an argument that goes round in circles. It runs, 'these people are in procession, hand in hand, and there are musicians playing, so they must be dancing. The dance characteristic of this century was the basse dance. Therefore, the basse dance must have been a processional dance, in pairs, holding hands.' The next time a picture is encountered it runs, 'These people are in procession hand in hand and there are musicians playing. The basse dance was a processional dance, so that is what they must have been doing.'

Indeed we are not told in so many words that the dance is for partners, man and woman, though this becomes apparent very early on, since 'for the first note which is called **démarche** one bows to the lady, bending towards her' (Lequet translation).

There is nothing in the text to say that the dance was processional. By Arbeau's time it would appear not to have been so.

It would be enlightening to be shown a 15th century picture of a basse dance, with an accompanying 15th century reference to it as a basse dance. The ones we all know could all be simply processions accompanied by music. Although, if they were, one might expect that there would be other pictures portraying dance in another vein which, so far as I know, there are not.

The argument is not that the dance was not processional. Only that we cannot be sure about it.

There is nothing in the text to support either side in the same foot/opposite foot controversy.

This is perhaps the place to note that the two great British pioneers of early dance, Mabel Dolmetsch and Melusine Wood, approached the subject from different starting points. Dolmetsch tells us herself that she was advised to start with books of more recent date and gradually work back into the unknown,<sup>10</sup> whereas Wood plunged right in at the deep, not to say unfathomable, end with a mediæval carole.<sup>11</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, that Dolmetsch advocates using opposite feet as was the norm in her day and was demonstrably done, though not exclusively even in any one dance, from about the mid-17th century onwards; whereas Wood assumes the use of same feet, as is logical (and about 95% automatic) when dancing the branle form of the carole.

### The Steps

The only really clear things we are told about the steps are threefold.

Firstly, in respect of their duration, each step (counting a pair of simples as a step) is equal in duration to any other. The duration is described as one note of music; but we do not, of course, know for sure how long one note lasts.

Secondly, they all have their immutable place in the order of performance, which runs, after introductory courtesies usually given as Reverence and branle; pair of simples, odd number of doubles, optional extra simples, odd number of **démarches**/reprises, branle.

Thirdly, the footing: first simples, doubles and branle start on the left, the extra simples, **démarches**/reprises, start on the right.

But what of their performance?

### Simple and doubles:

Of the **simples** we are told:

— that both go forward, the first on the left and the second on the right. Actually, Brussels supplies only the 'going' (**alant**) and Toulouze only the 'forward' (**avant**).

— that the first simple is done **en eslevant** according to

Brussels, **en enclinant** according to Toulouze, the body. **En eslevant** may be taken as raising, but **en enclinant**, in

Cotgrave's dictionary of 1611 meant 'to incline, decline, bend, bow, etc...', also 'to begin, or be readie, to fall'; and 'to make low courtesies, to humble himself before another.'

This I take to be the origin of Melusine Wood's instruction to bow on the first simple of each measure.<sup>12</sup>

— that the first simple goes forward 'a pace' (**ung pas**), and the second 'a little' (**ung petit**). Are they different, then?

This is all, about how to do the simples. Before discussing it, let us take a look at the doubles, since the points to note apply to both.

Of the **doubles** we are told:

— that the first double is done on the left and one has to **eslever** one's body 'and then' go forward three steps lightly.

— that the second is done on the right and one must likewise raise one's body 'and then' go forward. Nothing is said this time about 'lightly'. But we are told to step with right, then left, then right.

— that the third is done with the left, like the first. And so on. The fourth like the second. The fifth like the first and third.

Nothing more is said of the three steps that comprise the double. The alternation is only spelled out in relation to the second double. Nothing is said about the lady being on the same, or not being on the same, right, then left, then right foot.

Nothing is said about feet being turned out, or not.

Nothing is said about going on the toes. Heartz refers to the 'tiptoe motions which are such a telling characteristic of the fifteenth century type (of basse dance)<sup>13</sup>. This is obviously derived from Dolmetsch or Wood, but one wonders if he got it from seeing, or merely from reading about it. It has, of course, no foundation in the source material.

The text tells us only to raise the body; it does not tell us how. Nor are we told precisely when to raise it, nor when to make the footfall which follows raising it; and we are not told to lower it again at all, let alone when or how.

Nothing is said about closing the feet at the end of each simple of the **ss**, or at the end of the three steps that comprise the double.

Bearing this in mind, let us look at some of the traditional interpretations of the material.

Dolmetsch tells us 'The double consists of three steps. First beat: bend the knees outwards, marking time with the moving foot against the heel of the stationary foot. Second beat: step and rise on toes. Third beat: bend the knee of first foot slightly and step with reverse foot, but in posing the foot, rise instantly on the toes. Fourth beat: step with first foot with straightened leg, landing on the toe, but sinking again onto the flat of the foot. The first double starts with the outside foot (man left, woman right)...'<sup>14</sup>

Wood has 'The double is almost exactly like the old one, (she refers to doubles in branles and in her proposed estampies) but the three steps forward must be made lightly, on the toes.'<sup>15</sup> Later, she sets out the beats and bars, three beats to the bar, and gives the following actions, always on the first beat of each bar, '1) Step forward with the left foot on the toes, keeping weight forward over the foot. 2) Step forward with the right foot in the same way. 3) Step forward with the left foot in the same way. 4) Close the right foot to first position and lower the heels.'

Both the descriptions above include some form of bringing the feet together, Dolmetsch at the beginning of the step, Wood at the end. The only authority to my knowledge who does not recommend such a closing of the feet, is Ingrid Brainard,<sup>16</sup> for whom the simples 'are walking steps — advance left foot then right foot — and should be kept small', and the double, 'The basic shape of the 15th century double is: step left — step right — step left; then do the same beginning right.'<sup>17</sup>

I do not quarrel with a performing researcher's right to make decisions, and having made them to analyse and describe in some detail what has been decided upon. Where no guidance is given in the source material, one cannot do nothing. A step cannot be taken in an average of several ways. Nor can one dance with the perpetual 'proviso' floating like a balloon over one's head. It is rather the proclaiming of a particular version as gospel that is to be deprecated.

The closing of the feet was first referred to unequivocally by Arbeau in *Orchesographie* (Langres 1588-89), though Arena had referred to something of the sort in his treatise in macaronic verse, *Ad suos Compagnones* (c.1531).

Arbeau's words, describing the simple, are '**Vous marcherez en avant du pied gauche pour la premiere mesure: Puis mettez le pied droit joint avec ledict gauche pour la deuxieme mesure.**'<sup>18</sup> (You will walk forward with the left foot for the first bar: then you will place the right foot joined with the said left for the second bar.) He goes on to describe a double as three steps followed by a close, occupying four drum rhythms for its execution.

Arena says: '**Simplum sed facias de una tantummodo gamba/Dando duos ictus musica nostra docet.**'<sup>19</sup> 'You execute a simple with only one leg giving two beats as the music indicates.' (Melusine Wood's working translation from her unpublished notes.)

Arena on the subject of the double says, (the translation only this time), 'the double consists of three steps with both legs: but you will repeat it. Mark with the feet, walking four beats, but one leg will do three, the other one.'<sup>20</sup> The baffling first impression of this, suggesting a 'hop, hop, hop, step', is dissipated and all falls into shape when we remember Arbeau's strictures about Arena, that in his doubles, the step ends leaving you with your feet apart. That being so, it starts with a bringing up of the back foot level with the other (left foot moving, say); then the left foot is moved onwards one step; then the right; then the left again. Indeed, Arena himself confirms this later, saying 'One leg only walks the first two (steps), then the other leg does the third. The fourth will be done by the leg which did the first two.'<sup>21</sup>

Dolmetsch, it will be seen, follows Arena, taking her doubles from the earliest 16th century description. Brainard's focus is on the fifteenth century itself. Wood is looking back to the simples and doubles as she reckons they were in the middle ages. Incidentally, Arbeau tells us that it was his teacher at Poitiers who 'improved on Arena's style, saying it was more decent to finish the two simples (or the double, implied) with the feet together.'<sup>22</sup> But should we assume that this teacher at Poitiers was the only one to improve on the system? Or that Arena's system was universal, and was in operation eighty years earlier?

Bearing on this question of whether or not to close the feet, is the problem of fitting the steps to the music. Arbeau, as indicated above, refers to four drum rhythms being required for the musical unit to which one may dance the two simples, or double, or reprise, or branle.<sup>23</sup> Four drum rhythms, that is, per 'note' of the fifteenth century basse dance. The drum rhythm he gives is ♩♩♩♩. Six of our modern quarter notes/crotchets; let us say beats. Four sets of six beats, in the 16th century, per note. But the bulk of fifteenth century musical arrangements that have come

down to us have been interpreted as requiring only one such set of six beats per note. Exceptionally there are settings in which the note is elaborated to the length of twelve beats, or two sets of six. Notable are the two settings of *La Spagna* by Ghiselin, and by Josquin. In either case this gives us six, or twelve, beats to which to perform the two steps of the ss, or the three steps of the double.

Interpreting the steps Brainard's way, for the double there is no problem. For the two simples, in her own words 'Their rhythmical subdivision is left up to the dancer; they can be even which, in a triple meter, will result in an interesting juxtaposition of 2 against 3, a rhythm pattern which occurs in the music of the 15th century. Or, in certain choreographic situations one may choose to vary the dynamics by emphasizing the first beat of the measure, or the second, depending on the context; the actual length of the steps, however, should remain equal.'<sup>24</sup>

In the interpretations involving a close, however, even the simples require a count of 4 (step, close, step, close), and this count of 4 has to be fitted into six, or twelve, beats. Rather than spread it out evenly, stepping between beats in the case of six beats, most performers with a strong sense of rhythm prefer to make the middle step and the close shorter in duration than the first and third steps. This rings with an Italian reference to 'the second short step' in the double. (Cornazano, whose first edition of his book on the art of dancing was dated 1455, is describing a quality of movement that should enhance the steps of the double when he uses these words.)

Whichever way we perform the basse dance simples and doubles, we should be aware that the percentage of imagination in it is very high. It is even higher in the case of the **démarche**/reprise, and the **congé**/branle.

#### **Démarche/reprise and congé/branle**

The term **desmarcher**, the verb, is given in Cotgrave's *Dictionary* as 'To step, or goe, backe; to plucke, twitch, or bring backe a step; to remove a foot backward; to recoyle, retire, stirre from, give backe, lose ground.' But the noun has not only 'A backe step; a stepping or stirring backward;' but also 'a setting of one foot behind the other; also, a stepping aside, a traversing of ground;' and other things. But Cotgrave was, after all, more than a hundred years after the Brussels and Toulouse sources.

For the **démarche**, in both Brussels and Toulouse, we learn:

— that on its first occurrence at the beginning of the dance 'on the first not which is called **desmarche**' we are to make a reverence. We are not told how; only to do it **enclinant** towards the lady, and with the left foot.

Was the **démarche** at the beginning different from those that came later, and the same thing as the reverence? The later derivatives of the Brussels and Toulouse common original, *Moderne* and *Coplande*, generally use the term **reprise** in place of **démarche**. But at the beginning of the dance they tell us only to do a reverence, though *Moderne* adds '**comme doit estre une reprise**' ('as it were, a reprise')<sup>25</sup>

When the **démarche** comes in the course of the dance we are told:

— that it is so called because it retires (**reculer**),

— of the first in a set, that one has to do it with the right foot (to that extent it is different from the **démarche** described above),

— that one has to do it retiring (**reculant**), and it is called **démarche** because one retires,

— that one has to do it **eslevant** (Brussels) or **enclinant**

(Toulouse) the body. Toulouse does not say inclining towards anybody or anywhere,

— that one has to withdraw (**reculer**) the right foot near the other foot.

This latter action is problematical if one has ended the previous step with the feet together as per Wood and Arbeau. If one has ended it with the feet apart, as per Dolmetsch and Arena, it is even more of a problem since it would be the left foot in front (after a first or third double or subsequent right foot simples). If the left foot is already in front, how can one withdraw the right foot to it? (Turn around, perhaps? But surely this would have been mentioned.)

For the second **démarche** in a sequence we are told:

— that it is on the left foot,

— that it is similarly **enclinant** or **eslevant** the body,

— and turning a little towards the lady,

— and then to bring the right foot near to the left, **eslevant** or **enclinant** the body similarly.

The words 'and then' here may be critical.

Again the action is problematical. Look at the footing. You did the first **démarche** on the right 'and then' brought the right foot to the left; you now do the second on the left 'and then', again, bring the RIGHT foot to the LEFT. Is there some gesture to be done with either foot which is 'then' followed by a bringing of the right foot up to the left? And is the second reference to **eslevant/enclinant** redundant, or do we do whatever it is (raise or incline the body) once whilst performing a **démarche** on the left foot, and then again on placing the right foot near the left?

Of the third **démarche** we are told only:

— that it is to be done on the right foot like the first, in the same place, there, where the first was done,

which suggests there has been no actual displacement backwards on the dance floor. This would be welcomed by performers wearing appropriately long trains, who find some of the present day interpretations of the **démarche** extremely difficult, if not impossible.

The texts of Moderne and Coplande offer no help in solving the riddle of the **démarche**. They have edited out the relevant sections. Moderne's editing, indeed, patently jumps from the description of the **démarche** to that of the **branle**.

**For the conglé/branle** the information is slight. We are told only:

— that it begins with the left and finishes with the right,

— that it is called **branle** because one does it **branlant** from one foot to the other.

Cotgrave gives, for **branler**, 'To brandle, totter, shake, swing;' also to 'nod often, stirre apace, move uncertainly, or inconstently, from side to side; also to tremble or quake.'

The **branle** would appear to be some sort of movement of courtesy, a little hiatus in the proceedings. There must be several different possible movement patterns that would answer to the small amount of information we are given for it, and not violate credibility.

### In conclusion

It will be seen from the above that the amount of hard information we have to go on in attempting recreations of 15th century basse dance is slight. Perhaps we should call them creations, not recreations?

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In class and rehearsal there will arise the seeming contradiction of an admission that one cannot know precisely what was done in the 15th century, and an insistence upon performing very precisely to the requirements of the teacher or director present.

Many deliberate decisions and many more unconscious choices will have been made; about timing, turnout, springiness of step, part of the foot involved, for instance; and also about posture, carriage of the head, expression of face, gestures of hands, arms and shoulders. These will be commendable to the extent that they take into account knowledge not only of the source documents of the 15th century, and of later centuries, but also of art, literature, musicology, history of costume and of etiquette, and a rich experience of dance itself.

The source documents are only the start of the matter. But, as everyone knows, the start is paramount.

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|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1) Wilson                      | 15) Wood p.34                         |
| 2) Dolmetsch p.1               | 16) Brainard <i>Art</i> p.20          |
| 3) Brainard <i>Role</i> para 3 | 17) Brainard <i>Art</i> p.22          |
| 4) Lequet para 6               | 18) Arbeau f.27r+v                    |
| 5) Dolmetsch p.5               | 19) Arena, from Wood unpublished, p.6 |
| 6) Heartz p.292                | 20) Arena, from Wood unpublished, p.5 |
| 7) Heartz p.325                | 21) Arena, from Wood unpublished, p.5 |
| 8) Heartz p.292                | 22) Arbeau, tr. Beaumont p.55         |
| 9) Wood p.26                   | 23) Arbeau, f.27v                     |
| 10) Dolmetsch p.xi             | 24) Brainard <i>Art</i> p.20          |
| 11) Wood pp 5-6                | 25) Crane p.40                        |
| 12) Wood p.33                  |                                       |
| 13) Heartz p.325               |                                       |
| 14) Dolmetsch pp.19-20         |                                       |