

## Introduction

There are in existence twelve known manuscripts giving choreographies of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian dances. About fifty of them are *balli* in which the tempi may change in up to four different *misure*, and about forty *basse danze*, all in the same constant tempo. (It is not possible to be precise about these figures.) Every manuscript but one has at least one dance unique to that manuscript alone, while some dances are in many manuscripts. The music is given (tune only) for twenty-three of the *balli*, and none of the *basse danze*.

The question to be considered in this paper is 'What can we do with the dances without music?' Of course, one solution would be to leave them in the manuscripts without music and undanced. But that would be a pity; there are many splendid dances just waiting to be realised.

## Procedure

The first job must be to collate and compare the sources, where there is more than one. Sometimes a pair of sources show identical steps and choreography, but more usually there are differences. These discrepancies are often minor, but sometimes not. We have to guess whether they were intentional, or the result of bad proof reading. Sometimes a bit seems to have been omitted or added or even duplicated. Bits of a sentence can appear in the following sentence, though with punctuation minimal or non-existent it is not easy to sort out. (The proof reading of the Siena manuscript is a disgrace.) Finally, decisions must be made as to the precise form of the dance to be set.

How can we write music that is not given in the sources? Guglielmo made a number of useful suggestions. Firstly decide whether you want the tune in minor or major mode (*comporre per B molle, o per B quadro*). Then invent a tenor or melody which should be airy, perfectly measured, and tuneful (*il tenore overo il suono il qual sia arioso & di perfetta misura, & habia buon tuono*). We must be grateful to Guglielmo for offering the alternatives. Presumably he means that we may write the tune either in the top, or a lower part. And above all, it should please the ladies (& *sopra tutto che piaccia alle donne*). This is all good advice for dance music in any century.

How many parts? Guglielmo does go on a bit about the four principal voices (*quattro voci principali*); presumably what we would now call S A T B. But I am sure that it was not his intention that this should be the only solution. The most widely known dance picture of the period shows three dancers accompanied by a harpist. Of course, this picture might have represented a practice session. He does mention state occasions where many different instruments were in evidence. Music at that time was in a state of flux (When was it ever not?), and three part counterpoint was giving way to a more formal four part harmonic chordal structure. So presumably we can write music in two, three or four parts.

The step sequence should then be studied to see if the dance can be reasonably divided into discrete sections. A repeated sequence might then be set to the same music. This is probably not an essential requirement, but it certainly helps for teaching, practice and performance.

## Several different solutions

1. For a *bassa danza* use a French *basse dance* tenor of the right length (Example 1), and, if possible, which can be cadenced to the same lengths as the (assumed) sections of the dance. If necessary, the occasional note of the tenor could be lengthened, or two or three notes run together. I doubt if the original composer would have minded. It is worth noting that two of the three tenors suggested by Cornazano seem to be stylistically indistinguishable from their French counterparts.
2. Go for pastiche (Examples 2 & 3). It is not possible in a short paper to advise on this, except to suggest that one should avoid writing a long note in all parts at the same time. The dancers would not thank you if you did.
3. Use an existing 15<sup>th</sup> century composition of the right length which fits the sections of the dance (Example 4).
4. Find a more modern tune that fits, and captures the mood of the dance (Example 5). Nursery tunes are useful here. They have a timeless quality (not, of course, back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century) and the tunes trip along merrily over slow-moving implied basses, making them relatively simple to set. Renaissance composers would have been quite happy with this procedure. If you like the tune, set it on the top.
5. Use an incongruous modern tune, but put it in a middle part, where it will not be noticed except by such dancers as listen to the music (Example 6)..
6. Another acceptable trick which renaissance composers would be happy to countenance is to take an existing tune, and set it upside-down (Example 7). Surprisingly, this will often (not always) result in an equally acceptable tune which (though different) retains the flavour of the original.

## The problem with the *balli*

With the *balli* without music there is the additional problem of deciding which of the four *misure* to use for which sections. This is not too onerous a task. It is usually fairly obvious which bits should be in *piva*. Most *balli* start in *saltarello* of one sort or the other; and for *saltarello* sections in other parts of the dance one can use the fact that *saltarello* sections are usually in four, eight, twelve or sixteen steps. The appearance of a *volta del gioioso* indicates that there is a *bassa danza* section thereabouts, as does a marked change of step pattern.

## Conclusion

Finally, one should realise that dancing is a useless fun activity, with no effect whatever on the state of the national economy; and just as I would rather dance myself – however ineptly – than watch the most skilled professionals, so would I rather set my own music, and dance to my own preferred tempi. Enjoy!

## Acknowledgement

I am indebted to Barbara Sparti for her transcription and translation of the Paris manuscript.<sup>1</sup>

## References

1. Sparti, B. (editor) Guglielmo Ebreo of Pesaro *De practica seu arte tripudii*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993

**Example 1. Le grand rosin for *bassa danza* Ays**

cc ss d d r

ss d r r etc

**Example 2. Pastiche for *bassa danza* Alexandresca**

cc ss d s d

s r r cc etc

**Example 3. Pastiche for *ballo* Fiore di Vertù**

d d d d p p

p p etc

**Example 4. Ave Regina by Dufay for *bassa danza* Pellegrina**

ss d d r r R ss d

ss d etc

**Example 5. Little boy blue for *bassa danza* Febus**

cc \_\_\_\_\_ ss \_\_\_\_\_ d \_\_\_\_\_ r \_\_\_\_\_ ss \_\_\_\_\_ d \_\_\_\_\_ r \_\_\_\_\_

etc

d \_\_\_\_\_ d \_\_\_\_\_

**Example 6. Popeye the sailor man for saltarello section of *ballo* Humana**

d d d r r d R R

etc

**Example 7. Spero, upside down, for *ballo* La Vita di Colino**

Spero

La Vita