
Book Review

Jennifer Thorp, *The Gentleman Dancing-Master: Mr Isaac and the English Royal Court from Charles II to Queen Anne*. Clemson University Press: Studies in British Musical Cultures (Hardback), Clemson, SC, 2024. ISBN: 9781638040958, xix + 472 pp, 7 figures.

Jennifer Thorp offers a thoughtful, thorough, and engaging account of the English dancing master known as Mr. Isaac, best known today for his dances published during the first decades of the 18th century. Thorp provides carefully researched details about Isaac's career, first as a performer and then as a highly-respected teacher and choreographer; about his family, professional colleagues, and collaborators; and about his professional legacy and influence on other dancing masters of his day and after. Thorp also provides a summary catalogue and facsimiles of the twenty-two extant dances by Isaac, published during the first two decades of the 18th century and brought together here for the first time in a single publication.

"Isaac" (or variants such as Isaack, Isack, Isaake, etc.) may be either a given name or a surname, and prepending "Mr." doesn't change that ambiguity. This means that archival research to determine even basic facts about any Mr. Isaac is likely to require much patience and resolve, along with a first-rate memory and the ability to sense the implications of terse annotations. Thorp has done a masterful job, piecing together disparate bits of information from libraries, archive repositories, and special collections – there's a long list of these in the book's acknowledgements section – to develop a coherent picture of Mr. Isaac as a talented and generous man who at times benefited from family and social connections, but who was also subject to unanticipated ill fortune arising, for example, from the health or religious beliefs of England's rulers.

It turns out that neither Mr. Isaac's given name nor his surname was "Isaac". He was Francis Thorpe, born sometime in the 1650s into a family of musicians and dancers. Thorp provides details: his father, Isaack Thorpe (1615–1681), was also a dancer and dancing master, and Francis benefited – with his father's blessing – from using his father's name as he pursued his career. It appears that Francis/Mr. Isaac received his dance training in France, where by 1670 he was busy performing in comédie-ballets by Lully and Molière. In 1672 he travelled to London, apparently under the guidance Jerome Francis Gohory, who may have been his teacher in Paris and who, by the way, was Isaac's uncle. Gohory had become royal dancing master at the court of Charles II; Gohory intended to pass his position along to Isaac, but the king died before that could happen.

Thorp documents Isaac's transition from dancer to dance teacher. He performed in court entertainments until at least 1675; thereafter, his focus turned to teaching. It seems that by the late 1680s Gohory had shifted many of his duties to Isaac, duties that included teaching dance and deportment to the Maids of Honour, arranging dances, and coaching courtiers as they prepared for court balls. Isaac also taught dance to the young Princess Anne, and though he never

received an official appointment he retained a place at Anne's court after she became queen and until her death in 1714. Some of Thorp's section titles give an idea of Isaac's activity at court and in society: "Isaac's place at the court of Queen Anne", "Teaching the Maids of Honour and courtier families", "Isaac's pupil Katherine Booth, a would-be Maid of Honour", "Teaching in the London houses of the aristocracy and gentry", "The St Martin's Lane house and dancing school", "Isaac's apprentices", and "Isaac's scholars on stage".

Having trained and performed in France, it is not surprising that Isaac would have maintained ties to the French dance scene. In the autumn of 1684, he made a brief return: as Thorp writes, "Historians have assumed that the English dancing-master named Isaac, who taught country dances to the ladies of Louis XIV's court at Fontainebleau in October 1684, was indeed Francis Mr Isaac, and although the evidence is circumstantial it is difficult to see who else it could have been." Some time in that same year, 1684, Pierre Beauchamps was able to use his newly-developed notation system to record at least one entire dance. Thorp doesn't speculate on the likelihood of an encounter between Isaac and Beauchamps, but surely we may imagine that during his visit to Fontainebleau Isaac would have learned of Beauchamps's notation system.

Roughly two decades later, Isaac would become a strong supporter of Beauchamps's system, as published by Feuillet. Thorp provides fascinating and important details about Isaac's connections to Feuillet's translators, particularly John Weaver, and to other dancing masters, notators, and publishers in England, situating the use of Beauchamps-Feuillet notation within the context of "the rapidly developing entrepreneurial world that flourished in London by the early 1700s", a world that included "dishonest practice, plagiarism, piracy, and bitter rivalries." She also provides context and an approximate chronology for the twenty-two extant dances created by Isaac: dances to honour Princess Anne and members of the Stuart royal family, dances to honour Queen Anne on her birthday each year from 1704 to 1714, and other dances that were danced at court balls. Thorp makes astute observations about Isaac's approach to dance-making and his "choreographic individualism".

The Gentleman Dancing Master is a comprehensive and valuable contribution to dance scholarship, and a delight to read or re-read. It is a handsome volume, clearly laid out; Thorp and her publisher have made astute choices about paper, fonts, and so on. Dance notations – a bit less than half the volume – are clean and legible. This book will be a welcome addition to anyone's library.

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Published on-line ?? June 2024