RENAISSANCE COURT DANCE IN ITALY AND FRANCE

A Short Summary

Catherine Sim
RENAISSANCE COURT DANCE
IN ITALY AND FRANCE

A Short Summary

Catherine Sim
Preface

The major development of Renaissance dance took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This development did not proceed in a chronological through line; some elements and conditions were present in both centuries, and characteristics of some dance forms overlapped. These pages contain a breakdown by century where possible.

This book is meant to be a short summary of what is known so far of the why and wherefore of Renaissance dance in Italy and France. For those who wish to pursue this intriguing story, the references in the bibliography contain a wealth of useful and fascinating information.
Moreover, I was present in Venice when the Emperor [Frederick III] came, and the festivities that took place were the most noble that I ever saw in all my lifetime; ...And the Signory arranged dancing one evening and I organized a most noble entertainment of a livery[set] of masques with new balli. And on that evening I was knighted. And in all Christendom there never took place a finer celebration or a finer repast.1

This entry from the Autobiography of Guglielmo Ebreo (William the Jew) of Pisaro is one of a long list of festivities in which he took part during the course of his thirty-year career as a dancing master in fifteenth-century Italy. Italy led the development of dance, both social and theatrical, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with France destined to take the lead in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dancing masters and traveling nobility spread the dances from the Italian courts to England and most of the European continent.
As a prince of a great Italian court, such as those at Urbino, Florence, Mantua, Ferrara, and Milan, you had to be adept at political intrigue, acquire wealth through shrewd business transactions, be educated in Humanism, and have a high level of personal cultural refinement, which would include not only music, drawing, and poetry, but dance as well.

An ongoing debate as to what kind of dance was suitable for a courtier juxtaposed the ever-present requirement for dignified movement with the desire to display virtuosity. Improvisation and inventiveness were admired, but if the dance called for expressive gestures and large movements, such as were seen in masquerades and moresques, court pages or professionals were the customary performers, though some nobility and even royalty enjoyed stepping down from the heights and, well-disguised in costume and mask, cavorting with the lesser beings. Choreographers and teachers danced in all the forms.

On festive occasions, courtiers danced before their peers, in couples or trios, displaying not only skill and grace but improvisatory ability; performed in costume in entertainments, often allegorical tributes to host and guest, with music, mime, poetry, and dance; participated in the group dances for “as many as will,” which were often done at the end of banquets.

In their private rooms, they danced for themselves and each other, for both amusement and courtship.

The increasingly powerful merchant classes also pursued dance. Dancing schools are mentioned here and there in various sources, and, as courtiers would have had their lessons at court, it must be assumed that the schools taught dance to those classes that aspired to a higher social status.

Dance for spectacles, while using the same steps and patterns as social dance, adapted them to the theme or story in question. Though social dance focused on courtship or personal pleasure, it was not necessarily simpler than performance dance, as both forms had their share of virtuosity and ornamentation. Skilled male dancers of the sixteenth century might improvise with new variations on simpler steps, which then found their way into a dance vocabulary that not only impressed on the social dance floor but also embellished the spectacular entertainments of the day.

There was considerable variety in social dance: mixers, choreographed chases, kissing games and dances playing out innuendos of courtship, or those that simply displayed the skill of the dancers. Men, owing to their role in society and to their less obstructive clothing, were able to show off technical feats of the legs and feet, such as multiple pirouettes, tours en l’air, and beaten jumps. The ladies were constrained to be more modest in their demeanor, though not without displaying enjoyment and skill in their dancing.

Among the most prominent Italian treatises of the fifteenth century are those of Domenico da Piacenza and two of his disciples, Antonio Cornazano (not actually a dancing master but author of an informative treatise nonetheless) and Guglielmo Ebreo.

The status of fifteenth-century Italian dancing masters seems to have been somewhat ambiguous. According to Barbara Sparti, a leading historian of Early Dance, contemporary accounts of court spectacles and balls emphasize the magnificence and costliness of court presentations, mentioning dance only briefly here and there. Though they were called upon to participate in spectacles and to teach the young people dancing and deportment, the masters did not have permanent positions for the most part but had either to offer their services to a court or to work for specific occasions at the request of a prince. Not only does it seem they weren’t paid overmuch but in listings of court retainers they appear consistently near the bottom, suggesting their lesser significance in the overall scheme of things. In poorer courts, they were obliged to teach fencing, equestrian arts, and tumbling, as well as dance.

Perhaps in attempting to elevate the status, not only of dance but of themselves as well, the masters include in their treatises vigorous justifications of their art. They present it as being comparable to other liberal arts and particularly allied to music, with its elements of science and its association with the harmonious movement of the spheres. Linking dance to Italy’s increasingly prized heritage of ideals and personages of ancient Greece and Rome, they declare it worthy to be recognized as on a par with other arts pursued by the nobility.
While the Italians were developing ever more complex dance, the French were not sitting about plucking on the lute. Burgundy, a French-speaking territory politically separate from France until 1482, was noted for the sophistication of its court. The oldest known (but not the only) manuscript of dance in French is from Burgundy. It has no author or date, but the musical notation indicates that it is from the fifteenth century at the latest. It contains some instructions and notations of 59 Basses Danses and their music.

In the sixteenth century, the value of court dance rose considerably. The two great Italian treatises by Enrico Caroso and Cesare Negri were published in the early seventeenth century, at the end of their careers, which suggests that the dances they recorded had been done at least since the mid-sixteenth century.

The primary treatise on Renaissance dance in France is *L’Orchésographie* (1588), by Thoinot Arbeau, whose real name was not Arbeau but Jehan Tabourot, who was not a dancing master but a cleric who passed his days not at court but in a church diocese in the south of France. Arbeau’s treatise addresses not only dance but also the playing of drum and fife, fencing movements, and war dances. Dance historian Julia Sutton tells us that even though Arbeau did not work at court, and therefore cannot be a true source for what happened there, he has still provided us with useful information.

It is undisputed that dance in France absorbed a great deal from Italy. In Margaret McGowan’s *Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession*, we discover that, in 1499, Louis XII brought Guglielmo Ebreo’s dance manual back to France; Francois I became enamored of dance on a visit to Italy in 1515, brought Italian musicians and dance masters to his court, and never abandoned his love of the dance; Catherine de Medici, wife of Henri II, was responsible for developing many court fêtes in which dance was a primary element; Charles IX summoned Cesare Negri to his court in 1560; and Henri III was besotted with dance and lavish entertainment to the point of neglecting his political duties, with catastrophic results. These kings all danced themselves, some mingling with different social levels without regard to rank, and, in addition to dancing exalted roles, were amused to play the roles of a fish, a bear, a goddess, etc. To the base of Italian influence, the French, being particularly intent upon presenting themselves with finesse, added refinement, and, as noted above, developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries an intricacy of footwork and style that, in the Baroque court of Louis XIV, became the standard of dance in Europe.

According to the Church...

The masters seem to have struggled regularly against a negative attitude of the church, which, despite periods of its remission, simply wouldn’t go away. In defense of dance, Guglielmo Ebreo (William the Jew) structures a portion of his treatise *De pratica Seu Arte Tripudii* (1463) as a dialogue between pupil and master:

Pupil: “[Y]ou should consider besides how wicked and sinful it [dance] is, because it gives rise to infinite evils and distress, in which we see unmistakable examples every day. No more can you deny that it panders and incites to lust. Through it, terrible murders, quarrels, and enmities come about, which are not only exceedingly displeasing to God, but to men as well.”

To which Guglielmo replies: “…I do not deny that many murders, sins, and other evils come of it; that is, when this art is performed and practiced by dissolute, vile, base, and lecherous men to whom...I forbid and refuse it. But when it is practiced by noble, virtuous, and honest men, I affirm this science and art to be good, virtuous, and worthy of commendation and praise. Moreover, not only does it ennoble and refine virtuous and esteemed men, but even the ill-mannered and the base-born become most noble-minded.”

A familiar refrain...

As is true in our day, dancing masters had their share of frustrations with both pupils and colleagues. Ebreo said of certain other teachers/dancers: “...[A]t these festivities and in various other places, I have met many who consider themselves masters, and they hardly know their right foot from their left, and they believe themselves to be truly expert in three days.” As to dancers and pupils, Ebreo, in giving rules for women, says: “…[H]ow rare are the women who are perfectly adept in this virtue and art, since most engage in this activity as a haphazard affair rather than based on any knowledge of theirs...”

Problems of status and students notwithstanding, we are much indebted to these masters for having troubled to write down steps, dances, music, and style, without which our knowledge of Renaissance dance would be limited to generalized reports from contemporary participants and witnesses.
THE DANCES

In the Italian treatises, each dance has a name (e.g. *Nido d’Amore* [Nest of Love]), and a designation (*ballo* or *balletto*). These latter terms seem to have been used interchangeably. Each term can refer either to a single dance or to a dance with changes of meter and tempo, which creates a kind of short suite.

**In the fifteenth century**, Ebreo uses primarily *ballo* for his dances. The form of these *balli* was characteristically a *bassadanza* rhythm (slow and stately), followed by *guadernaria* (slightly faster), *saltarello* (bright and sprightly), and *piva* (twice as fast as the *bassa*; swift). Ebreo records dances by their type plus a descriptive name, such as “*Bassadanza* for four called ‘Patienza,’” and gives the choreographer’s name (mostly his).

**In the sixteenth century**, Caroso uses primarily the term *balletto*. In his manual, the *bassadanza* is consistently replaced by the *passo e mezzo*, and most dances have two, three, or four changes of meter and tempo. Caroso most often gives a descriptive title and a dedication, such as “*Rosa Felice. Balletto. To the Most Illustrious Lady, the Duchess of Sermonetta.*”

In France, Arbeau gives type of dance and descriptive title: “*Gaillarde called La Fatigue.*”

Following is a brief description of what might be called the most basic Renaissance dance types. Note that the time signatures could be considered typical of these dances, but they are by no means fixed. As Julia Sutton points out, “Apparently all steps and step patterns except canary steps can be danced in duple or triple time.” The dances are listed according to century of origin, so far as we know, but some from the fifteenth century carry over to the sixteenth.

### Fifteenth century

**Bassadanza** (*Bassedanza*) Fifteenth century. 2 beats to a measure. Characteristically serious, gliding along with the feet close to the floor. An important dance in the Burgundian courts, 1450-1480. Most Italian *bassadanza* have a good deal of variety. In the same period, the French *basse danse* was done only by couples or trios, was processional, and had a fixed order of steps.

**Gaillarde** (*gaillarde, galliard*) Fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. 3 beats to a measure. Principal step is a hopping pattern of 5 steps done in 6 beats of music. The mood is bright and energetic, and the dance is often a vehicle for the man to display his virtuosity.

**Saltarello** 3 beats to a measure. The term goes back to the fourteenth century and typically followed a bassadanza, but there are no choreographies recorded until the sixteenth century. This dance also has no identifiable step pattern, though the root word is *saltare*, to jump. The mood is sprightly.

**Piva** Fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. 2 beats to a measure but with a 6/8 character, using triplets. Twice as fast as the *bassadanza*. Usually the last dance of a *ballo*. Uses a running step that undulates swiftly over the floor.

### Sixteenth century

**Pavan** Sixteenth century. 2 beats to a measure. The Pavan is not a bassadanza. The name derives most likely from the city name of Padua, not from the word *pavone* (peacock), but the dance certainly employs *pavoneggiare*, the stylish swagger that shows off rank, wealth, and power. A slow and stately processional, consisting of simple steps forward, back, or side. Arbeau tells us that, “A nobleman can dance the *Pavane* with cape and sword...walking decorously with a studied gravity, and the damsel with chaste demeanour and eyes cast down, sometimes glancing at the onlookers with a virginal modesty...[I]t is used by kings, princes and great lords, to display themselves on some day of solemn festival with their fine mantles and robes of ceremony;”

**Passo e mezzo** Sixteenth century. 2 beats to a measure. Early Dance historian Julia Sutton tells us that, though the term means “step and a half,” there is no available description of a distinct step pattern for this dance. And all the examples we have are “elaborated variants of the pavan.”

**Canario** Sixteenth century. 3 or 6 beats to a measure. Has unique stamping movements. Is believed to have come from the Canary Islands off the coast of then-Spanish Sahara. Castanets are sometimes used in this dance.

**La Volta** Sixteenth century. 3 beats to a measure. May have been derived from the Galliard. In its very distinctive step pattern, the man lifts the lady with one hand around her waist and one on the low point of her corset in front, as he gives her a boost with his thigh and turns her in the air. Very popular in England, liked by Queen Elizabeth I and James I, although its propriety was sometimes questioned. Arbeau classifies it among the “…lascivious and wayward dances which have been brought into use, in the dancing of which the dames are made to jump in such a manner that they very often show their bare knees if they do not keep one hand on their dresses to prevent it” and wonders whether “…both honour and health are not concerned and threatened.”

**Branle** (pronounced “brawl”) Sixteenth century. 2 beats to a measure. A round dance of French origin, from *branler*, to sway, in which couples moved with...
simple steps forward, back, and side to side. **Caution:** *Le branle*, a step from the Middle Ages, simply meant to shift weight from one foot to the other, without traveling. *La Branle* is a Renaissance dance that does not use this shift of weight but is an aristocratic dance with many variations.16

**The Basic Steps**

The following steps are basic to most Renaissance dances. The steps are small, except in cases where a pattern demands that one cover more ground. The list is a memory aid only. For details, see DancetimePublications’s DVD, *How to Dance Through Time*, Vol. 3: “The Majesty of Renaissance Dance” and Julia Suttons’s VHS *Il Ballarino*. Here, one count, or a half count, is given for each segment of a step, though the musical meter may vary from 2/4 to 6/8.

**Riverenza** *(bow):*

- **Man:** Place left foot forward (1). – Place left foot back (2), – Bend the knees slightly, heels stay down (3). – Rise and bring left back to right. (4).
- **Lady:** Left foot starts already forward, flat on floor (so she holds count of 1); rest of riverenza is like man’s.

**Passo** *(pl. passi):* A step forward, backward or sideways. Steps are normally four fingerbreadths’ away from standing foot, hence quite small. (Count varies, depending on dance)

**Passo Puntato:** Step forward on left (1). – Close right foot to left arch (& – 2), Rise, and lower a little on both feet (& – a).

**Continenza:** Step sideways onto left – Bring right to left. – Rise a little on both and lower. Repeat to other side. (This is like the *passo puntato*, but moving sideways.)

**Seguito Spezzato:** Step forward onto left, flat, placing ball of right foot beside left (1) – Rise on both (&), – Lower on left, keeping right heel off floor (2).

**Seguito Semidoppio Ornato:** Two passi, (1 – 2), then one spezzato. (3 – & – 4).

**Fioretto:** With a little spring, circle right foot around back (&) to cut under left, ending on balls of both feet (1). - Lower and repeat on other side. Note: Don't turn feet out.

**Trabuchetto:** Jump slightly left onto ball of left foot, bringing right foot (flexed) to left, with its toe at arch of left, off the ground. (1) Lower onto left heel before beginning next step.

**Sottopiede:** Step or jump onto the left foot, landing on ball of foot and bringing the right toes behind and under raised left heel (1) – Lower onto right, raising the left forward a little, flexed. (&)

**Saffice:** One sottopiede (1 – &) to the left and one trabuchetto (2); can be done to other side.

**Galliard** *(Arbeau):* (This is a 6-count step; count 5 is in the air.) Jump onto the right foot, kicking the left to the front about 45° high in the air (1) – Jump onto the left the same way (2) – Onto right, the same way (3) – Onto left the same way (4). – Jump up, lifting the already raised right a little more (5, in the air); – Land on both feet, right foot behind and slightly side of left (like a 4th position in ballet, but feet parallel rather than turned out). (6) Repeat beginning with other foot.

**Galliard** *(Caroso):* Jump onto right, kicking left forward (1). – Step forward onto left (2). – Undercut left with right, kicking left lightly forward (3). – Jump onto left, bringing right forward in front in the air (4). – Jump with both feet off the ground (5). – Land on both feet, right foot behind and slightly to side of left (6).

**Seguito Battuto Al Canario:** Slide left foot forward, flexed (so the heel scuffs a little) (1). – Slide ball of foot back (as in tap’s shuffle step) (&). – Stomp onto left foot (2).

**Not only the What, but the How: Technique**

Early Dance historian Angene Feves neatly sums up the basic technique as follows:

1. The torso is held erect, without any bending either forward or sideways.
2. The arms are down at the sides, with just a bit of air between them and the torso, which keeps them from being either limp or tense. They are not raised above the head or extended into space.
3. In Italy, there is no turnout of legs or feet. Some French masters use a slight turnout.
4. Steps are small, only four finger-widths from their starting place.
5. Step heel first and slightly to the side of a straight-ahead step.
6. Step out on a flat foot, rather than rolling through the foot or rolling to the flat from sides of toes.
7. Start step patterns with the left foot—it was considered to be the weaker side, so standing on the right would help to avoid wobbling or falling.
8. When it is off the ground, the foot is flexed rather than pointed.
9. A great deal of the movement is done with straight legs, the bending of the knee (pié) being, for today’s dancer, unexpectedly absent on the landing of jumps and slight in preparation for them. In order to execute the jumps and fast footwork while keeping the torso and arms quiet, accomplished Renaissance dancers may have had a leg and foot-strength similar to that of the Irish dancers we see today.
10. There is a rise and fall in many steps, but whether the rise begins on the balls of the feet, then lowers, or on the flat, then rises and lowers, depends on the period and the treatise. 

_Even then, it’s still not dancing: Style_
Renaissance Dance, at times stately, at times zesty, is restrained but charming, respectful but playful. It is characterized by the contrast between complex footwork and quiet torso, by changes of tempo and rhythm within a dance, and by subtle contrasts in mood expressed by the dancers.

In his treatise, _De Pratica Seu Arte Tripudii_, (1463) Ebreo sets out six requirements for good dancing:
1. _Misura_ (Measure): In essence, good rhythm.
2. _Memoria_ (Memory): Ability to remember steps and patterns in order and to adjust to changes in tempo and movement style. In a ballo, for instance, there are often four sections with different rhythms and moods. One must not confuse one section with another or dance the patterns out of order. NOTE: Ornamentation, however, is expected of the accomplished dancer, who might skillfully perform a step from one dance, the saltarello, for example, in another—bassadanza, for example, fitting the first to the different meter of the second.
3. _Partire di Terreno_ (Partitioning the Ground): Adjusting the extent of one’s movement according to the size of the dancing area and the patterns of the dance. Lacking this capacity, one might return to one’s partner too soon, having made the steps too small or, on the other hand, not be able to reach him or her because of having traveled too far.
4. _Aiere_ (Air): “This is an act of airy presence and a rising movement with one’s body which appears, through nimbleness in the dance, as a sweet and most gentle rising up.” A lilt in one’s movement.
5. _Mayniera_ (Manner): “Shading” certain steps by turning the body “to the same side” as the foot one is stepping on. This seems to indicate that one turns the front of the body toward the stepping foot, which is the typical opposition used in walking. The body remains in that position until the end of the step. In Cornazano’s treatise, the same instruction could be interpreted to mean bringing the same shoulder as foot forward. Different specialists use different interpretations.
6. _Movimento Corporeo_ (Body movement): The integration of the above five qualities, enhanced by a well-proportioned, agile body and natural grace. Also refers to various versions of rise and fall.

Anyone wishing to dance would feel pressed to master these requirements or risk ridicule at court.

_Pavoneggiae_—to strut, or present oneself proudly, as would a peacock, was the hallmark of the stately _piva_ (French, _basse danse_). As can be observed in many paintings of the _fifteenth century_, the body was carried slightly back, giving it a dignified weight. The stylistic turning of the body (called _ombreggiare_, or shading) as described in Ebreo’s rule, “Maniera,” is distinctly early Renaissance and was possible because the ladies were not in corsets at this time.

Ebreo tells us that, when a gentleman dances in a long garment, he should dance with solemnity, whereas a short garment requires that one jump, turn, and perform flourishes.

Domenico states that the lady must not catch the eye of her partner but should look into the distance. Ebreo says: “Nor should her gaze be haughty or roaming (peering here and there as many do), but she should for the most part keep her eyes modestly on the ground,” not, he adds, sinking her chin. Her manner should be “... sweet, discreet, and pleasant.”

Later, however, _in the sixteenth century_, Caroso requires a level gaze from the lady, with which she should look at her partner or at those she passes while executing a figure.

At this time, corsets were stiffly boned in front and back, impeding any bending or twisting of the torso, so the body carriage was more erect, with less shoulder movement. Ladies’ sleeves were in many cases filled with bombast, which gave them fullness but which also kept the arms a little away from the body. It was not considered seemly to raise the arms above the shoulders. Skirts were heavy, so ladies, when executing turns, had to allow themselves time for the skirt to rebound at the end of the turn. Italian women wore shoes called _chopines_, which resembled espadrilles but with undercut and fairly high heels, which kept the hems of their skirts out of street debris. Caroso complains of ladies who “slide their chopines along as they walk, so that the racket they make is enough to drive one crazy! More often they bang them so loudly with each step, that they remind us of Franciscan friars” (certain of whom walked on high wooden pattens). Caroso tells them that, when dancing, they should lift their toes first before stepping, which keeps the chopines quiet and keeps them on the feet.
While the man is dancing, the lady should not stand like a statue but should pretend to adjust her train, sway gracefully, don a glove, or move her closed fan.

Caroso declares that dancing without one’s cape is not appropriate to the nobility, and, when wearing a sword while dancing, the gentleman must hold it with his left hand, so it will not wave wildly about.

Arbeau advises that, when one dances in company, one should not look down to examine one’s steps; one must hold the head and body upright with confidence and not spit or blow one’s nose much.

**Watch your Ps and Qs: Deportment**

*In the fifteenth century*, Ebreo urges gentlemen who intend to dance to be “temperate, honourable, and reverent” when meeting for this purpose, as there are those who “...turn this most worthy art into something vile and shameful, chiefly because they are not well-instructed, mannerly, or modest in their speech, nor sober in their eating and drinking, for dissoluteness and drunkenness are the ruin of every virtue.”

“Converse pleasantly in a low and modest voice,” says Arbeau *in the sixteenth century*. “[L]et your arms fall by your sides neither in a lifeless nor in a restless manner, and be suitably and neatly dressed, your hose well drawn up and your shoes clean.” He tells the gentleman that, if he asks a lady and is refused, he should accept the refusal gracefully and move on. In general, Arbeau says, “...if you desire to marry, you should know that a mistress is won by the pleasant disposition and grace with which one is observed to dance.” He goes on: “...[D]ancing is practiced to make manifest whether lovers are in good health and sound in all their limbs, after which it is permitted to them to kiss their mistresses, whereby they may perceive if either has an unpleasant breath or exhales a disagreeable odour as that of bad meat.”

Caroso warns ladies that farthingales, stockings, etc. must be well-secured before leaving home, so they don’t fall down in public. At the dance, the ladies should sit forward on their chairs, for if they sit too far back, the farthingale will tip up, showing their legs, requiring “[the poor things] to beat on them [the skirts] with both hands as if they were shaking out dust or fleas to lower them and keep them down properly...” If the lady is not dancing, she should shift her position slightly from time to time, handling a handkerchief or fan, and chat with those near her. She must not, however, fiddle with her skirts. When asking another to dance, one must look directly at him or her, so there is no confusion about whom one is asking.

### My Banquet (ball, pageant, tournament, entry, etc.) is Bigger than your Banquet: Spectacle

Courtiers and dancing masters had the opportunity to display their dancing skills not only at balls and other social gatherings but also at festive spectacles—one of the ways by which princely courts enhanced their political status, both by outdoing their rivals in magnificence and costliness and by impressing the people with their largesse. Occasions for spectacle were many, and included the entry of a prince or other important person into a city, princely weddings or births, coronations, peace treaties, and funerals. The festivities took the form of triumphal entries patterned after those of ancient Rome, jousts, tournaments and games of skill, carrousels (horse ballets), masquerades (elaborate costumed parades), balls, pageants, and banquets. The allegory and symbolism that threaded through all the events of these festivals, and that glorified the persons or occasion in question, were derived from the rediscovered ideas in the art, literature, and philosophy of ancient Greece and Rome.

Banquets, which took place in grand halls designed to accommodate large numbers of persons, were elaborate. At one end of the hall, most often rectangular, was a slightly raised dais, on which stood the table for host and honored guests. On two opposing long walls, guests sat only on the outer sides of tables, called sideboards, leaving the center of the hall free for servitors to move about and for entertainment to take place.

Of the four courses of a papal banquet in 1579, the first and last consisted of delicacies similar to today’s hors d’oeuvres and desserts. Following is the second course:

#### Hot Foods from the Kitchen: Roasts
- Fried veal sweetbreads and liver, with a sauce of eggplant, salt, sugar, and pepper
- Spit-roasted skylarks with lemon sauce
- Stuffed spit-roasted pigeons with sugar and capers sprinkled over them
- Spiced roasted rabbits, with sauce and crushed pine nuts
- Partridges, larded and spit-roasted, served with lemon slices
- Pastries filled with minced veal sweetbreads and served with slices of prosciutto
- Strongly seasoned poultry with lemon slices and sugar
- Slices of veal, spit-roasted, with a sauce made from the juices
- Leg of goat, spit-roasted, with a sauce made from the juices
- Soup of almond cream, with the flesh of three pigeons for every two guests
- Squares of meat aspic
The third course is much the same. The extravagance of this menu would certainly bring honor to the papal court, but it wouldn’t necessarily mean that guests ate inordinate amounts of food. It is probable that they selected from among the courses served to them.

In any case, the banquets were long and, as it was difficult to eat one meat course after another for several hours running, pauses were placed between the courses, during which milk-based dishes were served to refresh the diners and aid digestion. Traveling acrobats were brought in to amuse the guests as they awaited the next course. Fanciful food sculptures, called *tramessi* in Italy, *entremets* in France, made of sugar, marzipan, fruits, and other sweets, were either displayed on the tables or brought in on carts, which gradually became large enough to accommodate small orchestras or *tableaux vivants*. (Note: Like the terms *ballo* and *balletti*, those of *tramesso*, *entremets*, *intermedio*, *intermède*, and *intermezzo* can be confusing. As was the case with the dancing, they did not evolve in a straight line but overlapped in time. *Tramesso* (It.) and *entremets* (Fr.) referred not only to the fanciful food displays but also to the entertainment segments of a banquet. In Italy, *tramesi* developed into *intermedii*, while in France, *entremets*, became *intermèdes*. *Intermezzo* is a generic term for these interludes. In accounts of festivities, these terms are used variously.)

Over time these intermezzi evolved into elaborate floats, complete with musicians, actors and dancers. Allegories portraying ancient Greek or Roman gods and goddesses, or heroic or pastoral episodes, accompanied the food brought into the hall and called attention to the virtue, erudition, wealth, and power of the prince, as well as enhanced the image of any honored guests. Favorite themes were the Heroes of Antiquity and the Harmony of the Spheres. Following is an account of one of these interludes with song, dance, instrumental music, floats, and food presented at the marriage of Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan, in 1489:

*The guests enter an unadorned dining hall. Jason and the Argonauts then set out tablecloths of gold representing the Golden Fleece. Mercury brings in a fatted calf, stolen from Apollo, around which takes place the Dance of the Hebrews around the Golden Calf. Diana and her nymphs bring in a magnificent deer named Acte who, according to the singing which accompanies him, rejoices to be eaten by such convivial guests. Orpheus enters with birds he has charmed. Then Theseus and Atalanta, in a rapid dance, hunt the boar of Calydon. Iris enters with 3 peacocks on her float, Tritons convey the fish and finally, Hebe and the shepherds of Arcady, along with Vertumnus and Pomona, carry in the desserts. This is followed by a ballet glorifying conjugal fidelity.*

These entertainments came to be called “*intermedii*,” as they merged with musical theatre presentations. They were placed between acts of plays, operas, or comedies as separate interludes, related in content neither to the main play nor to each other! Their dance, music, poetry, and pantomime, presented in lavish costumes and with elaborate and startling scenic effects, ultimately exceeded the plays themselves in popularity.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, however, *intermedii* between acts of a play in Italy were thematically unified, and stage machinery created more and more wondrous effects.

**Exclusively yours: Ballet de Cour**

In France, whereas at least parts of Renaissance festivities occurred in places accessible to the public, *ballet de cour*, or court ballet, was just that: given at court, by courtiers, for courtiers and/or visiting dignitaries. This form was more cohesive than anything that preceded it, with themes expressed in plots rather than mere sketches. The plots, still derived from Greek and Roman mythology, were not true to the originals but were used as springboards to connect to contemporary government the new-found values of ancient politics and philosophy so admired in the Renaissance.

**Elements of ballet de cour:**

- *Entrées* of elaborate floats, on which were allegorical props and scenery and
- *Musicians, actors, and dancers* who descended onto the floor to perform
- *Musicians, choruses and solo vocalists*
- *Actors reciting poetry*
- *Scenic machines* descending from the ceiling
- *Choreography*
- *Dancers* who had rehearsed
- *Ballet finale*, in which a group of dancers created geometric figures that spelled out names of royalty or formed the shapes of significant symbols. The dancers moved in chains, lines, circles, squares, diamonds, etc. from one shape to the next, pausing at the end of each to allow the spectators, viewing from the dais (for royalty) or from the galleries above, to read the symbols. In these finales, design, which took precedence over step patterns, was intricate enough to prompt several contemporary viewers to remark on the skill of the dancers at not having missed a beat or gone out of line one time.

*Le Balet Comique de la reyne* (1581) was a prime example of this form. Though the best realized up to that time, it was not the first and was certainly not the last. Queen Louise, wife of Henri III and daughter-in-law to the queen mother, Catherine de Medici, organized it to celebrate the marriage of her
sister, Marguerite de Valois, to Henri’s favorite, the Duc de Joyeuse.

Catherine de Medici herself came to France at the age of 14 as the bride of Henri II and, as a great lover of music and dance, soon found herself put in charge of court entertainments. Over the years she brought a great many Italian musicians and dancers to the French court, among whom was Balthazar Beaujoyeux (originally Baldassarino da Belgioioso), who became choreographer and director for many of the more elaborate fêtes, including the Balé comique.

The performance began at 10 p.m. and ended at 3:30 a.m. Its ballet finale lasted an hour. It isn’t known whether there was a break or if the audience indeed sat for five and one-half hours!

The rectangular hall is set with musicians ensconced in a “Golden Vault” to the left of the king, while Pan is in his grove to the right. Opposite the king, at the rear of the hall, is Circe’s garden, embellished with all manner of fruit and flowers. Each character or group enters on a float or comes down on a machine from the ceiling, descends to the floor to sing, recite, or dance, and returns to the machine to exit.

As the story begins, Ulysses, hero and peacemaker (analogous to the king, of course) is discovered complaining of constant harassment from the wicked enchantress Circe and begs the king’s protection. In the entrées that follow, Glaucus and Thetys, with Naiads et al, favorable to the king, are turned to statues by a furious Circe. Mercury descends on a cloud from the ceiling and liberates them, only to be “frozen” again. The four Virtues, Temperance, Courage, Prudence, and Justice, sing out for Pallas, who, with Jupiter, joins the other gods (along with implicit help from the king) in overcoming Circe. All then pay homage to the king. The overall theme concerns itself with the attempt to restore peace and balance in the face of recurring disruption, reflecting the political circumstances of the time.

Ballet de cour persisted well into the seventeenth century, continuing as a court dance form as well as serving as a bridge to theater dance.

Choose what you will: Dance Forms in Renaissance Spectacle

Bal Following a banquet, a dance such as we might have today, but with a hierarchy of who may dance with whom and what dances usually followed each other.
Ballet de cour (see above)
Banquet (see above)
Mascarade, mascherata An interlude, which, though planned, might appear suddenly in the midst of a bal or other fête. Costumed with symbols relevant to a selected theme. Social dance steps elaborated with appropriate thematic gestures. Would probably also contain song and/or poetry.

Moresque, moresca According to Barbara Sparti: “Performed, for the most part, in costume, they [moresques] made use of distinctive headgear, masks, scenery and special effects – fire in particular. They portrayed allegorical, heroic, exotic and pastoral scenes. Mock skirmishes were common, the Fool was a popular character and the grotesque was frequently represented by doddering old men and fantastic monsters.” In one form this interlude had a Moorish element (the Moor being represented by dancers in black face), portraying the ongoing conflict between Islam and Christianity, the latter always being the victor.

Distinguishing mascarades and moresques as dance forms can be problematic, as no choreographic documentation has been uncovered as yet, and they both have all the following elements:

• masks
• elaborate costumes and headpieces
• props
• sets
• themes or brief storylines
• mime
• dance, including expressive gestures and larger movements beyond the accepted range of the dignified courtier, though some danced well-disguised in these interludes.
In the Middle Ages, dance was accompanied by singing and by pipe and tabor, and melodic phrases and rhythms wandered about freely. But in the fifteenth century, instrumental music began to be more important than voice to accompany dance. In that century, bagpipe, cornett, lute, harp, fiddle (sic), recorder, and flute joined with the percussion of various types of drum, cymbals, bells, and triangles in groups of instruments that could hardly fail to inspire movement. Interestingly, however, as instrumental music was used primarily for dance, it was dance that influenced its structure, in that dance required:

- steady meter, duple, or triple (as opposed to free rhythms)
- equal and balanced phrases
- regular cadences
- variation of passages

As dances were devised with varying tempi and meter, such as a pavan (duple) followed by a gavotte (triple), the music was created to vary accordingly.

During the sixteenth century more instruments, such as the violin, were added to dance accompaniment, and small orchestras were formed. Music itself, and dance along with it, became more and more complex as it moved through the sixteenth century and on into the Baroque courts.

**And in the end... Sprezzatura, leggadria**

Baldassare Castiglione, in his book, *The Courtier* (1528), says that, when a lady dances, she should not make movements which are “too energetic and violent.” He wishes the gentleman to dance in a dignified and graceful manner and not be tempted to show off in public. He should also be adept in the arts of war, as well as in music, poetry, art, literature, and good conversation. The lady of the Court should, “have knowledge of letters, of music, of painting, and know how to dance and how to be festive...” and, as declared by one of his interlocutors, “...[be] able to entertain...in dancing, music, games, laughter, witticisms, and the other things that we see going on at court every day....”

Castiglione encourages those at court “...to practice in all things a certain sprezatura [nonchalance], so as to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort...” These sentiments are carried forward in Giovanni Della Casa’s *Galateo* (1552-55), which was the definitive book on manners throughout Europe for many years. In addition to giving common sense advice concerning basic consideration for others, Della Casa advocates leggadria, “...an elegant grace that emanates like an aura from one’s actions, words, sentiments, and gestures, deriving from the renaissance virtues of harmony, concordance, reasonableness, and proportion.” Indeed, all the dancing masters we have seen urge this very quality to be the justification and manifestation of their art of the dance. And perhaps these notions of harmony and proportion, of grace and apparent ease of execution, also present in Baroque dance, and on into Romantic Ballet and to the present day, have made their way through time to be one of the essential ingredients of Western social and theatrical dance.
Greeks and Romans

In the following list of Greek and Roman personages in the interlude for the marriage of Galeazzo Visconti, the characters would have represented either personal character traits to admire in the duke and his bride or concepts such as love, fertility, good fortune, etc. wished upon them in their life ahead. Songs in the interlude would have connected the traits of the gods and concepts from Greek and Roman philosophy to the marriage celebrants. The list is not an interpretation of the interlude, merely a hint at how imagery was used to connect Renaissance life to the ancient cultures it revered and sought to emulate.

Jason and the Argonauts: The Greek hero and his crew who made a perilous journey to recover the Golden Fleece in order to regain Jason’s usurped kingdom

Mercury: Messenger of the gods
Apollo: Greek god of light and truth
Golden Calf: A worshipped idol
Diana: Moon goddess, patroness of hunting, the tides, female productive power in nature, virgins
Orpheus: Mortal, but greatest musician, who made music to keep Jason and the Argonauts from succumbing to the Sirens
Theseus: King of Athens. Wise ruler, just warrior, protector of the weak
Atalanta: Great huntress. Helped to slay the...
Boar of Calydon: A monstrous boar laying waste to the region of Calydon
Iris: Goddess of the rainbow, messenger of the gods
Tritons: Companions of Triton, a sea god who, with his shell horn, warned of coming storms and heralded the calming of the sea. The tritons had similar duties.
Hebe: Goddess of youth
Arcady: Birthplace of Pan, who made sweet music on his pipes and was always in love
Vertumnus and Pomona: Roman divine couple who cared for orchards and gardens

Notes

5. Sutton, 1.
7. Ibid., 115.
8. Sparti, De pratica, 121.
9. Ibid., 111.
10. Sutton, 33.
15. Ibid., 106.
17. Personal notes of author, 1994-2005, from workshops in Renaissance Dance given by Angene Feves, San Rafael, California.
19. Ibid., 109.
20. Sutton, 141.
22. Arbeau, 103.
23. Ibid., 18.
24. Ibid.
25. Sutton, 143.
29. Sparti, 54.
32. Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier, trans. Charles S. Singleton,
(New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.), 211.
33. Ibid., 213.
34. Ibid., 43.

**Bibliography**


**Feves, Angene.** Elements of Renaissance dance technique in class notes taken by Catherine Sim in workshops given in Renaissance and Baroque dance by Feves. San Rafael: 1994-2005.


*Treatises on dance containing descriptions of steps, patterns, deportment etc., with invaluable additional information from Sutton and Sparti.*

**Videos**

The following two videos contain breakdowns of basic steps and some of their combinations:


**Also of Interest:**

Ibid., *Dancetime: 500 Years of Social Dance,* Vol. 1, 15th to 19th Centuries. Kentfield, CA, 1996. DVD.
About the author
Within her 40 years of experience as dancer, teacher and choreographer, Catherine Sim taught ballet, dance history and ballroom dance at the College of Marin for 25 years. She studied Renaissance and Baroque Dance from Angene Feves and Sandra Hammond.

Dancetime Publications produces a wide variety of DVDs on historical dance, including the “How To Dance Through Time” series. Volume 3, The Majesty of Renaissance Dance, gives instructions and demonstrations of steps and the entire dance, Nido d’Amore.
An informative mini-history of dance of the Renaissance in the cultures of Italy and France where it developed

Major dancing masters & their treatises
The raison d’être of court dance
Department for dancing
Basic dance steps
Brief description of dances
Technique
Style
Dance in spectacle
Ballet de cour

© 2012 Catherine Sim