

Basic Dance Reconstruction

This is an article which I originally presented as a "Dance Reconstruction 100" class for a Rowany festival. It contains some useful pointers for beginning dance reconstructors and people who want to start reconstructing renaissance dance.

Where to Begin

Find some old dance books. No, older ones than that! Primary sources!

The primary sources can be found in the latest renaissance bibliography (at the end of this book). Also use the on line version -- it is the most up to date and is absolutely huge. It is worth getting a copy even if you have to find a friend to get one via e-mail for you. There is a copy as an appendix in my dance book if you have a copy of that.

Not all of the sources in that book are primary sources, however all of the primary sources are listed in it.

The period primary sources fall into these categories, from oldest to newest:

15th C Italian

There are several manuscripts of 15th C Italian dance (there were no printed books of dance in that time). The authors were:

- Domenico
- Cornazano
- Ebreo / Ambrosio (various versions)

There is an exceedingly comprehensive new translation of the above three books by A. William Smith just released in the USA by Pendragon Press.

There is an excellent transcription and translation of Ebreo, with reconstruction of the music, by Barbara Sparti available from Oxford University Press. Buy it if you are at all interested in this period because of the wealth of background material it contains.

**15th C Burgundian
(Basse Dance
books)**

There are three main primary sources for 15th C Burgundian dance. These are:

- The Brussels MS
- Moderne
- Tolouze

The latter two of which can be found in a single volume by Minkoff, and can be still obtained from Dance Books in London.

The MS “The Manner of Dauncynge of Bace Dances” is an English book but it may as well be considered a Burgundian text because it contains the Burgundian style of dances. It is possibly a translation of an earlier (lost) Burgundian MS, but it also probably contains some errors.

16th C French

The main one is of course Arbeau’s *Orchesography*. That is sadly out of print but can be obtained from some specialty shops. It is the seminal work on dance as far as the SCA is concerned because something like 50% of our dances come from it.

16th C Italian

There are two main authors in this area -- Caroso and Negri.

Caroso has two books (*Il Ballarino* and *Nobilta di Dame*) -- the latter is available in a translation only version from Julia Sutton. The former is currently available only in Italian.

Negri has a book “*La Gratie d’Amore*” -- not for the faint hearted. It is available in transcription and translation (done as a university thesis) by G Y Kendall, available from UMI -- consult your nearest university library and they will be able to get you the appropriate order forms.

**English
(Allemandes and
Early Country
Dances)**

The main source for these dances is the Inns of Court MSS.

The best transcription, translation, and reconstruction of the Allemandes in this book is Peter and Janelle Durham's book *Dances from the Inns of Court*, which you should find listed in the bibliography in this book.

There is a journal article in *Historical Dance* that gives a transcription of all of the MSS. They are not very big and the article is worth a look.

**English Country
Dance**

Well, there is only one source for English Country Dance and that is Playford. It’s not period (1651) but used heavily in the SCA.

Where to go Next

Some Easy Dances to Reconstruct

Start with dances from these books:

- Arbeau
- Playford
- Inns of Court

All of the above are available in English translations at least. Playford was originally written in English, while Arbeau is French but is very self explanatory -- it even contains some pictures.

Note that all of the dances from these books have been reconstructed, however it is not a total waste of time to go back to them occasionally. This is because (a) they are a good easy place to start and provide a useful reality check and (b) you often find mistakes in what you thought was a perfectly decent reconstruction!

Some Harder Dances to Reconstruct

My first recommendation is to point you in the direction of the 15th Century Italian books. This is because the dances are relatively easy to do, easy to teach, and easy to learn (although not as easy as Arbeau's stuff). Also, and more importantly, it has not already been done.

There are dances in these books that have never (to my knowledge) been reconstructed.

There are reconstructions that are continually being worked on and re-worked. More and more is being found out about the steps in these dances all the time (although David Wilson's "Steps Used in Courtly Dancing in the 15h Century" buries a lot of the arguments, as does some of Barbara Sparti's more recent research).

The next place to go are the 15th C Burgundian dances. Here is how to do them:

- The books themselves are written in French or Catalan, but easy to understand. Get a good translation of the introduction sections -- they are where all of the steps and patterns are described.
 - Pick one of the dances that you can actually find music to (there are a few good books on these, or you can find some on CDs or tapes). Just get a piece the right length is the important point.
 - The steps are written out in a tabular fashion -- it doesn't matter that the language is foreign. Just remember that R9 is reverance, and the other funny looking "r" is a demarche. Again, this is described in the introduction.
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Stuff for the Experts Only

Caroso and Negri are the obvious choices. They are the most difficult sets of dances to reconstruct, teach, learn and dance, and the most complex pre-17th C dances that there are.

Learning Caroso or Negri (in particular the latter) is like learning a new language. Do it a bit at a time. Get a copy of one of the books and browse through it. Ask a few experts. Play with some steps first then find a dance to work on and see how far you get.

Reconstructing from Negri is something I cannot teach in one hour -- find someone to talk to about it, get on renaissance via e-mail, or phone me a lot!

There is one other area that has not been touched much -- that is the Spanish manuscripts. These are very hard to reconstruct (although the dances themselves are similar to the Burgundian basse dances) because there are no introduction sections, and the dances are written using a strange notation.

There has been one good article in *Historical Dance* about translating this scrawl but very few people have been game to try it.

Things I haven't mentioned

This was not meant to be a class to show you how to reconstruct a dance -- it was designed to point you at the right books.

You can reconstruct a dance for yourself, teach it in your own local group, and then show it off to the rest of Lochac. It's not that hard.

The list above was not a 100% complete list of all of the sources either -- I have left out some of the more obscure ones like Lupi (Italy) and Arena (France), and also the Catalan/Spanish texts of the 15th C baixa dance. If you find a copy or transcription or translation of one then go for it!

You may need a bit more assistance than what the dance books tell you. Arbeau explains relatively simply how to do doubles and singles, but there are NO step descriptions in any of the 15th C books -- we have worked it out based on timings and words in some of the introductory sections. Get David Wilson's book if you want to do 15th C dances.

Some of the evidence we have for what these books mean is not 100% watertight. Get out your red pen if you have to and mark up someone else's reconstruction first (with their permission of course) and see if you can see where they have drawn evidence direct from the text and where other evidence or guesswork has been pulled in. Try to understand some of the thought processes. Don't be scared to change things.

Translations are all very well and good, but you must be able to recognise some of the language -- especially for the Italian stuff. Learn to speak "dance" not any language -- especially learn to speak "dance italian" (Julia Sutton's habit of calling a trabuchetto a "falling jump" just does not work for me -- learn what a trabuchetto is, how it works, and why it is called a "trabuchetto" -- there is a reason!).

Find a good source of music. That can be hard to come by, I know, but it is worth the effort browsing CD shops because there are new recordings being released all the time (the renaissance group is working on a discography to go with the bibliography).

The Reconstruction Process

To illustrate the reconstruction process, I'm going to work through part of a dance from Negri (one of the more complex sources) to show you exactly how the various bits fit together.

Reconstructing from Negri is not something I'd advise for a beginner, but the source is fairly easy to get hold of (ask any university library for a UMI order form), and it is available in Italian with the English translation.

Lo Spagnoletto

Lo Spagnoletto is the first dance in Negri's book, starting at page 209 in Kendall's translation available from UMI, with a starting position illustrated on the previous page.

Music and Timing

The music for Lo Spagnoletto is fairly easy – it is in duple time (Kendall has transcribed it into modern notation in 4/4), and appears to have 3 separate parts – A, B, and C. There are some words above the music that say “it is 3 parts of music and must be done 2 times per part until the end of the dance.”

In a lot of cases the sources don't give repeat instructions like that, in particular Caroso doesn't often include them, so we have to do a bit of guesswork. Having the music sorted out beforehand helps a lot.

How long is the music?

Reading the music and counting the bars is easy – each of the “parts” of music has 4 bars, and is repeated, so that makes 8.

Of course we still don't know how many times the music is to be played. Looking at the dance description briefly, there are 5 parts to the dance, so it could be that the music is played 5 times, or it could be that it is played one and two-thirds through – this would make 5 parts because each repeat of the music is 3 parts, as Negri says.

Looking at the dance description a bit more closely, it seems that parts 2 and 4 are repeated. So now we have the option of 7 times through the music, or 2 1/3 times through.

So, each of the “parts” of the dance will either be 8 bars of music, or 24 bars of music.

Steps

Start reading through the first part of the dance, which says (from the translation):

All four place themselves in the middle of the dance floor in a square, as you see in the present figure; together they do the riverenza breve with a jump, one seguito, two fioretti spezzati, and one seguito going around to the left hand side; ...

So far, we have a riverenza breve, some fioretti spezzati, and some seguiti.

Step length and timing

Negri's step descriptions for the balli (in his third treatise) begin on page 188 of the Kendall translation, and so far it's all bad. The riverenza breve is not described, the fioretto spezzato is mentioned but not described, but we do have a description for the seguito.

Riverenza breve

The riverenza gravi and minima are described, and although I won't repeat the descriptions here, they are fairly straight forwards. The riverenza grave takes 8 "perfect beats" or 16 "ordinary beats", and the riverenza minima takes 4 "beats" or 4 "half measures". Well, so far we have a couple of options – either it's about the same length as a riverenza grave, or the same length as a riverenza minima. I'm guessing the latter, since "breve" and "minima" both mean relatively short, and "grave" means long.

So, it's probable that the riverenza minima takes 4 half measures, or 2 bars. It seems the music for this dance has 2 beats per bar anyway.

In saltino

An additional instruction at the end of the riverenza says "in saltino". Pulling out an Italian dictionary, I find that this means something along the lines of "small jump". So, it's a riverenza with a small jump at the end.

Fioretti Spezzati

OK, people have been arguing about this for a while. Negri doesn't describe a fioretto spezzato, so it's either the same as a seguito spezzato, or the same as a fioretto but a bit different. Since Negri uses the term "spezzato" later in the dance to mean something different, I assume that this is not the same as a seguito spezzato.

I'll put a fioretto in instead, which takes one "beat" according to Negri. Let's assume for the time being that he means one bar.

Seguiti

Negri's seguito ordinario is described as two steps, and a seguito spezzato. He says to take 4 "ordinary beats" to do this. Well, we seem to have a clue from the riverenza description that an ordinary beat is half the length of a perfect beat, so let's say that this takes 2 bars – the same length as our riverenza.

So far

So far, we have a riverenza (2 bars), 2 fioretti (2 bars) and 2 seguiti ordinari (2 bars each, total 4 bars). So we have used 8 bars of music. That makes two repeats of the first part of the music (Negri did tell us to play each part twice, remember?).

Take this onto the dance floor and see if it fits. Yes, so it seems that 2 bars is about the right length of time for a quick riverenza, and the rest of the steps seem to fit into the allotted time so far.

We haven't got through the description of the first part of the dance yet. Looking at the rest of it, it says:

... and turning face to face, they do together three sottopiedi sideways to the left, and the cadenza on this foot; one trabuchetto to the right, one seguito turning to the left; three sottopiedi, one trabuchetto and one seguito going around to the right with this foot. Together they do two passi backwards turning the right side and the left, one seguito forward with the left, two passi backwards with the right, as at first; one seguito with said [foot], all stopping in their places.

These sottopiedi sideways and trabuchetto and seguito going around, are done in all parts of the dance, along with the two steps backwards, and the seguito forward, as above.

Chorus

Well, it looks like we have a chorus. According to the second paragraph above, the whole of the first paragraph is repeated in every part of the dance.

So, now it would make sense that we do what we have done in the two repeats of the A part of the music, then do the chorus in the B and C parts (also repeated), and play the music 7 times through for the whole dance – thus throwing out our earlier theory that we were perhaps going to only play it $2 \frac{1}{3}$ times through (which sounded silly anyway).

So, each repeat of the music is 24 bars. We have used 8 so far, and so we have another 16 to use up with the chorus.

Passi Gravi

I'm going to work backwards for a minute – it looks like the bit starting with the two passi backwards is going to be relatively easy to reconstruct. We know that a seguito is 2 bars, and if we take a passo = 1 bar then we have $2 \times \text{passi} + 1 \times \text{seguito} = 4$ bars, repeat that and we have 8 bars.

This neatly fits into our C section of the music (repeated), so we just have the B section to fit in everything between “three sottopiedi” and “one seguito going around to the right.

Well, it looks like the section is repeated, once to the left and once to the right. Each repeat will take the same time, therefore each repeat of 3 sottopiedi, cadenza, trabuchetto, and seguito turning will take 4 bars.

The seguito must take 2 bars, so we have 3 sottopiedi, a cadenza, and a trabuchetto in 2 bars. The sottopiedi are fairly quick steps anyway, so we should be able to squeeze this in.

Layout so far

So, we have the first full part of the dance, in one repeat of the music, all figured out. It goes like this:

Part A

Bar 1 – 2 Riverenza
3 – 4 Seguito
5 – 6 Fioretto, left and right
7 – 8 Seguito

Part B

Bar 1 – 2 3 sottopiedi going left, cadenza, trabuchetto.
3 – 4 Seguito, turning over the left shoulder.
5 – 6 3 sottopiedi going right, cadenza, trabuchetto
7 – 8 Seguito, turning over the right shoulder.

Part C

Bar 1 – 2 Passi backwards, left then right, turning shoulders.
3 – 4 Seguito forwards on the left
5 – 6 Passi backwards, right then left, turning shoulders.
7 – 8 Seguito forwards on the right

Direction of travel, etc

Negri doesn't say a lot about the direction of travel in this dance. In the first part he's talking about “going around to the left hand side”. This could mean all doing a circle over your left shoulder, or it could be going around the circle (as you've started the dance facing in a square, facing inwards) to your left. Since he begins the second part by saying “and turning face to face”, I rather suspect it's the latter, because that would normally have each dancer turning to face their own left to walk around the circle.

The seguiti “turning to the left” I have decided to interpret as turning over your left shoulder, similarly for “going around to the right”.

Part C

Part C is a little odd, because he doesn't say which feet to use.

I've decided to interpret it as starting on the left foot. Negri says "turning the right side and the left", so I interpret that as stepping backwards on the left foot, turning the right shoulder forwards (and the left backwards) in a sweeping kind of motion as you step backwards.

A clue here is that the two passi backwards are followed by two passi and a spezzato forwards – so obviously if you were to end up in the same place, the backwards steps would have to be slightly larger than the forwards steps otherwise you'd end up moving forwards by a spezzato in each half of part C.

On the repeat of part C he says "two passi backwards with the right". Obviously you don't do both passi with the right foot, so this must mean that the first one is done with the right and the second one with the left – which makes starting the first pair of passi left then right a bit more sensible.

Closing position

At the end of the description of this part, Negri says "all stopping in their places". This makes me believe that you end part C in the same place that you started part A. Just another small clue.

Unfortunately he doesn't provide any diagrams. Of course, a videotape would have been even nicer!

Where to from here?

Well, that is part 1 of 7, obviously. There are 6 more parts of this dance (well, 4 more parts, 2 of which are repeated).

Part 2 looks simple enough, it's just a description to the ladies, saying that they come forwards with 2 passi, one seguito, two spezzati, and one seguito (turning), so that appears to fit the same 8 bars that we did part A in previously (beginning with the riverenza in saltino and ending with the seguito). Another small sanity check.

Part 2 is even more hairy in terms of direction of travel, because all Negri says is "forwards" and "going around to the right". Obviously, if the two ladies dance directly forwards they will collide with each other, so I've decided to interpret this as coming forwards, passing right shoulders, then turning over the right shoulder to return to place. Other people have interpreted this differently.

Once you've done this a few times, you'll be able to look at other people's reconstructions that differ from yours and say "but that's so *wrong!*". By the time you've done this 50 times, you won't be so sure any more.

My reconstruction of this dance is given elsewhere in *Del's Dance Book*. I expect at least a few letters telling me what I've done wrong, and how to fix it.
