

Teaching Notes: 16th C Italian Dance

The dances of 16th Century Italy were very different from the dances of 15th Century Italy. Between the two repertoires they used some of the same names, often for different steps and different dances, which doesn't make things easier. It is important to remember that these two repertoires were at their extremes 150 years apart, and so bear as little relationship to each other as vintage dance does with techno.

Introduction

Teaching Notes

These dances are the most complicated of the renaissance dances to master, and the ones that are the most rewarding if you can take the time to learn them.

I never introduce people who have just begun renaissance dance to the 16th Century Italian repertoire.

Repertoire

I have included a relatively short repertoire of 16th C Italian dances in this book.

The repertoire contained in the manuals of Caroso and Negri is huge – much larger than that contained in the 15th C manuscripts. Even by today's standards the repertoire is very large – a modern ballroom dancer may have a repertoire of a dozen or so dances (with many variations), and a good latin/caribbean dancer may know as many as 5 dances! By comparison, the 100+ dances contained in Negri and Caroso forms a large list.

Building repertoire Building repertoire then is the complex part of learning 16th C Italian dance. If you are already an experienced dancer who wishes to teach these dances then I suggest that you begin with the dances in this book, then teach what you know.

If you don't already know a good repertoire of these dances then I suggest getting hold of *Del's Dance Book* and learn some. Once you have done that, teach some the dances in the following order:

- The two dances described here, Ballo del Fiore and Conto dell'Orco.
 - Il Piantone, either the version from *Nobilta di Dame* or *Il Ballarino* (don't confuse people by teaching both at this stage).
 - A ballo with a sciolta, for example *Contentezza d'Amore*.
 - One of Negri's square dances for four, such as *Lo Spagnoletto* or *Bizzarria d'Amore*.
 - Perhaps a simple cascarda, such as *Chiara Stella* or *Gracca Amorosa*.
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Sources I have included a much larger repertoire of dances in *Del's Dance Book*, however for the complete catalogue of 16th C Italian dances you will have to get hold of copies of Caroso's and Negri's books, and reconstruct from there.

Caroso and Negri

The two main dance writers of the time were Fabrizio Caroso, and Cesare Negri. They described dances that were similar in style, but had their differences between the two authors.

Caroso published *Il Ballarino* in 1581, and *Nobilta di Dame* in 1600. The dances in *Nobilta* are slightly more complex on average than the ones in *Il Ballarino*.

Cesare Negri published *Le Gratie d'Amore* in 1602. Negri's dances are generally more complex than those of Caroso.

Time and Tempo

Duple and Triple Time There are two basic tempi used in 16th century Italian dance. These are duple time and triple time. Duple time is usually slower, with two beats per bar, and triple time is faster with three beats per bar.

Balli Negri nearly always starts his dances in duple time and changes to triple time at some later stage, and occasionally back to duple time again. Caroso usually starts his balli in duple time, and often but not always changes to triple time to finish.

Some of Caroso's balli are entirely in duple time. This includes such dances as *Ballo del Fiore*, *Conto dell'Orco*, and the various *Contrapasso* dances. Because they are simpler and slower than the other dances and don't have time changes, they are often the easiest dances to teach and learn from this repertoire.

Style and Accoutrements

I consider it fairly important to teach the correct manner of doing these dances, as well as the dances themselves.

This means paying attention to what the dancers were wearing at the time, and how they were wearing it.

Starting Positions

Both Negri's and Caroso's books show the starting positions for each of their dances. There are a couple of points to note in these pictures:

- The dancers are standing fairly close together, despite the fact that they are wearing quite bulky garments. Judging by eye, there is rarely more than 30 – 50 cm or so between the man's toes and the edge of the lady's skirts (because the ladies are all wearing full floor length dresses it is impossible to see their feet).
 - None of the starting positions show the man beginning the dance with both feet together. The step description for the riverenza which begins each dance indicates that the man should normally begin with the left foot forwards (although this is not universal in the pictures). The weight is not evenly distributed, and should probably mostly be on the right foot.
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Fashion

All of the dancers are wearing hats or other headwear. At various stages during the dance, the man will take off or replace his hat. The man will usually remove his hat during a riverenza, but if he needs to take the lady by both hands at some stage during a dance he will replace it on his head.

The lady wears fixed headwear that cannot be easily removed and replaced. The lady's headwear usually includes an elaborate hairstyle.

The ladies carry fans, or less commonly, handkerchiefs.

Swords

All of the men carry swords, except the ones in Negri's galliard section (Negri says that the sword should be removed before the galliard). The sword is in a scabbard, and hangs at the level of the man's left hip, almost horizontal, parallel to the ground.

The left hand is held low, alongside the hip, so as to keep the sword in place (this hand also carry's the man's hat). The sword can also be moved left and right by movements of the hand, or the pommel of the sword can be lifted (lowering the point to the floor) by the palm of the left hand.

Lesson 1: Basic Steps

RvL -- Riverenza Left

Begin with the left foot somewhat ahead of the right foot. On the first beat do nothing. On the second beat, slide the left leg back behind the right. On the third beat, place the weight on the left foot, bend the left knee and sink lightly, keeping the head forwards and upright, and the body erect. On the final beat return to the upright position.

A riverenza on the right foot is done in the same way, except that the right foot is moving and the left foot stays still.

CnL – Continenza Left

To do these as a pair of steps, the dancers take a very small single step to the left, join feet together, and then step back towards the right, joining feet together again. The steps are done with a rising and falling movement, so that you rise on your toes slightly while stepping across, and then sink back onto your heels when the step is complete. Bring the left shoulder forwards slightly as you step to the left, and the right shoulder forwards slightly as you step to the right.

CnR – Continenza Right

SgL -- Seguito Ordinario

Caroso: Going forwards, step left, step right, step left, then raise your right foot and move it somewhat forwards as if to close, but do not close the step. This step takes 2 beats. This is similar to a standard French bassa danse / pavan double, but not quite as it is not completely closed.

Sc -- Seguito Scorsi

This is a small forwards shuffling motion done to a specified number of counts and normally to execute some pattern. Negri says to take 8 small forward steps in 2 beats, the same time normally taken for a seguito ordinario. Caroso says to take 10 of these small steps in 2 beats.

Ballo del Fiore (Il Ballarino)

There are a number of versions of this dance presented in Il Ballarino and Nobilta. This is probably the simplest and most elegant of the versions, from Il Ballarino.

This reconstruction is from The Letter of Dance, issue 6. The dance differs from a lot of other dances of the period, in that it starts on the right foot instead of the left. The dance stays in duple time throughout.

Introduction

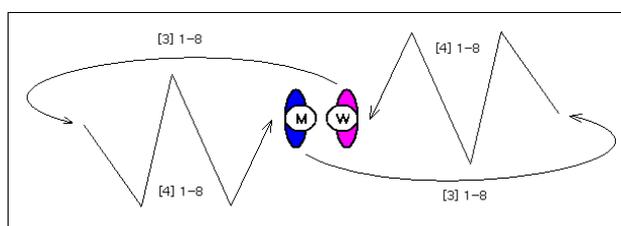
The dance starts with one man in the center of the floor, holding a flower in his right hand.

1 - 4	Rv R	Begin the dance with a riverenza on the right foot.
5 - 8	SgR, SgL	Two seguiti, turning in place.

Part I	1 - 8	Sg R, L, R, L	Four seguiti.
This part is done moving towards a lady. When he reaches her, he does the continenze and the riverenza.	9 - 12	CnR CnL	Two continenze R & L, moving sideways.
	13 - 16	Rv R	As he does the riverenza, the lady stands, and he takes her left hand in his right hand, passing the flower into his left hand.

Part II	1 - 4	Sg R, L	Two doubles.
	5 - 8	Sc R, R	Two scorsi doubles, 8 steps each, moving out onto the floor
	9 - 12	CnR CnL	Two slow singles R & L, moving sideways.
	13 - 16	Rv R	Riverenza

The dancers then dance the following pattern together:



Part III	1 - 8	Sg R, L, R, L	Four seguiti, moving in a J figure.
	9 - 12	CnR CnL	Two slow singles R & L, moving sideways.
	13 - 16	Rv R	Riverenza

Part IV	1 - 8	Sg R, L, R, L	Four seguiti, moving in a flanking figure.
	9 - 12	CnR CnL	Two slow singles R & L, moving sideways.
	13 - 16	Rv R	Riverenza

During the last riverenza, the gentleman kisses the flower, and at the end of the riverenza he passes it to the lady, who takes it in her left hand.

Repeats The dance then repeats from the start, with the lady dancing to find a new partner, and the man either dances off the floor, or finds a new partner himself.

An alternative is that the man starts the dance in the center of the floor, holding a bunch of flowers. At the end of the first repeat of the dance he would then pass half of the bunch to the lady. They would then both seek new partners, and the bunch would continue to be divided in half until each dancer had their own flower.

This dance and the music was fairly obviously used by Arbeau as the basis for his "Torch Bransle".

Lesson 2: Conto dell'Orco

Conto dell'Orco is one of Caroso's simpler dances, from *Il Ballarino* in 1580. This reconstruction is by Adina Hamilton.

The dance begins with one man and one lady, standing quite close together, facing each other.

More Step Descriptions

PsL – Passo

This step takes a single beat. Step forward with the left foot. The right foot should not be moved. This is similar to a puntata, although without closing the feet.

PsGL -- Passo Grave

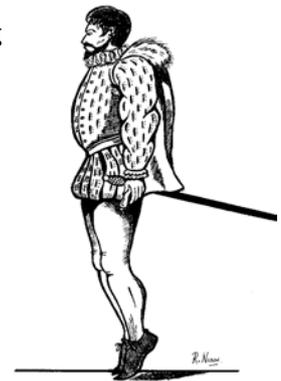
A passo grave is the same as a passo, except that it takes two beats.

RpGL -- Reprise Grave

A Reprise Grave to the left is done by stepping sideways with the left foot, onto the left toe, and rising onto the right toe, then stepping to the left with the right foot, joining feet and lowering back onto the heels. This takes two beats.

RpL -- Reprise Minima

A Reprise, or Reprise Minima, is done in the same way as a Reprise Grave, but in one beat.



Cd – Cadenza

Kick the left foot forwards, a little in advance of the beat, and spring into the air. While in the air, bring the left foot back in line with the right foot. Land on both feet, with the left foot slightly advanced. This is usually done at the end of a sequence of galliard type steps (eg: sottopiedi), and the time taken to do it is highly variable, but usually in the order of half of a beat.

A cadenza can be described as “Left”, indicating that the left foot is in advance as above, “Right”, indicating that the right foot is the one moving and in advance, or “a pie pari” which means landing with both feet together.

TbL -- Trabuchetto

This step takes one beat. Leap slightly to the left, landing on the left foot, and closing with the right foot so that the right heel is closest to the left instep, and about two finger-breadths away. This should be done lightly, on the toes of the feet, with the legs well extended, lowering the left hip and raising the right hip slightly as you land in the jump.



**SzL -- Spezzato /
Seguito Spezzato**

This step is done by stepping forwards onto the left foot, then forwards onto the right foot, up level with the heel of the left foot, rising onto the left toe as this is done. At the end of the beat, lower the left heel. The step takes 2 beats.

Caroso says to raise the left foot. Negri says to raise only the left heel. Apart from that, the steps are similar.

Trango

A trango left is a diagonal step backwards to the left on the left foot, and then pull your right foot back towards your left. You should end up with your right heel backed up against your left instep. A trango right is the same thing, stepping backwards to the right instead.

Doppio

This is, oddly enough, very much like a french basse danse or pavan double. It comprises three steps walking forwards, with a close on the fourth beat. Bend your knees slightly at the end of the step, and rise and then lower your heels into place as you close.

The Dance**Part I**

In each of the seguiti, make a half circle so that the couple are changing places on each one. This is only really possible if you are close enough together.

1-2	RvL	Riverenza
3-5	SgL SgR SgL	3 Seguito ordinario circling to the left.
6	TbR TbL TbR	3 Trabuchetti
7	Trango L, R	2 Trangi, stepping diagonally away from your partner.
8	Sz CdL	Finish with a seguito spezzato doing a full turn over your left shoulder and end with a cadenza.

Part II

This is a simple variation of the first part.

1-5	SgL SgR SgL SgR SgL	5 Seguiti circling to the left.
6	TbR TbL TbR	3 Trabuchetti
7	Trango L, R	2 Trangi, stepping diagonally away from your partner.
8	Sz CdL	Finish with a seguito spezzato doing a full turn over your left shoulder and end with a cadenza.

Part III	1-2	DL	1 Doppio forwards on the left foot. Note that this is fairly slow – half the speed of the <i>seguito ordinarii</i> from the last two verses.
Man's variation – only the man does this part.	3	PR PL	2 passi backwards, right then left.
	4	TbR TbL	2 trabuchetti gravi. These are a bit slower than the trabuchetti done earlier.
Note that the last three bars form a chorus, and are the same as the last three bars of the earlier parts.	5	RpR RpR	2 riprese to the right. You should now be back to the same place where you started the dance.
	6	TbR TbL TbR	3 Trabuchetti
	7	Trango L, R	2 Trangi, stepping diagonally away from your partner.
	8	Sz CdL	Finish with a <i>seguito spezzato</i> doing a full turn over your left shoulder and end with a <i>cadenza</i> .

Part IV Lady's variation – the lady repeats everything that the man did in part III.

Part V	1 – 2	PL PR SgL	This time changing places with two passi and a <i>seguito</i> , beginning on the left foot.
This part begins with a slow change of place, then concludes with the man and the lady both dancing their solo parts at the same time.	3-4	PR PL SgR	Change back to place with two passi and a <i>seguito</i>
	5-6	DL	During these last 8 bars the man and the lady both do the solo parts (as in III and IV) but at the same time.
	7	PR PL	
	8	TbR TbL	
	9	RpR RpR	
	10	TbR TbL TbR	
	11	Trango L, R	
	12	Sz CdL	

Teaching Notes

Spacing and step length

Keep the dancers fairly close together throughout *Conto dell'Orco*. The steps should be small and fairly light. A passo is no more than a foot length forwards, and many of the steps can be measured in fingers' breadths (eg: *continenza*, which probably involves more movement of the shoulders than of the feet).

Turning with a sword

Conto dell'Orco is the first dance that most people will do where they have to dance close to a partner, and turn while wearing a sword. Men should keep the sword from attacking their partner by placing the flat of the hand over the end of the sword pommel, and raising the pommel so that the point of the sword lowers to the floor.

This takes a bit of practice to get coordinated at.

Revision

Both *Ballo del Fiore* and *Conto dell'Orco* will require at least an extra practice session or two before the dancers are comfortable with them.