

Dance Notes for Musicians

This article contains the notes for a class that I presented at St Blasius' Day, in Politarcho polis, 2002. It is intended to be a set of working notes for musicians on some of the dances that we do in the SCA.

Introduction

Dance Styles

Broadly speaking, there are 5 dance styles done in the SCA. These are:

- French / Burgundian (bransles, pavans, basse dances)
- 15th C Italian basse dances and balli
- 16th C Italian balli
- Old Measures (allemandes, etc)
- English Country Dance

Each style has its own unique playing requirements which I will cover in this paper.

One important style that I'm not going to cover is the Gresley dances, which are from tudor England (1500 or so). The reason for this is because I don't know enough about these dances from a musician's point of view, and the music for these dances has only recently been unearthed and is still being studied.

French & Burgundian

Age

The Burgundian basse dances are the oldest dances done in the SCA, and the oldest dances for which there are any surviving choreographies. The first basse danse manual that we can find is from around 1440 or 1445. Before that date we knew there were dances, and we even know the names, some of the steps, and some of the music of the dances (estampies, saltarello, ductia, etc) but we don't have any choreographies.

Basse danse was an important dance form throughout the early renaissance, and spread throughout Europe. Basse danse manuscripts or books can be found from Spain, Italy, Burgundy, France, England, and Germany. Mention of basse danse as a dance form can be found in literature from Russia, Hungary, and Scotland.

Apart from the Burgundian manuscripts and books, two other sources of basse dances and other related dances include Arena and Arbeau, both of which were published in France in the 16th Century.

Basse Danse

Basse Danse literally means "low dance". The meaning of this is that the dancers remain low to the ground, and don't execute any jumps, kicks, or turns that would have them leaping into the air.

Unfortunately we don't do much basse danse in the SCA in Lochac. One dance that we do which is popular is Arbeau's "Joyessance vous Donnerai" often just referred to as "the basse danse", however there are other basse dances such as Casuelle la Nouvelle and La Spagna which have also been done.

Playing basse danse

Basse danse is always slow and processional, and should be played as such, with a constant speed throughout. Basse dances always begin with a reverence and so there is usually no need to play any introductory bars before beginning the music, although a drumbeat or two may help.

Basse danse music is always in 6/4. In 15th C Italy, 6/4 was considered the most "complete" time, and all other timings were derived from it. Later (post-period) basse danse tunes may exist in other timings such as 3/2, but should always be played as 6/4 for dancing.

In Arbeau's basse danse, each step takes two or four bars of the music, for example a single step takes two bars of 6/4. This means the music needs to be played through at a fairly brisk pace. In Burgundian and Italian basse danse (and presumably Spanish, although there is no surviving basse danse music from Spain), each double step takes one bar, and so 2 single steps also take one bar. This means the bars need to be played relatively slower.

Repeats

Apart from any internal repeats shown on the dance notation, basse dances are usually only played once through.

Bransles	<p>Bransles are probably the most popular dance form in the SCA, or perhaps tied with English Country dance.</p> <p>Bransles are dances done in a circle, usually for as many as will, although bransles can be and often were (in period) done in a line. The word "bransle" simply means to move from side to side, and so the dancers will generally be moving from side to side around the circle, rather than in and out of the circle.</p>
Some Common Bransles	<p>Probably the most popular bransle done is the official bransle or the officers' bransle, which is done to the same tune as the christmas carol "ding dong merrily on high".</p> <p>Other bransles include the cut bransles (or mixed bransles): Cassandra, Pinagay, Charlotte, La Guerre, and Aridan, always played as a set in that order. Also the mimed bransles, Washerwomans', Pease, Shoes, and Horses.</p>
Playing Bransles	<p>Bransles were often danced while drunk, and so one should play them as if the dancers and the musicians are all rather tipsy. Bransle music is often in 4/4, although can be found in 2/4 and even with variations in timing between the bars.</p> <p>Speeding up during the playing of a bransle, or even speeding up for some of it and slowing down for other parts, can make the playing and the dancing more interesting. There is no need to stick to a fixed speed. Aridan is often played with the speed increasing uniformly throughout, although there is no need to do this, and even starting slowly, speeding up in the middle, and slowing down at the end, would be rather amusing and perfectly OK.</p> <p>Bransles don't start with a reverence, and so a few introductory bars of music are usually required to get the dancers moving.</p>
Repeats	<p>If you are playing a suite of bransles, then it usually helps to play the first and last of them 3 or 4 times through, and the ones in the middle 2 or 3 times through.</p> <p>Officers bransle and other single bransles should be played until the dancers are bored with it. That usually takes a while.</p>
Pavans	<p>Pavans are slow processional dances, usually in 4/4 or 2/4, similar in some respects to basse dances (except that they have different internal structure, as far as the dancers are concerned).</p> <p>The only pavan done regularly in the SCA in Lochac is the Known World Pavan, done to the tune Belle Qui Tiens Ma Vie, from Arbeau.</p>
Playing the Pavan	<p>The pavan should be played slowly and processionally with an even speed throughout.</p> <p>The pavan does not begin with an opening reverence, and so a few bars of introductory music are required.</p> <p>Each repeat of the dance is 2 repeats of the music, and the music should be played 4 or 6 times through for 2 or 3 repeats of the dance.</p>

Galiards

Galiards are fast dances done in 6/4. They involve a lot of jumping about and running all over the dance floor.

A volta is a galliard variation which involves a bit less running about and a bit more turning and jumping.

A tourdion is a galliard variation that involves a bit more running about and a bit less turning and jumping.

Kick the tassel is a game involving galiards that involves not very much running about and a whole lot of turning and jumping.

Galliard Music

All galliard music is completely interchangeable, in other words if the dancers require 16 bars of galiards then just about any galliard tune in 6/4 played the appropriate number of times will do.

I normally prefer to dance La Volta (one particular galliard variation) to the relatively well known Volta tune by William Byrd, but really any galliard music will do.

Playing the galliard

Galiards should be played quickly, but not too quickly. People may be able to perform a galliard at just about any speed you choose to maintain, but the number of interesting variations that they can do at speed will be limited.

If this means anything to you: I prefer a single bar of galliard music to be played in about 2.25 seconds. This is somewhat slower than most recordings and a bit slower than most musicians that I have come across in the SCA, and so a common complaint that I have is that the galliard is played too quickly.

A tourdion should be played somewhat faster than that, and a volta should be played a little slower, although check with the dancers as dancers and dance masters have fairly widely different ideas on how fast a galliard should be played.

15th Century Italian Dance

15th C Dances

The following are examples of 15th C Italian dances done in and around the SCA:

- Petit Vriens
 - Anello
 - Gelosia
 - Presonera
 - La Spagna (a basse danse)
 - Pizochara
 - Rostiboli Gioioso
 - Vita de Cholino
 - Mercantia
 - Sobria
 - Voltate in ca Rosina
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Tempi

There are four tempi used in 15th C Italian dance. These are referred to by name by the Italians, and are:

- 2/4 (sometimes notated in 6/8, but played at 2/4 speed), known as PIVA
- 3/4, known as SALTARELLO
- 4/4, known as QUADERNARIA (occasionally saltarello todesco, although this really refers to the step and not the tempo)
- 6/4, known as BASSADANZA.

MOST but not all 15th C Italian dances will include at least one change of tempo during the dance. For example, a dance may start in bassadanza, then change to quadernaria, and then change to piva at the end.

Timing clues

One important timing clue is that the speed remains the same throughout the dance, NOTE FOR NOTE. That means, one quarter note in a bar of quadernaria is played at the same speed as one quarter note in a bar of bassadanza, which then implies that the bassadanza bar is 50% slower than the quadernaria bar.

Piva is played as if it were in 2/4, which means that two bars of piva take the same time to play as one bar of quadernaria, even if the piva is notated in 6/8. Note that I disagree with the concept of notating piva in 6/8, I think it should always be in 2/4 with triplets, but I'm not going to argue that point now.

Speed

These dances are not always sedate and are not always bouncy. As a guide, I would play each bar of (for example) Anello in about 2 seconds, this dance remains entirely in quadernaria so it's a good guide. Petit Vriens should be played somewhat quicker.

Remember that if a dance changes time signature at some stage, adjust the playing length of the bars and not the notes.

Riverenze

15th C Italian dances do not commonly begin with a riverenza, and so a few bars of introductory music is usually required.

One common exception are some dances that either begin or remain solely in bassadanza time (6/4), such as La Spagna, which contains an opening riverenza. However, note that Rostiboli Gioioso begins in bassadanza time but does not contain an opening riverenza, and so it is safer to play a few bars of introduction for all of these dances.

Repeats

These dances often have their own internal repeat structure but are usually played twice through, or sometimes three times through (eg: Gelosia). Petit Vriens should be played 3 or 4 times through, or until the dancers fall over.

16th Century Italian Dance

16th C Dances

There are a few different styles of 16th C Italian dance buried in amongst the things that we dance in the SCA. Some of these include:

- Balli, with no time changes (usually from Caroso): Ballo del Fiore, Il Conto dell'Orco, Contrapasso, Lo Spagnoletto, Bizzaria d'Amore.
 - Balli with time changes (Caroso or Negri): Bassa Honorata, Contentezza d'Amore, La Nizzarda.
 - Cascarde: La Fiamma d'Amore, Gracca Amorosa, Bella Gioiosa.
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Riverenze

16th C Italian dances almost always (with very few exceptions) begin with a riverenza. Therefore, no introductory bars are needed or advised when playing these dances. The introductory bars are essentially built into the music, so begin playing at the first bar (or upbeat). Adding extra bars at the beginning of the music will only serve to confuse the dancers.

Speed

These dances are usually played fairly slowly, except:

- A sciolta at the end of a ballo. A sciolta is a 3 / 4 or 6/8 section at the end of a dance that is mostly in 4/4 throughout. Examples of this are Contentezza d'Amore and Bassa Honorata. The sciolta needs to be played fairly briskly.
- A Cascarda. A cascarda is a dance entirely in triple time (3/4 or variations thereof). Play the entire dance fairly quickly.

All of these dances need to be played at an even speed throughout, except where a sciolta follows a ballo in which case the speed can be increased for the sciolta (a common complaint by people dancing Contentezza d'Amore is that the musicians often play the sciolta too slowly).

Repeats

These dances usually have their own internal repeat structure, and aside from that are played once through. The internal repeat structure is very important and will contain a number of loops, for example the ballo section of Contentezza d'Amore is played 5 times before progressing to the sciolta.

Cascarde, such as Gracca Amorosa, usually have a number of repeats marked on the dance – in the case of Gracca Amorosa that is x5 so the music should be played 5 times through for the whole dance.

The same goes for Negri's square dances, such as Lo Spagnoletto (x7) and Bizzarria d'Amore (x6).

Some of the dances have a weird repeat structure – be prepared for that. For example, Conto dell'Orco has a repeat structure that goes AA BB AA BB AAA. La Nizzarda's repeat structure goes (AA BB CBCB) x 2, although that is built into the arrangement that I have.

The Canary has a larger repeat structure – eg: Negri's Il Canario which is 17 bars repeated 42 times.

Old Measures

The old measures

The following dances are old measures, allemandes, or sometimes known as Inns of Court dances (although we now know that they did not entirely relate to the Inns of Court):

- Queens Alman, Black Alman, Lorayne Alman, and anything else with "Alman", "Almayne", or "Allemande" in the name.
 - Earl of Essex Measure
 - Turkelone
 - Tinternell
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Timing

These dances are usually in 6/4, and most of the original arrangements were for harpsichord, virginal, or similar. Modern arrangements are usually derived fairly closely from the originals.

Play these dances in a moderately upbeat manner. The simpler dances (eg: Lorayne Alman, Queens Alman) can be played fairly briskly, but slow down a little for dances with many parts such as the Black Alman.

Repeats

These dances are usually played 2 or 4 times through after following the internal repeat structure (which is usually fairly simple, with usually just some internal sections played 2 or 4 times in each repeat).

English Country Dance

Time and Place

English Country Dance dates from 1651 in England. We usually restrict ourselves to dances from the first Playford book, published in 1651, although the book continued to be reprinted with more weird and wonderful variations until the late 18th century.

Dance List

We do a fairly wide range of English Country Dance in the SCA in Lochac, and a wider range outside of Lochac. The first edition Playford dances that we do include:

- Argeers
- Cuckolds all in a Row
- Gathering Peascods
- Goddesses
- Grimstock
- Hearts Ease
- Jenny Plucks Pears
- Merry Merry Milkmaids
- Newcastle
- Nonsuch
- Parsons Farewell
- Picking up Sticks
- Rufty, Tufty
- Scotch Cap
- St Martins
- Upon a Summer's Day
- Wherligig

I have also seen a few later period dances around Lochac and other nearby groups, which we are trying to stamp out, including Hole in the Wall, Strip the Willow (a bastardised Scottish Country dance actually), Childgrove, and Female Sailor (this is actually a French Country Dance, from 1706). Feel free to refuse to play any of these.

Timing

Sometimes in 6/4, sometimes in 4/4 and sometimes in other timings. 6/4 appears to be the most common. A standard double step takes 2 bars and so the internal timing of the bars makes very little difference to how these dances are done.

Speed

Play these fairly briskly. Most of the time that I am doing, teaching, or watching country dance around Lochac, I have noted that the dancers can go a few shades faster than the musicians are playing so don't be afraid of increasing the tempo a little.

There are a few exceptions to this. Hearts Ease always works best when played slowly, as does Upon a Summer's Day and Chestnut. Some of the dances are fairly complex especially when involving newcomers, such as Wherligig, Argeers, and St Martins, so play these fairly moderately unless you know the dancers can handle it.

Reverence

The english seemed to forget what a reverence was for by about 1580 or so, and so none of these dances contain them. You will need to play a few bars of introduction.

Repeats

Most but not all of these dances are played 3 times through. There are exceptions, such as Picking of Sticks which has a weird repeat structure, and Goddesses which is played 11 times through. The repeat structure in Wherligig might seem complex but it is really just a bunch of internal repeats and the whole thing repeated 3 times.
