

Notes on the Interpretation of Baroque Dances

John Guthrie

When we speak of the dances of the baroque period we mean, presumably, that period in history which is embraced by the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV — that is to say, approximately, from 1660 to 1760. For musicians, painters, and architects, the period is far greater since it includes the restoration of the great Lateran churches by Domenico Fontana — in the second half of the sixteenth century — on new and daring lines. For us, however, the beginning of the baroque period is far less well defined, while the extreme limit must be marked by the first appearance of Jean Georges Noverre's celebrated letters in 1760, and ten years later Malpied's *Traité sur l'art de la Danse*.

While the extravagant settings and fantastic costumes for these same dances could well be described as 'baroque' — undefinable though the term may be — the dances, when we first come to know how they were performed from Feuillet's first book — are of a surprisingly chaste simplicity — not, in fact, in the least baroque. It is only in the later period — when the style was in decline — that the term seems to apply even if 'rococo' would be far more appropriate. It is not too much to say that our entire knowledge of how to execute these dances is based solely on Feuillet's stenochoreography. No work published since that date (1700) — and this, I would say, includes modern works as well — has enlightened us any further.

A more detailed and systematic approach to the regional background — since they are clearly regional in their origin — could enlighten us far more than microscopic studies of the dances themselves which seems to be the order of the day at the present time. The *bourée*, the *rigaudon*, the *forlana* and the *gigue* must surely all have had their origins in some not far distant region of France — or in the case of the *forlana* — of Italy. While the origin of the *minuet* may be doubtful, its attribution to the *branle de poitou* seems to me to be very hazardous. The *passacaille*, the *chaconne*, the *loure* and the *sarabande* must surely have their origins elsewhere: Curt Sachs believes South America and maybe this time his intuitions are right. The *sarabande* seems moorish and may well be traceable to the Arab occupation of Spain and North Africa.

Feuillet's death in 1709 put an end to the extraordinarily brilliant and felicitous collaboration between him and Louis Pécour for whom he transcribed an astonishing number of dances besides some of his own which, although charming, are not at the same level as those of Pécour who, besides being an accomplished dancer, was also, apparently, a man of culture and charm welcomed among the cultured society of the time.

It is from this date that we become increasingly aware of a rapid decline not only in the choreographic invention but also in the accompanying music. For more than thirty years after the death of Feuillet there was a constant output of 'collections' of dances selected from the ballets being performed in the Paris theatres and thence transferred to the London theatres, where French dancers were much in vogue. Most of the single dances were choreographed by English dancing masters, some of whom were engaged at the Court of St. James to teach dancing to the younger members of the Royal families. The music becomes more and more pedestrian, as if the distinguished composers of the early years no longer occupied themselves with the task, since royalty was not sufficiently interested to the extent that Louis XIV had been. Some of the dancing masters even wrote their own music which would explain a great deal.

Malpied's *Traité sur l'Art de la Danse* was probably published in 1770 and must be the last in our period unless we intend to prolong our researches into the vexed question of the so-called country dances, or into the other world in which Noverre's new ideas were to have their effect — the world, that is, of classical ballet which is, after all, the rightful heir to our baroque dances.

Malpied's explicit intention was to bring dancers back to a more strict observance of the finer and more correct forms of the dance, as he conceived them to be. Instead he succeeded only in complicating the simple rules that we have already understood quite well from our studies of Feuillet. What is not at all clear is for whom Malpied intended his work since many of the steps he describes go far beyond the abilities of most amateur dancers and yet cannot be considered sufficient for a technically proficient professional dancer. His one example of a *contredanse* figure is rather complex, unlike those described by Feuillet in his *Recueil de Contredanses* (1706), in which he emphasizes the extreme simplicity of the step patterns, clearly one of their main attractions for most people.

Malpied's chapter on arm movements leaves the modern reader still more perplexed. No-where does he even hint at the co-ordination of the body with these same hand and arm movements. It is as though the body was merely an adjunct to which the limbs were attached but with which they had no other relation. Furthermore his example of how to co-ordinate the arm movements with the steps is applicable only to very slow *entrées* or to the minuet which — by his time — was, we know, the slowest of all the dances in vogue in the ballrooms, the other dances being — in all probability — the gay *contradanses* in which arm movements were little regarded. The only other dance for which these movements would be suitable is the old *courante* so much favoured by Louis XIV and long since out of fashion. It is very probable that it is from the *courante* that these archaic movements were derived, becoming sacred in some way through royal patronage. Applied to dances of a more vivacious rhythm, his explanations would produce something very like the action of windscreen wipers, something which I have actually seen demonstrated. The effect is remarkable to say the least but has nothing to do with dancing. Certainly the basic formula of opposition and *épaulement* remains valid but must, in my view, be co-ordinated with the sequences of steps and the position of the body according to the rhythm of the music. Only then do they have choreographic sense.

What Malpied did not seem to have understood was that he was trying to give impulse to a worn-out tradition which — by his time — had lost the freshness and logic that it had in its youth. We are back again — choreographically speaking — with Cesare Negri who gives us instructions for a very limited repertoire of steps inherited from yet another past tradition with which we can assemble — as he himself does — any kind of dance, be it a *saltarello* or a *cascarda* — with *seguiti*, *spezzati*, *riprese* and *trabucchetti* — suited to the limited accomplishment of an aristocratic society brought up in the rigid formulas of the Spanish *galateo* and unwilling to learn — in all probability — more than was strictly necessary in order to cut a good enough figure in the viceregal ballroom. Caroso — in his first and most important treatise *Il ballarino* — is nearer the original sources than Negri. Negri's vast repertoire of variations for the *gagliarda* was intended for the young scions of the same families and are pure acrobatics for exhibitions in the ballroom to astonish their friends.

The long interval between Negri's treatise and Feuillet's first publication may never be filled although I have good reason to suppose that, at least in Italy, there is still important material lying neglected in provincial libraries and on the uncatalogued bookshelves of aristocratic homes which could help us at least to piece together the continuity of our documentation.

The little dances presented to us in Feuillet's early collections — some of which no doubt formed part of the choreographic whole in various opera-ballets — must have been composed at least as far back as the eighties of the previous century. They are miniature masterpieces like some kind of delicately fashioned jewelry — perfectly wedded to music of extraordinary charm within the formal canons of the period. With the choreography of Louis Pécour and the music of Lulli (or at least signed by him), Andrea Campa, Jean Mouret and even Marin Marais, it would have been difficult for it to have been otherwise. In spite of the apparent simplicity of the figures and steps they are not easy to dance and it is a tribute to the non-professional dancers of those times that they could accomplish them so creditably whether it were in the ballroom, or on stage with professional dancers.

By modifying the frontal presentation with the ceremonial bows to the Presence or to the public, and allowing the dancers more freedom of movement, especially in the quicker rhythms, the regional character immediately becomes evident. For those who are familiar with the letters of the adorable Madame de Sevigné one letter — quoted by Anne Daye in the *Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society Journal* No. 9: 1979, p. 35 — testifies to this. Madame de Sevigné is referring to a visit to friends in Brittany in 1671 where she was able to see local dances performed by guests with extraordinary vivacity and contrasts them with the dull stuff one sees at Versailles.

In the interpretation of these dances we must then rely on our personal accumulation of cultural experiences in many more fields than just those of dance and music if we wish to complete our picture in order to transform these hieroglyphics — which is all they are — into terms of dance. We should be aiming for the co-ordinated movement of the whole body and not only the arms, just as, we may be quite sure, our forefathers did.

I see no reason why we should accept as evidence of how renaissance people danced the bell-shaped ladies and heavily built young men posing in exactly the same position for every dance that Caroso and Negri describe — especially when the printer reverses the picture by mistake — or the delightful but naive and childish inexperienced drawings of little men with bent knees — drawn in all probability by old Arbeau himself with infinite pains — as final and only testimony of how our forefathers bore themselves when they were dancing. Indeed Arena has very different ideas and a wealth of evidence exists that confirms more Arena's ideas than either Arbeau's or Negri's. The delightful engraving by Jost Amman — one of a group of German engravers who lived in Venice in the sixteenth century — which Mabel Dolmetsch includes in her first volume on English and French dances — is only one of many of the same kind. There we see ladies and gentlemen letting themselves go in a vigorous *gagliarda* arms akimbo and at least one lady holding up her top skirt to give her more freedom for her legs — just as Calabrian women still do today — which would have shocked the ladies in Negri's dull pictures; yet both are practically contemporary, the difference being that one shows how they ought to have danced in Milan and the other shows how they did dance in Venice, a city renowned for the high

level of its culture. Which are we to take as our model? The same may be said of the dances of the baroque age. A close examination of the detailed engravings of scenes from the *ballets de cour* of the times of Louis XIV — in which we see whole groups of dancers in action — reveals that a considerable freedom of movement — not casual we may be sure — was quite usual, even if the choreographic figures tend to be as rigidly symmetrical as the stage setting — the latter for the mechanical exigencies of the stage. That the Carmargo and the Sallé, in the delicious portraits by Lancret, are posing in a classically baroque position, is not necessarily proof that they performed every dance in that position. Photographs of the great ballerinas of our own times — if they survive the years — might lead our great-great-grandsons to suppose that they only performed arabesques or danced exclusively on their points.

In my own teaching I have always aimed at creating — or rather letting my young dancers create for themselves — dignified and graceful movements in harmony with the dances. None of them — when they first came together — had had any previous experience of classical or 'folk' dancing, which made the formation of a natural style, in keeping with the dances they were learning, relatively easy. Being young, good looking and Italian they had little difficulty in acquiring the *grazia* and *pavoneggiamento* so much insisted on by Carosa and Negri.

The baroque dances do require a more artificially conscious *compartmento* but I have never tried to impose on my dancers illogical movements which are contrary to the natural movement of the body and in which I cannot believe myself.

There is no doubt that with the decline from the early creative freshness of these dances — a gradual hardening into stereotyped recipes did take place and — as is always the case — a new perspective became overdue — and Noverre was the pioneer even if we know that other distinguished dancers — among whom was the Sallé herself — felt the need for greater freedom of expression. Men like Malpied are always useful for codifying what has been experimented and has enriched the art but are, of course, always opposed to the new initiatives until they have been accepted by others. Noverre's letters, prolix and boring though they be, do put forward some fundamental ideas — indeed Noverre was not only concerned with greater freedom of expressive movement — he was also interested in the physiological possibilities of body movement and in how dancers should be trained to achieve a more brilliant and extended technique.

From his description of some of his ballets and his insistence on the need for more expressive movement we gather that Noverre thought of dance movement as being principally mime or pantomime, and here we must say he was wrong. Pure movement without any specific 'message' has its own meaning and exists as an expression of the spirit in its own right and not just as a vehicle for conveying something which could equally well be expressed in another medium.

