

## Live Music for Early Dance

By Bill Tuck

(Submitted for the January EDC Circular)

The question has occasionally been voiced: “Why are historical dancers so reluctant to use live music?” So often they seem to prefer the recorded sound that emanates at the touch of a button, or click of a mouse, from their digital sound system. For musicians, who spend so much of their time, money and energy on practising their obscure but ‘authentic’ instruments, this rejection is both puzzling and hurtful. Why don’t they like us? What do we have to do to make them like us, at least to the extent that they are willing to let us join in their jolly dancing games? This note is a partial attempt at trying to understand the conundrum.

Firstly, is the complaint true? To some extent, yes. At the most recent EDC festival only one group attempted to integrate live music into their performance. Two others produced their own music, but pre-recorded it for use. The reasons for this may simply be practical. Because of the demand for programme space, each group was allotted a strict time slot of between 12 and 15 minutes, both at morning rehearsal and afternoon performance. As we are all too aware, musicians are notorious for the amount of time they seem to take ~~fiddling around~~ setting up their kit, putting their music in order and tuning their instruments, before beginning to play. This represents a serious encroachment on the performance time, so it is little wonder that the use of live music is rejected in such a situation. On the other hand, where such constraints of time are not present, such as at Playford or Regency balls, or re-enactment demonstrations, the use of live music is generally accepted as essential.

Rehearsal sessions and teaching workshops, on the other hand, will very often be conducted without the use of live music. The reasons for this are again practical. Few musicians are willing (or indeed able) to tolerate the incessant repetition that a rehearsal or workshop usually entails. And in addition, they would expect to be paid, thereby increasing the cost to the dance participants, without providing ~~any useful~~ input that could not more easily and cheaply be obtained from a CD. It is little wonder, therefore, that we humble musicians are rejected.

One consequence of this rejection is that dancers become very accustomed to a standard of performance that is not easily matched by the average amateur musician, or indeed even by many professionals. No workshop could remotely consider providing a full period orchestra to accompany the dancers for a class on 18<sup>th</sup> century baroque dance, for example, yet that is exactly what they have from their CDs! And once they are used to this standard, they will not willingly adjust to the reality of an instrumental trio (recorder, harpsichord and bass, say) playing for their live presentation, no matter how competent the musicians.

In addition to the temporal, financial and quality constraints, however, there is the question of the attitude that many musicians have towards dance music. It is not generally regarded as ‘proper’ music and occupies an inferior place among the various musical genres: “you want me to play this **how** many times?” they will ask, incredulously. No music college, as far as I am aware, offers any special instruction in ‘playing for dancing’. Indeed, the problem is so acute that the Royal Scottish Ballet has been forced to institute a special course to train piano graduates fresh from music college in the particular skill (and profitable career option) of being a pianist for ballet. At the other end of the scale, I know of no interest at any music

school in the subtle (and historically correct) art of playing the pipe & tabor for 15<sup>th</sup> century court dance.

What is more, the attitude of musicians to dance itself can often be arrogant and patronising. It looks so easy, they may think that anyone could do it, not realizing that a considerable amount of practise is required to perform even the simplest *almain* with elegance, while mastering the minuet can take a lifetime:

“The minuet is allowed by the dancing-masters themselves to be the perfection of all dancing. I once heard an eminent dancing-master say, that the minuet had been the study of his whole life, and that he had been indefatigable in the pursuit of its beauties, yet at last he could only say with Socrates, *he knew nothing*” [The Analysis of Beauty, Hogarth (1753)].

The worst manifestations of this attitude can occur when musicians themselves undertake to teach a dance: there is more to Playford than just walking about, and more to a *branle* than stepping left and right at the correct time; for both were dances of the elite long before they were enjoyed by the rustic peasantry. It is not that musicians should refrain from teaching dance in all circumstances, but just that an audience of experienced historical dancers may need a different approach to one of less historically informed folk dancers.

On the other hand, there **are** musicians who take dance seriously: many baroque music specialists, for instance, are very aware of the importance an understanding of baroque dance can have in developing a ‘correct’ style for their interpretation of that particular genre. This is less about ‘playing for dance’, however, than about informing their own style in performing the standard baroque repertoire, much of which is comprised of ‘dance suites’ (not, however, intended for ‘real’ dancing -- In truth, opportunities to play for ‘real’ baroque dancers are so infrequent that they provide little justification for learning the style).

What can be done and what is already being done? The EDC has funded several projects to encourage the integration of dancers and musicians. The support given to the Rameau project enabled several baroque dance specialists to be included in the performance. EDC also supported Mary Collins in her soon to be completed project to show how dance influenced musical style -- and vice versa -- in the baroque period. And support has also been given to dance groups that wish to present programmes with live music, but lack the funding to engage professional musicians. There is also an initiative on the part of HDS to make musicians more aware of what is involved in ‘playing for dance’. Both the Chalemie and the HDS Summer Schools encourage musicians to attend and to play for dancers. While the constraints of time and financial budgets will always remain, I am hopeful that a greater awareness of the unique musical requirements and rewards of playing for ‘historical’ dance can be encouraged through such initiatives.

Bill Tuck

October 2017

