

Introduction

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To introduce the conference, it may be worth considering for a moment an interesting picture, well-known to musicologists, but infrequently studied by dance historians. It is the beautiful illustration shown below from the Bible of Borso d'Este, entitled *The Court of Solomon*, dating from around 1450 (and therefore contemporaneous with Domenico's *Verceppe*, with which our conference started, and the date of our earliest choreographies).¹ It is a puzzle on many levels. We can only guess at what the dance (if it is a dance) might be -- though it is certainly **not** *Verceppe* (which is for 3 ladies and 2 men, whereas here we have three couples). It looks like a *branle*, but is probably too early for that, and also Italian rather than French. The usual interpretation is that it is 'some sort of circle dance', which is obvious, but not very helpful. The band is more revealing, being a version of the 'alta' ensemble then known to be present at the Court in Ferrara (where Borso was Duke from 1450 to 1471 and where Domenico da Piacenza was dancing master at this time). But even more interesting is the placement and attitude of the observers: two ladies on the right, plus one in the foreground, looking intently as if waiting to be asked to participate in the next dance, along with the 'Duke' (Borso himself, in the guise of Solomon?) aloft on his throne at the left, together with two male courtiers, all ignoring the dance but with the duke intent on contemplation of the surrounding scenery. Does this suggest that dance was held in less esteem than architecture or landscape? Possibly.² The meaning of the painting would no doubt have been self-evident to its owner, but at this distance in time it is much more difficult to interpret: What were the dancers doing? What did they think they were doing? What did the participants say about the dances and their meaning for those taking part, either as observers or as performers? And lastly, what do **we** think they were doing? After examining the broader context in which the dance takes place, what would we now interpret it as showing? Like much of the record of early dance, along with our attempts to understand it, the picture is tantalising in its detail, but remains enigmatic.³ As such, it stands as a kind of metaphor for our study of perception and reception of early dance.



Illustration: The dance scene from Borso's bible: Taddeo Crivelli, *La corte di Salomone*

From the estampies of the 13th & 14th century to the tango of the 20th, the questions of “what was it?” and “what did it mean?” have been ever-present in our studies of dance and its place in history. In some cases – usually because they are so distant in time (such as with the estampies) -- we cannot realistically have a very good idea of how the dance was actually performed – if at all, in the case of the estampies. In others, we have a very good idea of what it was because of the very extensive literary, pictorial or even film record available (as in the case of the tango, for instance). But its meaning for those originally engaged in its performance may yet be obscure. What did the tango, waltz or quadrille actually mean to those dancers as they enthusiastically flung themselves around the dance floor – freedom and liberation (waltz), ordered social intercourse (quadrille), or hedonistic abandon (tango)? And what, in turn, does this tell us about the society in which these dances flourished?

At one level, these aspects represent the ‘perception’ and the ‘reception’, respectively, of a dance form; in other words, what it ‘looked like’ and what it ‘meant’. Of course, what the dance might mean to its original performers or audience could be quite different from how we see it today. Each of the papers presented in this volume takes a particular area of dance history and interprets the notions of perception and reception in various ways. At the simplest level it is just a matter of trying to reconstruct the dance from contemporary descriptions as found in text records, or pictures, or from the accompanying music – assuming these exist. In some cases, these are quite detailed, as for example, the choreography of Domenico da Piacenza’s *Vercepe*, as presented by Hazel Dennison. Other cases are more difficult to reconstruct by reason of the text descriptors being absent or ambiguous – as would apply with the ‘*Morus*’ dance described by Giles Bennett (where an outline choreography exists, but no music) or the *Estampies* discussed by Charlotte Ewart (where we have the music, at least in outline, but no choreography). Likewise, there is detailed choreography for *Martel d’Amore*, presented by Gloria Giordano, but no music.

This last example is an account of a long-running project initiated by Barbara Sparti to reconstruct a dance from a newly discovered late 16th century manuscript. In addition to the basic choreography, there was a further manuscript found of a poetic work linked to the dance. *Martel d’Amore* was performed for the first time on 21 January 1582 at the d’Este Court at Ferrara. Along with the exact date, we know the names of the dancers, their ages, the costumes they wore and their positions at court; enough information to establish to a very high degree the social context in which the dance took place. Only the music was lacking, but with some ingenuity this could be recreated to fit the choreography, allowing a complete performing version to be reconstructed. My own interest was piqued by the fact that, apparently, *Martel d’Amore* was performed again in February of the following year, in a more low-key production, with just the accompaniment of ‘tabors’ -- presumably pipe and tabor players.

The next step beyond reconstruction -- to understand the meaning of a dance in its context -- is somewhat more subjective. The waltz is a good case in point. Descriptions of the early waltz can be found in many of the late 18th/ early 19th century instruction manuals, but what did it mean to the dancers at the time? The dance itself was controversial in the beginning, as Paul Cooper explains, but the process by which it became accepted as a constant feature of the 19th

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century English ballroom is a fascinating one. Much the same might be said of the tango, the origins of which are even more obscure and the path to acceptance even rockier than that of the waltz. It was fitting therefore that it was left to the end of the conference, where Nira Pullin and Bill Wilson gave a spirited workshop, leaving us to decide on the question of whether the experience was truly scandalous, or whether dance itself might need to confront those questions of good and evil that have periodically arisen throughout history.

Less problematic is the link between Sport and Dance. This is the topic of Sharon Butler's paper on Arcangelo Tuccaro's dialogues on the art of vaulting -- one of the very earliest attempts at the theoretical and practical defence of gymnastics. Competitive dancing is not a new phenomenon -- witness those spectacular galliard jumps that seem to have been a feature of the Elizabethan ballroom, with young gentlemen competing to kick the high tasselled target. Now, of course, there is even the acceptance of 'dancesport' as a recognised competitive event, contending for a place in the Olympics -- though I doubt that galliards are included!

The relationship between Music and Dance, on the other hand, is rather more problematic. Of special interest is that between musicians and dancers, for this has been continually fraught with difficulties. Nothing better illustrates this theme than the 17th century dispute between the venerable and very ancient musicians' union (the *Confrérie de St Julien* established in the 14th century) and that of the dancers (the newly created *Academie Royale de Dance*, set up by Louis XIV in 1661). Christine Bayle teases out the relationship -- much as a marriage counsellor might -- though doubt still remains as to whether it was ever resolved.

A more positive relationship between music and dance is explored by Edith Lalonger in her investigation of *Ballets figuré* in Jean-Philippe Rameau's lyric works, such as *Zoroastre*.

The perceptions of the audience come directly from the senses, and especially from sight and hearing. Edith shows how Rameau and his librettists succeed in this appeal to the senses in different ways, mainly through the form of the *ballet figuré*. Rameau (Jean-Philippe, not Pierre!) is one of the best examples of a composer writing deliberately to show dance to its best effect, magnifying its sensory appeal while also enhancing the music.

In early 18th century London, meanwhile, the pantomime was a primary medium for dance, both comic and serious. Although enormously popular with the theatre-going public and crucial to theatre finances, pantomime's reception with critics and others was extremely varied, ranging from outright condemnation to guarded tolerance. Nor were they universally approved by ballet choreographers who were trying to establish dance as a high art, devoid of meaningless virtuosity and vulgar comedy. The perception and reception of dance in this context is explored by Barbara Segal.

The meaning of dance and its place in society is addressed by Dorothea Sauer in a paper that explores its wider psychological role. She analyses how dance, particularly choreographed dance as practised in court or aristocratic settings -- 'noble' dance -- is a way of exercising and demonstrating power; in other words, the ballroom (or dancehall) can be seen as a competitive arena in which individuals may demonstrate their control, authority and position in society.

Dance as a way into History informs the next group of papers: how people danced and why, tells us much about the society in which it takes place. The first example is the English country dance and its re-emergence (as the *contradanza*) in 19th century Cuba. Many paths have been suggested as the route by which the familiar dance forms of Playford's *English Dancing Master* and its successors found its way to the Caribbean, and Cuba in particular, but while no definitive explanation has yet been agreed, the possible journeys are sufficiently enlightening as to each warrant exploration. In a similar vein, the more recent migration of Historical Dance to Siberian Russia leads to interesting questions about how and why such an unlikely transfer would take place. Cultural affinity, or a yearning for a link to a rich urban past far removed, both geographically and socially, from a more restricted present? These are some of the issues addressed by Yelena Kilina.

Politics may well have been the primary cause of the migration of the minuet from France to Spain in the early years of the 18th century, for the establishment of the Bourbon French monarchy over Spain inevitably meant that court dance would go with them and in time trickle down the social hierarchy to become firmly established among much of the society. A more specific but perhaps more surprising transfer occurred with the *Moresca* arriving in South India via Portuguese colonisation.

There has, of course, long been an imagined association between the 'moresca' of Spain and Portugal and the traditional English 'morris' dance. How deep this connection may go and what these dances may mean in terms of ritual significance is something that is likely to be argued over for many years yet, so overlaid have both become with alternative layers of meaning -- from fertility rituals, to Moors vs Christians, to simple entertainments at village fetes. The complexity of this entanglement was born out to me by the curious similarity of the 'Morus' dance featured in Giles Bennett's paper to the traditional English morris. Yet another entanglement? Did the German play in celebration of the great English Catholic saint, Thomas More, as described in Giles' paper, represent yet another plausible origin for the 'morris'? (as was pointed out to me by Harvey Dobbs). Was the morris dance itself used covertly by recusant Catholics in Protestant England as a way of forging an identity, as some have suggested? Direct links to the (Catholic) Fuggers of Augsburg, as suggested by Giles, then begin to make sense.

Finally, we come to the question of the 'perception' and 'reception' of early or historical dance itself. In her keynote address, Theresa Buckland made the following statement: "The perception of Early Dance as a vital aspect of British Heritage, which is both culturally enriching and internationally significant, is undoubtedly shared by its enthusiasts and advocates. Its reception, however, within the academic field of dance in the UK, where such support might be expected to be echoed, is notably lacking." This presents the current situation in rather stark terms: within the academic world, detailed study of 'Dance History' generally begins with the invention of ballet in the late 18th century. In fact, a recently published anthology entitled *Re-thinking Dance History* contained no mention of anything earlier than the late 19th century.⁴ This is not a complaint, for the book was well-written, interesting to read, and apparently very well-received by its intended academic audience. It is simply to note that there appears to be two quite separate notions of what constitutes 'dance history': one sees the memory horizon stretching back barely into the 19th century, while the other encompasses European dance forms from at least the middle of the 15th century to the present. It could be

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argued, in fact, that we have more detailed evidence on how to re-construct the Italian *balli* of the mid-15th century than the creations of the Ballets Russe from the early 20th.⁵ It is also worth noting that primary documentary evidence, in the form of source texts giving detailed choreographies of 15th century dance, is now freely available online – so that the excuse of invisibility no longer holds. This is in sharp contrast to the continual struggle to document 20th century dance forms.⁶

In this respect, within the academic world, the study of Early Dance compares unfavourably with Early Music. Most conservatoires and university music departments now have well-supported programmes in early music, studying repertoires going back at least to the 15th century. Yet this is a relatively recent development according to Robert Mullally, for early music and early dance both had their serious beginnings only in the 1960s. Although there had been interest in each of these areas from at least the late 19th century, from enthusiasts such as Arnold and Mabel Dolmetsch, it was only in the 1960s, with the drive to create authentic replicas of period instruments, that performance of early music became more than just an academic curiosity among musicologists. Yet while the study of early music has become more or less universal in music colleges and university music departments in the intervening years, early dance still remains the domain of enthusiastic amateurs. The professionalisation of early music stands in great contrast to the relative lack of professionalism within the world of early dance. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as it could be claimed that the early music world has become over-professionalised and, in consequence, conservative, with little space left for the experiments of enthusiastic amateurs, so characteristic during the 1960s -- sometimes referred to as the 'heroic age' of the early music movement. Perhaps the future of early dance lies here, with these enthusiastic amateurs, and not in the academy?

End Notes

¹ The *Bible of Borso d'Este* is a two-volume manuscript. The illuminated miniatures, work of Taddeo Crivelli and others, were executed between 1455 and 1461. The work is held in the [Biblioteca Estense di Modena](#) (Ms. Lat. 422-423.)

² Barbara Sparti, The Function and Status of Dance in the Fifteenth-Century Italian Courts, in *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* Vol. 14, No. 1 (Summer, 1996), pp. 42-61

³ Barbara Sparti, Inspired Movement versus Static Uniformity: A Comparison of Trecento and Quattrocento Dance Images, *Music in Art*, Vol. 33, (Spring–Fall, 2008), pp. 39-51

⁴ Lorraine Nicholas and Geraldine Morris, *Rethinking Dance History: A Reader*, Routledge 2003.

⁵ Milicent Hodson and Keneth Archer, *Reconstructing Sacre du Printemps*, EDC Lecture 2018.

⁶ Dance Heritage Coalition, *Documenting Dance: A practical Guide* (2006) (retrieved from https://dance-usa.s3.amazonaws.com/page_uploads/DocumentingDance.pdf)

