

The Reception of Early Music and Early Dance

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Obviously, there are two entities involved here Early Music and Early Dance. As the revival of Early Music preceded the revival of Early Dance the question that immediately arises is whether, and if so, to what extent, Early Music, and its revival, influenced Early Dance. But there is also a second aspect to be considered: can the revival of Early Dance learn anything from the successes and--dare one say it--the failures of Early Music?

Early Music and Early Dance can- -I think—be considered under two broad aspects: research and performance. In the case of Early Music research clearly preceded performance. This research has been mostly carried out by musicologists, of course. One might say that a methodical study of earlier forms of music started with Charles Burney's History of Music in the 18th century, but in the 19th century and even more in the 20th century, there have been countless books and journals devoted to music of earlier periods in addition to those covered by the usual repertoire. There have even been journals devoted to particular early periods and to particular early instruments. This research, has been exclusively academic, with all that implies—a certain rigour and thoroughness in investigation, a certain tautness in expression, a certain formality in presentation. This, of course, does not mean that there has been a uniformity of opinion on the various aspects of the subject. For example, some musicologists carried on a particularly lively controversy on the tempo of dance movements.

The performance of what became known as Early Music is a somewhat different matter. Revival, more especially of vocal works, took place before the ground-breaking endeavours of Arnold Dolmetsch (1858-1940). His work did involve research, but his main achievement was in the reconstruction of early instruments, notably the viol and the recorder and also in playing of these instruments where he was joined by members of his family. Their work was largely self-contained and was generally disregarded by the rest of the community of musicians. There were, of course, some exceptions. One cannot forget, for instance, Wanda Landowska's revival of the harpsichord. A major attempt to encourage an interest in music of all periods was Decca's series of recordings made in the late 1950s called The History of Music in Sound. But these were instances of a rarefied interest. Everything changed in the 1960s. With the appearance of ensembles such as the Early Music Consort of London with its leading light David Munrow and, of course, Musica Reservata, Early Music was no longer too early for consideration and the concerts of ensembles such as these drew crowds to the South Bank for their performance of voices and instruments with music going back to the Middle Ages. The popularity of such groups was not to last, however, and eventually the Middle Ages vanished from repertoires and the performance of even music from the pre-Classical period became restricted largely once again, but not exclusively, to specialists.

The history of the revival of these performances has not been one of unqualified success. As might be expected with historical revivals, these early attempts had many pitfalls. Wanda Landowska's

harpsichord has been described as a piano with plucked strings. The instruments in the concerts of the 1960s, I remember, being described by one critic as a toyshop of instruments. Earlier interpretations of string playing has been unfavourably reviewed and the revival of the fortepiano has received some harsh notices. The objection to it was made that, while a harpsichord was different from a piano, a piano was just a piano. It is good to report that the position has moved on and critics are now even prepared to discuss the differences and appropriateness of early Viennese pianos as compared to early London pianos. The situation is now that critics are prepared to consider what had been previously called Early Music as part of music in general and the trials and errors have led to a better understanding of what was once known as Early Music. (I shall, however, continue to use the term for the purposes of this paper). But a word of warning: all is not well. We still have a problem particularly in Baroque instrument music, because, as one professor, who is also active in performance, put it to me that the fast tempi are usually too fast and the slow tempi too slow.

Thus, in music, research preceded, and to a certain extent influenced, performance, but in dance it seems as though the opposite is the case and performance has overtaken research. Performance of Early Dance or Historical Dance, as it used to be known, began with Arnold Dolmetsch's third wife, Mabel Dolmetsch (1874-1963). Her pioneering handbook *Dances of England and France 1400-1600* was published in 1949. But she was also involved in performance of her reconstruction of the dances. She was followed by Belinda Quirey and Belinda Quirey was followed by Melusine Wood. She also signposted her teaching with the manual *Historical Dances: 12th to 19th Century*. Her approach with a rather different approach to the subject than Mabel Dolmetsch's. Dolmetsch's emphasis inclined more to the historical aspect; Wood more to its practical implications.

Interest in Early Dance and its performance in the early days in the 1960s was very limited. It was difficult to fill even one class and it was a struggle to keep up the numbers in that class. How things have changed! There are now Early Dance groups in all five continents if I am not mistaken. There have been countless books and articles on dance on anything that might be called Early Dance. There have even been conferences on Early Dance!

To turn to the research aspect of dance, the books by Mabel Dolmetsch and Melusine Wood were not research publications, but handbooks—books to aid the performance of a selection of early dances. Strange as it may seem, much of the early writing on Early Dance, particularly concerning the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, was done, not by dance historians, but by literary historians and by musicologists. As regards choreography both groups got things spectacularly wrong. The musicologists even got dance music wrong. Inevitably, therefore, we must turn, to the dance historians.

Here results have not been particularly impressive, particularly when compared to the work produced by musicologists in the field of research on Early Music. The greater part of their articles on music can be termed academic research. That is emphatically not the case with writings on dance. The most obvious problem is that much of the writing on Early Dance can hardly be called research. For example, articles that are merely personal interpretations of dances or pieces that are largely speculative cannot be counted as serious work however interesting they may be. Then some writers seem to overlook the importance of evidence-- essential to any study worthy of consideration. The attitude often of some seems to be 'It's right if I say so'. Other writers, having chosen their topic—let's say an Italian 15th-century dancing master—seem to believe that they

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must tell all that they know about the subject and even all that they know about 15th-century Italian dance history. Relevance is important. Translation and idiom, and even literal correctness, seem to be a minor consideration. In a work that aimed to be a landmark in dance history, the French dance title ‘Adieu men voys’ (Farewell, I am going away) was rendered as ‘Thou dispatchest me to God’. This seems to have been the product of pure guesswork—and it was not the only howler in that particular work. Reviews of what has been written have fared even less well. Apparently, the only qualification for the task is an ability to read English. It is quite normal to review a book without any reference to the choreography or even to the music.

I don’t want to give the impression that books and articles on Early Dance have been a total failure; there have been some important contributions, notably articles by Ingrid Brainard, Maurizio Padovan and Barbara Sparti as well as others. A particular example of an article that makes a positive impression is David Wilson’s article in the journal, *Historical Dance*, on Domenico’s dance ‘Dammes’. In it Wilson looked at 10 versions of the dance not simply to comment on the choreography, but to prove the point that the same title, or a similar title, does not mean the same choreography and that each version of the dance must be considered on its own merits-- a point sometimes missed. Different versions of a dance should not be combined.

When we compare and contrast Early Music and Early Dance, then, the differences are stark. Writing on Early Music is academic; writing on early Dance usually is not. The performance of Early Dance is mostly by classes of amateurs. This is not to repudiate such performances. We have all enjoyed them and they impart a certain strength to the Early Dance movement. But professional performances need to be of a professional standard and research into the choreography, into the costumes and into the music all need be of a professional standard.

In conclusion the point of central importance is research. For professional performances the importance of precise and accurate research into the costumes which need to be correct in every detail and specific even to a certain decade; and the music and the musical instruments used also need to be correct for particular periods. This undoubtedly involves expense but perhaps the Arts council could help here. But without the essentials I’ve mentioned, the result is not really Early Dance; it is certainly not Historical Dance. In fact, recitals can just be a romp in fancy dress. Research into the appropriate music is important for everybody—not Bach minuets but minuets composed for dancing. Above all there needs to be research into the choreography. Practice cannot be grounded on oral transmission alone. Otherwise we end up with ‘Chinese Whispers’. Anyone seriously interested in Early Dance must be acquainted with the primary sources either in the original language or at least in translation. There is no excuse for dispensing with this basic essential as editions are now readily available. Just to take the 15th century Italian sources, there is Madeleine’s translation of Cornazano, Barbara Sparti’s edition and translation of Guglielmo--and I hope that this does not sound too immodest-- my own forthcoming edition and translation of Domenico. Other transcriptions and editions are, of course, available.

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