

HISTORICAL DANCE – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Since I first encountered Early Dance, or Historical Dance as it was then known, everything to do with the subject has changed, expanded, developed.

My first encounter, it must have been in the mid-60s, was at Morley College, at classes run by Wendy Hilton. Wendy at that time was directing a group called the Domenico Dance Ensemble, many of whose members I had the pleasure of meeting. And I observed of these people, that when they greeted each other, after the usual Hellos the enquiry was not "How are you ?", but "How's Belinda ? Have you heard from Belinda ?"

Here was obviously a force to be reckoned with.

I did eventually meet her; so I got to know what that was all about. Many of today's adherents to the pursuit of Historical Dance never knew the Belinda of that time. Never knew how charismatic she could be; how inspiring she could be.

How cruelly truthful at times, yes; but having shot down the feeble and the wrong-headed and the pretentious, how steadfast in her unwavering recognition of fundamental, genuine, value – the simple truth.

There must come a time when, so far from "How is Belinda ?", the question will be "Who was Belinda ?" People of that generation will never really know what they have missed.

To return to the subject of Historical Dance, and how it has changed since those days. And what I hope its future may hold ...

Its range then extended from misty beginnings in the Middle Ages, where information is scarce and scant in the extreme, to what Belinda called the Great Divide, when the Industrial Revolution initiated not only technological and social changes, but also changes in mental and bodily rhythms and harmony.

The solid middle ground was from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.

The actual content of it varied according to whose camp you were in, that of Melusine Wood, or that of Mabel Dolmetsch.

In the Wood camp, it began in the Middle Ages, represented by Farandoles, and some putative Branles and Estampies, largely dismissed today as of questionable authenticity, but of whose value I have spoken before and will do so again.

Wood's fifteenth-century repertoire consisted of a representative French Basse Dance, and from Italy a Bassadanza and a few Balli of Domenico's. Dolmetsch also had a French Basse Dance, but from Italy only one dance, a Bassadanza.

The sixteenth-century repertoire of both ladies consisted of Pavanes, Galliards, Almaines, some Branles from Arbeau, and some Balli from Caroso and Negri. There were more of the latter from Dolmetsch than from Wood.

The early seventeenth century was almost a no-go area, with a Slow Courante salvaged by Wood from De Lauze's baffling descriptions of the dances with no music, and Mersenne's music insufficiently related to the practicalities of the dance. From these she made an inspired reconstruction. (Incidentally, this is not given in any of her books, so that today's tentative reconstructions have been recalled from word-of-mouth or foot-on-floor teaching, and bear only a slight resemblance to Wood's own version. They do, however, seem to be highly acceptable as representative of the spirit of their period. 'Languid elegance' is the term much favoured to describe them.)

Then, in the second half of the century and on into the eighteenth, there were English Country Dances from Playford, and from others, and a smattering of Baroque, including two versions of the Ballroom Minuet: those of Rameau, favoured by the Wood camp, and of Tomlinson, the verbose, favoured by the Dolmetsch.

All of this had to be taken as read, from the published works of Wood and Dolmetsch, or from the teaching of their disciples. Dolmetsch did publish some actual excerpts from Domenico, in a very good lyrical translation. But her practical instructions for dancing the Bassadanza were very much her own interpretation in her own terms.

Everyone could at least have their own copy of Arbeau, in either the Beaumont or the Evans translation. But there were no facsimiles in those days, no photocopying even. As to the earlier material, such transcriptions as had been published were hidden away in journals of musicology, or even more obscure Italian journals of bibliography.

How different the picture is nowadays!

The Great Divide has been flown over, and Cotillions, Quadrilles, and closed couple dances are quite in vogue. Here the problems encountered are the exact opposite of the problem in the mediaeval period. There is an embarrassment of material, daunting in its quantity, but also a lot of it

contradictory. There is a certain attraction in that if you enjoy puzzles, but not if you simply want to know how to do a dance. Mercifully, we have our experts on the subject, who have taken the time to plough through all the documentation and distil it to us.

In the middle ground, the range from fifteenth to eighteenth century, those who previously ignored the Renaissance manuscripts because they did not give instructions on steps, can now purchase David Wilson's listing of all the oblique references to steps that do occur in the texts, collected and reviewed so that one can make one's own assumptions about what the steps might have been.

Of the texts themselves, the treatises of Domenico, Cornazano and Guglielmo, with the varied selections of dance descriptions that accompany them, successive publications have come to provide us by now with reliable transcriptions of all – even of all the seven copies of Guglielmo, by noting the variants in William Smith's transcription of the Paris Ambrosio version. From the researchers who have edited these publications we also have vastly more information about the original writers, their patrons and their times.

As a result of which, more people have consulted the material now made available to them, have read what there is to read on the quality of movement (which obviously had a higher priority with the writers than where to put your feet), and have brought out reconstructions of more of the dances.

In the sixteenth century also, material is more readily available. There are published facsimiles of the originals of the great bibles of Arbeau, Caroso and Negri; and also of Lupi and Luti and others. And there are more people consulting them, and in greater depth.

Regarding the seventeenth century, there is new source material on the dances in Spain presently being investigated. (The Society for Dance Research and the Early Dance Circle have both provided occasions for a report back from researchers, who presented different interpretations, but patently from the same source. We await the outcome of further work in this area with interest.)

As to the Baroque, there is so much going on that several exponents, each having their own priorities in respect of style of performance and method of teaching, are able to have also each their own devoted disciples. I am glad to have seen them supporting each other's presentations – rivalling each other perhaps, but not indulging in acrimonious rivalry. It would be good to bring them all together to debate differences, but possibly there is not a lot to be gained by this. There is much to be said for agreements to differ.

Which is to say, the Italian fifteenth century (ReNAISSANCE), the Italian sixteenth century (RENAissance), and the Baroque, are all alive and well and living harmoniously in this day and age.

Some of the milestones leading to this happy state of affairs I should like now to mention.

There was an encouraging foretaste of fruiting of the Italian fifteenth century some years ago now, when the Capriol Society of Oldham hosted a study day on one of the dances, 'Leoncello' – a number of participants being invited to lead off with their particular reconstruction, all of which were tried, and discussed. The day ended with a ball in Italian Renaissance dress, so it was like a mini-festival.

Then, there was a day run by the Early Dance Circle on aspects of sixteenth-century Italian dance reconstruction. That day started, as I recall, with grouping into threes, preferably strangers to one another, to be quickly talked through a sequence of steps for one of Caroso's or Negri's simpler dances. There followed then a discussion of possible interpretations of seguiti ordinarii, seguiti spezzati, and trabuchetti, and fioretti a piedi pari, and all that, which saw the usually tonguetied Brits tossing around foreign terms with polemic energy and linguistic ease. That was a study day held in Birmingham, and people came to it from as far afield as Scotland, York, Cambridge and Gloucester. Quite an event.

More recently, there has been the conference on Dances to Honour Kings, hosted by King's College London, though the actual administration was by Moira Goff, Sarah McCleave and Jennifer Thorp. The attendance at this event included visitors from Australia and the United States, as well as Europe.

I found it surprisingly interesting, Baroque not being my favourite topic, and I eagerly await the issue of proceedings, so that I can pore over the bits I did not understand or could not hear. (And I hope that I am not committing a breach of etiquette now in regretting that it was called at a time when one of our leading Baroque exponents was busy with her own summer school.) The moment in the conference that I want to refer to here, is when one of the speakers requested volunteers to demonstrate what she had to say, and behold a German, a Swede and a Canadian were handed the Feuillet notation and danced the required excerpt. Their styles differed, which was interesting in itself; but most gratifying was simply the fact that it could be done at all.

All this upsurge of interest in Historical Dance and the accessibility of source material does, however, create its own problems.

The ground rules may not be observed in the same way by all participants. It depends what your goal is. To gain academic recognition? To choreograph some dance for a theatrical production? To add to one's personal dance collection? To strengthen one's basis of teaching? Or perhaps the spur is simple curiosity?

One's approach does affect one's judgement.

There is the danger of tunnel vision. Looking for a specific thing, and seeing it and nothing else. A bit of instant choreography for a show, familiar words suggesting familiar sequences in a familiar but totally wrong style. Or there is the mirror effect, the result of peering through a window into a dark room and not realizing that you are seeing yourself.

Apropos the effect of seeing things differently, as a result of approaching them from a different vantage point – those two English pioneers of research into Historical Dance, Melusine Wood and Mabel Dolmetsch, approached it from directly opposite ends. Some of their differences of interpretation can be traced to this.

Mabel Dolmetsch, coming from a musical family, with connections to musicological research, followed advice that she was given, to start with the more or less familiar and work back to the unknown. She was from an age in which the nineteenth-century dances were still remembered, and from these she approached the Baroque, and so on, backwards. Which accounts, perhaps, for speaking of foot positions and turnout when instructing in the fifteenth-century French Basse Dance, assuming that partners danced on opposite feet.

Melusine Wood (I wish I could tell you this with the words and force of action with which I heard Belinda tell it) ... Melusine Wood approached from the other end. Confronted by the contradiction between what her sense of historical period told her was appropriate (she was indulging an interest in the seventeenth century at the time) and what she actually found being taught as historical dance, which struck her as ludicrously inappropriate, she decided to go right back to the beginning.

She started with the mediaeval Carole. The circular form of this suggested that as all move together to left or right according to the pattern of the dance, all must or should (there are always the few totally dance-inept) be using the same foot at the same time. She advised walking forwards rather than stepping sideways, and persisted with this advice when proposing arrangements to the music of early English Estampies.

This simple walking, with good deportment, with no frills such as turning out and pointing the feet, or tripping along on the toes, leaves you with what ? It leaves you with good deportment, which I have already mentioned. It leaves you to trust to the music, letting its melody cue your mood, its rhythm power your steps, its phrasing shape the spatial patterns through which you move, and the cadence upon which you arrive. It leaves you expressing a courtesy towards your partner that has nothing of coyness in it, and a respect for the onlookers that commands their respect for you in return.

What the paring away of mannerisms more properly belonging to other periods or other dance disciplines does, in fact, is not a whittling down, but a creative operation. It is a positive style in itself, a sound foundation upon which to build; a common basis for the dance of all centuries; a good starting point.

And now, I move on, to the end point: the future. (This is the "I have a dream" section.)

To backtrack a little for a moment, some time ago the Historical Dance fraternity in this country closed ranks as never before, over a threat from outside. This was the appearance on the market of some videotapes purporting to offer the definitive review of Historical Dance from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. I refer to the Berkhut tapes. Those who saw them were appalled. And told others. Everybody who saw them agreed, not only on being appalled by them, but that something should be done about it. And it was.

In the course of this, people who had been only names to each other actually met. People who had had to agree to differ as to their own interpretation of historical dances, agreed wholeheartedly in this one matter. The Historical Dance fraternity for once closed ranks. "This must continue", we said.

Among the people present at the meeting on 5 April, and those who had wished to be there but could not make it and sent their sympathy, we have a wealth of creativity, knowledge, experience, skill, power to influence.

Can we not share it ? Increase it ?

Does it really require a threat from outside, or a death, to bring us together ?

Forget about the in-fighting of the past, and the public image of Historical Dance as something full of historical poisoning. To quote a line from the film 'The Lion in Winter', "What family doesn't have its ups and downs ?" What profession does not have its divisions, its disagreements ?

Let us stop looking at skeletons in other people's cupboards, with scorn; neither let us look upon our own skeletons with apprehension lest they be found out. There is dross here and there in every court. We should either ignore it, or bring it out into the open and examine it together. But what is more important is to consider what strengths we all have to offer.

Who are we ? I have been using the word to mean all we, in this country, who are interested in Historical Dance.

The Early Dance Circle, which hosted this meeting.

Dolmetsch [Historical Dance Society], and Nonsuch [History and Dance Ltd], the two oldest established organizations, probably best known for their longstanding summer schools, but they do a lot more as well.

The I[mperial] S[ociety of] T[eachers of] D[ance], one of the

largest teaching unions, with members all over the world; which once had a Historical Dance Branch, of which several of us were members, but regrettably the branch has ceased to exist.

The Dance Research Committee, an offshoot of the above.

Numerous groups, professional and amateur, capable of giving concerts, running courses, providing dances or dancers for events.

Numerous individuals, professional and amateur, with varying degrees of talent for dancing, scholarship, organizing ability.

And there are others, outside our small fraternity, watching with interest what we do.

This country was at the forefront of Historical Dance, when it all began. Let it be so again.

Over to you ...