

Changes in the ballroom repertoire initiated by the French Revolution

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Before the Revolution

To make it clear what changes in the ballroom repertoire were initiated by the French Revolution, we must first establish what the repertoire was before the Revolution and also define the nationality of the ballroom under discussion.

The first step is to review the situation in France in the ballroom at court and, later, in the city of Paris.

With the death of Louis XIV in 1715, control of the country passed to his nephew Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, acting as Regent to the new king, who was only five years old. The Regent, having no desire to live isolated in the country at Versailles, moved the court to Paris. Even before this move, the baroque couple dances in the so-called 'noble' style had begun to fall out of favour at state balls and the move to Paris hastened this decline in their popularity.

In the last years of Louis XIV's reign the king became a recluse, concerned with religious matters. The young courtiers were thus freed from his strict control over the way they behaved. They revelled in this new-found freedom. No longer required to spend many hours practising the difficult step combinations required by the couple dances of the baroque 'noble' style, they acquired the habit of removing themselves to the country residence of the Duchess of Maine, at Sceaux. There they joined her Honey Bee Club, (*Mouche à Miel*), the members of which devoted themselves to learning and enjoying much simpler contredanses of the early cotillon type and the new, progressive longways style of country dance imported from England. Although the names of some of these dances have been recorded – *Fustenburg*, *Pistolet*, *Derviche*, *Pet en Cul* among them – we cannot be certain exactly how all of them were danced. In 1725 Feuillet dedicated his forthcoming collection of contredanses for 1706 to the Duchess of Maine and in this collection *le Pistolet* is fully described and may be the same as the earlier one.

The Feuillet dances for 1726 are all of the English longways progressive type, and he includes among those with French names a few with the same names and similar figures to those we find in Playford's manuals: for example, *Christ-church Bells*, here called *le Carillon d'Oxford*; *Liliburlero*, called *Lirboultaire*; and *Valentine's Day*, called *la Valentine*.

At the court of Louis XIV the adoption of strict

rules of precedence had prevented the introduction of the English style of progressive dance. The idea that, having started at the top, one had to move down the set was seen, at least by the older nobles, as an affront to their rank and position in society. After the court moved to Paris it became far less fastidious about matters of precedence and rank. Some important state balls were no longer held in the court itself but in venues in the city of Paris such as the Opera House. Admission to these balls was no longer limited to the nobility alone but could be obtained by payment of a fee.

This intermingling of differing ranks of society would now encourage the general adoption into ball programmes of longways progressive dances in the English style. Because the originators of most of these dances were unknown, it is difficult to assess how many were imported and how many were composed in the English style by the French themselves. Feuillet complained that he did not know the composers of many of the dances he included in his collections.

From 1715 until the Revolution, the longways progressive dance in the English manner vied in popularity with the totally French product, the cotillon – or contredanse Française. Feuillet describes the cotillon in 1706 as 'a little dance, much in fashion', showing it as a dance for two couples facing one another. Within four years two more couples had been added to the dance and by 1717 Dezais had published choreographies for the contredanse Française in the form of a square with one couple on each side. It was in this form, of a square dance for eight, that the French contredanse was to become equal in popularity, during the 18th century, with the English longways dance and eventually to dominate the ball repertoire.

Although, as already stated, the 'noble' dances declined in popularity, they did not completely disappear; they were retained in dancing schools as a method of teaching good posture, balance and aplomb. The minuet was especially favoured for this purpose as the figures of the dance were so simple that they could be learned very quickly. The dancing master could then concentrate on the manner of dancing it rather than the dance itself. The fact that most dancers in the early years of the 18th century had a working knowledge of the minuet steps enabled some composers to choreograph cotillons where part of the dance was in minuet time and the rest of the dance in ordinary

contredanse time. The English dancing master Sir John Gallini retained one in his collection of 1770 with the title *La Graziosetta*.

One of the reasons for the cotillon increasing its share of the dance programme to the disadvantage of the progressive longways dance was its exclusiveness. As it required only eight dancers it was very easy to ensure that the other places in one's set were filled with one's close friends or dancers of a similar standard of dance technique.

Both the 'noble' style dances of Pecour and the new contredanses, or cotillons, had, initially, a distribution restricted by the cost of producing instructions for them. Each dance required as many as eight copper-plate engravings and few could afford the expense of acquiring large collections of these dances.

The dissemination of the cotillon to the lower ranks of society, the provinces of France and to other countries was greatly accelerated from 1762 by an invention of the Parisian dancing master and publisher, Monsieur de la Cuisse. His diagrammatic method of explaining all the figures of any new cotillon could be printed on one sheet of paper only. This greatly reduced the cost of publishing new varieties of the dance and in due course, de la Cuisse would be issuing two new dances each week of the ball season. At a cost of only a few coppers each, the new dances were soon spread through all ranks of society and into the rest of Europe and England. The spread of this form of dance to the country districts was also aided by troupes of dancers performing them during the summer months at country fairs and festivals as little ballets to attract crowds to the various amusement booths. Many of the cotillons were devised by dancing masters attached to the professional theatres, where they were used as interludes between the acts of plays. The necessity of providing original figures of pleasing appearance for stage presentation helped to maintain the quality of new productions.

Around 1770 Paris was introduced to a new form of couple dance, based on figures of a German dance similar to the *ländler*. This French version of the dance was called, appropriately enough, the *allemande* (that is, the German) and, because of the French dancing public's preference for 'set', rather than couple, dances, some of its figures were introduced into the cotillon, producing a new crossbreed known as the *allemande cotillon*, or simply the *allemande*. This is quite confusing for students of dance history, who have to differentiate between a number of dances or figures with this same name.

Just as, earlier, the French cotillon had increased its share of the dance programme at the expense of the progressive dance in the English manner, so the *allemande cotillon* began to be favoured over the French form and by the 1780s and 1790s they were the major content of published collections.

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The Revolution and its aftermath

It is at this point we come to the revolution of 1778.

The immediate effect was to remove from public show anything that could possibly be associated with royalty or the court. Dancing masters were quick to remove from their dance lists all the old 'noble' style dances; even the minuet's long life was curtailed. As the mass killings increased, one might be forgiven for thinking that public dancing of any sort would cease. Surprisingly, this was not so.

Even when 'The Terror' was at its peak, people danced. It would appear that people – that is, the ordinary townspeople – took to dancing as a means of distracting their minds from the famine and distress surrounding them on all sides. They danced, for the most part, in circles or squares of the cotillon type. As well as the cotillon there was a return to the old circle dances of the *branle* type: dances more suitable for the venue of the street, as halls where the public might gather – perhaps to conspire – had been shut by the authorities. Looking at such new dances as were published at this time, we see the effects of shortages: the paper is of poor quality, diagrams are omitted. It can be seen that the dancers are no longer called Ladies and Gentlemen; now, one's fellow dancers must be referred to as Citizen and Citizeness. The authors of new cotillons also felt it necessary to change the style of titles for their dances. New dances were given names such as *The Rights of Man*, *La Robespierre*, *La Guillotine*, *La Bonaparte*.

As the height of The Terror passed, there was a general desire for a return to normality and dancing increased in popularity. Dancing became, in fact, a craze – the favourite pastime of all. One reason for this was the availability of many more venues for public dancing – the convents and monasteries, which had been emptied by the bloodthirsty, anti-religious revolutionaries. Balls were held in the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, at the Convent of Saint Mary and at the Carmelite Monastery. A contemporary complained, 'All the violin players are booked three weeks ahead.' This craze for dancing would continue to increase for many years and reach its peak in Paris around 1810.

It cannot be said that the cotillons composed during the revolution were of a particularly high standard. They were, for the most part, arrangements of standard figures, the main, or 'chorus' figure, being usually quite short. In order to increase sales, the dances were often set to popular revolutionary songs of the day. This must have made for difficulty in dancing them, as many of such songs have appalling tunes. Consider the difference between the music composed by Lully for his opera *Euridice*, in use for a cotillon just before the revolution, and a revolutionary song used for a similar dance during the revolution: 'Ça Ira'.

I personally think that 'Ça Ira' is a terrible tune for a dance, and I am not alone in this. In his book *The Companion to the Ballroom*, Thomas Wilson, the

London dancing master, remarks on the difficulty of fitting steps to it when it was used for an English country dance in 1816. It was perhaps difficult to find a suitable tune to fit a dance called *La Guillotine* but someone certainly rose to the challenge.

Even after the peak of the bloodshed had passed, fear of informers reporting some passing remark and the resulting trouble with the authorities, led dancers to form into cliques of people with similar tastes and opinions. It was safer to mix only with people you knew well. Balls themselves tended to be specialised: that is to say, balls for workers in the same trade or profession. Balls for shopkeepers, balls for market porters. Even when various ranks of society attended the same ball the more prosperous would dress down to make themselves less conspicuous. The harmony between the clientele at such a ball was superficial, restricted to good manners, no intimacy. Mercier, writing in his book *Paris*, remarked on the triviality of any exchanges at these balls. For safety's sake, one was careful of what one said. Mercier says '... a crowd of two hundred women dancing in silence must be a peculiarity of the French.'

Napoleon

When Napoleon came to power, the new high society that formed around him was of a very different background and education from that of the court of Louis XIV. Those of the old royal court had all received an education in the classics of French literature, art and history, and social intercourse and conversation between them was easy. The new high society included a few remnants of the old nobility, high-ranking officers of the army and their wives, and those who had become rich through profiteering in munitions and supplies. This mixture had very little in common, and social intercourse proved very difficult.

The situation was saved, and society stabilised, by the increased interest in dancing that I mentioned earlier. The general interest in dance, the ballet, and particularly in the newly developing form of a square dance for eight, the quadrille, was to unite the new high society in a common culture. At a ball, difficulties in conversation were minimised: one talked of the dance and the dancers. Entry into the new high society no longer depended on one's birth or education; what was important was one's ability to dance well. This effected a swift change in the dance repertoire.

During the Revolution and immediately afterwards, dances of the cotillon type were favoured because of the anonymity of the participants. All danced at the same time. No one was singled out for particular attention. One, as we say, kept one's head down. Now, in order to gain entry to the newly constituted high society, it was essential to be noticed, and one way to do this was to gain proficiency in the more flamboyant steps and to use them in passages in the dance where one danced solo. Quadrilles themselves changed their

character to include more solo passages. Keen dancers began to take private lessons from well-respected members of the ballet and it became the custom to use professional dancers to give a demonstration of their abilities during a ball.

This cult of individual technical proficiency tended to reduce sociability in the ballroom. Many young ladies refused to take part in quadrilles composed around 1810 for fear of exposing their inability to perform the solo passages well. Some balls deteriorated into a series of demonstrations by the more technically proficient of those present. A contemporary wrote 'Of twenty women invited, nineteen refused' and 'In the old days one danced at a ball, today one watches ballets there.'

After reaching, as I have said, a peak around 1810, there came the inevitable reaction against the cult of the individual and from then on quadrilles became more sociable. By the time the quadrille was well established in London society around 1815, a sensible balance had been established between quadrilles involving solo passages and those that did not. In the longest lasting and most popular set of quadrilles, known in England as the *First Set*, the only quadrille to retain a solo passage was *Pastourelle*. By 1850 *Pastourelle* itself was modified to remove this anomaly.

Summary of the French experience

In France, the main effect of the Revolution on the repertoire of social dance was the removal of any passages that glorified or revealed individuality. With the re-establishment of high society under Napoleon, this trend was reversed, the cult of the individual dancer peaking around 1810, equality gradually re-establishing itself in the following years. Throughout the whole period, from the Revolution to the Empire, the ball repertoire retained some of the old favourite circle dances, such as *Boulangère* and *la Carillon de Dunkirke*. These were interspersed between cotillons and helped to retain the general sociability of a ball. The *Carillon de Dunkirke*, in particular, was very simple and included some hand-clapping. The English longways dances never fell completely out of favour, and the minuet itself reappeared in a minor role, usually early in a ball programme and used by many to assess the standard of dance to be expected of a prospective partner.

From 1800 there also appeared the new couple dance: the waltz, danced only, at first, by those in high society, married ladies and their partners. This was the forerunner of all the other couple dances to arrive in the 1840s. The waltz, at its introduction, was performed to much simpler tunes than those used later. They still had many of the characteristics of those used for the *ländler* from which the dance evolved.

England

The effect of the French Revolution on the dance

repertoire in England was delayed for about ten years. This gap was the result of, first, the internal confusion in France due to the Revolution itself, and, later, the war between England and France, resolved in 1815 by the battle of Waterloo.

In England the programme of a ball in the late 18th century was generally arranged as follows. Between 6pm and 8pm the musicians played minuets. All those wishing to show their ability at this dance would perform it, one couple at a time. A good chance to show one's technical skill, expensively acquired. From 8 o'clock until the final dance, the programme would consist of English progressive longways country dances. Occasionally a few French contrivances of the cotillon type were introduced, always near the beginning of the programme. The figures of the cotillons, unlike the country dances, could not be acquired on the night of the ball; they had to be practised for some weeks beforehand. Thus their number was restricted and only a few used in any one year.

By the time Napoleon was defeated, high society in London had become thoroughly bored with the longways dance. It had, after all, been around for a very long time – over one hundred years. Having escaped a revolution themselves, the English did not feel the necessity to restrict their actions or

conversation for fear of their own safety. Dances of the cotillon type were therefore perhaps less appealing in England than in France. Some evidence for this is the relative scarcity of published cotillons in England.

Around 1807 both the waltz and the quadrille invaded Britain. The waltz was at first only performed as a couple dance by high society in London. In the lower strata of society its attractive tunes were substituted for reels or jigs, to give birth to the waltz country dances. The waltz was only gradually accepted as a couple dance and those regions of the United Kingdom separated from London by distance and poor transport, did not make it a major part of their programmes until the 1870s. The quadrille had a much better reception. Shorn of its wilder solo passages by 1815, it was ideally suited to replace the longways country dance. It had new tunes, interesting figures and moreover it gave the young people of the day more opportunity to converse away from chaperones. The waltz and quadrille were thenceforward to reign supreme in the British ballroom until the last years of Victoria's reign.

*In conclusion, I should like to acknowledge my debt to the French dance historian Monsieur Guilcher, from whose book *La Contredanse* I have quoted extensively in this paper.*