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Dancing Masters at the Court of Burgundy: Some facts, speculations and conjectures

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The following paper is dedicated to the memory of Peggy Dixon and David Wilson who did so much to further our understanding of the dances of the Burgundian Courts.

Introduction -- What are we talking about?

It is generally believed that the *basse danse* emerged from within the courts of the Dukes of Burgundy during the early part of the 15th century and reached its highest point of development with the creation of the extraordinary manuscript MS 9085 now in the Bibliotheque Royale de Belgique in Brussels (and generally referred to as the Brussels MS). The notes of the music and the dance text are drawn in silver ink upon black-dyed velum – with the lines of the stave in gold. It is made up of 25 single leaves (each approximately A5 in size) and contains the descriptions and music for 58 dances, together with an explanatory text in the first six pages.

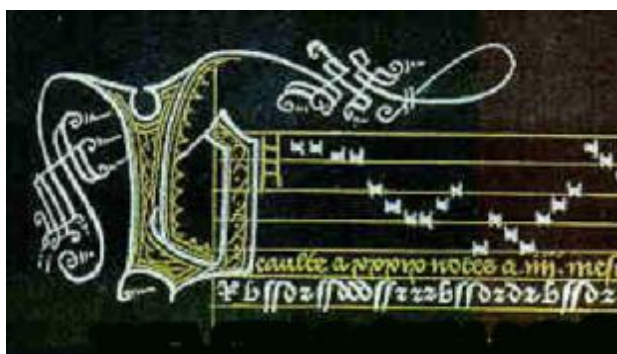


Fig. 1. The Brussels MS (detail)

Following the masterly work of Hertz in the late 1950s in decoding and analysing MS 9085 and the later efforts by Wilson and Dixon to refine the step descriptions, we have a very good idea of how to interpret this document as a dance choreography. A number of puzzles still remain, however, including the

determination of an accurate date for its creation. The MS is generally believed to have been created around 1470 (Crane, 1968) or possibly in the 1490s (Hertz, 1963), but the range could be anywhere between 1450 and 1500.¹

Along with the problem of dating the point of creation of the manuscript we have the even more tantalising problem of identifying its creator:

“[Even] in the highly refined aesthetic atmosphere of the court of Burgundy in the fifteenth century, the identity of the persons in charge of dance remains obscure. It is not known who compiled the beautiful black-and-gold-and-silver Brussels *basse danse* manuscript nor who developed the subtle technique needed for the proper execution of its repertory.” (Brainard, 1998).

In other words, who were the dancing masters, the ‘persons in charge of the dance’, that lay behind this enigmatic work?

A similar collection of dances, showing considerable overlap with the Brussels MS, was produced as a printed publication by Michel Toulouze in Paris at some time in the 1490s. A number of other publications, some again showing an overlap with Toulouze and the Brussels MS, appear in the early years of the 16th century. In addition there are a few informal and fragmentary hand-written lists that relate to the same dance form. None can be dated to any period prior to the Brussels MS except for a single hand-written page showing six dances -- generally referred to as the Nancy MS, dating from 1445 -- which show some similarities to the *basse danse*. These will be discussed in more detail later.

In the first half of the 16th century, following Toulouse, a number of publications in France, England and many other parts of Europe refer in one form or another to the *basse danse*, indicating its widespread distribution. Among the most important is the work by Arena (1529), discussed in detail below. By the time of Arbeau (1588), however, the dance was regarded as very old fashioned.



Fig. 2. Page from Toulouse, showing *Filles a marier* (middle) and *Le Petit Rouen*

The enigma of the *basse danse*

The *basse danse* has frequently been regarded as ‘enigmatic’. Initially this view was created by the great puzzle as to how the description contained in the Brussels MS should be interpreted in order to create the dance and the accompanying music. To a large extent this problem has more or less been solved. The steps (*single*, *double*, *reprise*, etc.) are encoded by single letters, s, d, r, and so on, and their interpretation is generally agreed (Wilson, 84/85). The accompanying music is created from the *cantus firmus* or *tenor* line, by a process of ‘improvisation’ in which the long notes, all of equal length, serve as a framework

around which a musical form can be created by the instrumentalists, such as the loud wind band or *alta capella* (Heartz, 1963). We also are generally agreed on how the steps match these long notes and at what tempo the dance should proceed, along with the appropriate underlying rhythm (Dixon, Wilson, et al).

In addition, the internal structure of the *basse danse* choreographies has been thoroughly explored and illuminated in the work of Wilson (1984/85) and others (eg. Meylan, 1968). Without going into any detail here, it is possible to break down any *basse danse* into a set of from 3 to 6 ‘measures’, each of which is made up of a sequence of steps from the basic repertoire of *singles*, *doubles*, *reprises*, etc., beginning with ‘ss’ and ending with ‘b’ (for *branle*). Furthermore, *singles* occur only in twos, while *doubles* and *reprises* may occur only in sequences of 1, 3, or 5. Thus for the dance ‘Filles a Marier’ shown above we have the 32 notes set out in 4 measures thus:

R b ss ddd ss rrr b
 ss d rrr b
 ss ddd ss rrr b
 ss d rrr b

Similarly for ‘Le petit Rouen’ (in 40 notes and 5 measures):

R b ss dddd rrr b
 Ss d rrr b
 Ss ddd rrr b
 Ss d rrr b
 Ss ddd rrr b

There are 13 dances common to the Brussels MS and Toulouse in which the music is the same but the step sequences are different (Wilson, 84/85) – that is, the same tune can have different choreographies. Furthermore, the 51 relevant dances in the Brussels MS (seven being omitted from consideration as not conforming to standard *basse danse* structure) are associated with 31 choreographies. In Toulouse, 48 dances have 28 choreographies (Wilson, 84/85). In other words, it is frequently found that the same step sequence is associated with different sequences of musical notes.

What this would seem to imply is that the **choreography** may come first, chosen so as to conform to the ‘general rules’ for constructing a ‘proper’ *basse danse*, then a suitable *cantus firmus* is found (or created) with the correct number of notes to match the sequence of steps in the choreography.² The practice of composing new music, or adapting a pre-existing tune to fit a choreography was a common feature at this time.

But what does it mean?

Despite such analyses of all the known descriptions of *basse danse* -- totalling in excess of 300 examples and going over a period of some 100 years (Wilson 84/85) -- there are still some puzzles remaining. Chief of these is what does it all **mean?** -- what function did the *basse danse* serve? The steps are extremely limited in number (namely four, plus the *reverence*) and seem almost absurdly simple in execution (compared say to those of 15th century Italy). At the same time, the rules for combining these steps into a dance seem wilfully complex.³

A second puzzle is how the dances were created and how they were transmitted. In other words, who were the choreographers and who the dancing masters?

A third puzzle is to do with the music. If a tune may have more than one choreography then how do the performers know which to choose? Conversely, if a choreography might fit more than one tune, how is it decided which is meant? More generally how were the dances and dancers coordinated with the music and musicians?⁴

In the following sections we shall address each of these three questions in turn in an attempt to find the answers or at least to conjecture possible solutions. Before proceeding with this, however, here is a summary of our principal conjecture on how the dance was created and performed (at least in the early part of the 15th century):

The *basse danse* was ‘created’, ‘improvised’, or ‘memorised’ by the lead (male) dancer. His partner (together with any following couples)

would simply copy his moves. The musical accompaniment was most likely pipe and tabor (rather than *alta capella*, as suggested by Hertz) and it was the job of the musician to find a suitable tune, once given the number of step measures in the dance. Arriving together on the final note with the final *branle* was a primary objective. No teaching in any formal sense was involved – the basic art was learnt primarily by observation, though the taborer may have had an important role in its dissemination. Later in the 15th century (or early 16th century) a process of ‘democratisation’ reduced the number and complexity of *basse danses* to a few simple recognisable forms.

Meaning and social function of the *basse danse*

To understand the social context of *basse danse*, a brief outline of the historical background is necessary (see, for example, Prevenier & Blockmans, 1986). The domain of the Burgundian Netherlands was established in 1384 when Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, acquired control of the lands around Flanders, through his wife Margaret of Male, on the death of her father, Count Louis of Male. Philip was the brother of Charles V, King of France (1364-1380). Over the next one hundred years the domain under the control of the Burgundian Dukes expanded to include most of the Netherlands region. **Philip the Bold** (ruled from 1363-1404) was succeeded by his son **John the Fearless** (1404-1419) and then by **Philip the Good** (1419-1467) and **Charles the Bold** (1467-1477). Many of the lands between Burgundy and the Burgundian Netherlands (including the region around Nancy) remained under French control, however, until 1465. They were lost again in 1477 on the death of Charles the Bold at the Battle of Nancy, when an army of Swiss mercenaries under the control of Louis XI of France defeated that of Burgundy. At this point the Burgundian Empire collapses and is partitioned between the Hapsburg Empire to the east and France to the west (although the Burgundian Netherlands remains as a distinct entity for several decades more and well into the 16th century, but under the control of the Hapsburg court of

Maximilian I). Along with this dissolution goes the wide-spread dissipation of its cultural artifacts – including the *basse danse*.

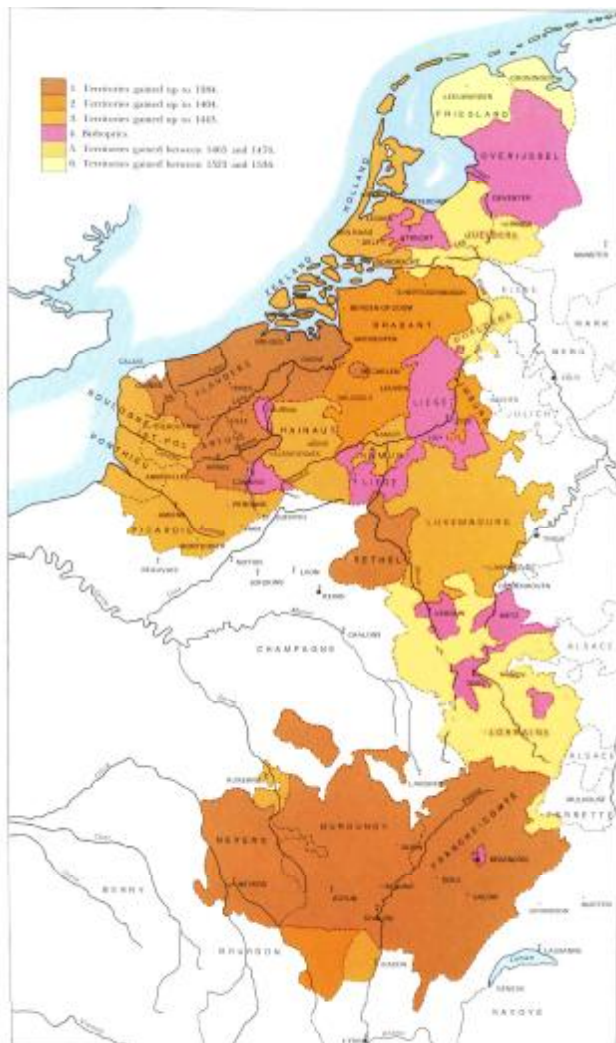


Fig. 3. Map of Burgundian domains, showing date of acquisition (Prevenier & Blockmans, 1986)

Through much of this period, the towns of Flanders (Ghent, Bruges, Brussels, etc.) were very wealthy through trade with England and other parts of Europe, to which they had easy access via the sea. Taxation of this wealth in turn formed the basis of the wealth of the Burgundian Court. At the same time the language and cultural differences meant there were frequent hostilities between the Flemish-speaking towns-people and their French-speaking masters.⁵ This provides the social and political environment in which the *basse danse* arises. It is the product of a wealthy court, somewhat isolated from and frequently at war with the general populace over which it rules.

Following the murder of John the Fearless at the French court in 1419, the Burgundians were even at war with their co-linguists (forming instead a defensive alliance with England). In such a situation court ritual becomes very important as a means of reinforcing internal bonds between courtly allies.⁶

The *basse danse* can thus be viewed as an essential part of court ritual, designed to reinforce bonds between members of that court, and to exclude all but a few selected persons from outside the court environment – perhaps to include foreign ambassadors of friendly states, but almost certainly not the local gentry (at least in its early years). ‘Hermetic’, ‘arcane’, ‘exclusive’ and ‘formal’ – these could all be words to describe the Burgundian *basse danse*.

The creation and transmission of *basse danse*

In a feudal society, courtly education was experiential, with young gentlemen sent as pages into the household service to perfect by example their deportment and learning – a custom that persisted well into the early modern era and no doubt was common within the Burgundian court circles of the early 15th century. Such ‘young gentlemen’ would in time be given administrative roles within the court or serve as ambassadors to the courts of neighbouring principalities.

In addition to a cadre of ‘civil servants’ or administrators, to control their fractious Netherlands colonies they would also need an army, along with a loyal and reliable officer corps. Much of this would have been recruited from among the minor nobility of the Burgundian homelands to the south, set at some remove from their Netherlands possessions. This, too, would need to be trained.

‘Experiential learning’ may well have been adequate for the acquisition of skills in *basse danse*. The individual steps are not complicated and the choreographies are based on a limited set of formal rules (rather than on the aesthetic imagination of an ‘artist-choreographer’). The rules of ‘deportment’ are likewise best demonstrated by the example of others. This is quite different from

the procedure of dance creation and instruction that one sees in Italy at this time.

The nearest analogy is with military training. Again this is rule-based and designed to instil discipline, as well as to ensure an automatic and appropriate response in the heat of battle. It would not be unreasonable to compare the arcane ritual of the *basse danse* with the parade-ground drills of the modern army or the sword-play drills of the 15th century knight.

But what about the women? Here is a somewhat contentious assertion: The Burgundian *basse danse* was a dance in which men displayed their unerring ability to learn a complex sequence of steps and to perform them with some modicum of grace, while women demonstrated their ability to follow a male lead in a suitably subservient fashion. For, unlike the *balli* or *bassa danze* of Italy, where both male and female participants had to learn their respective parts (which were usually different) the *basse danse* requires **only** the male to know the sequence of steps (while the individual steps – single, double, branle, etc. -- were sufficiently elementary to be universally understood).⁷

To substantiate this rather bold claim we need to look in some detail at the descriptions in the later texts – principally that of Arena (1529), who is the first to appear in the genuine guise of an ‘instructor in the art of *basse danse*’. This will be done later. Within the court environment of the Burgundian empire of several decades earlier, there is no direct evidence of there being any individual in that kind of role – nor is there any reason why there should be for, as we have already suggested, there was ample opportunity for a recently arrived young male to observe others and to practice with willing female partners.⁸

The conjecture here is that the dance sequences were created by the (male) dancers themselves, having memorised the basic rules. Standard sequences could of course also be memorised, though more kudos might be attached to coming up with one that was not

within the common repertoire. All that was then needed was that the lead dancer inform the musician(s) of the number of notes required; it was then up to his female partner (always slightly behind) and any other following couples to copy his steps – a task made easier by the relative ease with which the step sequences could be anticipated (for example, *singles* always occur in pairs and follow a *branle*; *doubles* and *reprises* always occur in odd numbers). The challenge for the leader was to satisfy all the rules and to end on the final *branle* at the same time as the musicians reached their final note!



Fig. 4. Pipe & tabor accompanying a *basse danse* (Flemish, late 15th Century)

It has even been suggested that an elaborate game might be devised in which one party gives the number of notes to be played and issues a challenge to the assembly for some bold knight to come up with a suitable sequence of steps, fulfilling all the rules. Such on-the-spot improvisation could be seriously challenging, and to fail to arrive at the final *branle* on the last note might well register as the ultimate dance floor ignominy!⁹

This introduces a very explicit ‘competitive element’ into the dance – it is a competition between the knights not only to win the favours of chosen ladies, but also to triumph over their rivals. As such it fits very well

alongside the passion for tournaments so much in evidence during the Burgundian period. It is also well-documented that at the great tournaments, the knights and ladies liked nothing better than an evening of dancing after a hard day's jousting – though one would not expect all of the dances to be in the form of competitive *basses danses*.

This idea of the *basse danse* as 'self-created', or perhaps even improvised, goes some way towards answering the frequently posed question of just why there are so many of them (nearly 100 separate choreographies in total) all of which are very similar to each other.

Realisation of music for *basse danse*

This brings us to our third puzzle: Who played for the *basse danse* and what did this performance involve? One possible lead towards an answer is suggested in Rheinhard Strohm's book *Music in Late Medieval Bruges*:

"The famous dancing festivities of the Burgundian Court were also arranged partly by the city. Besides the 'open' ball in the palace there were balls in the reception room of the new town hall in the *burg*. This room had a balcony for the musicians, of just the kind illustrated in many Burgundian manuscripts. According to the miniatures, three players were normally active at a time. These minstrels of the city – *not to be confused with the courtly dancing master on the ballroom floor with flute and tabor* – played dance music from their own repertory." [italics mine] (Strohm, 1985, p84)

The implication here is that there were a range of dance activities, from regular balls in the town hall, to 'open' balls at the palace (to which at least the gentry might be invited) to rather more exclusive affairs at which the court dancing master with pipe and tabor might preside. Is it only at the latter that the *basse danse* is performed? Such evidence as we have, iconographic and otherwise, would seem to suggest as much, at least for the early part of the 15th century. Later – post the 1477 dissolution – the *basse danse* becomes more

widespread and reaches well into the domain of the upper gentry (Arena, 1529).

Although we have suggested that there was no clear function for a dancing master, it may be that the *taborer* comes closest to filling this role. If his job was to accompany the *basse danse* then it would be he who must have within his repertoire 'a tune for every numerical requirement'. This is in itself a demanding role – a good many of the 70 or so *basse danse* tenors documented would need to be memorised and played on demand and without error.¹⁰ The three-man *alta capella*, on the other hand, would be less restricted in what they might play – their skill lay in being able to improvise three-part counterpoint over a memorised tenor, but a more limited range of tenors would be adequate (which may explain why almost all written-out improvisations relate to just one tenor, the *Spagna*).¹¹ A reasonable division of labour would suggest they might leave the *basse danse* accompaniment to the *taborer*. This would go some way towards explaining why so many illustrations, albeit from a later period and usually from German lands, show two groups of musicians in the gallery – the *alta* band, and a flute & drum combo (the German equivalent of the French/Burgundian pipe & tabor).

There is also the question of sound level – an *alta* band (with its two shawms and trumpet) generates a seriously loud noise, excellent for cutting through a crowd of rowdy dancers jiggling about to a *saltarello* or *haute danse*, but far more than is necessary to accompany a sedate *basse danse* involving no more than three or four couples (and perhaps only one). Support for this idea again comes from Arena (1529), although he is referring to a later period and slightly different context: "country folk ('gent de village') want reed instruments; for them a good flute is worthless" (Arena, p19).¹²

That leaves only the technical question of how to perform the *basse danse* music effectively on pipe & tabor. It is perhaps unfortunate that few musicians have taken up

this once noble instrument to show us how this might actually be done. Most current musical effort has been expended on trying to solve the problem of creating 3-part improvisations for the *alta capella* – often with rather disappointing results as far as providing a ‘danceable’ accompaniment goes.¹³ On the pipe & tabor, on the other hand, it is relatively easy to create a ‘lightly ornamented tenor’ with an appropriate rhythmic underlay that is entirely adequate as accompaniment to *basse danse*. An example of such simple ornamentation is the familiar tune of *Rosti Bolli* from the Italian repertoire – which closely follows the *basse danse* tenor of the same name in the Brussels MS and Toulouse (Crane, p99). In the Hapsburg domains during the first half of the 16th century, it appears to have been the flute and drum that filled the role of the one-man pipe & tabor, perhaps allowing slightly more freedom in the improvisation.

Much of the above may seem rather speculative at this stage. In the following sections the original sources will be explored to see if there is significant support for these assertions.

The Brussels MS and Toulouse

What do these dance manuals represent and what do they tell us?

Brussels MS

Our primary (in fact, almost solitary) source of information on *basse danse* for the earlier period is the Brussels MS. The most obvious thing about this object is the extraordinary care with which it has been produced – gold and silver on black vellum -- and the most obvious question is why? Only five other MSs of this kind are known to exist, all dating from the 1460s (Crane).

Significantly, it contains not only a ‘crib’ for creating a *basse danse* to each of the 50 or so tenors, but also instructions on how to perform the steps, along with the rules that the choreographies must obey. As to how or why it was compiled we have very little to go on. Wilson (EDC Annual Lecture 2003) has

stated that it was ‘apparently commissioned by Françoise of Luxembourg to grace the library of her friend Marguerite of Austria, probably between 1497 and 1502’. Hartz (1963) also supports this later date. Crane (1968) on the other hand places it in the 1470s. Assuming the later date makes it more or less contemporaneous with Toulouse.

Unfortunately it gives us little direct information about the **context** of the *basse danse*, except to indicate that it must have been of considerable importance to the Burgundian Court to warrant such a lavish reproduction. It can also be inferred that the dance was intended to be very exclusive – for no handbook of common dances of ‘town and country’ would ever have been produced in this fashion.

Part of the puzzle is its distinctive colouring. What did black mean to the Burgundians? Do the other black vellum MSs give any clue? It was certainly a signifier of status – Philip the Good is frequently depicted clad wholly in black, with only a modest adornment of gold and silver. What might be implied from the fact of one woman giving it to another (if that was indeed the case)? Was it perhaps a symbol of mourning for a lost world? The year 1477 represents the high point and watershed for the Burgundian empire, from which it gradually falls away to be subsumed under France and Austria. Mary, daughter of Charles the Bold marries Maximilian of Austria, while losing control of all French possessions in the years following 1477. Her daughter, Marguerite of Austria, however, retains governorship over the Flemish regions until 1530. Is it therefore some kind of memento for times past?

Toulouse

If the Brussels MS and Toulouse are contemporaneous, as Hartz (1963) suggests, then it creates something of a problem for the idea of exclusivity expressed above. Toulouse was a **printed** publication, not a one-off manuscript. It was therefore designed to be quite widely distributed through multiple copies, rather than the exclusive property of

one individual. In other words it is **intended** to break the spell of exclusivity. Was it perhaps created as some sort of pirated edition from the same compilation of dances that were used as the basis for the Brussels MS?



Fig. 5. Philip the Good (in black and gold) with some of his courtiers

Unlike the Brussels MS, the Toulouse publication was clearly intended to provide a key for entrée into the exclusive world of the court for ambitious members of the gentry. An earlier example of this is recounted in Hartz (1963): In 1473-75 a rich merchant of Calais paid one Thomas Rede, harper to teach him forty dances, seven songs and a hornpipe on his two instruments, harp and lute, and also for dancing lessons “ffor my byll off ffortyng off bass daunssys”. Unfortunately he does not say if this was sufficient to gain him entry to court.

The dance of war and the dance of peace

While the overlap between Brussels and Toulouse is considerable – the text and dance list are almost identical – there is one small feature of difference that may or may not be significant. Where the text in Brussels reads:

“se nomme basse danse pour ce que on la joue selon majeur parfait, et pour ce que quant on la danse on va en **paix** sans soy demener le plus gracieusement que on peult”.

Toulouse reads: “...on va en **pays** sans soy demener le plus gracieusement que on peult”. Paix or Pays? – Peace or Country? The two words are in fact interchangeable, but the

sentence meaning is ambiguous. Dixon (84/85) explores this issue in some detail, noting that most commentators opt for something like ‘serenely’. But Melusine Wood (1982) interprets it as meaning ‘in country fashion’ without courtly airs or graces! Her use of this interpretation to imply that the *basse danse* must therefore be of ‘lowly origin’, rather than a courtly dance, simply serves to illustrate the problem of understanding this enigmatic dance form.

But another way of looking at this is more general: what both Brussels and Toulouse are implying is that the *basse danse* is a dance of peace as opposed to a dance of war. The ‘pyrrhic’ dance, or the dance of war, is of very old and universal origin. We have relics of this in the form of sword or battle dances such as Buffens (Arbeau) and the two different kinds of dance have existed side by side for centuries. It is a curious fact, and may be significant in this regard, that whereas a *cantus firmus* based on the well-known tune *L’Homme Armée* – supposedly created as a call-to-arms on the occasion of the attempt to form a new Crusade in the 1450s -- formed the basis for over 50 mass compositions, it does not appear at all among the 70-odd *basse danse* tenors (Wright, 2001).

Much has been written on the transformation from warrior to courtly society and the centrality of dance in this process has been frequently acknowledged: ‘Dancing was one of the physical practices that proved useful in transforming the feudal warrior to a renaissance gentleman’ (Howard, 1998). Central to this discussion is Thomas Elyot’s *Boke of the Governor* (1531) which presents a manual of instruction not only for the basic steps of the *basse danse*, but also for the manner in which they are to be executed, including the relationship between the male – in the lead role – and his female partner: “now it behoove the dancers and also the beholders of them to know all the qualities incident to a man, and also to a woman likewise appertaining” (Elyot, Fols 82v-83r). It is clear from Elyot’s instructions that the dance is highly gendered. It is also clear from his

descriptions that the dancing of the elite in this early modern period was evolving into “a means of courtly self-fashioning, an instrument for the acquisition and exercise of social power” (Howard). It was this process of ‘self-fashioning’ that characterised the emergence of the self-made courtier, moving up from the class of gentry (often via the legal profession – as in the case of Thomas More and many others) to that of the controlling aristocracy. This, of course, was precisely the audience of Arena, Coplande, Elyot and others in this first half of the 16th century.

In the earlier period, however, the courtly dance was still imbued with a sense of mystery to which the novice, who might wish to become a knight, must be initiated – not from books of instruction but by patient observation of his courtly superiors. It is not surprising, therefore, that the court rituals of the Burgundians appear to be filled with symbolism and numerology. In the case of the music of this period, this has been much explored by musicologists, for example in the studies by Willem Elders on the polyphony of Flemish composers such as Dufay, Josquin, etc. There has been relatively little attempt to explore this area, however, in the case of dance, though there is a brief discussion in Elyot’s *Boke* of the numerological meaning behind such things as the three steps of the *double*, or the two of the *single*, for example. The most detailed investigation of possible symbolism behind the formal structures of the *basse danse* is that of Meylan (1968), though again the focus is on the music rather than the dance steps themselves.

It has often been remarked as puzzling why there should be so many *basse dances*, all looking more or less the same. As suggested above, part of the answer lies in their function, which was not to provide a variety of visual entertainment for a watching audience, but to satisfy the participants of a court ritual. In this respect they are quite unlike the dances of 15th century Italy. Nevertheless, much of the symbolism behind this court ritual still remains to be decoded.

Arena and the 16th century dancing masters

The first document to which we can attach an author’s name and which can truly qualify as a manual for instruction in the art of *basse danse* is Antonius Arena’s *Leges Dansandi* (or The Rules of Dancing) first published in 1529, and later running to as many as 50 editions between 1529 and 1770 (Marrocco, et al). This extraordinary output is a measure both of the popularity of the book and of the demand for instruction in the art of *basse danse* – rather surprising, given that it was written in macaronic Latin accessible only to a relatively narrow range of the populace (mostly law students).

By 1529, however, the form of the *basse danse* had changed. No longer did it show the elaborate complexities recorded in the Brussels MS, but in a form reduced to a much simplified single ‘*basse danse commune*’ (though he does list for convenience the choreographies of some 58 ‘*basse dances incommune*’ – which he warns are not often danced at great banquets but only in the more intimate surroundings among friends, and even then with caution).

But Arena was not in any real sense a dancing master (in the manner of the Italians, Domenico or Guglielmo, say). He was more an enthusiastic amateur with a gift for imparting this enthusiasm to others. The value and interest in this work lies not so much in the choreographies, as in the additional information he provides of the social context in which the *basse danse* took place.

“Whosoever desires to learn the fair *basse danse* and quickly become perfect in the art, let him make an effort to memorize this book which describes the way to dance correctly. It is a fine thing for young men to dance in time and to move their feet neatly and in the right way; and it is proper that refined folk do not make mistakes when they are dancing; to dance badly is a great disgrace.”

With this opening statement of Arena, we see *basse danse* moving well away from its origins in the Burgundian court and into the

rising world of the French gentry, eager to realise their new-found ambitions for upward mobility:

“But since no professor, past or present, has ever taught you the way to dance, I have now decided to teach you various dances and good dancing styles.”

There then follows some general instructions on how to comport oneself on the dance floor and how to execute the four basic steps. He also remarks on the importance of knowing the number of steps in each dance, implying that it was up to the dancer to say which dance was wanted, and how many steps. If the taborer then got it wrong -- resulting in the dancers not landing on the last note with the final *branle* -- there would be serious trouble (recalling the poem by Coquillart (1482), noted earlier).

The treatise is quite specific that pipe & tabor is considered the only appropriate instrument to accompany the *basse danse*, dismissing reed instruments (ie. shawms) as only of interest to country folk and that

“I will certainly not impart my rules for dancing to that crowd, since even if they were to learn the *basse danse* these rustic progeny would not be able to acquire the style”.

“When you have memorised these passages, take the trouble to find a pipe and tabor player who is also a good teacher of the dances. Unskilled taborers will never teach you to be skilful; no-one can teach what he does not know. He must know how to whistle many new dances and how to play them well.” He finally admonishes: “pay the flute-player generously and you will quickly become an expert”. To further advance one’s skill he then recommends observing good dancers in order to copy their style and “to frequent banquets and observe closely the dancing of those who can dance well”.

Although written some 100 years after the assumed beginnings of the *basse danse* in the Burgundian Court, the prescriptions in Arena give a very good idea of the way things are likely to have operated in the earlier period. Firstly, the instructions are directed

exclusively towards young men – no mention is made of how females are to learn the *basse danse*. The implication is that they simply follow the male lead and, furthermore, “only two must dance the *basse danse*, as a pair when the flute plays.” Once the basic steps have been mastered, the learning of style is by observation of others more skilled, or else from a good taborer -- there is no ‘dancing master’ in the Italian sense.

With the publication and widespread distribution of Arena, the *basse danse* moves into the public domain – it is no longer simply the preserve of court circles. This idea was expressed some decades ago in the seminal study of the *basse danse* by Daniel Hertz (1963). Hertz’s general thesis is that with the dissolution of the Burgundian court, following the defeat of 1477, the *basse danse* becomes more widely disseminated, in particular by the emerging profession or trade of dancing master such as typified by Arena and Arbeau:

“With the agent of its transmission an itinerant pedlar who taught his skills for a fee, a mercantile discourse evolved that resonated with transactions, vocations, and deals.” (Howard, p50)

As with Arena, Arbeau also suggests that the most appropriate accompaniment for a *basse danse* is the pipe and tabor – although he does allow that the fashion for using shawms and trumpets is gaining ground, but is not necessarily an indication of good taste:

“Nowadays there is no workman so humble that he does not wish to have hautboys and sackbuts at his wedding.” (Arbeau, 1588, p51)

Taborers at the Burgundian Court

The texts examined so far date mostly from the 16th century and are looking at the *basse danse* in retrospect, at the end of perhaps over 100 years of development. Nevertheless they do give some clue as to who might be cast in the role of dancing master -- namely, the court taborer.

Returning to the earlier period, we can examine the (fortunately numerous) court

records for evidence of taborers at the Burgundian Court, and of their role within the court. In the period of Philip the Bold (1363-1404) their presence is well-documented (Wright). As early as 1364, when Philip journeyed from Paris to Dijon formally to receive the duchy of Burgundy he had a taborer, Henri Baudet, in his service. Louis of Male (Count of Flanders and father-in-law to Philip the Bold) has two taborers listed in his accounts for 1375, one of whom – Claus Tabourin -- transfers to the court of Philip in 1378 (filling the place of Henri Baudet, who had since died) and serves the duke for the next 24 years. Claus is sometimes referred to in the records as ‘l’Alement’ and was almost certainly Flemish. The full complement of instrumental musicians at Philip’s court in 1378 consisted of three wind players (Nicolas Alfons, Louis Mulier and Jean de Dinant), a taborer (Claus Tabourin), and two trumpeters (Nicolas de la Marche and Berthelemi Lyon). The significance of this grouping is that it shows the presence of three distinct musical units: the *alta capella* of three winds (probably three shawms at this stage), the taborer (ie. pipe & tabor), and the trumpet ensemble, each with a distinct musical function within the court.

The minstrels of Philip the Bold, who were chosen from the servile class and remained in it, were ranked at court in the same general category as messengers, bakers and cooks. The chance for social or professional advancement at court were strictly limited. On the other hand the opportunities for monetary gain were almost limitless. In addition to daily wages, pensions, housing grants and monies earned on special feast days, the minstrels were annually given large sums simply in recognition of their “bons et agreable services”. The total income from all sources which each received in an average year approached four hundred francs, an amount almost ten times that of a typical skilled mason, carpenter, or town minstrel of this period (Wright p43). Claus Taborin, for example, had sufficient resources to maintain his own house in Paris.

On the death of Philip the Bold in 1404, most of his minstrels were not retained in the employment of his son, John the Fearless (Wright, p 44). Many were elderly after 30 years in the employ of Philip, so retired on pensions. In fact, John did not employ significant numbers of new minstrels until 1407 – and then it was primarily trumpeters. This was to support the violent military campaigns with which he seemed continually to be embroiled. No mention of a taborer appears in the records of this period (though they may have been subsumed under the general title of ‘menestrel’).

After John’s death in 1419, the seven minstrels (four woodwind players and three trumpeters) in his employ were transferred to his son and successor Philip the Good (1419-1467) and most remained there for many years.

Information from the court records of the period of Philip the Good (1419-1467), is also useful in establishing the members of the court music. One surprising result is that Philip the Good does not appear ever to have had a taborer in his permanent musical entourage. His preference was for trumpeters, though he did also maintain a full complement of *alta capella* musicians, plus the occasional lutenist or harper (Marix). Although taborers are mentioned as performing at several of the great feasts, such as the Feast of the Pheasant in 1454, it appears that they probably belonged to the entourages of other nobles.¹⁴ Maugin was taborer for Adolf de Cleves, Jehan de Hastre was taborer for the ‘Grand Bastard of Burgundy’ (Cornelis, the eldest illegitimate son of Philip) while Charles d’Orleans had two taborers, Pierre Fleury and Jean de Launay (Marix p107). An indication of the high regard that taborers had within the court is the fact that Maugin accompanied Louis de Bruges, seigneur de la Gruthuse, on an ambassadorial visit to Scotland in 1460 (Marix p57).

From this distribution of taborers it would not be unreasonable to infer that dance (and *basse*

danse, in particular) may have been a much greater feature of some of the minor courts of the Burgundian domain than at that of Philip himself. Of particular interest would be those of the two eldest bastard sons Cornelis and Anthony. Both were noted for their military exploits as well as for their skills in tournament contests and at the ‘courts of love’ (meaning that their illegitimate offspring were notably numerous (Prevenier and Blockmans, 1986)). Cornelis was killed in a battle with the burghers of Ghent in 1452, after which Anthony took on his role as chief organiser of courtly festivities such as jousting tournaments (with their associated dancing).

Anthony (known as the Great Bastard of Burgundy) was also known as an avid collector and commissioner of manuscripts (Vaughan). He lived into the early years of the 16th century and would certainly have been well acquainted with the practice of *basse danse*. It is purely conjectural, of course, but he would seem to be a more likely commissioner of the Brussels MS than François of Luxembourg.

The high regard and substantial wealth that accrued to the taborers stands in rather marked contrast to the relative cheapness and ready availability of their instruments. Unlike the trumpets and shawms of the *alta capella*, the pipe and tabor was a decidedly inexpensive instrument, available to any aspiring musician.¹⁵ To gain and maintain a court appointment of such considerable value would have required more than the simple ability to play a few tunes. What this suggests is that their real role at court was to act as guardians for the semi-secret skills of the *basse danse*. Furthermore, this assumption that there was an element of secrecy to the *basse danse* may well account for the fact that we have no written records prior to the Brussels MS (except for the so-called Nancy MS – but that is another story!).

Conclusion

The following is a summary of the principal arguments of this paper.

1. The Burgundian *basse danse* is a rule-based construct – ie. it is not a choreography in the normal sense. It could be viewed as a game – any sequence of the basic steps that satisfied the rules would count as a legitimate dance. All that the musician would need to know was the number of steps or notes required. Of course it was always possible to memorize the step sequence of a dance beforehand, if only to avoid the ultimate embarrassment of ‘landing on a double when the music stopped’. But it would be just as legitimate to create your own. It was also heavily gendered: Burgundian court circles were anything but an equal opportunities society.

2. This therefore is our hypothesis: The Burgundian *basse danse* – at least in the first half of the 15th century – was ‘created’, ‘improvised’, or ‘memorized’ by the lead dancer (invariably a man, from the existing iconographic evidence – and also from Arena’s description). His partner (together, perhaps, with any following couples) would copy his moves – experience shows that it is not difficult to anticipate the likely next move given a minimum of visual or tactile clues.¹⁶ The musician would have been told beforehand how many notes to play and could be assumed to have memorised an appropriate sequence on which he might reliably create a simple improvised sequence. The challenge was to arrive together with the dancers on the final note. The underlying motive in all this was to demonstrate one’s leadership ability, memory and grace of movement to the assembled court – and thus to prove oneself worthy of membership of this elite.

3. Of course the process might easily be reversed: the musician or major domo can announce the number of notes and the challenge to the knight is to immediately create a dance that satisfies the rules and fits precisely the note sequence. Perhaps this is the significance of the joker that appears

frequently in images that look as if they might be *basse danse* representations – he is playing the role of the ‘Riddler’, teasing the knight to match the proffered number. In other words, the *basse danse* is an elaborate game of ‘*courtoisie*’, a part of the elaborate ritual of ‘courtly love’ that still flourished into the 15th century within certain parts of Europe.

4. With this image in mind, the dancing master becomes not only superfluous, but even detrimental to the basic objectives of creating a ritual of exclusivity. Unlike the court dance of the 18th century, for example, a Burgundian *basse danse* is not technically difficult to master — knowing the rules, and with a modicum of natural grace, anyone could do it. So to retain exclusivity, the rules would need to be secret, which is perhaps the reason why we have little or no record prior to the Brussels Manuscript.

5. What the Brussels manuscript, Toulouze, Arena and others represent then is the codification of the *basse danse*, followed by its popularisation, simplification, and eventual decline. From this point of view, the Brussels MS represents the beginning of the end. It is perhaps significant that it has been suggested as having been presented by a woman to another woman (Heartz/Wilson) indicating a transfer of power from the male to the female. Also, because of its extreme richness and intrinsic value, it is unlikely ever to have been widely accessible -- in this sense the information was intended to remain ‘secret’.

6. *Basse danse* accompaniment seems almost always to have been by pipe and tabor. Whereas this is confirmed by numerous references in original sources, few if any suggest that the *alta capella* (or loud wind band) was used as accompaniment for *basse danse* – though several indicate its use for other kinds of dances. The confusion is probably caused by the fact that the *alta* did play an improvised repertoire based on the same *cantus firmus* tenors as those of the *basse danse*.

7. Arena and similar publications in the 16th century represent the ‘democratisation’ of the *basse danse*. These indicate that the role of the taborer in this later period included the teaching of the dance as well as playing for it. In fact, it seems likely that the taborer may well have had some of this responsibility in the earlier period as well (although without any formal recognition of the role).

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Notes

¹ Dating the Brussels MS has been problematic. On the basis of an inscription on the fly-leaf it has been suggested that the MS “was commissioned by Françoise of Luxembourg to grace the library of her friend Marguerite of Austria, probably between 1497 and 1501” (Wilson). This was originally proposed by Heartz (1963), but discounted by Crane (1968). In view of the highly ‘gendered’ nature of the MS and also of the dance itself, it seems an unlikely commissioning. A more plausible assumption is that it was simply passed as a gift from the library of Françoise, who may have inherited it, to that of Marguerite. Crane bases his earlier dating of the 1470s on consideration of other unique features of the document: the black-dyed vellum, the formation of music note-heads, etc.

An extensive discussion of the arguments for various dates for both the Brussels MS and Toulouse is to be found in Dixon (1987). Strohm (1985) asserts that “the late date (c1500) proposed by Heartz is entirely convincing, paleographically and historically” but provides no further evidence (n44, p170).

² This is, of course, not unlike the modern procedure for creating a country dance whereby the choreography is designed first, then fitted to a suitable tune (often chosen by the band only

at the time of performance from a standard set of 'jigs and reels' within their repertoire).

³ This problem of meaning was expressed in typically forthright terms by Belinda Quirey in her book *May I have the Pleasure* (p24):

"In fact I think the whole of (French) Basse Danse is a tedious affair, guaranteed to strengthen the distaste of those like the late Henry Ford who hold that 'history is bunk'. It shows the medieval mind at its worst: a lot of finicking little rules within a rigid framework".

⁴ "The still unresolved relationship between music and dance locates the *basse danse* on the boundaries between an oral improvisatory culture and a written, replicable one, a 'bridge and border between two eras' " (Elias -- quoted in Howard, p17).

⁵ Philip the Bold, as a French prince spoke no Dutch, and while his son John the Fearless tried to learn the language he was not particularly successful at it (Prevenier and Blockmans, p260). The language issue remained a serious one even as late as 1477, when the new edicts stipulated that civil servants should be Dutch-speaking natives of the Netherlands.

⁶ In this respect, it might be compared with the ritualised life of the British Raj in India – including its highly formalised games of polo and cricket, to which limited numbers of outsiders might be admitted. On the dissolution of empire, of course, everyone gets a chance to play.

⁷ A few authors have commented on this apparent gender bias in the *basse danse*. Nathalie Dolmetsch (1976), for example, has remarked that "a possible explanation of the reason for the 'male chauvinistic' attitude of the dance treatises is that the books were written for the men, whereas the women (poor sheltered creatures) had to be taught privately by the dancing masters." It is my belief that we have an over-romanticised view of 15th century court culture, which was indeed

intensely 'male chauvinistic' and the dances simply reflect this fact. Women were not expected to learn them, but rather to follow the male lead. The contrast with the Italian dances of the same period is notable – the greater gender equality shown in the dances of Domenico and Guglielmo may be attributable to the earlier arrival of humanistic learning at the Italian courts.

⁸ Gender roles within Burgundian court circles appear to have been closely defined, but were radically different from our present-day norms. For example, it is generally agreed that Philip the Good fathered as many as 26 illegitimate children from more than 10 different women, in addition to several legitimate children from his three (successive) wives (Prevenier and Blockmans, 1986, also Vaughan, 1970). All his bastards appear to have been acknowledged and many held significant positions within the Court or Church. The mistresses, though generally kept in the background, were well-provided for and usually held places at the various princely establishments in the towns which Philip's peripatetic court regularly attended. Such behaviour appears to have been tolerated by this section of society and was not at all uncommon. The wives of course were much more restricted in their behaviour, for such rampant promiscuity would have endangered the rules of succession. Nor could they be expected to approve of such behaviour on the part of their spouses, and often retreated into the cultivation of art or religious interests to compensate. This rather extreme and somewhat negative attitude towards women must be factored into our understanding of the social context of the *basse danse* (and of courtly behaviour in general).

⁹ This idea was first expressed by Frank Perenboom at the Ghent Historical Dance Conference of 2000.

¹⁰ Coquillart's poem on the problem of what happens (and who is legally responsible) if the taborer gets it wrong is quoted at length in Hertz (1963) p307.

¹¹ *alta capella* -- Bessler's term for the loud wind band of two shawms (treble and alto) plus slide trumpet -- is frequently illustrated. That such a band existed in the Burgundian Court is indicated by a bill for instruments: two bombards and two treble shawms for 13 pounds, plus a 'trompette des menestrals' (slide trumpet) for 10 pounds (Marix p102) during the period of Philip the Good (1420-1467).

¹² There is also evidence from other sources, much of which has been collected in Mullally (1977).

¹³ Quirey: "Musicologists hold that in earlier times the air of the *basse danse* was stretched out into long notes, each the length of a quarternote and put down into the tenor. They are then covered with a great deal of drumming and extra notes in the top parts, utterly obscuring the tune from the non-specialist or non-concentrating ear. The resulting auditory cryptogram delights the musicologist ... but how anyone ever wanted to dance to it defeats me." (Quirey, 1976)

Contrary to the view of Hertz ('Hoftanz and *basse danse*', 1966) there is very little direct evidence of the *alta capella* (or loud wind band) being used to accompany the *basse danse* (as opposed to other types of dance, or to accompany events such as banquets or marriage processions). On the other hand there is considerable direct evidence (from the writings of Arena and others) that the preferred accompaniment for *basse danse* was pipe & tabor. Of the 19 pictorial references cited by Crane as possible illustrations of *basse danse*, ten involve pipe and tabor, while of the remaining nine, several are clearly not *basse danses* (being torch dances or *morescos*) while others could equally well be processions (and of these nine, only four actually show a standard *alta capella* line-up).

¹⁴ It is recorded that at the famous Feast of the Pheasant at Lille in February 1454, three taborers played together as one of the

entertainments between courses (Marix p40). The feast of the Pheasant was organised as a response to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, with the intention of mounting a new Crusade against the Saracens (though nothing in the end came of it). It may be worth noting that no dancing appears to have been recorded at this famous feast, unlike at the many jousting tournaments, where dancing after the day's events appears to have been a regular feature.

¹⁵ A slide trumpet, at 10 Flemish pounds, cost around three times as much as a shawm (Marix, p102). The daily wage for a master mason in Bruges at this period was around 10 groats (Prevenier and Blockmans), which would give the price of a shawm at around '78 days skilled labour', and 240 days for a slide trumpet (one Flemish pound = 240 Flemish groats). Assuming skilled labour today can fetch around £100 per day, this gives the price of a shawm at £7,800 and a slide trumpet at £24,000!! (roughly ten times their price today, given that a shawm can be had for around £750 and a good trombone will cost perhaps £2000). Costing the best part of a year's skilled labour, a slide trumpet was a seriously expensive item that, like a splendid jewel, might only be displayed on occasions that warranted a significant show of grandeur. Philip the Good is generally said to have had twelve trumpets in his employ, of which several were 'trompettes de menestrals', or slide trumpets.

¹⁶ This argument owes much to discussions with dancer Frank Perenboom who presented a similar idea (unfortunately unpublished) at the Ghent Historical Dance Conference of 2000. It was also his suggestion that the *basse danse* might well have been improvised on-the-spot, while still remaining within the given rules.