

Dance in the Life of the Polish Gentry during the 16th - 18th centuries

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Dance as part of court and gentry life on Polish territory has never been the subject of a monographic study. This subject requires robust interdisciplinary research. In this article I would like to present the manifestations of the existence of dance in Poland from the earliest mentions to the later crystallization of the national dances. I'm not going to discuss the shaping and history of Polish ballet, neither will I analyze Polish folk dance in this article. I intend to trace the social meaning of dance which appeared at the courts and in the lives of the Polish nobility and, to be more exact, the gentry.

Political and cultural life in Poland was associated with a specific type of noble called the gentry – “szlachta” in Polish. The Polish gentry were a very diversified group in terms of wealth and social origin, but every member had the same rights. At the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the gentry's growth in wealth and political influence led to changes in social and political relations ensuring the gentry and aristocracy in Poland a dominant position over the next three hundred years. The interests of the state are identified with the interests of one state - the nobility. What is more, the nobility numbered up to 10% of the whole society at certain times. For this reasons, Poland used to be called the Republic of Nobility.

We do not have a great deal of information about Polish dance. In Polish historical sources we can only find short descriptions or single sentences referring to it. We also do not have a special source referring only to dance, such as the dance manuals of other European countries. The majority of the dances' names we know only from descriptions of various social events, from diaries or other historical

records. These descriptions are very short and there are no extant musical notations or step descriptions that could help to reconstruct Polish dances of the past. We are aware, however, that dance in Poland has been very popular since Slavic times.

Dance in Poland, as in other European countries since the Middle Ages, was practiced in many social circles. Each social class enjoyed dances, but their form and function differed. In the extant sources, we can find information about peasants gamboling to the beat of lively music, as well as of townspeople and clergy dancing¹. This fact doesn't surprise us, as we know that the author of the French treatise about dance, who published it under the pseudonym Arbeau, was in fact a cleric, Jeana Tabourot. Dancing was used during various ceremonies and rites as well as for entertainment.

The first mention of dance in Poland can be found in the chronicles of John Dlugosz from the 15th century. In the chronicles, for example, we read reports from the marriage of Emperor Charles and Elizabeth, granddaughter of Casimir the Great, during which the tournaments, dances and gambols lasted several days².

The old traces of dance tunes can be found in Christmas carols and religious songs. The earliest known rhythms and melodies of folk dance in Poland were preserved in the music to a religious song by Blessed Ladislaus of Gielniów³, translated from Old Polish as “Judas sold Jesus”, written in 1488. We don't know if Blessed Ladislaus was the first who dared to combine secular and religious elements but it is a source of the existence of songs and carols in dance rhythms. With this

song we know that the dance tunes existing in the fifteenth century in Poland were already widely known. They were probably known earlier in folk culture, which was the ground for the formation of national culture.

commonly danced in 16th and 17th century. Its origins and name derive from the German word *zeuner* (*zigeuner* – Gypsy). Jan Kochanowski, the Polish Renaissance poet, in one of his poems described *cenar* as lively, frantic, with bows. The preserved notes confirm the vivid character of this dance.

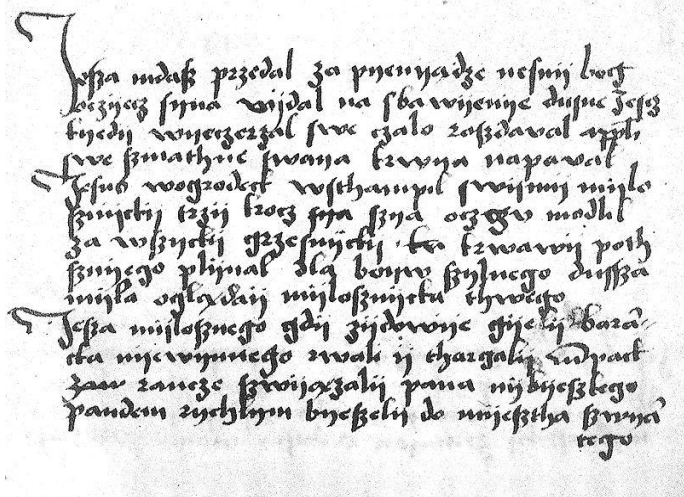


Fig. 1 Text by Blessed Ladislaus of Gielniów

Foreign influences

In the sixteenth century, Polish gentry had frequent contacts with French and Italian courts, which resulted in familiarization with dances from these countries in the Polish courts. These dances became an inseparable part of Polish court culture. This movement in court life took place during the reign of Sigismund I the Old. His wife, Italian queen Bona Sforza, was an art patron and, thanks to her support, Polish youth were able to study abroad. At Wawel Castle, the seat of the Polish king, dancing Italian dances was a part of the lively atmosphere. As we know from a letter of Canon Górski to Jan Dantyszek, Sforza entertained the old king with singing and dancing⁴. Recently, the brochure of songs accompanying such dances has been found.

Dances such as *gaillarde* (Old Polish *galarda*), German *Zeuner* (*cenar*) and others became popular at the Polish court. A dance, which was successful in Europe, was the so-called 'maruska' (Old Polish - *maruszka*). This figure dance was danced during feasts and street masquerades. These masquerades are mentioned in Sigismund I the Old's bills. Then the *moreska*, together with the other dances, began to be an entertainment reserved exclusively for the court. *Cenar* or *cynar* was



Fig. 2 Bona Sforza, Queen of Poland (reigned 1518–1548)

French dances were associated with Henri de Valois (Polish – Henryk Walezy), the first king elected in Poland, who reigned from 1573 to 1575. He was the advocate of a dance perceived as indecent. *La Volta* carried the stigma of obscenity, and was not allowed to be danced by girls of the highest lineage.

Reminiscences of dances from other countries are present in everyday Polish, which is an important source of customs and history. For instance, we have an expression 'wodzić rej', i.e. leading up in the dance, or being the first couple. This expression comes from the name of a French dance, 'virlai'. In Albrecht Radziwiłł's notes from 1637 we can read about 'gladiators' salt', and afterwards 'soldiers' salt'. The word 'salt' comes from Italian and it means 'dance'. In Latin the word 'saltus' stands for the dancer.

Renaissance Polish sources for dance

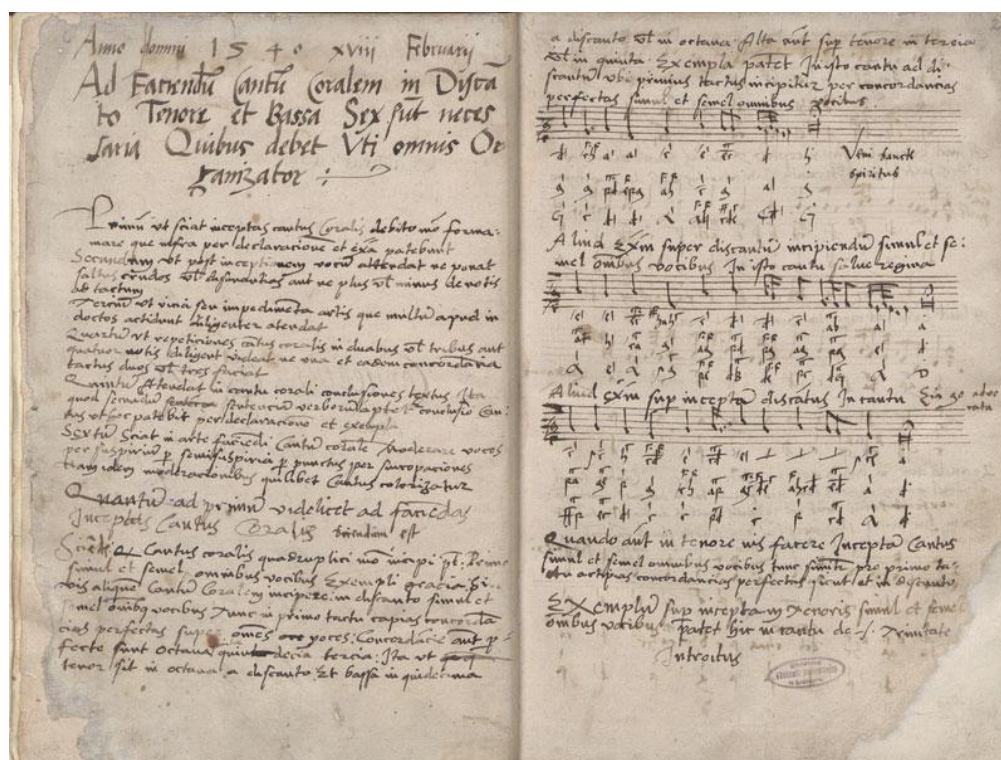
The oldest musical notation of interest is the Organ Tablature of Jan of Lublin. It includes dance music from 1540, and it is the only source from this period containing references to dance. Jan's notation shows beyond all doubt that there was a demand for dance music. In this tablature we find instructions about how to dance certain dances such as *Corea super duos saltus, ad unum saltum* - dance for two dancers, or one dancer. There also appear a number of names for dances - Konrad, Ferdinand, Simon, Rex - but the tablature does not contain any information on the steps or choreography. Dances in Europe had an international career, taking their name from their country of origin. Other names from this tablature such as *Czayner Thancz* (*Cenar*), *Bona cat*, *Rocal fuza* or *Corea hispaniarum* prove their foreign origin.

We can find references to other foreign dances in Polish sources, as well as references to Polish dances in foreign sources. In the Chronicle of Silesia of 1406 we find a note listing nine German names for dances, including a Polish dance, judging by its name. The slow differentiation of Polish dance forms proceeded without leaving any records known to us.

However, in Renaissance literary texts we find the names of some typical Polish dances such as *goniony* (*chased*), *stryjanka*, *hajduk*. The poet Kochanowski wrote: *there danced with bows/ cenar there, there and chased also*. In the prose and poetry of the Renaissance, dance was often criticized. We find descriptions of peoples' misbehavior in country dances, which are meant as a warning. At the courts, particular attention was paid to the aesthetics of dance. In the book *The Polish Nobleman* by Luke Górnicki, based on the Italian treaty *Il cortegiano* by Baltazar Castiglione, we find a description of court life in Renaissance Poland. He gives advice to men and women about how they should behave when dancing. He draws attention to the aesthetics of dance, and jeers at ill-matched couples and bad dancers⁵.

In the poem *Song of St. John* by Kochanowski, he puts these words into the mouth of a young girl: *That's my biggest flaw, / that I danced with pleasure, / tell my neighbors, / Is there here one without that disadvantage?* It shows that dancing was not always well-received - it is treated here as a young girl's fault, but it is a common flaw.

Fig. 3 Organ tablature by Jan from Lublin (16th C)



This means that the majority took pleasure from this kind of entertainment. Mikolaj Rej, in *The Life of an Honest Man* describing wedding dances, admonishes the peasants that these dances lead to immoral behavior and physical distress in labor. But it does not bother him later in this work when he presents a wealth of court music bands. He lists musicians ready to play for dancing, just waiting for the ladies to enter the ballroom. The instruments they are playing are: harp, lute, flutes, cornets, shawms and trumpets.

17th and 18th century

Music and dance were used to fill leisure time with entertainment. At courts it was considered rude and improper to jump, excessively squeeze each other or dance till you dropped, as peasants did. Therefore, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, it was not customary among the gentry to dance in a lively spontaneous way. Foreign observers of Polish life noted that fact. An Italian informant who visited Poland in 1668, wrote that Polish dance is more a rhythmic, sliding walk to the music than a real dance. We cannot find any original Polish dances that have a lively rhythm from that period. Perhaps lively dances, considered as immodest, did not fit the moral standards and customs of the gentry. Also bolder steps and moves, making the dancers move closer to each other, were absent from Polish court dances.

At the beginning of the 17th century Jakub Sobieski – father of the future king Jan III Sobieski – when sending his sons abroad for education wrote:

“When it comes to dance, because the French Queen will be our guest, you must learn the French Galliard and the noble dances at court, so that when you return home, you could easily help her to become adapted here. And as regards myself, I do not care [about dance], for me, you may dance on horseback, beating the Turks and Tatars, that I wish for you. That is why learning this art [dance] I leave to your decision.”

Such views stand in contrast to the customs at other European courts. The style of entertainment of the Polish nobility was consistent with their moral standards. At the noble manors dances were held, jokes were made, and the atmosphere was often ribald, but not debauched or licentious. The loosening of moral standards came during the reign of the Saxon dynasty, also under the strong influence of the culture of the French nobility. There were certain customs related to sleigh rides. During the carnival, noblemen used to organize such rides, going from mansion to mansion and gathering participants, accompanied by musicians playing dance music. Such parties lasted for a few days and were spent in dancing, feasting and drinking. On the last day of carnival there was a ball with masks and costumes, - noblemen dressed as peasants, Jews and Gypsies.

Polish dances

The influence of western cultures and the increase of interest in Polish music and folk culture contributed to the development of Polish dance in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The aristocratic public was delighted with plebian dances, which were perceived as endowed with a raw charm. Polish gentry, as a specific social group, adopted cultural components both from the courts and the village inns. We know about such Old Polish dances as *goniony*, *hajduk*, *drabant*, *stryjanka*, *chodzony* (the *walking dance*, then-*polonez*), *mazurek* (English *mazurka*, then-*mazur*):

Goniony- “it was a play and dance at the same time”. Jan Kochanowski describes goniony as a “play, in which one is chasing another”. Mikolaj Rej, in “The Life of an Honest Man”, observed that God would punish the one, who danced goniony. Jan Chryzostom Pasek compared war to goniony. According to his words, it was not actually a war, it was goniony, but without ladies. To describe the dance, many writers have used the adjective “frantic”.

Hajduk – a folk dance danced by men. Its tune consists of two parts. From the oldest notation from 1540, we know that the melody of hajduk was lively and two-piece. Hieronim Morsztyn, the baroque poet, mentioned the hajduk in his poem *Światowa rozkosz* (*Worldly Pleasure*) from 1606.

Drabant - both appearance and origin of this dance are hardly known. Its name comes from an Old Polish word, which means walker or infantrymen. Oskar Kolberg claimed, that drabant was invented in the Saxon period. The dance was connected with war and the spree, but there is no evidence to confirm this.

Stryjanka - an Old Polish dance, consisting of two parts: the first is a kind of march, followed by stryjanka itself, which is a lively mazurka interspersed with singing. Stryjanka was danced at home, accompanied by the violin. The violinist was in the first dancing couple and he led members of the household. Respectable people danced only the first part of stryjanka, while they just observed the others who were dancing the second, lively part.

An interesting portrait of the Polish nobility and aristocracy in 18th century has survived thanks to Jędrzej Kitowicz, and his work *Description of Customs during the reign of August III*. We read that noblemen loved to organize sumptuous receptions with large tables full of food and drink, visited by crowds of guests: friends, neighbours, the military. Dancing was one of the major entertainments at these receptions, and a day without a guest was rare. Such banquets and dances were held all the year round on various occasions: for Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, to celebrate name days, baptisms, engagements or weddings. The biggest parties were organized during Carnival, between Fat Thursday and Ash Wednesday. Sometimes they lasted for a few days after the beginning of Lent when, even if the guests did not dare to dance they still drank, but usually the parties ended on Tuesday at midnight.



Fig. 3 Portrait of Jędrzej Kitowicz

Kitowicz also writes about public parties that started during the reign of August III. At first they were organized in one place in Warsaw, and only during Carnival: from New Year to Ash Wednesday, twice a week, every other Tuesday and Thursday. They were introduced by an Italian – Salvador – who lived in Warsaw, and they soon gained popularity not only among noblemen but also commoners. Therefore there was a need to create more such places, where the balls called “reduta” could take place. Soon they were organized not only before Lent but also before Advent. The entrance fee to these balls (“redutas”) was the same for everyone, both noblemen and commoners, and the guests wore masks that symbolized equality (however nobles didn’t actually need to wear the masks and could take them off when they wanted). As Kitowicz writes, there were more than 50 pairs dancing on the dance floor, not to count those, who danced foreign dances in a smaller ballroom.

Polish dances in the international arena 16th – 18th century

Polish dances were known abroad under the general name *corea polonica*. They enjoyed a special appreciation among the Germans. These dances had usually two parts. They are described in the chronicles with the first part identified as a form of *polonaise*, a formal parade with decorative bows and a specific spatial layout (separation and glide of pairs). This was followed by a brisk dance. The tablature by Christopher Loeffelholtz from 1585 contains a *Good Polish Dance* in the old two-part form. Two old Polish dances were also found in the work of the famous French lute player Besard, entitled *Chorcae polonicae Diomedis*, the author of which, Kation Diomedis, was born in the mid-sixteenth century in Venice. He lived in Poland during the reign of Sigismund III Vasa, he borrowed the old Polish music in his work.

In the seventeenth century, German composers such as Valentin Haussman, Hans Leo Demantius and others listed more than 100 dances of Polish origin. But this music must be treated with some reservation. From that time only one tablature, *Corea Polonica* written by a Polish author, Wojciech Długoraja, has survived. The dances performed at European courts could already be a form of Polish national dance. Two national dances, the *polonaise* and *mazurka* were described as Polish dances in spite of fundamental differences.

Polish national dances

In the 18th and 19th century court dances and dances of rural origin, specific to particular regions of Poland, became the Polish national dances. Probably the oldest dance of Polish noblemen is the **polonaise**. Its roots lie in a folk dance, the so-called “walked dance”. Different influences transformed it, including foreign ones, until it became a typical Polish gentry dance. Probably at first only men danced it as a dance-march of triumph after the battle. Therefore it contains elements of war dances. At the court of Henry of Valois (after 1574) it took the shape of a ceremonial

parade before the king (not unlike the *pavana*). Then it began to be danced by women, but separately. Only in the course of time did the men begin to dance it together with women. The dance was led by the oldest, most respected person or the one in the most important official position. This dance reflected the prevailing social relations, particularly for the Polish gentry. A romantic description of the *polonaise*, with the correct pairs in order, according to title and position, can be found in the Polish national epic *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz. This is a description of the era, where social relations can be read in conventionalized dance. The *polonez* was considered as the only dance congruent with knighthood because it was a triumphal procession and an expression of chivalry. Its serious nature meant that it was danced by kings, knights, scholars, clerics and even elderly persons.

The other national dance is the **mazurka**. In Polish, this musical form is called *mazurek*—a word derived from *mazur*, which, up to the nineteenth century denoted an inhabitant of Poland's Mazovia region. It is a Polish folk dance in triple meter, usually taken at a lively tempo, and with the accent on the second or third beat. The French still play the *mazurka*, which was introduced by the Polish legionnaires at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. From France the mazurkas spread further – to Italy and Austria, among other countries; they remain alive in their cultures up to this day. In Poland, these rhythms were the musical core among both the folk and the manor dwellers until the 1950s. Polish dances were in fashion throughout Europe. Even nowadays, one of the most popular dances in Sweden or Denmark is called *polska* and in Norway, *pols*.

Conclusion

Despite the absence of literary works directly concerning the activities and forms of dance, we learn that dance on Polish territory was a common form of entertainment to mark the various festivals and rituals. A variety of other sources exist from which we learn about the Polish dance, including chronicles and diaries, codes and legal acts, royal bills, literature and

poetry. The oldest reference to dance in Poland comes from the fifteenth century. As a result of the flow of many cultures and the complex form of social class which was the Polish nobility, we can conclude the uniqueness and diversity of dance forms, typical for the Polish territory. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, noble dances developed into the national dances. Dancing in the life of the Polish nobility, as well as the rural population and the middle class, was an integral part of social and cultural life of past ages.

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Notes

¹ Konarska – Zimnicka, S., s.151

² Długosz, J., *Roczniki*, t.5, ks. 9, s.404

³ Written music for the song by Blessed Ladislaus comes from a later period, 1554 and 1558, and is probably of Czech origin.

⁴ Gloger, Z., *Encyklopedia Staropolska*, t.IV, s.356

⁵ Górnicki, Ł., *Dworzanin Polski*, t.I, s.77