

Why Do We ...

By Robert Huggett

There are some aspects fifteenth century dance that appear to be generally accepted as the right thing to do but I don't recall having ever seen a clear justification for them. So this article is an attempt to collect together the evidence for a few examples. If I've missed anything important or interesting, then I'd be very glad to hear of it. Maybe this will prompt someone else to cover off a few more conventions for the benefit of those that are curious but don't know where to look.

All of my points relate to rhythm and timing, so I thought I'd start by paraphrasing what the main sources of the period say on the subject in general. Because not everyone reading this article will be a musician I'm going to quickly summarise the terminology used below. I lay no claim to great expertise in this area, but I think know the basics. Musical theory of the fifteenth century classifies musical bars/measures as being either Major or Minor and Perfect or Imperfect.

- A Major measure is one in which the Breve/Bar/Measure is divided into 3 semibreves (strong beats).
- A Minor measure is one in which the Breve/Bar/Measure is divided into 2 semibreves (strong beats).
- A Perfect measure is one in which the semibreve is divided into 3 minims (weak beats).
- An Imperfect measure is one in which the semibreve is divided into 2 semibreves (weak beats).

So there are 4 possible combinations:

- Major/Perfect. 3 strong beats per bar each divided into 3 weak beats. Which is generally rendered as the modern 9:8 time signature.
- Major/Imperfect. 3 strong beats per bar each divided into 2 weak beats. Which is generally rendered as the modern 6:4 time signature, but sometimes as 3:2.
- Minor/Perfect. 2 strong beats per bar each divided into 3 weak beats. Which is generally rendered as the modern 6:8 time signature.
- Minor/Imperfect. 2 strong beats per bar each divided into 2 weak beats. Which is generally rendered as the modern 4:4 time signature, but sometimes as 2:2 or 4:2.

There is of course a lot more to it than that, but I think that is probably sufficient for this discussion (although I may know better before too long).

Domenico da Piacenza talks at some length about 4 misure/measures that are used in his dances:

- Bassadanza, which is Major /Imperfect. Guglielmo & Cornzano assign perfetto maggiore to bassadanza.
- Quadenaria, which is Minor /Imperfect. Guglielmo agrees, what Cornzano actually thinks is unclear to me.
- Saltarello, Domenico and Cornzano both state this is Major/Perfect. Guglielmo states that it is perfetto minore (6/8) which is how everyone actually seems to play it.
- Piva. Domenico and Cornzano both state this is Perfect/Minor which is how it is usually played and Guglielmo states that it is Imperfect/Minor, which also works in practice.

Antonio Cornzano gives a description of the relationship of the measures in his treatise of circa 1455, but he doesn't specify the relative proportions beyond saying that 1 Measure of Piva, occupies the time of 1/2 of a measure of bassadanza. Antonio Cornzano

contradicts Domenico (agreeing with Guglielmo) in saying that bassadanza is Perfect/Major. He also appears to state that quadenaria is Major/Imperfect (possibly a typo and the reading is disputed).

In *De Practica Seu Arte Tripudii* Giovanni Ambrosio (Guglielmo Ebreo) only mentions misure briefly and does not give a table of proportions. He lists 4 measures: Major/Perfect, Minor/Perfect, Minor/Imperfect and quadenaria (but note this list is different in different copies some contain omissions and others duplications).

Considerably more recently Barbara Sparti pragmatically points out in her chapter on interpreting the music of the 15th century Italian dances in *De Practica Seu Arte Tripudi* [Oxford University Press 1993] that if you ignore the theory and the time signature and just take the notes given and fit them to the number of measures that you are told you need to make out of them then:

- Bassadanza always comes out at 6:4
- Quadenaria always comes out as 4:4
- Saltarello usually comes out as 6:8 but sometimes as 3:4 – interesting that, you'll see why later.
- Piva generally comes out as 6:8, but sometimes 2:4.

First Point: If Domenico says Saltarelli are Major/Perfect Then Why do we dance them as if they were Minor/Perfect?

I asked Veronique Daniels this question a couple of years ago and she suggested that Domenico might be using the terms Major, Minor, Perfect, Imperfect to mean something different to the accepted interpretation amongst musicians. Perfect and Imperfect may refer to for example: a whole "Tempo di Bassadanza" (Perfect) or a half "Tempo di Bassadanza" (Imperfect) and Major/Minor would indicate the division of the Brevis. (Then for the Prolatio, it would be considered as minor, without the necessity of mentioning it.) This would give us:

- Bassadanza: Major/Imperfect = For half a Tempo di Bassadanza, the Brevis is divided into 3 Semibreves
- Quadenaria: Minor/Imperfect = For half a Tempo di Quadenaria, the Brevis is divided into 2 Semibreves
- Saltarello: Major/Perfect = For one Tempo di Saltarello, the Brevis is divided into 3 Semibreves
- Piva: Minor/Perfect = For one Tempo di Piva, the Brevis is divided into 2 Semibreves

Veronique also pointed out that In the written practice of the Balli, the bassadanza is written one level faster, that is that one should read it as an "Augmentatio", one Minima of the written bassadanza = 1 imperfect Semibrevis of the saltarello, or the piva.

And a particularly telling observation "One more argument against the Saltarello being in 9/8... I don't see any possible confirmation in the written music examples given by Domenico and his disciples..."

Which agrees with the opinions of the professional musicians that I asked if it made musical sense to render the saltarelli in the Lo Estampies document (British Library Add MS 29987, circa 1400) as 9:8? The answer I got was no, in several cases they are very unlikely to be 9:8 because they have the wrong number of notes.

The only fly in the ointment is that if for saltarello the brevis is divided into 3 semibreves then Saltarello music really should be 3:4 not 6:8 – see Barbara Sparti's observation above.

So given the evidence I'm happy with Veronique Daniels suggestion that probably Domenico meant something different by his terms than what we conventionally understand by them. Further Guglielmo's description agrees with the terminology used by contemporary musicians and as the music doesn't really work as 9:8. So it appears that we are doing the right thing when we dance saltarello as 6:8.

Second Point: All the authors agree that Bassadanza is Major (but disagree on the Perfect/Imperfect tag), so why do we dance it as if it was Minor/Perfect?

Domenico, Guglielmo and Cornazano all agree that Bassadanza is Major and so has 3 strong beats (semibreves) and if we consider it to be 6:4 rather than 9:8 then the strong beats are 1, 3 and 5. So why do we step on 1, 3 & 4 ? I expect this one was thrashed out long before I got interested in historical dance, and the conventional solution is undoubtable elegant and satisfactory, but I've never seen a justification for it written down. Here is the evidence that I have managed to find both for and against the current convention:

Against:

- In Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana Capponatiano 203 by Antonio Cornazano circa 1455 (translation by William Smith) we find "Each tempo of the bassadanza is divisible into four parts. The vuodo is one, that is, the first upsurging motion, then each of the three steps that are performed takes up one fourth totalling four." Which seems to state quite clearly that the 3 steps of the Bassadanza double are of equal duration. This apparently contradicts something he said earlier in his manuscript – see the "For" list below.
- The following:
 - Sensuit lart et instruction de bien dancer by Toulouze circa 1496,
 - Brussels Bibliotheque Royale MS 9085 by Anon some time before 1501, most likely around 1497,
 - The manner of dauncynge of bace daunces after the use of fraunce & other places by Robert Coplande of 1521,
 - S Ensuyent plusieurs Basses dances tant Communes que Incommunes, Jaques Moderne no later than 1556 and not before 1528

All state in more or less exactly the same words that "the first pas double is made using the left foot, and you should raise your body and take 3 steps forward lightly". None of them make any mention at all that the steps are of differing durations. This could of course just be plain laziness on the part of the authors rather than a clear statement that the steps are evenly spaced.

- In Orchesography (1589) Arbeau describes the basse dance double very clearly and unambiguously as 3 evenly spaced steps and a close.
- In il Ballarino (1581) Caroso included an anonymous Bassa and Alta. In this he used doppi (which he clearly defined as having 3 evenly spaced steps and a close) for the bassa and Seguiti Ordinari (slow, quick quick) for the Alta/Salterello.
- In Neuf Basse Dances, Deux Branles, Vingt et Cinq Pavannes avec Quinze Galliardes of 1530 by Pierre Attaignant the basse dance music all seems to me to be structured in the style of Arbeau's basse dance – four 3 beat bars per double and by Susato's Danserye of 1551 the transition in the music is clear – to the extent that some Bergerette/Basse dances are barred in common time. However, this change must have come after Toulouze & Brussels because all of dances for which only breves are given (most of them) there is only 1 note per measure. The new style would need 2 notes per measure. So probably we should ignore the evidence of Arbeau and Caroso because they are describing a later evolution of the basse dance from the one we are discussing.

However most of these sources are French, not Italian and more importantly the earliest is from the late 1490s. So it is possible that the evenly spaced rhythm was only used in France and Burgundy, or that the nature of the basse dance changed sometime around 1500. The only piece of evidence in the list above that is Italian and contemporary with Domenico/Guglielmo is that from Cornazano – and he was a poet/courtier and not a dancing master. Maybe he just got it wrong.

For:

- Notes on the flyleaf *Gestes des noble Francoys* by Guillaume Cousinot 1429, most likely appended circa 1445. These notes describe 7 dances, most of them start with a sequence of 3 simples and this occurs in other places in the dances. David Wilson argues very convincingly in *The Basse Dance Handbook* of 2012 that this notation is probably used to distinguish doubles danced evenly (step on 1, 3 & 5) from those with steps on 1, 3 & 4, with stepping on 1,3 & 4 being the norm.
- In Derbyshire Record Office D77, Box 38 (Gresley) of circa 1500 strings of simples also occur, often in multiples of 3 as well as doubles. If you think that there are basse dance sections to these dances (and I don't) then I expect further support for the above can be found here.
- In “*Anthonius arena Soleriensis Provincialis ad suos Compagniones Studiantes/ qui sunt de persona friantes/ bassa Dansa in galani stillo compositas*” circa 1528 Arena says (David Wilson's translation): “Remember, therefore, that the pas double comprises three steps, but you will execute it with both legs. Mark 4 beats with your legs as you step; three are made by 1 leg, one by the other.... Let but one leg make the first 2 steps, after which your other leg shall give another, but the fourth step shall be made by that most noble shank that previously made the first two steps.” That seems to me to describe the modern convention if you are happy to assume that steps and beats have been confused in the second part of the description. However, it is worth noting that Arena is apparently at odds with his fellow countrymen and also with the contemporary music.
- If we look at Paris, *Bibliothèque Nationale f. Ital 972*, by Domenico of Piacenza circa 1445 (William Smith's translation) then in Chapter 14 we find “put a tempo of Bassadanza movement into one of Quadenaria. But the Bassadanza does not have its arrangement (ordine) because, as I said in chapter eleven, the Bassadanza is wider by a sixth than Quadenaria. Therefore, dancing Bassadanza in Quadenaria, the Bassadanza will be a bit faster **and therefore does not have its arrangement of movement. But because the prolation is altered**, it is beautiful ... “Which I think is a very wordy way of saying that when you fit a bassedanza double to quadenaria music not only does it take less time, but the relative durations of the steps change – presumably from syncopated to even.
- In *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana Capponatiano 203* by Antonio Cornazano circa 1455 (translation by William Smith) we find “to perform a doppio, you must campeggiare on the left foot which remains on the ground and somewhat turn the torso to the side, ondeggiare **during the second short step** (passo curto)...” Well if there was a second short step then presumably there is also a first and there must be a long step for the short one to be shorter than. Unless he is using passo curto as a specific step name equivalent to the later passo presto.
- Interestingly most of the basse dances from Brussels & Toulouze that have music expressed in more detail than just the basic breves (*la Dance de Cleves*, *la Dance de Ravestein* and *la Franchise Nouvelle*) have minor phrasing (2 strong beats) to the extent that Frederick Crane in *Materials for the Study of the Fifteenth Century Basse Danse* (*Musicological Studies* vol. 16) bars them as 3:4. If we accept Veronique Daniels suggestion about Domenico's use of the terminology then that is

what we would expect to see and if we accept her argument for the Saltarello, we must surely accept it for the bassadanza as well.

- Because it's harder. The Bassadanza is supposed to be the most prestigious of dances in the period, so given that this style of dancing was a way for the elite to display status and superiority over the common herd it makes sense that it should be difficult and require training. It would also be in the dancing master's best interests to make the high status dances unnecessarily difficult as one way of ensuring their continued employment.

So on balance the evidence for France seems to suggest that the basse dance in that part of the world was danced with evenly spaced steps from the 1490s onwards and that at some time in the first half of the sixteenth century the music changed to provide a 4th beat to close the step at the end. However, Arena does provide some justification to continue with the current practice. For the Italians the evidence isn't strong either way, but the balance of probability seems to me to be that what we are doing (stepping on beats 1,3 & 4) is correct.

Third Point: What rhythm should we use for Saltarello in Quadenaria ?

A number of fifteenth century dances call for you to dance a step in a measure that is not it's native measure; usually saltarello in either bassadanza or quadenaria. Fitting a saltarello into bassadanza tempo is straightforward and gives rise to no questions, but for saltarello in quadenaria there are two possible solutions. Everyone that's ever taught me this has taught it as steps on beats 1, 2 & 3 with a hop on the 4th beat. This is a perfectly good solution. However recently I got to thinking that seeing as quadenaria and salterello both have 2 strong beats to a bar then if you ignore the weak beats it's perfectly possible to dance a conventional saltarello rhythm against a quadenaria tune. You just have to mentally divide the strong beats into 3 in the same way that musicians do when playing triplets (3 notes in the time of 2).

However, it seems that I was wrong to think that. If we look at Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale f. Ital 972, by Domenico of Piacenza circa 1445 (William Smith's translation) then in Chapter 14 we find "put one tempo of saltarello movement in one tempo of Quadenaria. But the saltarello will be a bit wide because, as I said in chapter 11, the saltarello is narrower by a sixth to Quadenaria and, **hence does not have its arrangement** (ordine).... I think that means that you adapt the timing of the saltarello step to the quadenaria music – as we conventionally do.

Bonus Question: How Fast Should the Music be?

I think that what the original sources say is clear enough, but what the authors actually intended and did is less obvious. Domenico uses bassadanza as the basic measure from which the others are derived. He says that:

- 1 measure of Quadenaria occupies the time of 5/6 of a measure of Bassadanza.
- 1 Measure of Saltarello, occupies the time of 2/3 of a measure of Bassadanza.
- 1 Measure of Piva, occupies the time of 1/2 of a measure of Bassadanza.

A ratio of 6:5:4:3.

Veronique Daniels proposed at the NEMA conference in 1990 that what he actually intended was a ratio of 6:4:3:2. Unfortunately I don't have a copy of that paper, so I can't share with you the reasoning. Others have suggested that these ratios were just intended as approximate guidelines and were not closely adhered to in practice, which I personally think is likely to be true. Certainly it is very convenient to believe that.

In terms of speed, I think that it is generally accepted that the basic pulse for early music should be taken from the human pulse. According to Wikipedia that is between 60 and

100 beats per minute, typically between 60 and 80 beats per minute. It seems to be generally accepted that a beat is either a semibreve or a minim. However modern editions tend to halve or quarter the original note values, so in my calculations below I'm quoting a basic pulse in modern minims for the Imperfect measures and dotted crotchets for the Perfect measures.

If we use Domenico's proportions (6:5:4:3) and experiment with different basic pulses then:

Bassadanza (6:4) (minims/minute) [Duration in seconds of 1 measure]	Quadenaria (4:4) (minims/minute) [Duration in seconds of 1 measure]	Saltarello (6:8) (dotted crotchets) [Duration in seconds of 1 measure]	Piva (6:8) (dotted crotchets) [Duration in seconds of 1 measure]
60 [3]	48 [2.5]	60 [2]	80 [1.5]
75 [2.4]	60 [2]	75 [1.6]	100 [1.2]
90 [2]	72 [1.66]	90 [1.33]	120 [1]

The middle line above seems to be about right to me.

If we use Veronique's proposal 6:4:3:2 and experiment with different basic pulses then:

Bassadanza (6:4) (minims/minute) [Duration in seconds of 1 measure]	Quadenaria (4:4) (minims/minute) [Duration in seconds of 1 measure]	Saltarello (6:8) (dotted crotchets) [Duration in seconds of 1 measure]	Piva (6:8) (dotted crotchets) [Duration in seconds of 1 measure]
60 [3]	60 [2]	80 [1.5]	120 [1]
75 [2.4]	75 [1.6]	100 [1.2]	150 [0.8]
90 [2]	90 [1.33]	120 [1]	180 [0.67]

Finally, another interesting snippet that I found while doing my reading for this article is that Domenico says that the Bassadanza should start in the vuodo (upbeat) in top line, whereas Quadenaria should start on the beat with the tenor. He says that the dancer should also start Bassadanza with a movimento in the upbeat and step on the beat. Saltarello follows the practice for Bassadanza and Piva that of Quadenaria.