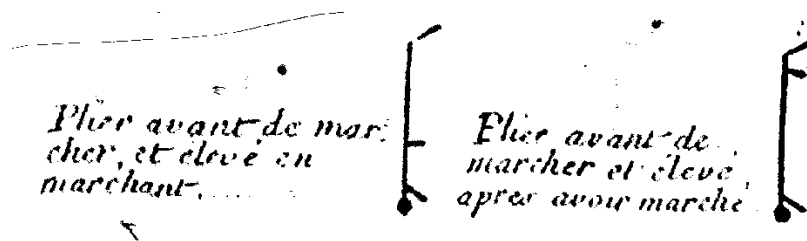


“IN MOVING OR AFTER MOVING?”:  
the issue of the demi-coupé

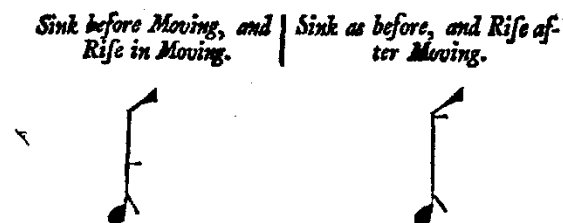
The demi-coupé is the fundamental ingredient in the style of dance known as “baroque dance” or “French noble style”, practised in Europe from the late seventeenth century to the mid eighteenth century. It is strange, then, that two different understandings of it exist, and that performers and teachers fall into two camps; those who teach “bend, then rise while stepping” and those who teach “bend, step, then rise”. This may not seem a significant issue, but the consequence is that, in the first instance, it is the back leg - that is, the left, if the right foot is advanced - that must stretch in order for the dancer to rise, since the right foot is still moving, while in the second case it is the front leg that stretches, since the weight has been transferred to it so that the back foot can follow.

How can there be this confusion? Why are different teachers teaching different ways of doing this most fundamental move? My attempts to discuss this with teachers have generally led nowhere. Either it isn't seen as an issue, or the subject is avoided, as if it's too contentious and best left alone. So let's grasp the nettle and look at the sources. All the sources quoted below can be viewed on the website of the Library of Congress at [www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920](http://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920).

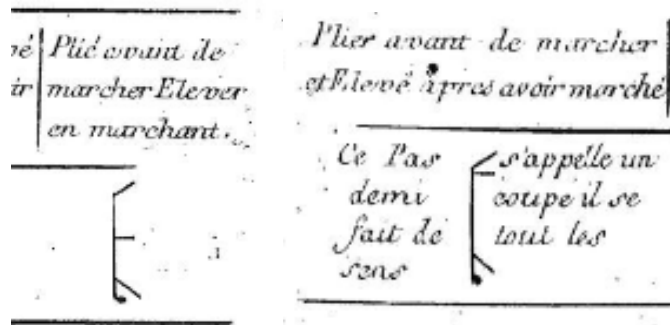
To take them in date order, the first is the *Choregraphie* of Raoul-Auger Feuillet, published in 1700. Though his purpose is to describe a system of dance notation, he gives unambiguous descriptions of the movements denoted by the signs. (p.10)



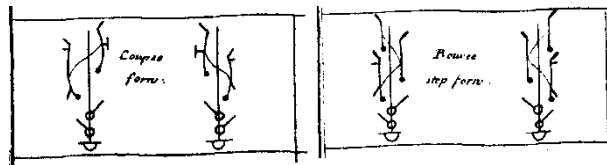
John Weaver published his English translation in 1706, under the title *Orchesography* (p.16).



Around 1770, M. Malpied included a similar table in his *Traité sur l'art de la danse* (p.41).



This seems definite, then – if the perpendicular “rise” mark is at the end of the step mark, furthest from the bend mark, we are to step first, then rise. To rise while stepping would be indicated by placing the rise mark in the middle of the step mark – something that occurs quite rarely in dance notations, whereas step phrases such as the coupé and the pas de bourrée are always notated with the rise mark at the end of the step mark, as in these examples from Weaver:



Now let's look at *Le Maître à Danser* by Pierre Rameau, 1725, regarded as the most important description of the style. Firstly, here is the translation of John Essex, published in 1728 as *The Dancing-Master*. On page 42 he describes the “half Coupée”:

*“In this Sink you carry the right Foot before you, without rising, to the fourth Position, as this third Figure shews; and at the same Time bring the Body forwards on it, rising upon the Toes of the right Foot, with an extended Knee...”*

We are specifically told not to rise until we reach fourth position. The sketch referred to as, “this third figure,” clearly shows the dancer in fourth position, with both knees bent. The dancer has stepped, but has not yet risen; therefore, he rises after stepping, and the front leg does the stretching, the weight having been transferred.

On page 70, Essex describes the Fleuret (which Rameau says has largely replaced the original pas de bourrée, and the terms are generally used synonymously):

*: It consists of a half Coupée, and two Walks on the Toes....take care not to move the right Leg before you to the fourth Position till you have sunk, and at the same Time that is moved rise on the Toes; then make two Walks on the Toes of each Foot...”*

Here, we are told to rise “**at the same time** [the right foot] is moved.” In Feuillet’s table, this should be shown with the rise mark halfway along the step mark; but the fleuret or pas de bourrée is always notated with the rise mark at the end of the step mark.

For comparison, here is Rameau’s original French (in the 1725 edition, but identical in the 1748 edition). It will be seen that Essex’s translation is accurate:

For the demi-coupé: *“De-là vous passez étant plié le pied droit devant vous sans vous relever, a la quatrième position, ainsi que cette troisième figure le démontre, & dans le même temps*

*apporter le corps dessus en vous élevant dessus la pointe du pied droit. Et dans le même tems apporter le corps sur le pied droit en vous élevant sur la pointe du pied...*” (Repetition in the original.)

The drawing referred to as “cette troisième figure” is very similar to Essex’s “third figure”.

For the fleuret: “... *il ne faut pas passer le pied droit devant vous a la quatrième position, que lorsque vous avez plié, et du même tems qu’il est passé vous vous élevez sur la pointe: puis marcher deux autres pas tout de suite sur la pointe...*”

Now let’s look at Kellom Tomlinson’s *The Art of Dancing*, which he claimed was “first design’d in the year 1724”. He also uses images to illustrate the text, but they are not very clear. On page 26, chapter 6, he describes the “Coupée” thus:

*“the Pose must be on the left, and continue so to be, till you have completed the first Step of the two, which, as I have said, compose the Coupée. The first Part being finished, the right Foot immediately receives the Weight, in the rising from the Sink...”*

This is not very clear; but on the next page he discusses the “Coupée with two Movements”, explaining that in the first movement “*the Sink is made, before the foot moves; and the Rise, after the Foot has moved, that is to say, when you have made a Step...*” That seems clear. Yet a few lines later he writes “*to sink, before the Foot moves, and rise in moving, or immediately after it has moved.*” Is this telling us that it’s a matter of choice?

On page 29, chapter 3 “Of the Bourée-step or Fleuret” he tells us: “*the first [step] ... is to be performed in the same method, as the Half Coupée...that is to say, must always sink, at the Beginning of the Step or Walk and rise at, or gradually before the End of it.*” Again, there seems to be a choice.

The works of Dufort, *Trattato del ballo nobile* (1728), Minguet e Irol, *Arte de Danzar a la Francesa* (1737), Bonem, *Tratado dos principaes fundamentos da danca* (1767), Malpied, *Traité sur l’art de la danse* (c.1770) and Magri, *Trattato Teorico-Prattico di Ballo* (1779) cover similar ground to Rameau.

So, to sum up, the evidence is contradictory. Everyone can claim that their way is right, and doubtless everyone will carry on doing what they’ve always done – and generally, that means “the way my teacher taught me”. Personally, I like the strong positive feel of stretching the front leg after the weight has been transferred to it, as against the more floaty feel of “rising while stepping”, which I was taught by my first teacher. It also ensures that a decent plié is made before the step, something which often tends to get lost.