

Delizie e Danze: A tangible context for an intangible heritage.

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Historical sites and buildings by their very foundations and structure, their social and cultural provenance, provide a tangible context for the realisation of early dances. Early Dance however is perceived as inherently ephemeral and as such classified as an intangible cultural inheritance. The workshop given at Prior Park in April 2014 sought to examine these notions by placing two specific buildings in juxtaposition with two dances of the same name, time and place. Having observed and compared their form, function and content, participants were invited to dance the differences whilst considering their architectural and cultural context. The two buildings are nowadays defined as *delizie* or *ville*. They are named Belriguardo and Belfiore and have their origins in the city and provinces of Ferrara amidst the delta of the Po river in north eastern Italy. The dances, also named Belreguardo and Belfiore, have their origins within a treatise of dancing *De la Arte di Ballare et Danzare* written for the Este court in Ferrara. Both *delizie* and dances were created c.1390-1455 in what is now classified as *il primo rinascimentale*, the early renaissance.

In the 20th century Ferrara gained prestigious recognition as a Unesco World Heritage site, not once but twice. In 1995 it was celebrated as a historical city and for the conservation of its “exemplary Renaissance town plan”¹, the canons of which “have profoundly influenced the urban development of the following centuries”². In 1999 this recognition was extended to “the residences of the Este dukes in the Po delta”³ as “an exceptional illustration of Renaissance culture in its natural surroundings”⁴. The “residences” cited here refer to the many *delizie* built in Ferrarese territory from the late 14thC well

into the 16thC. According to Maria Theresa Sambin De Norcen the term “*delizie*” was not in usage at this time with regard to buildings. Renaissance scholars and poets, inspired by classical sources, used the concept of *delizie* in reference to “*alle amenita dei giardini e della campagna*”⁵, the pleasurable delights of gardens and the countryside. Sambin De Norcen cites the recurring phrase “*orti (o ortorum) delitae*”⁶ (gardens of delight) within the works of Petrarch and Leon Battista Alberti. The noble residences of the Este court beyond the city were defined in accordance with their form and function. Some were known as *palazzi*, built on a grand scale to house the Este family, court and guests away from public and city restraints. Others called *castaldiere* were predominantly large rural estates used for agricultural expansion and land reclamation. Residences on a smaller scale, more intimate retreats were known as *case*. Some of the *delizie* could also provide strategic surveillance posts for security. The *delizie* or *ville* as they are also collectively known came to be seen as a tangible representation of power, honour and noble leisure beyond the city, whilst also maintaining a balance of land and water and nature for the common good.

The Delize

Belriguardo

Belriguardo was commissioned by Nicolo III and built in 1435 at Voghiera some 13km east of Ferrara on the Sandalo river. It was primarily a summer residence for the whole court and easily accessible by the many waterways of the surrounding wetlands. The external aspect of Belriguardo was late gothic in style, topped with battlements, all

gloriously painted, gilded and embellished with symbolic imagery of the Este dynasty. Visitors would enter across the moat, passing the great fishponds and through the Tower of Angels into the walled central courtyard with its porticoes and gothic windows. Two red marble staircases led to the seclusion of the upper storey, the piano nobile with its many apartments and the great hall. Secluded formal gardens displayed rare plants, exotic flowers and hedged mazes all intersected by elegant streams and narrow wooden bridges. This “*giardino segreto*” was “*destinato solo alla Corte e agli ospiti di riguardo*”⁷, for the exclusive use of the court and their honoured guests. It was reputed to be one of the most beautiful in all of Italy.

Belriguardo

Leonello d’Este son of Nicolo, in his brief rule as marchese (1441-1450) drew on his profoundly humanist education to create a flourishing renaissance court. He sought to extend and embellish Belriguardo, his designs drawing on the classical architectural treatise of Vitruvius. A second great courtyard, l’Alta Corte was built to the rear of the original (now Bassa Corte) surrounded by cloisters and a portico adorned with marble pillars. On the piano nobile some 80 new reception and bedrooms and a great new hall were created. The internal decorations were in “*un nuovo stile protorinascimentale*”⁸ a new international style created by Pisanello and Gentile da Fabriano. The entire project was inspired by chivalric, gothic and classical forms and required a workforce of craftsmen, painters, decorators and glaziers armed with new skills to realize this unique edifice modelled on the classical architectural designs of Vitruvius. The gardens were enlarged and embellished with fountains and water features and exotic plants. Belriguardo was defined as the most splendid residence in the Este lineage and “*una delle piu lussuose del secolo*”⁹, one of the most luxurious residences of its time.

Belfiore

Belfiore was the first of the Este *delizie*. It was built c.1391 just beyond the city walls on

an island in the river which at that time flowed to the north of Ferrara. According to Sambin De Norcen, primary evidence is scarce and fragmentary but a 14thc. source confirms that it was commissioned on the initiative of Alberto V driven by an early spurt of humanism¹⁰. We know it was sited amidst its own gardens near uncultivated parkland and woods. Reference is made in 1422 to the purchase of vines and trellis by Nicolo III son of Alberto, with further mention of a wine harvest and cages for animals were recorded but the species were not named¹¹. Belfiore seemed in its early days to have served primarily as an outpost for hunting wild boar and deer, a popular leisure sport for the court. Yet Sambin regards Belfiore as no mere country villa seeing it more in accordance with Alberti’s “*ortum suburbanum*” a deceptively informal yet sophisticated residence, a delightfully pleasurable retreat in a healthy environment.¹² Sporadic references praise Belfiore for its salubrious aspect, its agreeable and pleasant breezes, the warmth from the sun, its restorative air. Easily accessible yet sufficiently distanced from the city, the special qualities of Belfiore enabled guests to participate in a swift transformation from the rigours of court. It also provided illustrious visitors with respite prior to formal entry into Ferrara along the Via di Belfiore.

Upon inheritance in 1441, Leonello began to make Belfiore his own unique *delizia*. Gardens were created with meandering pathways to accommodate areas of light and shade for pleasurable walking and erudite gatherings. There was no central court, no great hall, no piano nobile. Apartments were designed in juxtaposition with the open air, linked by porticoes and loggias. Belfiore is perhaps most renowned for Leonello’s *studiolo*, an essentially humanistic space displaying his ideals through its frescoes and paintings of the Muses by Maccagnino da Siena and Cosimo Tura. Belfiore as with the other Este *delizie* embodied much of what Alison Cole describes as “the ideal of courtly recreation in all its diverse forms”¹³. Fragmentary sources suggest it had its own unique ambience providing a delightfully relaxed escape from the strictures of court.

Sambin De Norcen sees Belfiore as a place predominantly of “ludico-ricreativa”,¹⁴ of fun and games, sports and recreation in the open air. This delightful world can be glimpsed through the text of letters home sent by Sforza Maria Sforza, a visitor to Belfiore at the time, to his mother and brother dated August 22nd 1468: “Yesterday we did not go out into the countryside but while we were dining we had various amusements – of playing of harpsichords and lutes, and by jesters (buffoni) and by Master Giovanni Orbo, who recited remarkable things in a marvellous manner quite extraordinary”.¹⁵

The Dances

The aforementioned dance treatise *De la Arte di Ballare et Danzare* (also entitled *De arte saltandi et choreas ducendi*) was the work of Domenico of Piacenza also known as Domenico of Ferrara. He was acknowledged by his contemporaries as master of his perfect art and renowned skills and cited as a great innovator and creator of a new style of dancing.¹⁶ The treatise (codified as Pd) comprises his theory of dance and dancing, the skills and steps required and the theory and function of four musical measure, namely bassadanza, saltarello, quadernaria and piva. He then describes choreographies for 18 balli together with their music and 4 bassadanze, all with great clarity and detail.

Belreguardo and Belreguardo Novo

Intriguingly Domenico gives us the choreography for two dances called Belreguardo, one simply that, the other entitled Belreguardo Novo (the new Belreguardo). Both are balli, danced to identical music and measure comprised of 12 Saltarelli followed by 24 measure of bassadanze. Domenico identifies the music used for both as that of a “*canto del vecchio*” an old song. Whether or not a significant factor, Belreguardo is the first dance recorded within the treatise. It is a ballo for a man and a lady who begin the dance with 11 saltarelli (using the 12th as was customary to prepare with a movimento or as a pause to close the sequence). The couple continue with the bassadanza section, a sequence of sempii,

doppii and contrapassi, interspersed with riprese, continenze and saltarelli larghi and concluding with a riverenza. The balanced sequence of saltarello and bassadanza denotes a noble choreographic form common to Domenico’s work. Other factors however are singular. The couple remain together side by side throughout this dance. They seemingly travel in a forward direction possibly around the hall. There is no mention of a repeat of the dance. Such sparse detail is unusual in Domenico’s work. Perhaps this earlier Belreguardo was echoing the deceptively simple choreographic patterns we recognise in the restrained elegance of the Burgundian basse danse. Within the rest of Domenico’s repertoire men and ladies may begin and end a dance together but the rest of the choreography is embellished with turns, circling, weaving, sequences of alternation, moving apart, coming together. We need to examine Belreguardo Novo to see such patterns in action.

Belreguardo Novo the source informs us is a ballo for two men and a lady in the middle. As with the Belreguardo for two the trio begin by dancing eleven of the saltarelli. At this point the line of dance is specifically located in the middle of the hall where the lady rests for two tempi whilst the men morph into a single file one to the front of the lady the other behind her (and with fascinating precision) facing her shoulders. They remain “a la fila” for ten tempi embellishing the line with half turns and contrapassi. Then using saltarelli larghi and deft turns the men surround the lady, readjusting their places to either side of her, challenging her with a beat of the foot, to which the lady responds by specifically “*fuze com uno doppio innanti*”¹⁷, escaping forwards with a doppio. She maintains a forward path whilst they continue to exert control through further changes of place and a final flourish of individual bravo before all end side by side with two continenze and a riverenza. The dance is repeated with the other man leading. A simple comparison of the bassadanze section for both dances reveals an intriguing utilisation of step patterns which have been transformed with choreographic skills into a very different Belreguardo.

Belfiore

Belfiore is danced in quadernaria and piva, measure which are said to denote a sense of popular and commonplace culture. The ballo is for two men and a lady who open the dance in an unspecified direction with twelve piva in quadernaria misura. They continue to dance a la fila with a series of strong rhythmic step sequences in what becomes a game of follow my leader, culminating in the the lady's pathway woven dextrously through the men even as they change ends, to arrive at the front as the new leader. A note at this point indicates they take hands and repeat the dance again thus most probably for a third time. The reference to taking hands also suggests this occurs during each of the opening piva. The fluid and flexible lines of dance are traced by nimble footwork and rapidly paced change.

BELREGUARDO

1-4 dddd LRLR

5-6 ddd LLL

7 ss RL

8-9 ddd RRR

10-11 rr LR

12-13 mov. 2 saltarelli larghi LR

14-15 rr LR

16-17 mov. 2 saltarelli larghi LR

18-19 rr LR

20-22 ss LR d L with Riv. piccolo r R

23-24 cc LR Riv. L.

Delizie and Danze

1435 was a significant year for the Este dynasty. Not only did Nicolo III commission the building of Belreguardo but his son and heir elective Leonello was married to Margherita Gonzaga. It is possible that the

original Belreguardo ballo was created by Domenico for the celebrations of both. Equally plausible is that Belreguardo Novo was created to honour the full realisation of Leonello's grand designs for his palace of summer delights. Domenico's choreography for Belfiore could have been inspired by Leonello's visions for Belfiore. It is a very different dance to either of the Belreguardo balli. Its patterns mimic the relish of the chase, the dynamics of the hunt and the meandering pathways of the gardens. Imbued with energy it becomes a dance game in which the linear fluidity echoes a less structured style of life.

To place the dances in the context of the delizie enables us to engage with what Cole

BELREGUARDO NOVO

1-2 dd LR men alone

3-4 dd LR all a la fila

5-6 ddd LLL mv.L

7 cc RL

8-9 ddd mv.R

10 cc LR Riv. L

12 saltarello largo L all

13 saltarello largo R men (with boto/beat)

14 d R lady

15 d R men

16 saltarello L all

17 saltarello R men

18 cc LR all

19-20 dd LR all

21-22 dd LR men

23-24 cc LR Riv. L all.

defines as “the aristocratic ideals of the Este, drawn from codes of medieval chivalry and heraldry on the one hand.....by classical and mythological heroes on the other”.¹⁸ They offer us a glimpse of the renaissance concepts of Magnificence and Decorum, of erudite recreation and pragmatic humanism, concepts which informed the unique achievements of Leonello’s brief rule. Sambin De Norcen asks us to consider the special affinity between the delizie and the danze through the very names they share. Whether danced “all’interno delle grandi sale del piano superior, o all’aria aperta”¹⁹, within the noble halls of the upper floors or in the open air of the gardens, Domenico’s dances embody the form and content dictated by and derived from the spaces in which and for which they were first created and performed. Such unique properties are seen by Sambin to “poi replicate infinite volte, li e altrove”²⁰ to then be danced an infinitesimal number of times there and elsewhere.

Which is where we find ourselves today, able to perform these delightful dances which in turn reflect the unique choreographic skills and pioneering treatise of Domenico da Piacenza e da Ferrara. The glories of Belriguardo are long gone but its core structure remains and can be magically encountered emerging through the watery mists of a spring morning. Belfiore no longer stands, sacked by the Venetians in 1483. The river no longer flows to the north of Ferrara but the spirit of Belfiore can be glimpsed through the sunshine and trees of the northern walls. What were new dances for new spaces are old dances which we are privileged to dance anew. The delizie and the danze remain both tangible and intangible threads of an extraordinary cultural heritage.

The dances Belreguardo and Belreguardo Novo and Belfiore can be read with great clarity in David Wilson’s transcription of Domenico’s treatise, *Domenico of Piacenza, Sources for Early Dance*, published by the Early Dance Circle 1988.

Full descriptions for dancing Belreguardo and Belreguardo Novo can be found in *Ballare et Danzare*, published by DHDS in 2012 together with an accompanying CD. A

realisation of Belfiore can be obtained from DHDS publications prior to its inclusion within the publication of a further compilation of 15thC Italian dances.

References

- ¹ I *Racconti del Castello/The Castle Talks*. Borella.M, editorial project. EDSA. Provincia di Ferrara. 2006. P.176.
- ² ibid
- ³ ibid
- ⁴ ibid
- ⁵ Sambin De Norcen.M.T. *Le Ville di Leonello d’Este*. Venezia. Marsilio Editori. 2012.p.14.
- ⁶ F.Petraca, *Itinerarium ad sepulcrum Domini*, consulate nell’ed.digitale di Biblioteca Italiana, 2004; Alberti, *L’Architettura*,cit., p.415 , in Sambin De Norcen M.T. ibid. p.14.
- ⁷ *Lungo Antiche Sponde/Along Ancient Banks*. Tourist Guide. Provincia di Ferrara.p.61.
- ⁸ Ackerman.J.S, in Sambin De Norcen, . p.8.
- ⁹ ibid.p.8.
- ¹⁰ Sambin DeNorcen .p118.
- ¹¹ G.Biondi, Documenti relative allo spazio di Belfiore nell’archivio di stato di Modena, in *Le muse e il principe,I,Saggi*, cit., pp.292-293, in Sambin De Norcen,p.121.
- ¹² Alberti, *L’architettura*,cit.,pp.790-792, in Sambin De Norcen,p.121.
- ¹³ Cole,A. *Virtue and Magnificence: Art of the Italian Renaissance Courts*. New York. Harry N. Abrams Incorporated. 1995, p.120.
- ¹⁴ Sambin De Norcen , p.120.
- ¹⁵ Motta, “Musici,283” in Lockwood,L.*Music in Renaissance Ferrara 1400-1505*. Oxford. Clarendon Press.1984. p.105.
- ¹⁶ Sparti,B.*Guglielmo Ebreo of Pesaro: On the Practice or Art of Dancing*. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1993. p.3.
- ¹⁷ Domenico da Piacenza (Pd),Bibliothèque Nationale, fonds ital.972, Fol 8v lines 31/32.
- ¹⁸ Cole,A.ibid, p.120.
- ¹⁹ Sambin De Norcen.p.169.
- ²⁰ Sambin De Norcen.p.169.