

A dancing master for the horses – Pierre Dubreil and the equestrian ballets at the Bavarian court

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In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, dancing and riding were closely related to horse or equestrian ballet. First, the article will deal with this special kind of dancing in general; the second part will focus on two horse ballets from the court of Munich.

The carrousel

Dancing, riding and fencing were the three fundamental arts in which a nobleman was educated in the baroque era. These arts were united in the so-called carrousel, an elaborate divertissement at the court. A carrousel had several parts; it started with a festive procession to the riding yard or the tournament hall inspired by the triumphal processions of the ancient Romans.¹ After the procession, different types of contests took place which originated from medieval tournaments. In contrast to these, the horsemen did not fight against each other but showed their skills against an inanimate object. Popular exercises were, for example, running at the ring or running at the quintain.² In the first discipline the horseman had to catch a small ring which was hung up with a spear. In running at the quintain the contestant had to hit a wooden Turk's head between its eyes. If he missed it, the figure swung around and threw the horseman off his horse.³ The culmination of the carrousel was the performance of a horse ballet. However, because it was so intricate, it was not a mandatory part.

As a rule the carrousel had a motto or was based on mythological themes. Sometimes it was combined with a theatrical performance: the tournament opera.⁴ The contests and the horse ballet were accompanied by

instrumental music, especially with trumpets and kettledrums, instruments which have traditionally been connected with riding for centuries.⁵ The participating horsemen and musicians were dressed in richly decorated costumes.

A brief history of the horse ballet

The earliest known horse ballet was performed in 1581 at the French court. Shortly after that records of horse ballets in Italy can be found.⁶ After the Thirty Years' War they were established at German-speaking courts, especially Vienna, Dresden and Munich.⁷ At the English court no horse ballets were performed.⁸ One of the most famous performances took place in Vienna in 1667 on the occasion of Emperor Leopold I's wedding.⁹ As in the *ballet de cour* it was common that the horse ballets were performed by noblemen, with the sovereign in the first place. Traditionally the horsemen were divided into four groups, the so-called quadrilles – a term which later became used in dancing. Choreographies for horses were notated either in verbal descriptions, with floor pattern or by pictures. The ridden figures, which were characterized by symmetry and geometric design, show strong parallels to the *ballet de cour*.¹⁰

The art of school-riding

The origin of the horse ballet is connected to the art of riding which developed in sixteenth century Italy and was brought to popularity in seventeenth century France. As mentioned at the beginning, riding, besides dancing, was an important part in the education of a nobleman.

The elegant and skilful art of baroque riding was called school-riding¹¹ and was taught by a riding master. As in baroque dance the noblemen learned to perform elaborate steps and skilful jumps. The steps and jumps were based on the three natural horse gaits; walk, trot and gallop and were divided into two categories; airs on the ground and airs above the ground.¹² Airs on the ground are steps in which the horse always has contact with the ground. The most common type here is the Spanish Walk, a characteristic of which was its proud appearance. It could be used for nearly every dance type like Bourrée, Courant or Saraband.¹³ Airs above the ground are named as such, as there is a moment in the step when all four of the horses' legs are in the air. They are more advanced and therefore belong to the high school or *haute école*. In trot there are, for example, the *piaffe* or the *passage*. Steps based on gallop are *terre à terre* or the *courbette*. In the *courbette* the horse tucks up its fore legs simultaneously, when it jumps forward it immediately lifts both hind legs so that all four legs are in the air at the same time. In contrast to the *courbette* in the *terre à terre*, the fore respectively the hind legs touch the ground in a different position and not simultaneously. The school jumps are the most skilled movements, of which the *capriole* was the most difficult one. The horse jumps from a straight position into the air, extends its hind legs and lands on all four legs at the same time.

These steps were described and pictured in numerous contemporary treatises about school riding which were mostly written by a riding master. In Valentin Trichter's extended new edition of Löhneisens *Neu-eröffnete Hof-Kriegs- und Reit-Schul* from 1729, it is written that all exercises like tournaments, carrousel and horse ballets have their origin in the lections of school-riding.¹⁴ The Jesuit, Claude-François Menestrier, who is known as the author of *Des Ballets anciens et modernes* from 1682 – in which he also speaks about horse ballet,¹⁵ wrote a book about the art of riding. In his *Traité des tournois, ioustes, carrousel, et autres spectacles publics*, which was published thirteen years earlier, he

not only describes the steps which were used in horse ballets at that time, but also gives advice for each step if it could be danced, for example, forward, backward, or in a circle.¹⁶ This reminds us of Feuillet's recommendations for the use of steps in *contredances*.¹⁷ In this context it is important that contemporary sources always wrote that horse ballets were danced, not ridden. There are more parallels to baroque dancing. A cross-shaped floor pattern which was ridden with *courbette* steps was named *sarabande*.¹⁸ Also the terms *cadence* and *equilibrium* were used in school-riding.¹⁹

Horse ballets at the court of Maximilian II Emanuel

In general, extant choreographies of horse ballets are anonymous or were written by a riding master. In the following paragraphs, two horse ballets will be presented which were performed in Munich at the court of Elector Maximilian II Emanuel. The name of their choreographer is known and remarkably it is not the riding but the dancing master who is the choreographer, which is unique in all known horse ballets. Responsible for the carrousel and horse ballets under the reign of Maximilian II Emanuel and his successor Karl Albrecht (the later Emperor Karl VII) was Pierre Dubreil. He started his career as a dancer at the Paris Opera²⁰ and later went to Brussels.²¹ In 1711 he gave a guest performance in Handel's *Rinaldo* at the Queen's theatre in London.²² From 1715 until his death in 1732 Dubreil was employed at the court of Munich. He was engaged as a dancer but soon he became dancing master and *valet de chambre* to Prince-electoral Karl Albrecht.²³ In a letter to him Dubreil listed his duties:

[...] elle [Karl Albrecht] m'accorda le titre de Valet de Chambre pour en faire le service a l'occasion des Carousels, Operas, Comedies et autres fetes [...] je eu de composer les Ballets tant des Operas, Comedies, et Carousels, d'instruire Messeigneurs les Princes, d'enseigner les Cavaliers et Dames de la Cour, les Pages, les Valets et femmes de Chambre et tout les Grenadiers du Regiment des Gardes.²⁴

Here it is important to notice that he was responsible for the carrousels and that he composed the included horse ballets. From several primary sources it is known that Dubreil was even responsible for the costumes of the mentioned festivities.²⁵ Costumes which he designed for a carrousel performed during Carnival 1718 are shown in the tournament book of Karl Albrecht.²⁶ His extant dance choreographies include seventeen contredances and four couple dances²⁷ – the latter are ‘[...] the only extant *danses à deux* by a French dancer and choreographer residing in Germany.’²⁸

The aforementioned tournament book of Karl Albrecht documents every carrousel which took place in Munich between 1717 and 1734.²⁹ It contains lists of the different contests and the participants. Even the winners and their prizes are documented. The carrousels took place in the tournament hall of the court. While the court opera at the Salvatortheater had space for 3,000 people, the tournament hall had space for 8,000 to 10,000 visitors.³⁰ During Dubreil’s time at Munich twenty-nine carrousels were held but a horse ballet was included in only four of them.³¹

The first two performances took place on 17 and 20 February 1721. The horse ballet which was composed by Dubreil was part of a *carousel comique* during the Carnival season. In the beautiful and precious tournament book contests and ballet are described in detail.³² Also the music for the procession is included.³³ The composer is not mentioned but due to the fact that the dancing masters mostly wrote the music for the ballet scenes in the operas, it is to be supposed that the procession music of the *carousel comique* was composed by Dubreil. The horse ballet was performed after the procession and was followed by the contest in form of running at the Turk’s head.³⁴

The horse ballet, entitled *Ballet du Carrousel comique / composé et dessigné par le Sieur Dubreuil / Valet de chambre et maitre de danser de S.A.S. / Monseigneur le Prince Electoral*, is drawn on folded plates of parchment in red and black ink.³⁵ All figures

are painted in rich detail. The ballet is divided into four parts and shows snapshots of the costumed participants riding their horses above lines which show the path on the floor. In this ballet the horsemen were not divided into four quadrilles but into two parties, named after the mythological figures Bacchus and Silenus, one coloured in red, the other one coloured in black. The party of Bacchus was led by Prince-elector Karl Albrecht, the party of Silenus was led by his younger brother Duke Ferdinand Maria, both costumed as German hunters.³⁶ The choreography started with two Pulcinellas who entered from each side of the tournament hall and who rode against each other.³⁷ This is not portrayed on the plates; they show the group choreography. Little by little the other costumed horsemen like hunters, peasants or harlequins with grotesque weapons entered the yard and performed a stylised humorous pursuit. The diary of Count von Preysing reports that there was one rehearsal for the music and nine rehearsals for the whole carrousel, which started one month before the performance.³⁸

One year later, two other performances of horse ballets took place in Munich. The ballet was part of a carrousel named *The four seasons* and was staged for the first time on 10 February 1722. The carrousel was repeated two days later.³⁹ According to the motto, the horsemen were divided in four quadrilles. The quadrille of spring was again led by Prince-elector Karl Albrecht while the quadrille of summer was led by his brother Duke Ferdinand Maria.⁴⁰ This time the tournament book lacks a description of the carrousel so it is not known in which succession contests and horse ballet took place. The choreography is entitled *Ballet du Carrousel des quatre saisons / Composé par S.A.S. Monseigneur le Prince / Electoral*. However the author supposes that Karl Albrecht had very few ideas for the ballet which his dancing master had to transform into a choreography. That is indicated by the above mentioned description of Dubreil’s duties and the fact that special knowledge is needed to create a choreography of that scale. A further important aspect is that the ballet was written in a notation which is

derived from Feuillet's contredance notation.⁴¹ The person who wrote the horse ballet used the notation very precisely and was aware of writing the floor pattern and the direction of the dancers and horsemen correctly. So there is much evidence that Pierre Dubreil was responsible for this horse ballet.

As in Feuillet's contredance notation, the foot path is marked by a line, due to the lack of the melody there is only a bar line at the end of each figure. When needed, the pointed line is also used in the notation. The symbols Feuillet uses for the dancers are used here for the horsemen. As there are more than two participants, the author used additional symbols. The relation between foot path and the symbol for the horsemen indicates if they had to move forward, backward or sideways. According to the four quadrilles the choreography is notated in four colours (black, red, green and yellow). It was also adjusted to the outline of the tournament hall where the ballet took place. The ballet is divided into twenty figures and has a free structure without any repetitions of floor pattern.⁴² Compared to Dubreil's contredances the floor patterns are more complex because with horses he had other possibilities. With the exception of the end, the ballet is danced by eight horsemen. Most of the time horsemen from two quadrilles dance together which is mirrored by the other four horsemen on the other side of the yard, as can be seen, for example, in figures five and six. In only five of the twenty dancing figures are the horsemen of the quadrilles mixed. As in baroque dance the floor patterns are always axial or mirrored symmetrically. Another similarity is the use of imitation. In figure fourteen on each side of the yard a couple of horsemen cross each other's paths which is then imitated by the next couple. In figure sixteen the ballet is reduced to one horseman from each quadrille before it is extended to forty-four horsemen two figures later. The horse ballet ends with the departure of all participants.

Conclusion

It has been shown that there are many similarities between riding and dancing in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Both use symmetrical floor patterns, similar figures, artificial steps and jumps. Treatises about school-riding wrote about dancing horses and, significantly, the fact that a dancing master wrote choreographies for horses, shows how closely related dancing and riding were. Both riding and dancing were arts which were highly significant for the nobility. In the horse ballet both arts were united into one of the most elaborate and aesthetic *divertissements* which took place at the courts of the baroque era.

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1. Bayreuther, *Pferde und Fürsten*, p. 196.
2. Watanabe-O'Kelly, *Equestrian Ballet*, p. 198.
3. Ibid.
4. Watanabe-O'Kelly, *Triumphall shews*, pp. 85 ff.
5. Titcomb, *Carrousel Music*, p. 205.
6. Watanabe-O'Kelly, *Triumphall shews*, pp. 99-100.
7. Watanabe-O'Kelly, *Equestrian Ballet*, p. 208.
8. Watanabe-O'Kelly, *Triumphall shews*, p. 101.
9. Watanabe-O'Kelly, *Equestrian Ballet*, p. 208.
10. van Orden, *Music, Discipline and Arms*, p. 251 and 273.
11. Watanabe-O'Kelly, *Equestrian Ballet*, p. 203.
12. Fürstliche Hofreitschule Bückeberg, *Reitkunst*. If not indicated otherwise, the information concerning the steps and jumps originate from the DVD. The Fürstliche Hofreitschule in Bückeberg is one of three riding schools which today preserve the art of baroque riding. Famous riding schools like the Spanish Riding School in Vienna in contrast practise classical dressage.
13. Trichter, *Löhneisen Reitschul*, part 6, p. 18.
14. Ibid., part 6, p. 37.
15. For example Menestrier, *Ballets anciens*, pp. 230 ff.
16. Menestrier, *Traité des tournois*, p. 171f.
17. Feuillet, *Recueil de Contredances*
18. Fürstliche Hofreitschule Bückeberg, *Reitkunst*.
19. van Orden, *Discipline and Arms*, p. 270-271.

20. Dubreil is mentioned as a dancer in thirteen libretti of the Académie Royale de Musique between 1702 and 1709. A portrait of him as Scaramouche (in Dubreil: *La Hessoise Darmstat* and Dubreil: without title) refers to his performance as Scaramouche in *Fragments de M. de Lully* in Paris 1702.
21. *The Daily Courant*, 19 and 22 March 1711
22. Ibid.
23. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv: Pierre Dubreil files (HR I Fasz. 466 No. 403).
24. Letter from Pierre Dubreil to Karl Albrecht, probably 1727. Underlining in the original. (HR I Fasz. 466 No. 403).
25. For example Decree by Maximilian II Emanuel from 17 October 1720 (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv: Fürstensachen 772p, f. 34) and *Ausgabebuech de anno 1720*, f. 313v (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv: Kurbayern Hofzahlamt 333).
26. Tournament book of Karl Albrecht, f. 22r-37v. Regrettably the digital reproduction does not show the beautiful colours of the original. That Dubreil was responsible for these costumes comes from *Ausgabebuech de anno 1720*, f. 313v (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv: Kurbayern Hofzahlamt 333).
27. Dubreil: without title, Dubreil: *La Hessoise Darmstat*, Dubreil: *La Carlstadt*.
28. Little & Marsh, *Danse noble*, p. 118.
29. It seems that Watanabe-O'Kelly had no knowledge of the tournament book, because she did not mention it in her publication on tournaments at German-speaking courts where one chapter is about the court in Munich and where she listed all European Festivals in an index.
30. Ulrich, *Nationaltheater*, p. 12.
31. After Dubreil's death two carrousels took place in March 1734. The second on 8 March was a repetition of the carrousel which took place on 17 February 1721. (Tournament book of Karl Albrecht, f. 103v-104r)
32. Tournament book, f. 54r-66r.
33. Tournament book, f. 61v-62r.
34. Tournament book, f. 55v.
35. Tournament book, f. 57v-60r.
36. Tournament book, f. 62v-63r.
37. Tournament book, f. 55r.
38. von Preysing, *Tagebuch*, 17, 22, 25, 28 and 31 January, 1, 8, 10 and 15 February.
39. Tournament book, f. 69r.
40. Tournament book, f. 69v-70r.
41. Turnierbuch f. 74v-79r.
42. Tournament book, f. 74v-80r.