

Bransles

Bransles are the simplest of the known renaissance dances, and a bransle is usually the first dance that is taught of any of the known medieval or renaissance dances.

Most bransles are circle dances, which are usually danced in a circle of alternating men and ladies (although this does not strictly matter). Some bransles are line dances, while others can be danced as either line or circle dances.

History

The word “bransle” comes from a French word meaning a side-to-side movement. Most of the steps in a bransle are from side to side.

There is one primary source for all of the bransles described in this book – this is the “Orchesography” of Thoinot Arbeau, published in France in 1589. You can find references to a translation of Orchesography available from Dover (by Mary Stuart Evans) in the bibliography provided with this dance book. Orchesography is the most fundamental primary dance source used for dances in the SCA, and it is a “must have” if you are going to do any period dance research.

There is also a facsimile edition of Orchesography available, although obviously unless you read French the translation will be easier to work from!

Social Setting

It is reasonably obvious from the description of the bransles in Orchesography, and from Arbeau’s status in society, that the bransles were dances done normally by the lower or middle classes in French society at the time (the upper classes were probably dancing pavaues, galliards, and perhaps some dances in the Italian style at the time).

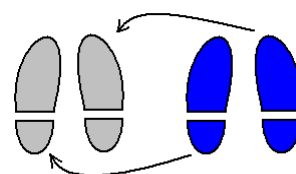
Timing

Generally, bransles are done in 4/4 time.

The Basic Steps

SL -- Single Left

Starting with feet closed (or wherever the feet ended up after the last step), step to the left with the left foot, and then join feet, stepping to the left with the right foot.

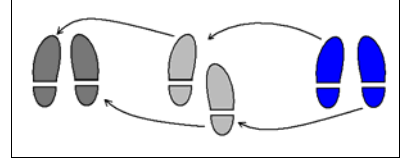


SR -- Single Right

Step to the right with the right foot, then join feet, stepping to the right with the left foot.

DL -- Double Left

Step to the left with the left foot, bring the right foot over near the left foot (either to the right of it and adjacent to it, or to the right and slightly behind it, or behind it while turning slightly at the waist). Then step to the left again with the left foot, and join feet, stepping to the left with the right foot.

**DR -- Double Right**

Step to the right with the right foot, bring the left foot over near the right foot (either to the left of it and adjacent to it, or to the left and slightly behind it, or behind it while turning slightly at the waist). Then step to the right again with the right foot, and join feet, stepping to the right with the left foot.

Two Basic Bransles: Bransle Double and Bransle Single

These bransles can be done in a line or in a circle. Partners or alternating genders are not required.

Bransle double

DL, DR, DL, DR, ...

The dance repeats to the end of the music.

**Bransle single
(Bransle simple)**

DL, SR, DL, SR, ...

The dance repeats to the end of the music.

These two dances are extremely basic, and are therefore not taught or danced much. They do in fact form part of a basic set of bransles, and are good warm up dances.

Either of the above two dances (or both of them) can be turned into a knot bransle. In a knot bransle, the dancers form a line. The dancer at the head of the line leads the other dancers around the hall, weaving around the hall and in and out of the line itself. This can cause the line of dance to get knotted around itself, which can take some straightening out. Dancers should try not to let the line break at any point, which can get harder and harder as the line gets more knotted.

Some More Bransle Steps

Occasionally you'll find that we ask you to do a single or double with a "cross". This just means that at the end of the step, you cross your foot in front of one knee as you finish. So, if you are doing a double to the left, you cross your right foot over in front of your left knee as you finish. See the picture on the right.

Below are the descriptions of the singles and doubles with a cross.



SLx -- Single Left Crossing

Step to the left with the left foot, then bring the right foot across in front of the left leg in a small kick. The right leg should be bent, and the right foot should pass about midway up the calf of the left leg.

SRx -- Single Right Crossing

Step to the right with the right foot, then bring the left foot across in front of the right leg in a small kick. The left leg should be bent, and the left foot should pass about midway up the calf of the right leg.

DLx -- Double Left Crossing

Step to the left with the left foot, then close feet, stepping to the left with the right foot. Step to the left again with the left foot, then bring the right foot across in front of the left leg in a small kick. The right leg should be bent, and the right foot should pass about midway up the calf of the left leg.

DRx -- Double Right Crossing

Step to the right with the right foot, then close feet, stepping to the right with the left foot. Step to the right again with the right foot, then bring the left foot across in front of the right leg in a small kick. The left leg should be bent, and the left foot should pass about midway up the calf of the right leg.

KL -- Kick Left

A kick left goes like this: Jump into the air very slightly, finishing with the left foot off the ground.

A kick right is just the opposite. Note that the picture shows that the dancer only comes very slightly off the ground with the front foot.



Cp -- Capriole

The picture shows part of a capriole. This is done by leaping into the air and passing your feet back and forwards past each other. Depending on how adept you're feeling, you can make 2, 3, 5, or even more passes.



A Basic Bransle Set: Double/Single/Gai/Burgundian

This bransle set, according to Arbeau, was the first dance done at any ball. The entire dance set can be done as a learning piece in a circle, or as a knot bransle set if the dancers are more experienced. Bransle single and bransle double have been described earlier.

Partners or alternating genders are not required for any of the dances in this set.

Bransle Gai:

KL KR KL KR pause

KR KL KR KL pause

The dance repeats to the end of the music. The dancers should move to the left while executing the kicks.

Burgundian Bransle (Bransle de Bourgogne):

DLx DRx DLx DRx

The dance repeats to the end of the music. The dancers should make the steps to the right smaller than the steps to the left, so that the entire line of dance continues to move to the left.

The entire bransle set (Single, Double, Gai, Burgundian) can be done as a set of dances done in a circle, a line bransle set, or a knot bransle set.



This picture, from a manuscript in Valencia, shows dancers performing a dance that could possibly have been a bransle, or a fore-runner to it.

Mimed Bransles

The mimed bransles form a simple four-bransle set. These dances are easy to learn, and introduce the more common bransle steps with a bit of interplay between the partners using steps unique to each dance, which makes for a fun set of dances. The dances are all circle dances for couples, the lady stands on the man's left.

Each dance starts with the circle holding hands for the introduction, and then dropping hands for the theme.

Washerwoman's Bransle (Bransle les Lavandieres)

Introduction

DL DR DL DR

Optionally, during the doubles left, partners can flirt with each other. During the doubles right, the men flirt with the ladies on their right (not their partner), while the ladies flirt with the man on their left.

Theme

Partners turn 90° and face each other.

Men SL SR

Wagging their fingers at the ladies in a scolding manner, the ladies stand with their hands on their hips.

Ladies SL SR

As above, wagging their fingers at the men.

All dancers turn and face the center again.

All: DL
 DR
 DL
 KL KR KL Cp

During the double left the dancers clap their hands to the beat of the music.
 Double Right.
 Double Left, clapping as above.
 Kick Left, Right, Left, and Jump, while turning in place over your left shoulder.

Pease Bransle (Branle des Pois)

Introduction

DL DR DL DR

Theme

Men: Jump

Jump left on both feet, landing next to their partner.

Ladies: Jump

Jump left on both feet, away from their partner.

Men: Jump Jump Jump

Jump left with three smaller jumps, again landing next to their partner.

Ladies:	Jump	Jump left on both feet, away from their partner.
Men:	Jump	Jump left on both feet, landing next to their partner.
Ladies:	Jump Jump Jump	Jump left with three smaller jumps, away from their partner.

Shoes Bransle (Clog Bransle, Bransle des Sabots)

Introduction DL DR DL DR

Theme

Men:	SL SR	Stamp 3 times with the right foot.
Ladies:	SL SR	Stamp 3 times with the right foot.

Horses Bransle (Bransle de Chevaux)

Introduction DL DR DL DR DL DR DL DR

This introduction is twice as long as the introduction for the other bransles in this set.

Theme

Men:	Paw Paw	Paw the ground twice with the right foot, imitating a horse.
	SR	
	DL	Turning over the left shoulder, across the front of their partner, ending to the left of the partner (in other words, the men rotate around the circle one place to the left). ¹
Ladies:	Paw Paw	Paw the ground twice with the right foot.
	SR DL	As above.

Repeat the theme.

Note that Arbeau actually says to do the dance with the man holding both of the lady's hands. I assume that the couples would be in a line facing each other to do this.

¹ Arbeau just says to turn over the shoulder, however this reconstruction is the one most popular in Lochac.

Mixed Bransles

These dances form a five bransle set. They are usually done in the order Cassandra-Pinagay-Charlotte-LaGuerre-Aridan. Arbeau refers to these as the Mixed Bransles of Champagne, while in Lochac they are known as the Cut Bransles.

The dances are best learned in the order that they are shown, and the order that they are danced in the set. They increase with complexity through the set, and the Aridan can take quite some time to master.

Cassandra

Part I DL DR DL DR

Part II DL DR SL DR (repeat)

Pinagay

Part I DL KL DL KL KR KL

Part II DL DR

Charlotte

Part I DL KL KR DR (repeat)

Part II DL KL KR
SR KL KR KL
SL KR KL KR
DR

This dance is more complicated than the first two, and takes a little bit more effort to learn. The key is to remember that each single is followed by three kicks, and the doubles are only ever followed by two kicks. Also, remember that after each single you do not change feet to start the kicks -- the best way to remember this is to not close the single completely, so that you are left with one foot slightly hanging in the air ready to start the kicks. After each double, you close the step and change feet as normal to begin the kicks.

La Guerre

This dance is actually easier than it looks, if you have the stamina to keep up with it. The steps alternate left-right-left-right, just like a large number of other simple dances. Remembering that is often the key to remembering the entire dance.

Part I

DL DR DL DR DL DR DL DR

The introduction to this dance is twice as long as the introduction to any of the other dances in this set.

Part II

DL DR

SL SR DL

SR SL DR

SL KL KR KL (Feet Together) Capriole

The only tricky part about this dance is that the entire theme is done at double speed. Think quickly, and remember double-double/single-single-double/single-single-double/single-kick-kick-kick-capriole.

To do a capriole, jump into the air, and waggle both feet around a bit (or ride a bicycle backwards is another way to do it). Land on the ground on both feet, with the left foot slightly forwards of the right foot.

Aridan

This dance is the hardest of the mixed bransles to learn. Remember that the introduction is quite short, and the theme is longer and repeats. Also remember that the theme is in three parts, a, b, and c.

Part I

DL KL KR KL (repeat)

Part II

a.	DL SR SL SR	Double left, three singles.
b.	DL KL KR	Double left, two kicks.
c.	DR Step L Close KR Step R KL	Double right, step close kick step kick. Or: double, shuffle kick step kick.

The entire theme then repeats (parts a, b, and c).

The correct way to do (c) is as follows: Double Right; step left, close, step left, kick right; step right, close, kick left. The bit after the double is sort of a truncated double left with a kick right at the end; followed by a single right with a kick left.

The Official Bransle

The official bransle (Bransle de l'Official, officers' bransle) is probably the most common dance in my part of the SCA, and one of the most popular. The dance is a circle dance for as many couples as will. The man stands to the left of the lady.

Part I DL DR DL DR²

Part II SL SL SL SL SL SL

KL KR KL (feet together)

At the end of this sequence, partners turn towards each other slightly, the lady turning to face the man. The lady leaps across the front of the man, assisted in her leap by the man who should guide her with his hands on her waist.

The entire dance repeats.³

Scottish Bransle

This is a circle or a line dance, for as many dancers as will. Partners or alternating genders are not required.

Part I DLx DRx SLx SRx

Repeat.

Part II DLx SRx SLx DRx

DLx SRx KR KL KR Jump and Capriole

The entire dance repeats until the music runs out.

² Arbeau gives these steps as doubles with small hops in between each step. The dance that is done throughout Lochac does not include the hops, although some dancers ornament the steps slightly with kicks at the end of each double. The singles should be hopped as well – however be careful to put a single hop at the end of each step of the singles, rather than bouncing around madly on one leg as I have seen some people do this. If your tendency is to bounce, then you're probably better off leaving the hops out all together.

³ Which way you do this depends on how your musicians play the tune.

Bransle of Brittany (Trihory)

This bransle is mentioned in passing in Orchesography, being a bransle that Arbeau learned when he was a student at Poitiers.

Part I

DL Spring Left, landing on both feet.

Part II

KL KR KL

The dance repeats from this point.

Arbeau states that "at the end of the trihory" the steps KR KL KR are done differently. Standing on the tips of your toes, swing your heels to the right, then to the left, and then swing to the right again at the same time raising your right foot. The music is the same whether the theme is done as a set of jumps or swings.

It would be open to interpretation as to whether these steps would be done only at the end of the dance, or at the end of each second repeat (being the end of the sequence of music that Arbeau has provided). Having tried the dance only briefly, I would believe that the alternate steps would work better if they were done at the end of each second repeat as there are no clues in the music as to where the end of the dance is.

Torch Bransle

Figure 1

The dance starts with a number of men on the floor, holding a lighted candle. Each of them dances through the hall using the following steps:

DLf DRf DLf DRf DLf DRf DLf DRf

(8 Doubles forwards, alternating Left and Right). The doubles are all done with a hop at the end.

Figure 2

At the end of Figure 1, the man should come and stop near a lady. He performs a short reverence and then dances towards her:

SLf SRf SLf SRf

(4 Singles, alternating Left and Right)

Repeat

Repeat the dance from the beginning, dancing together.

In the repeat of figure 2, use the last two of them to reverence and hand the candle over to your partner.

In the next repeat, the new holder of the candle dances off to find a new partner, and the dance can repeat from there ad infinitum.

Hay Bransle

This dance starts with any number of people in a line. Most of the recordings I have seem to be set up for 3 people, which is how I have seen it danced most often.

Figure 1

SL SR DL

SR SL DR

repeat

This is done using courante steps – hopping before each step of the single or double.

Figure 2

Play the B music as many times as necessary for the dancers to get through this section.

Using pavan doubles, make a hey until the everyone is back to their original places.

Notes

You can take hands or not during the hey, whichever you prefer. Arbeau doesn't say.
