

15th C Italian Dance Steps

Basse Danze Steps

SL -- Single (sempio¹)

The sempio (single) step is just a single step forwards on the left foot, as shown in the picture. A sempio right is a single step forwards on the right foot.

Sempi are not closed.

There is some ornamentation in a sempio, basically I prefer to do the *campeggiare* (shoulder and hip movement) without the *ondeggiare* that is found in a *doppio*. So, the sempio looks just like the first step of a *doppio*.

Two sempio can be done in one bar of *bassadanza*, which means that they take three beats each, or slightly slower than the first step of a *doppio* (which would be done in two beats).



DL -- Double (doppio)

An Italian double (*doppio*) was done to a rising and falling movement, with the dancers rising onto their toes during the steps, and falling back to the flat of the feet at the end of the beat. This step takes 1 measure.

A *doppio* left in *bassadanza* time looks like this:

- Step forwards on the left foot (as shown above for the sempio).
- Step forwards on the right foot, bringing the right foot either level with, slightly in front of, or slightly behind the left foot.
- Step forwards again on the left foot.

Note that there is no close at the end of the step. Remember to start the next step with the right foot.

Since there are six beats in a bar of *bassadanza* time, each of the above actions will take two beats.

Remember to use lots of *maniera* (*campeggiare* and *ondeggiare*) while walking through the step: Bring your hip and shoulder forwards gracefully while making the first step, rise up to your toes on the second step (as shown in the picture), and lower on the third step. Be graceful about raising and lowering, try to rise and lower slowly rather than falling back on your heels like a sack of potatoes.



¹ Literally, "simple" or "simple step". Look for the *quadernaria* section in "L'altria Fia Guelmina" for an example of where this description does not apply.

Contrapasso

Contrapassi are doubles that are done consecutively on the same foot . The first double is step left-right-left as a normal doppio, and then do a quick shift of weight onto the right foot.

The next contrapasso will also begin on the left foot, so two or more contrapassi in a row will be done left, left, left, not like *sempii* or *dopii* which would be done left, right, left.

The last contrapasso in a sequence is abbreviated, so that instead of finishing with a movement back on to the right foot, it simply omits the final step onto the left. So, two contrapassi in a row would be done as step left, step right, step left & back, step left, step right; still finishing with the left foot ready to lead the next step. Three of them would be done step left, step right, step left & back, step left, step right, step left & back, step left, step right.

Contrapassi can also be done on the right foot, which are the same as described above but changing “left” for “right” throughout.

Note that two of these steps are done in 1½ bars of music, and so the last movement back onto the left foot is done rather quickly, and the timing of the steps must be arranged carefully to match the music.

Diana Cruickshank examines this contrapasso step in detail in an article in *Historical Dance*, 1992.

Reprisa

The Ripresa, the Italian equivalent of the French Reprise was done quite differently. Basically it looks like two singles, and takes 1 measure.

RpB -- Ripresa Backwards

Step backwards with the right foot, bending the knee slightly. Then join feet, stepping backwards with the left foot and rising onto the toes. Then repeat the same movements, stepping backwards onto the flat of the right foot, and then step backwards with the left foot, rising onto the toes again.²

RpF -- Ripresa Forwards

This step can be done forwards on the left or the right foot. It is similar to the riprese backwards, listed above, but done moving forwards.

RpL -- Ripresa Left

Step to the left with the left foot, bending at the knees very slightly and remaining on the flat of the feet. Then join feet, stepping left with the right foot, and rising onto the toes. Repeat the movement, stepping with the left foot and dipping, and then stepping with the right foot and rising. This riprese can also be done with the right foot, moving to the right.³

² The riprese in the 16th C Italian dances was done as a single movement, in much faster time (half the time of a single *continenza*), and always done sideways, never backwards or forwards. Many reconstructors have used the 16th C step as a rationale for insisting that the 15th C step of the same name was also a single step. I reject this on the basis of the steps in *Pietosa* -- two riprese forwards cover the same distance as two doubles (*dopii*) forwards, and hence fit better if they are two steps. Cornazano provides another clue here -- he states that the length of a riprese should be varied, and also makes a statement that could be interpreted that the step can be done in two movements.

³ I make the assumption that the sideways riprese is done in the same number of movements as the forwards or backwards riprese. There is possibly less justification for this. The steps should be much smaller than the forwards or backwards riprese (see my previous comment about Cornazano), especially in dances like *La Spagna*, *Reale*, and *Pietosa*, where the dancers are moving apart while holding hands.

**RpT -- Ripresa
Turning**

Place the left foot in front of the right foot, heel to toe, and bend at the knees. Then, rising on the toes, swivel in place through 180° over the right shoulder. The left foot will now be behind the right foot. Repeat the movement, placing the left foot in front of the right foot while bending at the knees, then rise and swivel again.

RvL -- Riverenza L

The riverenza done in bassadanza time is done in a single bar, or six beats. Here is how to do a riverenza beginning on the left foot, in six beats:

- Push the left foot forwards, somewhat ahead of the right.
- Pause
- Bring the left foot backwards, to somewhere behind where it started.
- Bend both knees, keeping the body straight up and down, keeping the head upright and facing forwards, as shown in the picture.
- Begin rising off your knees, starting to straighten your knees and start coming back into place.
- Return to the upright position with the feet back where they started, straightening both knees and rising back into place.



A Riverenza on the right foot is done in the same way, except using the right foot.

**CnL -- Continenza
Left**

This pair of steps is done in the same way as a stepping branle, done in the Burgundian Basse Danses. To do these as a pair of steps, the dancers take a single step to the left, join feet together, and then step back towards the right, joining feet together again. The steps are done in an Italian manner, with the same sort of rising and falling movements seen in the Italian Reprise. Each step takes the same time as a single step. Occasionally they are done right then left, although almost never singly.

**CnR -- Continenza
Right****CbL --
Cambiamento Left**

Simply, change weight onto the Left foot. A Cambiamento Right is a change of weight onto the Right foot. This step takes no time -- it should be done as part of the previous step. For example, a Single Left followed by a Cambiamento Right is done by stepping forwards on the left foot, closing feet with the right foot, then quickly shifting weight so that your weight is on the right foot.

**MvL -- Meza Volta
Left**

A quick half turn, to the left, ending up facing in the opposite direction to the one you started. A Meza Volta Right is simply the same thing done turning to the Right.

**VtL -- Volta tonda
Left**

This is a full turn, to the Left, ending up facing the way you started. A volta tonda Right is the same thing done turning to the right.

Ballo Steps

All of the steps I have shown so far are bassedanze steps, that is they are all in 6/4 time. A doppio is done to one misura of bassedanza time, in other words in one measure or bar of 6/4 time.

Some of the steps that are to follow are in other misure. Saltarello steps are done in saltarello time, therefore in one bar (3 beats) of 3/4 time. Piva steps are done in 2 beats, of (usually quite fast) piva, or 2/4 time, and so on.

Many of the steps can be done in any time -- for example the ballo "Pizochara" has several reprise done in 2/4 (piva) time, while in other dances reprise are done in 6/4 bassedanza time.

PvL -- Piva (Left)

The "piva" step is the main step done in piva time. The dance descriptions of the time often say things like "do sixteen tempi of piva" which means to do sixteen piva steps in sixteen bars of piva time, the step being implied by a measure.

Here is how to do a piva step, beginning on the left foot:

- Step forwards on the left foot
- Step quickly forwards on the right foot, bringing the right foot either level with, slightly in front of, or slightly behind the left foot.
- Step forwards again on the left foot.

Note that the above three actions are done in two beats. The second action is done quickly on the second beat, and the third step forwards happens just after the beat. The count is "ONE and TWO, ONE and TWO", etc.

The piva step looks like a very fast doppio step, which is exactly how the manuscripts describe it to be done.

To commence the next piva step, step forwards on the right foot, past the left foot, as if starting the first step of the sequence, and continue from there.

SIL -- Saltarello (Left)

A saltarello step is done in 3 beats (one measure of saltarello, or 3/4 time):

- Step forwards on the left foot.
- Make a quick "lilt" onto the right foot (in effect moving the weight of the step backwards), then step forwards on the left foot.
- Hop forwards on the left foot, leaving the right foot raised to commence the next step.

Note that this is only one of many interpretations of this step, and there are other arrangements of the steps (hop-step-lilt-step) that are also found. The manuscripts of the period are not sufficiently clear on the description of this step for a "proof" of one method or another to be found.

Saltarello Todescho

A “saltarello todescho” step is done in 4 beats (1 bar of 4/4 quadernaria time), beginning on the left foot as follows:

- Step forwards on the left foot
- Step forwards on the right foot, bringing the right foot either level with, slightly in front of, or slightly behind the left foot.
- Step forwards again on the left foot.
- Hop forwards on the left foot, leaving the right foot raised to commence the next step

This should be done evenly spaced across the four beats of the bar, one action per beat.

Note the similarity to the piva step. There is no rushing of the right foot step as there was in the piva step, however, and there is a hop at the end.

To commence the next step, begin on the right foot. Remember that all steps are done in a strict left, right, left sequence.

Every Step Is Derived From A Doppio

Every one of the above steps is derived from a doppio. Look back at the description of a bassadanza doppio, I have included a diagram.

Note how the (left) doppio step begins with a step forwards on the left foot, continuing with a shorter step forwards on the right foot and a rise onto your toes, and then another step forwards on the left foot.



A piva step is just this step done more quickly, in 2 beats rather than 6.

Saltarello and Saltarello Todescho

A saltarello step is very simply the doppio step, with a hop at the end, all done in 3 beats. Or, if you prefer, it is a piva step with a hop at the end.

A saltarello todescho step is the same as a saltarello step, but done in 4 beats. Or, if you prefer, a slowed down piva step with a hop at the end. Or, just a saltarello step done more slowly.

In this way every step and time of 15th C Italian dance relates to every other step and time.

M -- Movimento

This is basically a small rising motion. Nothing else specific is known about it, so I treat it as a small rise onto the balls of the feet, and down again, in half of a bar.

I use the movimento as a place for improvisation in many of my reconstructions.