

Introduction

Historical Background

The *balli* covered in this manual are dances belonging to a tradition popular in Northern Italy from the mid-15th through early-16th centuries. The earliest choreographies are from about 1450, but the roots of the dance form are obviously much earlier; *saltarello*, for instance, which is both a type of dance of this period and appears within the *balli*, was also danced in the late 14th century.

These are undoubtedly dances of the upper classes, but it is not certain how similar they are to dances done by the rest of the population. Cornazano does say that the dances he describes are not for commoners,¹ but he could hardly be expected to tell the highborn lady that he is writing for that milkmaids also enjoy doing them. The *saltarello* and *piva* seem to have been done widely, including by lower classes². However, the choreographed *balli* and *bassadanze* of the dancing masters were unlikely to be learned without regular classes, and were therefore probably restricted to the upper and richer middle classes. The *balli* seem to have been usually danced by only one set at a time, and the emphasis was therefore much more on performance than as a purely social activity. It is possible, however, that, as many people would know the dances, at less formal occasions they were danced by as many people as wished to.

The choreographers of this period were mostly dancing masters attached to a court, although members of the nobility were known to create dances as well. The dance manuals that survive (all hand-written) were sometimes presentation copies, carefully calligraphed, illuminated, and made for a specific individual, while others are presumably personal copies, having been scrawled out in casual script.

The most important choreographer of this period was Domenico da Piacenza. One of the surviving dance manuals, PnD, is attributed to him,³ dating from about 1450 or 1455. Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro (later known as Giovanni Ambrosio), who was a student of Domenico, was the other major choreographer of this period. Two of his manuals survive, being PnG, dated at 1463, and PnA, from some time later, probably during the 1470s. Antonio Cornazano, another student of Domenico, was not himself a choreographer, but did write one of the other surviving manuals (Rvat), which dates from 1465.

These four manuals are the only ones that contain music for any of the dances: a total of three tunes that are not for specified dances, and the music for 23 of the *balli*. The other manuals that survive do not have music, and contain very little theory that is not included in PnD or PnA. Most of the dances in the other manuals are also by Domenico and Guglielmo, though a few dances are specified as being by other choreographers.

The sources are unfortunately somewhat vague, being created for people who were already at least partially familiar with the dance form. This is especially true regarding the performance of the steps, which are often not described at all. Because of this, modern reconstructions show considerable diversity.

For more on 15th-century dance, see the introductions to Sparti and A. William Smith.

¹ Rvat line 513.

² Sparti: P 58, n. 41

³ No author is given, and Domenico is mentioned in the third person, but it gives his theory on dancing and only his dances are included.

The Four *Misure*

At this time there were four dance *misure* (rhythms), being *bassadanza*, *quadernaria*, *saltarello*, and *piva*. (There is disagreement over exactly what modern time signature these are equivalent to. In our arrangements we have used 6/4 for *bassadanza*, 4/4 for *quadernaria*, 6/8 (or sometimes 3/4) for *saltarello*, and 2/4 or 6/8 for *piva*.) Each of the four *misure* corresponded to a dance, done entirely in that rhythm, and each had its own characteristic step. According to Cornazano, a tenor of music could be played in any of the four *misure*.³ Two of the manuals (PnD and Rvat) explain how each step may be performed when done to music of another *misura*, and the *balli* often have sections where the step of one *misura* is done to the music of another.

Bassedanze were slow, somewhat processional dances, for which choreographies survive. No matching music is found in the sources, so presumably any tune of the right length, played in *bassadanza misura*, could be used. (This differs from the related Burgundian *basse danse*, where the choreographies had set tenors.) No choreographies are given for the other three *misure*, but the *saltarello* and *piva* were also dances. Both were lively and improvised, probably danced by any number of people, in couples or perhaps larger groups, at the same time. The *saltarello* may be the ancestor of the 16th-century galliard. *Quadernaria* was also known as *saltarello tedesco*. Cornazano says that it is rarely danced as an independent dance type, and, indeed, there are no references to people dancing it, unlike the other three *misure*.

According to PnD and Rvat, *bassadanza* and *saltarello* both should start on the upbeat (*vuodo* in the manuals), while the *quadernaria* and *piva* should start on the downbeat (*pieno*). PnD explains further, saying that the *bassadanza* and *saltarello* begin with a *movimento* on the upbeat, stepping on the downbeat that follows, while the other two *misure* start by stepping on the downbeat. (This *movimento* is used quite differently than the normal *movimento*, which appears as a dialogue between dancers; it may be performed identically, or it may be that "movimento" in this case means "a movement" rather than "the *movimento* step".) PnD sometimes specifies a *movimento* at the beginning of a sequence of *saltarelli* where in the same dance in other sources it does not appear.⁴ We presume that this *movimento* can be considered as part of the *saltarello*, and that the other writers were either less careful to specify this detail, or that they did not use this method of performing the *saltarello*. We chose not to have this *movimento* in our reconstructions of the steps, in order to keep them simpler. People may wish to add it to the beginning of *saltarello* sequences, but should note that it then also probably belongs at the beginning of *bassadanza* sequences.

The Structure of *Balli*

The *ballo* uses all four of the *misure*, sometimes all in the same dance, although some of the *balli* remain in one *misura* throughout. The choreography of the dance and the music matches exactly, resulting in music that sounds odd to modern ears, as it can even contain half-length bars. The choreographies are often theatrical, with themes suggested by their titles. Most of the *balli* require a specific number of dancers, which ranges from one couple up to twelve dancers. The dances are not always for couples, often being for trios or larger numbers. When the sexes are not balanced, there are usually more men than women, the most extreme case being the dance *Sobria*, which calls for five men and only one woman.

Certain figures and patterns are common in the *balli*, such as processional sections where the dancers move forward together, sections where the dancers move apart and then return, arming figures where partners take hands and move around each other, and numerous weaves and heys where one or more dancers weave around other, stationary, dancers or all of the dancers move in snakelike patterns around each other. Dances later in this period start to use a verse format, where the same music is repeated with different steps, and the verse/chorus format, where a repetitive chorus is danced between verses.

³ Rvat line 1127.

⁴ For examples, see the beginning of *Mercanzia*, *Sobria* and *Vercepe*.

Repetition is extremely common. Figures are often repeated by each dancer, or each couple, and an entire dance may be repeated so that each person, or sometimes only each man, gets to lead. Some sources (NYp, Fn, and Fl) specify quite often that a dance should be repeated, while others (PnA and PnG) never do. PnD tends to only mention repeats where there could be uncertainty in who leads or in how many repeats there should be. It may be that repeating a dance was so much a part of the repertoire that it was often considered unnecessary to state it. PnD, however, often gives the instructions by saying what to do *if* a repeat is done,⁵ so our view is that repeats are optional in most cases. We have chosen to include them only some of the time. (For more on repeats, see also Leading, below.)

Ornamentation and Improvisation

Ornamentation and improvisation were considered important to the dances, but are unfortunately described as casually as the steps themselves. Four of the major elements of styling are a rising motion, shoulder shading, adding ornamental movements to the ends of steps, and varying stepwork.

The rising motion, called *ondegiarre* by Cornazano and *aire* by Guglielmo, is described somewhat differently by the two men.⁶ Cornazano says that when doing a *doppio* one should rise on the second step, and come down on the third,⁷ while Guglielmo says that steps should be done rising "*nel baccere de tempi*",⁸ presumably meaning on the first beat, where the first step would fall. The brief discussion of *agilitade* in PnD (where it is mentioned along with *maniera*) is probably equivalent; there the dancer is instructed to rise slowly and descend quickly.⁹ This is nearly identical to another description of *ondegiarre* in Rvat.¹⁰ Guglielmo states that it should be done moderately, so it is obviously not meant to be an extreme rise. We have decided that the rising motion should be gradual, so you should start it near the beginning of the step and carry it through to the end. Typically this means you should start rising on the second beat, though for shorter steps you may need to start at the very beginning instead. We have the descent happen as late in the step as possible, so that the tension can be maintained. When there is no ornament added this works well, and the descent can still be considered as occurring on the third step, which complies with Cornazano's instruction. However, adding ornaments is usually easier if the descent has already occurred, and it may be more correct to descend as the third step is taken, so that is another option. Certainly it should be emphasized that the rise should at all times be done as naturally as possible, and not forced into places where it will make the dancer look and feel awkward.

Shoulder shading is called *campeggiare* by Cornazano and *maniera* by Guglielmo. (Our use of the word "shoulder" is somewhat misleading, as that word is not used in the descriptions; at least the upper body seems to have been turned, and it may be that the entire body is. Despite our instructions to move only the shoulder forward, dancers should attempt to move naturally, allowing the rest of the body to follow as much as it will.) It is unclear which shoulder is to be moved forward as the dancer begins a step - either the same as the foot which is used, or the opposite. Our opinion is that Cornazano seems to be saying the former¹¹ and Guglielmo the latter,¹² but that there is room to argue each case in both places. Our decision was reached partly by examining pictures of

⁵ See *Fia Guilmina* (the first version), *Belreguardo Novo*, *Vercepe*, *Belfiore*, *Mercanzia*.

⁶ Cornazano also mentions *aire*, but as a separate, or more general, element of styling, and without describing it. Possibly his and Guglielmo's *aire* are the same thing, while his *ondegiarre* is different, but the descriptions do seem to be discussing the same general ornament.

⁷ Rvat line 119.

⁸ PnA line 461.

⁹ PnD line 419.

¹⁰ Rvat line 381.

¹¹ See Rvat line 119.

¹² See PnA line 487.

dancers of this period, where a turn of the body to the side of the foot is very common,¹³ and also because we reasoned that if the shoulder opposite to the foot is used, this is what naturally takes place while walking so it would not need to be specified. However, since the shading takes place throughout, for instance, a *doppio*, where more than one foot is moved forward, this is not very conclusive. The duration of the shading is not certain: it is clear that it lasts through an entire step, but, as Guglielmo says that it is maintained until the end of a *tempo*,¹⁴ it may be that when two steps are done within one *tempo* that the same shoulder remains forward through both steps. We decided to have the shading be performed with each step, as that is less complicated.

Adding an extra movement to the end of steps was common. PnD says that the ornamental movements take a quarter of a *tempo*, and that if two are done in the same *tempo* they take an eighth of a *tempo* each.¹⁵ The extra movements that could be used are listed in PnD as *frapamento*, *scorsa*, and *cambiamente*¹⁶ and as *trascorsa*, *frappamento*, and *picigamento* in Rvat.¹⁷ What these ornaments are is not certain, but it is probable that any movement that fits in the time allotted, and does not leave the dancer in a position from which it will be awkward to do the next step, would have been acceptable. Cornazano does state that these ornamental movements are not needed by women,¹⁸ so adding extra movements was probably more often practiced by men.

Dancers were expected to vary the steps they used, and a number of variations are mentioned. One of these is to replace the basic step with other steps at will, which Cornazano mentions specifically for the *piva* (at least in the man's case)¹⁹ and the *saltarello*.²⁰ (It is unclear, however, if these variations were done only in dances entirely in the *piva* or *saltarello misure*, or if they were also practiced in sections of *balli* which are in those *misure*.) He also mentions "*diversite de cose*" as one of the requirements for perfect dancing, and from his description seems to mean that the steps should be done in various different ways, instead of always the same.²¹ This may mean adding the extra movements at the end, as discussed above, or it may be some other manner of modifying the steps. It may just refer to the various ways that the steps are done, such as a *doppio* being performed differently depending on which *misure* it is in, or to the many different methods of doing a *voltatonda*. It is clear that dancers were expected to be flexible, to improvise, and to vary their performances.

Modifying the step size to one's partner and the size and shape of the room is discussed in PnA,²² and Cornazano also touches on the subject.²³ This suggests that a standard step size is not expected, so steps might be large or small depending on what is needed at the moment. Dancers who are used to the small steps required for 16th-century Italian dance should be particularly aware of this.

¹³ See Castelli for many illustrations of dancers.

¹⁴ PnA line 488.

¹⁵ PnD line 110.

¹⁶ PnD line 103.

¹⁷ Rvat line 285.

¹⁸ Rvat line 323.

¹⁹ Rvat line 223.

²⁰ Rvat line 228.

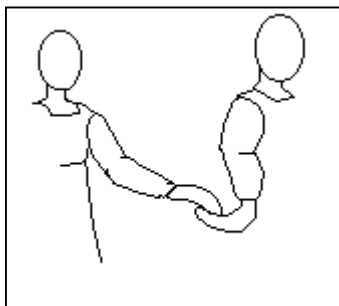
²¹ Rvat line 134.

²² See PnA line 416.

²³ Rvat line 144.

Leading²⁴

It is notable that the person on the left side is often referred to as being above or in front of ("sopra" or "innanzi") the person to the right.²⁵ This terminology suggests that the person on the left may actually be slightly ahead of the one on the right. This position appears in a lot of illustrations of dancers from this period,²⁶ and with it is often a hand-hold where the man has his hand in front of the woman's, curling his fingers under hers, as shown below.



For some *balli*, such as ones where there are three dancers, the two on the sides moving identically, this formation does not work, and there are certainly illustrations (such as the one from PnG) where the dancers are shown even with each other. But many of the dances do work with a leading-style formation, and some problems in reconstruction may be solved by it. It may be that this method of dancing was older, and only rarely or never used in this period, but that the terminology remained. We decided to always have the dancers in an equal position, side by side, but the other formation is discussed in some dances where it may lead to solutions in the reconstructions. (See the notes for *Belfiore*, *Fia Guielmina*, *Jupiter*, and *Prexonera*.) Dancers may be interested in trying this method, and will probably find it easier if they use the hand-hold as well.

A frequent instruction at the end of a dance in NYp, Fn, and Fl is that the dance should be repeated, the woman or women going ahead.²⁷ If "in front" really does mean "on the left", then this would mean she must move to the left position. NYp sometimes changes dances²⁸ so that she ends up there, so that certainly seems to be the case for NYp. But often nothing is specified to make her actually end on the left side, and something would have to be added to the dance to make her do so. It is possible that "in front" could also mean lead, indicating the dancer who does things first, and that leading could be done from the right. We have presumed that if the woman does the repeat "in front" then she should be the first to do sections that each does in turn, but this is unlikely to be the only meaning of the term, as it is called for (unless it is an oversight) in the NYp, Fn, and Fl versions of *Belguardo*, where the dancers always move in unison.

We have concluded that there is not a definite all-encompassing formula for repeats and have only included them in some dances. In those where we do, we have decided on a case-by-case basis whether the woman should repeat the dance in the left position or instead only lead (from the right), by doing figures first and deciding where in the hall the dancers will travel.

²⁴ Andrew Draskoy suggested this idea to us.

²⁵ NYp does specify that it is the person on the left who is the one in front, in the dance *Gioioso in tre*.

²⁶ See, for instance, many of the illustrations in Castelli.

²⁷ "la donna vadia innanzi". Sometimes it is specified that the man puts her ahead.

²⁸ See *Amoroso* and *Rostiboli*.

Notes on the Reconstructions

It is quite evident that any reconstruction of 15th-century dances will be wrong. The sources, including the music tenors, are vague and contradictory, and they leave out tremendous amounts of information. They were written over a span of about sixty years, by different authors with different understandings of their subject. The most obvious fact is that the steps were a living tradition usually taught, as dance mostly is, in person. Regional variations doubtless existed, and the steps changed over time. Attempting to set down one way of doing things becomes very artificial, and, in that respect at least, is patently inaccurate, historically. The very fact that the sources do not specify an exact way of doing things, but instead talk of diversity and improvisation, means that the steps were considered fluid. But the goal of this manual is to teach people, at a distance, and in order to do so we need to write things down. So we have attempted to record, for each dance, one of several valid ways of interpreting the dance and music, and to indicate alternative interpretations where we saw them. The best that we can hope for is that our reconstructions will approximate what was done, and make it possible to recreate the dances.

We have presumed that anyone who is seriously interested in why we have made our decisions will also have acquired access to the sources, in copy or transcription. We therefore decided not to include copies of the originals. There are many dances mentioned, for instance, which are not covered in this manual.

In order to create the reconstructions of the dances we generally used PnD when it included the dance. If the dance is also in NYp, we tended to also rely heavily on that source, as it is more descriptive than most, but, as the versions there sometimes seem to be a different version, we did so with some reservation and sometimes marked it as an alternative. Of course, where other versions of the dance were available we also took them into account, but our reconstructions tend to favor the two sources just cited.

In some cases the music and choreography from a given source did not appear to match each other exactly. (We tended to discover these early, as the first thing we did with each dance was have Monica transcribe the music while Vivian made a first pass on the choreography. Then we compared notes.) Where there were differences, if another source addressed the issue we tended to adopt that solution. Otherwise, we tried to make the minimum change necessary to still produce a choreography and music that were stylistically correct.

In order to create our reconstruction of the steps we went through the sources, looking at references to the steps both in the theory sections and in the dances. When a dance in one source describes a step one way while the same dance in another source has the step described differently, we have often taken this as evidence as to the performance of the step, while it may actually indicate that someone had faulty memory, or decided to modernize and improve an old dance.

We have also looked at how much ground seems to be covered by different steps in the same dance, reasoning, for instance, that if partners separate with one sort of step, and then return with another, the size of those two steps is approximately equivalent. This approach is consistent with Ambrosio's instruction that when a man departs with his *tempo* from the woman, he must be able to return with the same *tempo*.²⁹ This usually works well, generally resulting in two *sempii* covering close to the same distance as a *doppio*, a *saltarello* a little more than a *doppio*, and so on. However, this is not totally reliable; in applying this principle with rigorous precision to the dance *Febus* one can prove that two *saltarelli* should cover no ground at all.

Spellings of names of dances in the reconstructions are rather arbitrary: When the name is in PnD, we generally used that spelling, except in cases where we had gotten so used to another spelling (*Gelosia* which is *Giloxia* in PnD, *Leoncello* which is *Lionzello*, *Marchesana* which is *Marchexana*, *Pizocara* which is *Pizochara*) that we decided to stick with that. For dances not in PnD, the choice of spelling amounted to random choice. When referring to a dance in a particular source, we tried to use the spelling from that source, in order to aid in finding it.

²⁹ PnA line 425.

In claiming these as "our" reconstructions, it is necessary to admit to not having worked in a vacuum. It is very difficult to reconstruct a dance, even when working from the original manuscript, without presuming that the way one has previously learned it from someone else is the correct way. And, even for those dances that we had never done before we made a reconstruction of them, it is impossible not to make assumptions based on the way that we were taught to dance similar dances. We have attempted to look at the steps and dances independently, but our previous experience will make complete impartiality impossible. We have tried to indicate where other people's work has been used, but cannot be certain that we haven't failed to cite someone. We apologize for any oversights.

In particular, the steps and dances are doubtless very much influenced by Vivian's involvement with Il Pomo Verde, a Renaissance dance troupe directed by Cynthia Campbell, in Montreal. The dances that she learned while a member -- *Colonesse*, *Gelosia*, *Giove*, *Pizochara*, *Rosina*, *Rostiboli*, and *Verceppe* -- are most likely to have been influenced. *Petit Riense* was originally learned by Vivian from Dr. Ingrid Brainard, so that reconstruction was also influenced by another's work.

General Notes on the Transcriptions

The pages that follow include transcriptions of the "melodies" for these dances. We use the word "melody" loosely because in places all that is recorded in the sources is a *bassadanza* tenor line, around which musicians would have arranged or improvised. In other places the music is quite melodic.

All of this music was originally written in the octave or so surrounding Middle C -- that is, movable F and C clefs were used. While we have preserved this in the transcriptions that follow, we have sometimes shifted all or part of a line by an octave in the arrangements we have provided. (We have also varied which line in an arrangement gets the original melody.)

For consistency and to make life a little easier for the non-musicians reading this book, we have transcribed all dances in treble clef (or the octave-shifted treble clef) regardless of the clef used in the manuscript(s).

In cases where the time signature in the music was absent or in conflict with the choreography, we generally preferred the interpretation that was consistent with the choreography. Notes on specific judgement calls accompany the transcriptions.

As with the dances, we worked primarily from PnD when a dance was included in that manuscript, and primarily from PnG (as reproduced in Sparti) otherwise. We were also aided by Smith's transcriptions from other sources.

Where it was necessary to make changes to the music to accommodate the choreography, we tried to make the minimum change necessary. We have tried to indicate all such changes in the music notes following each dance. Some types of interpretation, however -- such as how *minimae* modify *semibreves* -- are matters of interpretation and almost second-nature; these interpretations are not always discussed in the pages that follow. We have provided the music from PnD in some of the trickier cases so that others may more easily explore alternatives. (We did not have a copyright-free edition of PnG, so we have been unable to reproduce those pages. They can be found in Sparti.) Readers who are interested in comparing the various editions should also consult Smith.

