Dance and Rhythm in Period

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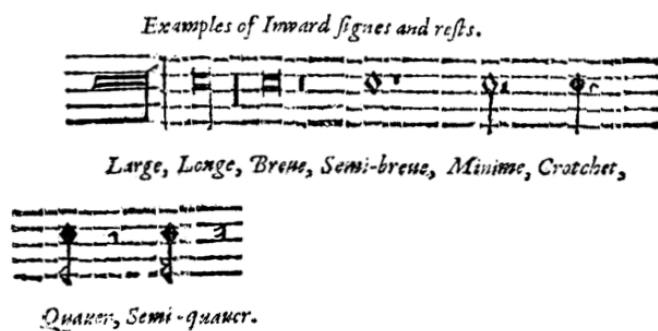

Figure 1: Note durations from [14]

What is Rhythm?

Rhythm concerns: stressed and unstressed notes and the variation between notes of different lengths.

Rhythm in the Medieval Period

There are several aspects to specifying a musical performance: pitch, duration, volume, articulation. For the most part, only pitch and duration were notated in period. We will mainly concern ourselves with duration for now.

The first precursor to modern Western musical notation was for chant (c. 950). [13] It gradually evolved from a mnemonic system that did not precisely specify rhythm or pitch to a system for specifying a performance to musicians who were not familiar with the original source music.

Early rhythmic ideas evolved from the notion of poetic feet (trochee, iamb, dactyl, etc.) – for example the *rhythmic modes* of the Notre Dame school (c. 1160-1250). Stressed and unstressed syllables relate to long and short durations respectively. The notion of "musical feet" (*Rhythmopoeia*) was alive and well in the 16th and 17th century, at least in the minds of theorists (e.g. Mersenne [6]). The idea of rhythm and stress as being tied to particular strong and weak beats in a measure did not develop until well into the 18th century.

Mensural notation started to developed in the 13th century. The original note durations were the longa (long), breve (brief) and the maxima (extra long). Mensural or "measured" notation referred to the ability to precisely notate rhythms. Sometimes the longa was twice as long as a breve and sometimes it was three times as long – performers had to figure it out from context.

The Tactus

The *tact* is the basic beat of the piece. Everything was conceived of in terms of how the tactus was subdivided. This is rather different from the modern conception of rhythm which is additive: for example, in 4/4 time, four quarter notes are added together to make a measure. It was conducted by a "down-up" motion – even for duple meters, uneven for triple meters.

How fast was the tactus? Mersenne [6] related the tactus directly to a measurable time of 60 beats per minute; it is related to the resting heartbeat (60-80bpm). In practice it varied, but would not have been particularly fast or slow. See [16] and [15] for an extensive discussion. There are many hints in different places and different times, but they are often contradictory and it can be hard to come to a satisfactory conclusion.

Perfection and Imperfection

There is the notion of *perfection* and *imperfection* throughout period musical notation. Perfection is when a note is three times as long as the next smaller value. Imperfection is when a note is twice as long as the next smaller value. A perfect note is one and a half times as long as its imperfect version.

By the late 16th to early 17th century there were four main *moods* or *proportions*. This controls how larger-value notes are divided into smaller-value notes. Minims and smaller are always subdivided into two of the next smaller value. It wasn't as important how the maxima and longa were subdivided because the tactus was the breve.

The *mood* controls the division of breve to semibreve, while the *prolation* controls the divison of semibreve to minim.

Imperfect of the less was already the most common by 1600. Evolved into current "Common" time.

Imperfect of the Less

Most "duple-time" dances: pavanes, almans, most bransles, country dances.

Imperfect of the More

Galliard, triple-time country dances.

Perfect of the Less

Not much used in the 16th century, but it pops up some in 15th century dances.
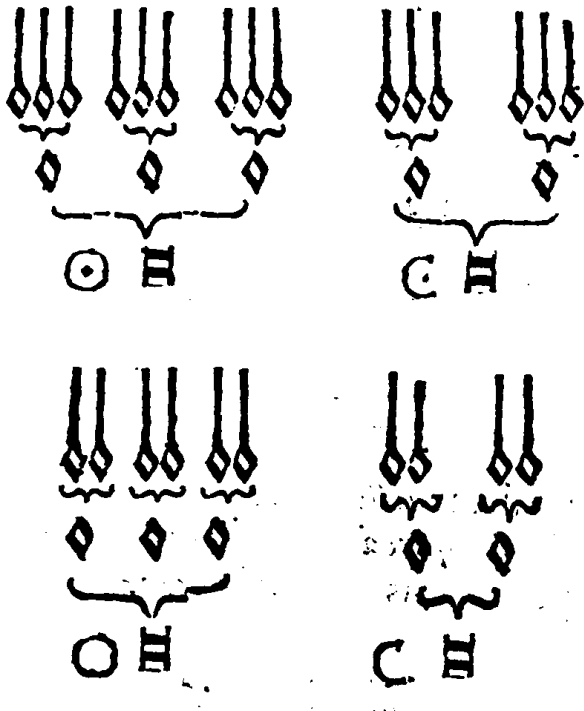
Figure 2: Mensuration signs and their meanings from Morley [7]. From upper left, clockwise: perfect mood, greater (or 'more') prolation, imperfect/more, perfect/lesser, imperfect/lesser.

Figure 3: Signs of diminution; the last is for double diminution for imperfect of the less.

Perfect of the More

Also not much used by the 16th century, and none of the dances we will discuss use it.

Diminution

Diminution halves the note value; double diminution halves it again. Diminution moves the tactus to the next longest value note. However, often when using diminution the note values used would be smaller, so the music wasn't actually twice as fast; but the diminution might suggest a slightly faster tactus. Cut time and common time are still used in much the same way. Modern time signatures like 3/2 vs. 3/4 carry this through a little bit: there isn't a strict relation with tempo, but there may be somewhat different feeling, and that depends on the composer. Example: Bizzarria d'Amore (Figure 17) vs. Belle Qui (Figure 6).

Alteration

There were many ways to alter rhythm. For example, changing the color of the note head could cause notes to act like triplets. Signs of proportion could change the tempo of the piece, for example speed up by a factor of 2, 3, 3/2, etc.

Signs of proportion look like a modern time signature but are not used the same way. Modern time signatures evolved from them. The most common one to see in dance music is simply a "3", either by itself or with another sign. It seems that sometimes it was used to indicate a proportion of three notes in the time of two), called "sesquialtera", and sometimes it was used to indicate a proportion of 3/1.

The modern "dotted" notation was originally known as a *prick of perfection*. Other sorts of alterations were common in the 13th-15th centuries. The trend over the centuries was in general towards more explicit notation relying on a smaller set of basic principles.

By the late 17th century the Perfect versions fell out of use. This was probably due to the gradual shift of the tactus from the breve to the semibreve, making the perfect moods rather irrelevant. Instead of using diminution they just used shorter-value notes to indicate a faster tempo. By the 18th century modern time signatures came into usage. Measures can still be subdivided in different ways, but now they are built up out of smaller units instead of divided from an unchanging whole. For example 6/8 is two groups of three 8th notes; 3/4 is three groups of one quarter note. As far as division of notes, all usage is "imperfect of the less" – note values divide in two by default, but you can always use a triplet to divide into three.

Note Inflation

The duration of notes gradually inflated; by the 16th century the tactus was normally the semibreve. Now the tactus (the basic beat of the piece) is normally the semibreve (cut time) or the crotchet (common time), but composers can specify an exact tempo. We don't know exactly why for sure, partially because the change was slow and unlikely to be noticed changing in a single musician's life, but it was noted by Ravenscroft [14]: "But in regard the Notes now in vse are not of so long a quantity, as when the Perfect Moodes were vsed"

The evidence on the relationship of tactus and tempo and the use of various mensuration signs is often fragmentary and sometimes contradictory. We can only come up with a "best effort" guess. But: People in period were not materially physically different from us. A theory which leads to a dance that seems uncomfortably slow or fast is probably not the best one.

15th Century Dances

The signs used in 15th century dance material are for the most part the same as the 16th century notation described above, but some does not have particularly explicit indications of rhythm. Part of that is because in music of this time period whether notes were "perfect" or "imperfect" had to be inferred from context and part of it is because the music for these dances is in manuscript form only, which wasn't necessarily copied or transcribed with the same care as the beautiful sacred manuscripts. This can make transcribing this music challenging at best. The most successful musical reconstructions focus on making the music fit the dance rather than vice versa.

In 15th century Italian dances there are four *tempi* or *misure*.

- *Bassadanza* – usually transcribed as 6/4

Figure 4: Vercepe from PnD, Domenico, 1450

- *Quadernaria* – 4/4
- *Saltarello* – 6/8 or sometimes 3/4
- *Piva* – 2/4 or 6/8

According to *Joy and Jealousy* [17]:

> Domenico apparently felt quite strongly that the correct ratio among these misura was 6:5:4:3 – that is, that a tempo of piva was half the length of a tempo of bassadanza. We have found, as did Domenico, that many musicians are not sufficiently comfortable with the misura to accomplish this. We believe that using the ratio of 6:4:3:2, which results in a semibrevis always having the same duration regardless of misura, is very helpful to musicians. Further, there is considerable controversy about whether Domenico's ratios were meant to be taken literally or were indications of a more general style of playing.

Vercepe (Figure 4) exhibits frequent changes between the various *tempi*.

Late 16th & Early 17th Century Dances
Pavane

The pavane was a common processional dance all over Europe. Praetorius [11]: "A kind of steady, solemn music . . . It generally has three repeated sections of 8, 12, or 16 beats [tact] each; no fewer are allowed due to the four steps or paces that must be observed." Ravenscroft [14] and Playford [10] agree that "imperfect of the less" is used for pavanes Some pavanes are shown in Figures 5 and 6.

Alman

We usually think of almans as being very similar to pavanes. Some of the discussion seems to indicate that almans may have been thought of as faster, but it may just be that they were trying to indicate that the alman had more of a "4" feel as opposed to the "2" feeling of the pavane. Praetorius:
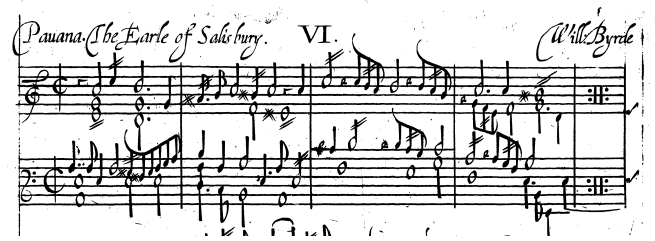

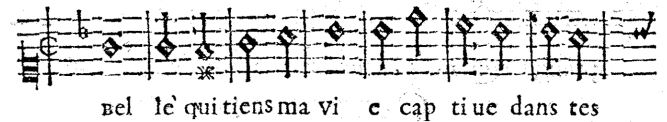**Figure 5: Earl of Salisbury Pavane from [2]**

Figure 6: Belle Qui Tiens Ma Vie from [1]

"The dance is not as agile and quick as a galliard, but rather more somber and slow and with no extraordinary motions necessary. It has two, at times three, repeated section*s, each with only four beats as a rule. And although there are also only four beats or ordinary steps in a pavan, they are in duple proportion as opposed to the allemande, so that if there are sixteen beats or semibreves in one section* of a pavan, there will be half as many – namely eight beats of minims – in an allemande." Ravenscroft indicates that almans again use the imperfect mood and lesser prolation, but with the greater diminution. But he seems to say that the notation doesn't have a strict relation to performance: "And so again for those madrigals, pastoralls, pavanes, and such like, which are charactered with this great diminution, should they be sung according to the tact thereof, they would make such a confusion that the performers would surely be taken for madmen, and the songs themselves would seem no better than common jigs to the hearers"

Galliard

The galliard had a close relationship to the pavane; however, the semibreve was divided into three minims instead of two. Praetorius: "The galliard is in triple meter and, like the pavan, has three section*s that repeat, each with four, eight, or twelve measures [tact], no more or fewer." Ravenscroft and Playford both specify the imperfect mood and perfect (or "more") prolation. Some galliards are shown in Figures 7 and 8.

Figure 7: Earl of Salisbury Galliard [2]

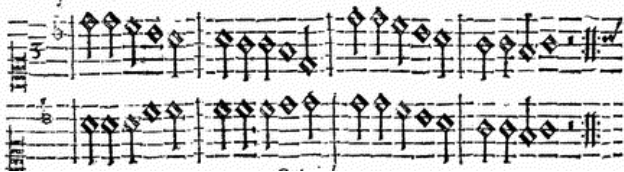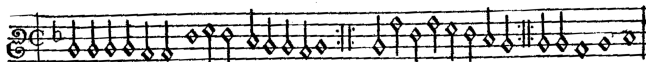Figure 8: Galliard from Arbeau [1]

Figure 9: Bransle de Lavandieres from Arbeau [1]

Bransles

Ravenscroft specifies the double diminution of the perfect prolation as the proper notation for the dance, the "swiftest motion that any tune is composed of under this measure, as country dances, bransles, voltas, courantes, and such like, [with] six notes to one *tact* (whereas afore but 3.) Presumably he is discussing Bransles Gay, since other bransles are in duple time. A branle from Arbeau is shown in Figure 9.

Praetorius, in the preface to Terpsichore [4] has an extensive discussion on the notation for bransles.

Bransles simple:

> I have notated the Bransle simple with minims and semiminims in a suitably slow Tactus and, for this reason, I have marked with "C" at the beginning, the sign for a very slow Tactus. Others have previously notated these bransle with semibreves and minims [e.g. Arbeau] and then they must be measured with a faster Tactus. The sign for a very swift Tactus (cut C) is reasonably to be prescribed. However, where the sign cut-C 2 (Diminutionis Diminutio - double diminution] is found marked, an even faster Tactus is obliged for a very rapid Tactus is to be observed.

Bransles gay (Figures 10, 11)

> The bransle gay is usually written by the musicians of France so that three types of Tactus can be used in the following ways: 1. As a Triplam. 2. As a Sesquialtera. In this case two rests must be sent before the first note or else should be imagined as being there, so that the first note, which is usually a minim, is given a Tactus. 3. While the two Tactus in the bransle gay are difficult to be observed, and the French dancing-masters generally have deemed to use a Triplam to an equal Tactus in their galliards, voltas, and these bransles gay (although the galliards are slow and the bransles gay fast), to measure with the foot, so this has given me cause for further consideration and I have finally found that it is better and easier to accomodate bransles gay, as

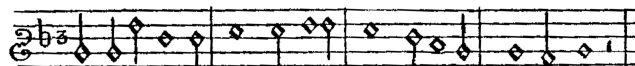Figure 10: Examples of various notations for Bransles Gay [12]

Figure 11: Bransle Gay from Arbeau [1]

> well as some voltas, with minims and semiminims to the equal Tactus, as may be seen in nos. 1, 2, 3, 5 and 12. (Several examples.)

Country Dances

There are two major species of country dances in 1651 as far as rhythm is concerned: duple time dances and triple-time dances.

Duple time dances are primarily notated in alla breve and that continues through the 18th century (Figure 12).

Some use the backwards alla breve for double diminution (Figure 13).

There is not as much consistency for triple time dances. They are primarily notated with filled-in minims with an imperfect prolation, but some clearly indicate perfect (Figure 14).

The triple-time dances evolve into 6/4 in later editions (Figure 15).

Balli; Cascarde

16th century Italian dances tend to have much less variation of rhythms than the 15th century Italian dances. It does happen, but usually at most once in a dance. There are a few different common rhythms: the galliard as discussed above, the "Cascarda" rhythm (Figure 16) and the "Balletto" rhythm (Figure 17). The Cascarde tend to be in a fast triple time and the Balletti tend to be in moderate duple time, although this is by no means universally true.

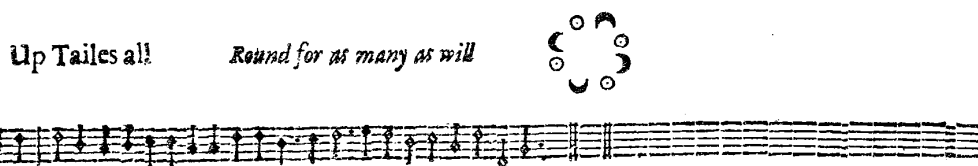Figure 12: Goddesses from [9] (1651, 1698 and 1714 editions respectively)

Up Tailes all   *Round for as many as will*

Figure 13: Up Tails All from [9]

Upon a Summers day   *Longwayes for fix*

Stingo, Or the Oyle of Barly   *Longwayes for fix*

Figure 14: Upon A Summers' Day and Stingo from [9]

Figure 15: Black Nag from the 1709 edition of [9]
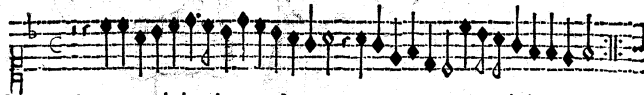
Figure 16: Alta Regina from [3]

Figure 17: Bizzarria d'Amore from [8]

Transcription

Transcribing these dances can sometimes be difficult as there are several competing aims. The goals usually in opposition are producing something that resembles the original notation and producing something modern musicians can play from without specialized knowledge. The first goal can often lead musicians astray or confuse them – for example, musicians usually expect 3/4 to be waltz-like and 3/2 and 6/4 are relatively unsual time signatures. The bottom line is that there is no substitute for familiarity with the dance forms.

Conclusions

Rhythm in period was thought of in a top-down rather than bottom-up fashion. Stressed and unstressed notes depended more on the length of the notes than their position. Tempo was not well-indicated; different composers meant different things, and practice was not standardized across period or in different locations.

One method to determine tempo is to find examples of written-out divisions and determine the fastest they could be comfortably played by competent players. Late in the Renaissance and in the Baroque this method won't always work, as highly-ornamented stuff was not always written for dancing.

To conclude, some thoughts from Ravenscroft: "But what a confusion will this be when they have a song or tune composed of all these tacts, as divers there are in use for masks and revells, and shall find but only one character to express all motions? how can that work be performed in his proper nature except the composer shall either demonstrate by a canon what his meaning is, or himself personally be there to explain his formed intended?"

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