

## **Moving Inside and Outside the Box:**

### **Thoughts on the Graphic Notation of Baroque Dances for the Ballroom**

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In 1700 Raoul Auger Feuillet's *Chorégraphie ou l'art de décrire la danse par caractères, figures et signes démonstratifs* was issued in Paris. This landmark publication described in detail a notation system that, its author claimed, could accurately capture in graphic form all the essential information needed 'to learn all kinds of dances'. The system could at once 'preserve' a dance ('archive it', so to speak) and serve as a vehicle for its reconstruction. A small number of competing systems of dance notation had seen sporadic use in France (and elsewhere) since the 1680s, but Feuillet's became dominant. His *Chorégraphie* enjoyed wide circulation, was translated into several languages, and was re-issued in many forms during the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century. Because the notation system codified in *Chorégraphie* had been devised initially by Pierre Beauchamps, director of the Royal Academy of Dance after 1680, and chief choreographer at the Paris Opera until 1687, it is referred to often in modern scholarship as the Beauchamps-Feuillet system.

The preservation in Beauchamps-Feuillet notation of nearly 350 ballroom and theatrical dances, principally from the very late seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries, has had a profound impact on studies of baroque dance. Scholars and performers, quite understandably, have viewed this repertoire with some reverence, because it is retrievable

in a seemingly reliable way. In fact, not counting the age of the moving picture (in all its forms up to the present), no other period in European dance history is represented by so many ‘recoverable’ dances. Scholars of this repertoire have good reason for celebration. Yet these dances, in their preserved, transmittable form—as graphic symbols on a page—lie very still, just as they have for roughly three hundred years. Because they lie still, they are susceptible to prolonged study, analysis, and interpretation. But in this inert state they display none of the vitality and mutability that inevitably attends the *performance* of dance, or for that matter, any performative art. In their time, the dances preserved in the Beauchamps-Feuillet system (or at least some of them, likely the vast majority) were dynamic: each re-enactment responded to a fresh set of circumstances. And the performed dance was itself an agent in the very shaping of those circumstances.

Recent discoveries and research by scholars such as Rebecca Harris-Warrick (Harris-Warrick, 1998, 1999) and Carol Marsh, (Harris-Warrick and Marsh, 1994) to name just two, have revealed how imperfect the picture assembled from just the surviving artifacts of baroque theatrical choreographies really is, and how much work remains to be done in order for us to gain a more complete grasp of the dancing in ballets, operas, entr’actes, and afterpieces of the period. The repertoire from the ballroom preserved among the surviving dances has been less critically scrutinized, in part because the record is embedded in a complex of social practices that is much more difficult to track. It is the dance of the ballroom that I will address in this investigation.

My goal here is not to minimize the centrality to scholarship of analyses and reconstructions of the ballroom dances preserved in the Beauchamps-Feuillet system—indeed, I have depended heavily on them in my work, and will continue to do so. Neither do I propose a fresh reassessment of the role of dance in social gatherings, although that issue remains crucial to this investigation. My aim, rather, is more basic: How did ballroom dances acquire sufficient stability and autonomy in their time to be transmitted through chronological and geographic space, and how was this transmission accomplished? The obvious answer to the second of these questions, of course, is through notation systems such as Beauchamps-Feuillet. But that answer begs many other questions.

Re-enacted in our time, the surviving ballroom dances still possess a remarkable potency. They evoke a kind of formality that is at once ostentatious and approachable. They invite our close scrutiny. The following is a performance of a courante, titled ‘La Bocannes’, whose notation is preserved in two undated manuscripts of French provenance (likely from the first third of the eighteenth century).<sup>1</sup> The courante was the dominant couple dance throughout much of the seventeenth century. It was a favourite of Louis XIV (1643-1715) who is reported to have danced it with skill and grace, ‘better than anyone in his court,’ (Rameau, 1725) but it was only rarely encountered in the eighteenth century ballroom. The mirror symmetry of the dancers’s movements—what the gentleman does to the right , the lady does to the left—was typical of most ballroom dances. This courante begins with a very formal opening figure, again not uncommon in ballroom dances. The dancers move forward and backward in the room, only acknowledging each

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<sup>1</sup> Paris, *Bibliothèque nationale*, Ms. Fr. 14884, and *Bibliothèque-Musée de l’Opéra*, Rés. 934.

other briefly. In the remaining figures of the dance they move along diagonal axes as well, circling each other occasionally. Although they seem more engaged in the remaining figures, they never take hands, nor do their paths result in any prolonged proximity. On this count, 'La Bocannes' is comparatively austere. [At this point Dr Semmens showed a video of the dance.] The two dancers are Paige Whitley-Bauguess and Thomas Baird. (Whitley-Bauguess, 1999)

The notation of the first page of this dance is also typical in its layout. The Beauchamps-Feuillet notations are always in a box—on a rectangular page that also serves as a representation of the space in which the dancers are to perform. At the top of the page/room is the tune of the accompanying music, and below that is the dance. The paths the two dancers trace in the dancing space are indicated by a track. Along that track are placed small dashes that mark off measures of dance, corresponding to the measures of music. The basic coordination of music to the actions of the dancers is therefore indicated. Superimposed on the track are the graphic symbols that indicate what steps the dancers are to use, when they are to take hands or drop them (not operable in this dance), and how they should orient themselves to their partner and the dancing space: that is, when they are to turn, to face each other, to face away, and so on.

We will revisit 'La Bocannes,' later in this presentation, because it offers a very interesting case in the transmission history of a baroque dance.

But I must first begin with some premises. (1) Although it was imitated across a fairly wide segment of the class structure that helped to define society in seventeenth- and

eighteenth-century Europe, ballroom dancing was essentially an activity of the elite, who cultivated it at a very high level of expertise. (2) Children learned through dancing masters how to present themselves, how to move elegantly, how to bow, how to carry a fan or hold a hat, and how to dance from very early ages. Those who performed ballroom dances in the company of others of high social station, in short, were in a position to perform them *very* well. (3) The dances the upper classes performed, moreover, were of considerable complexity, as we have just seen, especially those that were presented one couple at a time, while others looked on with studied interest and attention. Their dances shared a technique and a good deal of the actual step vocabulary with those performed by professionals of the time. At formal balls the couple dance was not only the principal activity, it was organized in a way that acknowledged rank, as well. Those of higher station danced first. (4) The high level of dancing proficiency among the upper classes was an important way in which they were able to set themselves apart from other classes, for whom such skills were not as highly valued. (5) The dancing practices of France—formalized during the reign of Louis XIV—and the underlying social structures they served both to nurture and to celebrate, were regarded as a model, and were imitated across much of Europe and the New World.

Looking backwards from today it is very difficult *not* to regard some of the specimens of ballroom dancing that have survived from the period, and at least some of the performances we might imagine took place, as ‘works’ of great art (or perhaps of great ‘artistry’). But today’s point of view has been informed, however we might wish to minimize the effect, by intervening developments in dance that have served to highlight a

considerable gap between dance as a 'social activity' and dance as a 'theatre art.' That gap was not nearly so wide in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: professionals from the theatre and skilled dancers of the nobility frequently worked together. (Semmens, 2004, 162-164) Today, in contrast, we have no difficulty distinguishing social dancing from theatrical dancing by professionals. Even when the lines between the two are blurred we are not often fooled. In the extended dance duo to Cole Porter's 'Night and Day' by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in the 1934 film *The Gay Divorcee*, for example, their dance was conceived as belonging to a social event of high society. But the dance simply becomes too skilful, too demanding in technique, and too elaborate in its design for us to consider it real social dancing. We notice the difference right away. For the same reasons, when we consider a ballroom dance preserved in Beauchamps-Feuillet we might find it rather too artful to be understood primarily as a social act. But that is precisely what it was. The behaviour of the noble classes, including their conduct in the ballroom, was driven not by an urge for artistic expression, but by social imperatives that *required* them to behave, to converse, to move, *and* dance (if they chose to do so) with easy grace and skill. (Elias, 1983, 78-116)

Scholars of baroque dance need to remain as mindful of this context as they are of the undeniable beauty of the ballroom dances that survive.

I will not, indeed I cannot, argue the ontological status of ballroom dancing from earlier periods here. But I think it is significant that, from our perspective, a dance such as 'La Bocannes', when performed well, seems to have all the trappings of a work of art. It has purposeful design, it requires controlled skill in performance, it is attractive, and it

engages us, just as the dances of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers do. Moreover, it is preserved in a 'text' that some individual of the eighteenth century took the time and trouble to prepare or to copy. That individual did not randomly select a dance; she or he chose this one! Why? I cannot answer the question. In both manuscripts in which the dance is transmitted 'La Bocannes' is nestled with one or two other courantes. Because the courante was exceedingly rare by the time these manuscripts were prepared, it may have been that the copyist regarded them as 'precious' and therefore worthy of inclusion. Whatever the reasons may have been, it is the 'text' of this dance that has preserved it, and it is the text of this dance that has served as a primary object among scholars who wish to consider it. Even if the eighteenth-century copyist did not regard the text of 'La Bocannes' as precious, scholars of today most certainly do. Without the two texts of the dance that have been passed on to us (they are virtually identical), an enormous resource for studying 'La Bocannes' would be lost. As we shall see, however, we would still be able to investigate this dance in at least some detail. Its transmission was not a singular event.

The dances conveyed to us through Beauchamps-Feuillet were probably not as 'fixed' in their ballroom conduct as the notations might suggest. Indeed, in his introduction to the very first collection of ballroom dances issued in this notation Feuillet tells us that Louis-Guillaume Pécour, the author of all the dances presented, 'had wished to review [the collection] before it was printed, in order to ensure they [the dances] were quite correct, because there is a good number of people who do not have [that is 'who do not perform']

them accurately.’ (Feuillet, 1700, unpaginated preliminary matter)<sup>2</sup> Whether Pécour did in fact examine Feuillet’s prepared plates, or whether, even, he was able to decipher the notation we can never know, although the latter proposition seems likely (Pécour was a close associate of Beauchamps for several years). What is important for my purposes here is that both Pécour and Feuillet evidently had witnessed variety (but not necessarily imperfection) in performances of at least some of the Pécour dances Feuillet was preparing for publication. That variety did not compromise the identity of those dances. The dances had an identity (or, perhaps, identities) even *before* they were treated to a notation in the Beauchamps-Feuillet system. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest, as well, that some variety in performances of any ballroom dance might have been commonplace even *after* it had been treated to a notation in the Beauchamps-Feuillet system. The notation, simply put, privileged a single version of a dance’s identity, and it was to Feuillet’s advantage to claim, as often as he could, that it was the version ‘preferred’ by its author that he had notated. That made his products seem ‘authoritative’.

Just how did Feuillet and other notators go about encoding a ballroom dance, if it was not one of their own creation? In light of the considerable detail his notations capture, it seems very unlikely that all of the steps and figures of a dance could be set down after just one or two viewings, even if Feuillet (and others) were in possession of prodigious powers of observation and memory. Rather, the dances committed to paper must have been either known or learned by him before he set about the task. Some of the dances he issued, according to Feuillet’s own testimony, were in fact quite venerable. Of ‘Le

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<sup>2</sup> ‘J’ay mis à la fin de ce Livre un Recueil des plus belles Dances de Bal, qui ont é composées par Monsieur Pecour, qu’il a bien voulu revoir luy-même avant d’être gravées, afin qu’elles soient bien correctes, à cause qu’il y a une grande quantité de personnes qui ne les ont pas fidèlement.’

Cotillon, danse à quatre’, included in the *IIIe Recüeil de danses pour l’année 1706* (Paris, 1705), he wrote: ‘The Cotillon, although an old dance, is so popular at Court today that I thought I could not fail to include it in this little collection.’ (in Semmens, 1997, 40)<sup>3</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, (Semmens, 1997, 41-47) the ‘Cotillon’ was witness to traditions of ballroom routines from much earlier in the seventeenth century. Because it is a very straight-forward dance, with a refrain that is repeated several times, the ‘Cotillon’ might be an example of a dance that Feuillet really could notate after just a few viewings. But it is rather exceptional in its simplicity. On the other hand, ‘Aimable vainqueur,’ issued by Feuillet in 1701, was ‘danced before the King at Marly’ earlier in the same year. A comparatively complex dance, its very recent accompanying music was drawn from the third act *divertissement* of André Campra’s *Hésione*, an opera that was premiered in December 1700. How did Feuillet learn this dance? Did he have dancing master collaborators at the opera house and court, or in other noble households in Paris? Did they sometimes pass on notations to him? Although I cannot prove it, I believe that the answer must be ‘yes’ in the case of theatrical dances, and ‘perhaps’ for some newly created ballroom dances. But what of the ballroom dances that had been around for some time, and were only rarely performed by the time a reliable notation system had been devised? How might dances such as these have been rendered into a notation?

This brings me back to ‘La Bocannes’. Of all the dances treated to a notation in the Beauchamps-Feuillet system it is most certainly the oldest. Some version of this dance was already known to Marin Mersenne before 1636, because he refers to it specifically in

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Le Cotillon, quoi que Danse ancienne, est aujourd’hui si à la mode à la Cour, que j’ay cru ne pouvoir me dispenser de la joindre à ce petit Recüeil.’

his famous *Harmonie universelle*, and reproduces its melody in full. He notes that it was a ‘Courante that has its own particular steps, phrasings, and figures,’ (Mersenne, 1636/1970, II, 170) but offers no further details about its choreography, and he informs us that its title refers to its author. ‘La Bocanne’ was in fact Jacques Cordier, a popular dancing master, violinist, and composer at the court of Louis XIII. His dance received subsequent notice many times in the years that followed, and its tune was reproduced in a number of musical sources from the mid-seventeenth century until at least 1712 (Philidor, 1712). It was, in short, a seventeenth century ballroom ‘hit’. Does the dance we viewed near the beginning of this presentation bear any resemblance to Cordier’s creation?

Nearly thirty years ago the late Wendy Hilton argued that the eighteenth-century manuscript notations preserving ‘La Bocannes’ might well yield reconstructions close to the original dance, although she admitted that the issue cannot be answered in any conclusive way. (Hilton, 1977, 163-165) Even if the dance had been transformed, either through deliberate or accidental revision, or through the vagaries of failing memories, in the roughly one hundred years between its composition and its eventual notation, it still experienced a remarkably long journey. And its journey continues: ‘La Bocannes’ is with us today!

How has it reached us? At the heart of the process before the Beauchamps-Feuillet system was available was a kinesthetic mode of communication, equivalent in some ways to the oral transmission of musical repertoires. One learned a dance through seeing (and hearing) its performance often, and one learned it by rote, through individual tutelage from a dancing master. A dancing master was valued, therefore, not only because of the

quality of his instruction, but also because of the range of repertoire he possessed. Circumstances such as these not only depended on a standard ballroom repertoire (updated often, to be sure), they helped to perpetuate that repertoire as well. There were, obviously, limitations to the number of dances a dancing master could know and remember and, more often than not, an even more limited number of dances that his young charges were able to master with skill. Even after the Beauchamps-Feuillet system was in place the dancing master remained an indispensable commodity in noble households. It was he who had to master *Chorégraphie* in order to learn the ‘newest’, the ‘most popular’, the ‘little known’, or even the almost ‘forgotten’ dances that the system transmitted. He then could teach them to his pupils. In light of these modes of transmission, I cannot see how some variety (if only in minor details) in the conduct of any ballroom dance did not develop. That variety might have been reduced through repeated ballroom performances—a ‘preferred interpretation’ might have evolved—but it is just as likely that the variety increased over time. At any rate, a concerted effort for consistency in the performance of a dance seems never to have been a particular concern, except for notators such as Feuillet, or choreographers such as Pécour.

Nevertheless, ballroom dances *did* possess a degree of stability and autonomy (‘work’-status, from a modern perspective) before and after the Beauchamps-Feuillet system became codified. That is why so many of them have survived. For ball-goers in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, however, the idea that, in dancing, they might be performing a ‘work’ was simply not operative. I do not wish to be misunderstood: Noble dancers *did* prepare their dances with great care, and they were acutely aware of

the importance of a good performance. (Harris-Warrick, 1986, 44; Semmens, 2004, 107-111) But it was not out of some sense of duty to the work, or to honour Pécour or Feuillet. Rather, they were engaged in a ceremony that showcased their status and upbringing, their individual strengths, and their qualifications for membership in the elite group that watched their dances unfold. The dance was a vehicle, a process, not an object. Its efficacy in confirming one's position in the group might have privileged a current dance created by the most famous choreographer of the day (Pécour), or it might just as easily have privileged a dance that was rather venerable ('La Bocannes'). That, I think, explains in part why ballroom dances remained in the ballroom, or left it, and why some dances were committed to a notation, and others were not. 'La Bocannes' is with us today, the product of a host of intertexts, only two of which were inside a box.

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