

Reconstructing 16th Century Dance

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The Renaissance dance period is generally considered to be the 15th and 16th centuries from c1425 (the earliest extant dance manual, probably Domenico da Piacenza) to c1630. Dance follows other cultural developments such as art and music, but their respective time periods do not always match due to differences in interpretation of changes of style. The Renaissance dance period can be divided into two rather general sections: 15th century dance style c1425 – c1525, and 16th century dance style c1525 – c1630. This presentation will concentrate on 16th century dance reconstruction which is considered late Renaissance dance.

How do we go about attempting to recreate these dances? There are many tasks to complete before we have some idea of what these dances might have looked like.

This list includes:

- Translate – one source only?
- Secondary sources?
- Music transcription - align with the steps? repeat structure?
- Instrumentation
- Reconstruct the dance
- Try it on dancers
- Costumes
- Hall – space
- Etiquette
- Who is dancing? What occasion?
- Politics, Economics, Geography, Culture, Gender Roles

16th Century Life

Dancing played an important part in renaissance life for exercise and courtship and was considered a worthy skill to be attained. It was the main vehicle for social interaction. Arbeau, (1589) a French dancing master, says..."if you desire to marry you must realize that a mistress is won by the good temper and grace displayed while dancing, because ladies do not like to be present at fencing or tennis, lest a splintered sword or a blow from a tennis ball should cause them injury...and there is more to it than this, for dancing is practiced to reveal whether lovers are in good health and sound of limb, after which they are permitted to kiss their mistress in order that they may touch and savour one another, thus to ascertain if they are shapely or emit an unpleasant odour as of bad meat." "Therefore...it becomes an essential in a well ordered society".

Dancing was considered one of the manly arts and to be the peaceful counterpart to the art of war which was the nobleman's primary profession. The physical arts of dancing, swordsmanship, and horsemanship were equal in skill and strength, and seemingly accorded equal status.

“Let me just say that when a prince or gentleman who has come to a ball is invited to dance by a lady, it is improper for anyone else to take his seat. And should you do so, it would be reasonable to return it with good grace when he has stopped dancing. And do not follow the current habit whereby everyone tries to put their chair nearest to the dancing place in front of gentlemen already seated. They do this only to be invited to dance by the ladies, and knights and gentlemen follow their example, also placing themselves in front and creating an uproar. Sometimes there is little space to dance, and even worse, it has happened on occasion that quarrels have arisen from this situation. Thus it is good to observe the rules of decent and honourable conduct, for by so doing, one will be welcomed and beloved by ladies as well as by gentlemen”. (Arbeau)

“Most of the authorities hold that dancing is a hand of mute rhetoric by which the orator, without uttering a word, can make himself understood by his movements and persuade the spectators that he is gallant and worthy to be acclaimed, admired and loved...does he not plead tautly with his mistress, who marks the seemliness and grace of his dancing, 'Love me, Desire me'?” (Arbeau)

There are many primary sources but these are some of the most important of the dance manuals.

Partial list of primary sources

Il Ballarino	Fabritio Caroso	1581	Italian
Opera bellissima...	Prospero Lutij	1587	Italian
Orchesographie	Thoinot Arbeau	1589	French
Nobilta di Dame	Fabritio Caroso	1600	Italian
Mutanze di Gagliarda	Livio Lupi	1600	Italian
Le Gratie d'Amore	Cesare Negri	1602	Italian
Discorso sopra...	Felippo Alessandri	1620	Italian
Apologie de la...	F. de Lauze	1623	French
Raccolta di varij...	Fabritio Caroso	1630	Italian
Le Gratie d'Amore	Cesare Negri	1630	Spanish translation
Discursos sopra...	Juan Navarro	1642	Spanish