

## A Renaissance Ball

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On Thursday evening we moved 500 years back in time to attend an evening's entertainment in a Renaissance court. Music was provided by Maaïke Boekholt and Regina Albanes of the Dutch Renaissance/Baroque ensemble La Primavera, and I acted as the dancemaster for the evening. As was customary at this type of occasion, a table was set aside for refreshments, our wonderful host Jan providing fruit and nuts of all sorts to add to my Renaissance cookies.

I opened the ball traditionally with a *pavane* and *galliarda*. The pavane is a stately processional dance where a line of couples slowly moves across the hall. It is also eminently suitable for showing off one's dress, in this case a dark velvet gown with a brocade overgown, all inspired by the frescoes of Domenico Ghirlandaio. The galliarda, as well as the following dance the *canario*, are more energetic skipping dances. These were danced in couples and the main idea is to impress one's partner and the onlookers by skillfully varying the basic step. Especially the canario was considered quite daring and was very fashionable in the 15th century. This was the first time ever I had a chance to dance it in the original manner, without a set timing or choreography; I stepped, slid and stomped my way through the hall until I ran out of breath (and solos). For a moment I really felt like a princess in my late fifteenth century Italian court dress, dancing a sparkling canario to live music! It was time for everybody to join the ball. To get started, I introduced the most important steps, the *double* (step, step, step, close/pause) and the *simple* (step, close/pause). Besides these, one needs to know that almost all period dances start with the left foot independent of what position one dances in. This means that when two lines are dancing opposite from each other, everybody starts to their left and thus the lines move to different directions, while in more modern Western folk dance women usually mirror men's steps (i.e. start on the right foot).



Figure 1: A couple from Caroso's Il Ballarino.

After learning these very basics, we could already dance *bransles*, or circle dances, as taught by Monsieur Arbeau's Orchesography of 1589. As far as we know, these dances were danced in all settings several centuries both before and after they were published. Very few of them require having a partner and the line, half-circle, or full circle of dancers can easily be adapted to the shape of the space available.

## Reuerence



Figure 2: A reverence, greeting, as illustrated by Arbeau.

To finish off the first part of the ball we danced a pavane together. The only difference to the bransles is that this time the simples and doubles were taken forward and back while the circle dances move sideways. This dance is danced in a line of couples and the man is always on the left and the woman on the right, just as is common in all Western dances to date. This is due to the fact that for a right-handed man, the sword or rapier would be hanging on the left side and would get tangled in the woman's skirts at almost any movement. He is still supposed to keep the sword under control while dancing, but this way it is quite a bit easier.

The pavane step set goes 'simple [1,2], simple [3,4], double [1,2,3,4]' and the pace is always slow. If there's a long way to go, a pavane can be danced all forward, but the variation of dancing every fourth set backwards is common. Especially the older pavaues are played with an easily discernible beat that helps with the counting of steps. For example this Pavane Lesquercade played by the Helsinki Early Music Society has very clearly marked step sets: <http://www.cmah.org/Music/Cappella/mp3/lesquercade.mp3>

The break allowed me and the musicians to relax a bit. Once again I noticed that many in our group are interested in music and musical instruments and gathered round La Primavera to study the gamba, the lute and the Renaissance guitar. Those who weren't enticed by the instruments went to sample the desserts set appetizingly on plates just like in Renaissance paintings.

The cookies and the cake look fairly humble and quite traditional, but the texture and the taste may surprise. For the first, everything was baked without added leavening or raising agent,

i.e. no baking soda, cream of tartar or baking powder was used, neither was yeast (which is and was used for bread, but not for this type of baking at that time). Instead, the fluffiness is achieved by beating the eggs and/or butter for a long time, which obviously used to be the task of the kitchen boy, but in want of one I let machinery do the heavy work.

The other noticeable thing is the spices. Nutmeg and mace are used a lot more, and so is coriander seed. Rosewater, which I have to get from an Arabic food store, is also commonly used in medieval and Renaissance recipes. A more modern alternative is to use lemon juice. Note that if you bake with rosewater, the smell is stronger than the taste, so be prepared to have a faint smell of rose all over the house for some time during and after baking!

Finally the sweet tunes of music called everybody back to the hall. I got to sit down while La Primavera showed us their best, for once without having to take dancers into account. Then it was my turn to give them a rest and dance to recorded tunes. With that we returned to the wealthy courts of Italy, first with *Zinevra*, a slow so-called *bassa danza*, a style popular in the fifteenth century. Despite the term 'bassa', low, the steps in *Zinevra* move up and down and the movement is supposed to be continuous and as undulating as that of a gondola's. This is where strong calves trained by gagliardas really come to their own!

Fast forwarding a century, for my last solo I danced *Barriera Nuova* from Fabritio Caroso's *Il Ballarino* of 1581. The dance is designed for three couples dancing alternatively side by side in a circle and facing the partner on the circle line and the movements supposedly remind of a leafy hedge waving in the wind. As I was dancing alone, I danced on an arc, facing either the left or right front corner, whereas in the original dance I'd be facing my partner. As the coreography at large loses a bit on this, I especially concentrated on executing the many complicated steps of the dance as exactly as possible. Of all the dances of the evening, the *Barriera* shows best where the art of ballet has its origins.

Time to move on, to England and Inns of Court, where young men of noble birth learned not



Figure 3: A still life by Flemish painter Clara Peeters, painted in 1611.

only law, but the social skills required of a gentleman. They paid for a dancemaster to teach them and jotted down notes that have survived to our days. The Old Measures are known from several different sources and all are fairly simple dances, which gave these young men a chance to get to know the eligible young ladies who were otherwise so well guarded.

Out of the eight dances belonging to the Old Measures set, we danced two *almans*, Old Alman and Lorayne Alman. Both are danced in a line of couples proceeding around the hall. The steps are as in the earlier dances, except that instead of closing the step by bringing the foot next to the other one, there's a slight lift, knee first, and the foot remains in the air for the next step.

The most complex dance we danced together this evening was *Petit Riens*, a 15th century Italian dance for three persons. It is a lively

dance where, after a longish introductory run, the right-hand person runs away from the others who then follow in their turn, and finally all three make up in the end so the dance can start from the beginning again.

Our little ball ended with *Schiarazula Marazula*, the dance to which the tune is also (erraneously) known as Maltese or Turkish bransle. It is a circle dance with Eastern tones and snapping and clapping. The main idea of the whole dance is a competition between the dancers and the musicians: the music starts slowly and accelerates after each repeat until either part cannot keep up. The secret to surviving this dance to the end is to shorten the steps when music gets faster and to keep track of the directions (left, right, in, out) rather than to worry about the steps. Not surprisingly, this time the dancers gave up first - but fun was had by all!