

GOLDEN ERA OF BAROQUE DANCE

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SUMMARY. The reign of Louis XIV marks an important milestone in the development of dance and art. Convinced that visual arts and music would significantly contribute to a monarch's authority, image, and glory, the "Sun King" coordinated artistic activities through establishing a significant number of royal academies. Through the *Académie Royale de Danse* the art of dancing was given a proper language and notation system for the first time in history. On the other hand, the *Académie Royale de Musique* was tied to the birth of a national operatic style. Opera was the perfect tool for an idealistic and majestic projection of a nation's monarch.

Keywords: baroque dance, Louis XIV, dance notation systems, ballet de cour, royal academies, Jean-Baptiste Lully, music, opera.

1. Political context

In the *Letters Patent of the King* Louis XIV describes the Art of Dance as one of the "most honorable and necessary methods to train the body, and furthermore as the primary and most natural basis for all sorts of Exercises [...] consequently it is one of the most advantageous and useful to our Nobility, as well as to others who have the honor of approaching Us, not only in time of War for our Armies, but even in Peacetime while we enjoy the diversion of our court Ballets"². Such acknowledgement and recognition towards arts from the monarch whose reign is the longest documented in the Central European history, require at least a brief description of his personality and achievements as a ruler.

Known as the "Sun King", Louis XIV was born in 1638 and as a very young child he succeeded to the throne, after his father passed away on May 14th 1643, becoming the leader of a highly unstable government.

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² Needham, Maureen. *Louis XIV and the Académie Royale de Danse, 1661. A Commentary and Translation. Dance Chronicle*. 1997, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1997), Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

From his godfather, Chief Minister Cardinal Jules Mazarin he received a rather practical and politically oriented education. As a young boy aged 10, he observed and learned from his mentor managing the civil war called La Fronde in 1648, a fight caused by the French Parliament against Mazarin himself. After Mazarin's death in 1661 Louis took control over the French government. As an absolute monarch and supported by his finance minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, his goal was to improve France' taxation system and support industrial growth. In implementing reforms toward a more stable government, he constructed a more centralized administration and forced part of the Nobility to relinquish former political influences. His contribution and support for arts determined me to describe his reign as a "golden era for the arts", therefore in the following pages I will refer to the tremendous progress his 72 years of reign brought to this field.

2. Letters Patent of the King to Establish the Royal Academy of Dance in the City of Paris

In March 1661, now twenty-three years of age, Louis XIV established the world's first dance academy and one of his first signed documents was the *Lettres patentes du roy, pour l'établissement de l'Académie royale de danse en la ville de Paris*; this document established the *Académie Royale de Danse*. In the next few years other academies followed: *Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* in 1663, *Sciences* in 1666, *Opéra* in 1669 and *Architecture* 1671. Louis was determined to establish this institution in order to bring more awareness to the art of social dancing in Paris and in the same time to the theatrical dancing in the ballets de cour. As a result, the number of professional dancers increased dramatically over the next few decades, as the choreographies became more and more demanding and complex. The institution consisted of thirteen dancing masters, who were chosen by Louis himself, based on their level of experience. However, the original document signed by Louis himself and lost in the archives contains the name of the thirteenth member of the *Académie*, a fact the raised many questions among the 19th and 20th century dance historians. One of the possible candidates was definitely Pierre Beauchamps, Louis' favorite choreographer, dancing partner, and master.

As stated in the manuscript, the art of dance suffered enormous damages caused by the wars and conflicts of the past. There were very few of those left who still mastered this art. It was a matter of great importance for the King to establish an academy where these masters and other professionals capable of teaching revive this art, build a solid dancing technique, and improve it as much as possible.

In the *Statues That His Majesty Wishes and Intends* the duties and privileges of his thirteen members are laid out. One of the most remarkable things is the overall attention, respect, and support the King manifests throughout the whole written document. Furthermore, the chosen thirteen were rewarded generously for their work and dedication; according to the *Letters Patent* they were exempted from certain taxes and the fees they received could have also ensured a very high living standard. One of their duties consisted in passing aesthetic expertise upon each newly created dance, before it could be presented or performed in the City of Paris. Finally, the Academie would be in charge with training the courtiers for the dancing activities that took place at Louis' Court.

Since the overall political climate of the country was rather unstable, nothing was secure, even with the King's protection. This newly formed dance institution was the target of numerous attacks of the *Ménétriers et joueurs d'instruments*, a violinists' guild which dated back to 1407. It was Louis XIV himself who appointed Guillaume Du Manoir as *Roi de violons*, a title with the sole privilege of teaching arts and music throughout the Kingdom. Moreover, no one should be admitted to the guild without serving 4 years of apprenticeship and paying substantial sums of money to the *Roi* and to the corporation. The musicians of this guild would be permitted to play in public places and where this rule was not respected, the *Roi* could send the offenders to prison and destroy their music instruments. The jealousy of Du Manoir knew no limits when the *Académie Royale de Danse* was established; moreover, he sued to recognize and reestablish his corporation's former privileges. After numerous conflicts between him and the dancing masters, Du Manoir resigned in 1693 and died in 1697.

From its very beginnings in 1713, *L'École Royale de Danse* has been connected and linked to the Paris *Opéra*. Both institutions coexisted until the 18th century and had the same goal – to train dancers for the stage, although the activities of the *Académie* started to become superfluous. In 1775 Jean-Georges Noverre, recently appointed as an *associé honoraire*, attacked the institution for not having published any treatise on technique or dance theory and after 1789 it was closed³.

3. Dance Notation Systems

Around 1674 Louis XIV asked Pierre Beauchamps to develop a system of dance notation and by 1684 Beauchamps had found a way to write down the choreography from Jean-Baptiste Lully *Phaeton*⁴.

³ *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁴ Pierce, Ken. *Dance Notation Systems in Late 17th-Century France*. *Early Music*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

The wish and need to find a way to put body movements on paper must have been a matter of great importance during those years. Two other systems were also under development – those of André Lorin and of Jean Favier – but Beauchamps' system proved to be the most popular and successful.

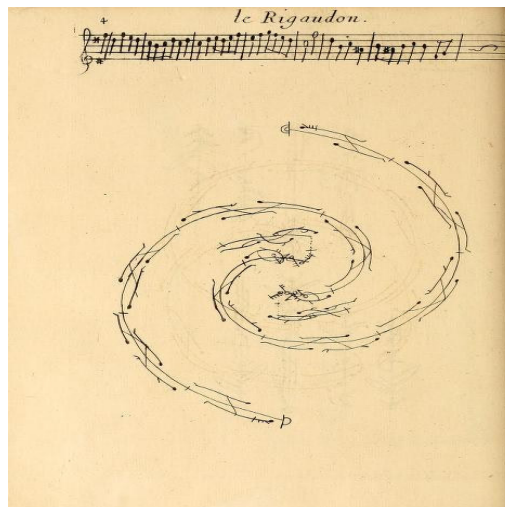
In the following sections I analyze and compare the three systems.

3.1 Beauchamp system

In 1700 Raoul-Auger Feuillet published a system of dance notation in a book called *Chorégraphie*. Pierre Beauchamps, director of the *Académie Royale de Danse* and Louis' dancing master, filed a complaint, claiming that Lorin and Feuillet had been given credit for inventing a notation system that in fact belonged to him and therefore depriving him of the glory he deserved. Feuillet and Lorin both countersued, the latter also claiming defamation of character. In the end Beauchamp was recognized as being the creator of the system published by Feuillet. On the other hand, Lorin's system was acknowledged as structurally and fundamentally different to Beauchamp's. Lorin and Feuillet kept their rights and privileges.

In his petition to the King, Beauchamp says his intention was to invent a system that helps dancers notate their choreographies, and at the same time being clear enough for everyone to read it without professional instruction; a very similar statement comes from Feuillet in the title-page of his *Chorégraphie*.

Picture 1



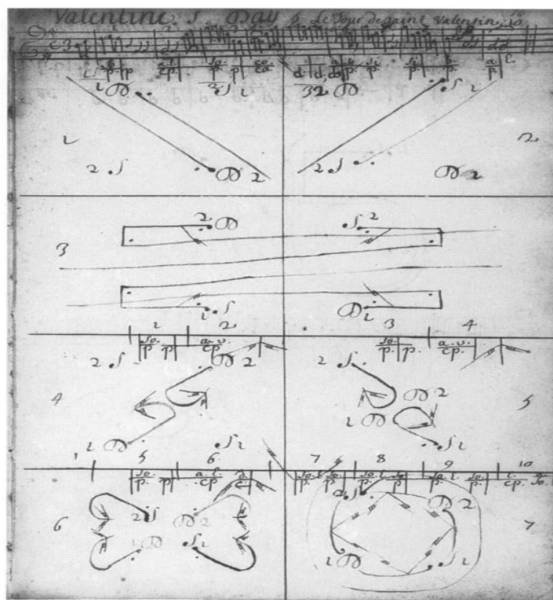
Recueil de Dances, composées par M. FEUILLET, Maître de Dance

In the Beauchamp notation system, the dancing space is pictured from above. Each of the over 330 choreographies following this system states the music piece to be performed and it is written at the top of the page. Each dancer's path is represented by dance symbols placed along their line. Their steps and step units are shown schematically: they are not to scale and are to be executed horizontally. Each element – such as jumping, rotation or pirouetting – are specifically shown along each path. The perpendicular lines intersecting the paths indicate bars of music and line up with the tune.

3.2 Lorin system

Two manuscripts by André Lorin have been found in the archives: *Livre de contredance présenté au Roy*, in which Lorin notates country dances he learned during a trip to England - he mentions the fact that he changed and improved them according to the French dance style. The other manuscript, *Livre de contredance du Roy*, contains illustrations, personal notes, and poems⁵.

Picture 2



Lorin notation – *Livre de contredance présenté au Roy*
(Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale)

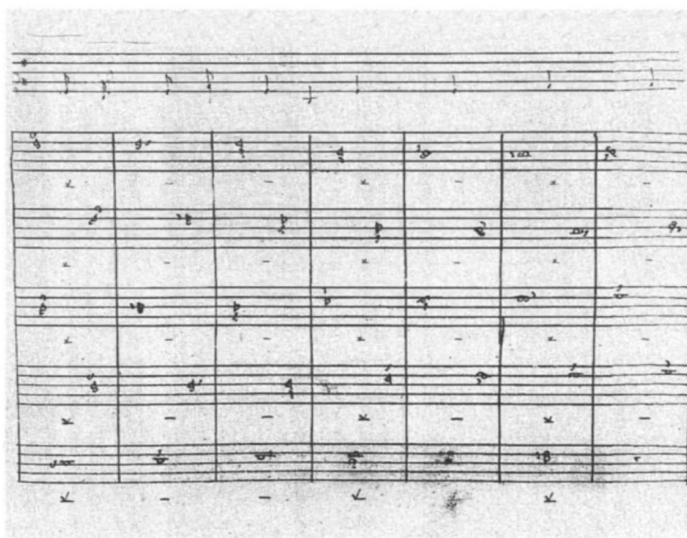
⁵ Pierce, Ken. *Dance Notation Systems in Late 17th-Century France. Early Music.* Oxford University Press, 1998.

Both Beauchamp-Feuillet's and Lorin's systems offer an aerial view of the dancing space. Here the system is divided into small rectangles. The choreographic movements and paths of each dancer are clearly indicated in each rectangle. As in Beauchamp-Feuillet, the music piece is printed at the beginning. Symbols for steps and step units are notated below each bar of music at the top of the page.

3.3 Favier system

In 1688 Jean Favier choreographed an entire comic masquerade, *Le Mariage de la Grosse Cathos*, - a work for dancers, actors, singers and an oboe ensemble. Further notes have not been included in the manuscript and deciphering it remained a challenge until scholars Rebecca Harris-Warrick and Carol Marsh discovered the key to reading it in an article from Diderot's *Encyclopédie* from the 1700s.

Picture 3



**Favier system – Le mariage de la Grosse Cathos
(Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale)**

In Favier's notation each dancer's part is represented as a system that looks like a music system. The whole material is divided into rectangles, which, like in Lorin's system, line up with the music bars of the

tune shown at the top of the page. The parallels between music notation and dance notation are in this case stronger than in the other systems: different choreographies and dancers' paths can be represented on the same page and yet each element is to be acknowledged separately and individually, like in an orchestral score. Each rectangle corresponds to the bars of music above the system and the choreographic movements line up with the music at the top of the page, i.e., each rectangle represents a different length of time. Elements such as jumping, or pirouetting are placed below the staff and their location on the system approximately indicates the moment when these are to be executed. In his manuscript of *Le Mariage de la Grosse Cathos* Favier explicitly indicates movements such as bending or jumping.

Of all these different notation systems, Beauchamp-Feuillet proved to be the more famous and popular throughout the centuries. Through the differences in their approach, we can also get a better sense of how their inventors thought about the language of dance. All three systems provide information about steps, step units and other body movements and in each of the three systems music and dance are both treated with the same importance. Is it also interesting to notice and acknowledge minor nuances in the dance vocabulary when analysing the systems; if Lorin's system is suitable in highlighting the nature of country dance and contredances, from Favier's system we learn about a wholesome approach of the dancer's body, where bending and jumping are explicitly notated. The 1680s can be considered as a golden age for the art of dancing, where for the first time in history the thought and intention of inventing a proper system came to manifest.

Finally, as dancing is an art which involves numerous components – human body, music, and the blend of these two – it is necessary to view the notation systems as a bridge that connects the thought or the vision to the actual result: the choreography.

4. Dance in the French baroque operas

“Opera is a spectacle made as much for the eye as for the ears”.

Durey de Noinville, Histoire du Théâtre de l'Opéra en France (Paris, 1753)

Opera was the ideal vehicle for a dramatic projection of the ruler's image, since the social, political, and moral usefulness of art played a crucial role in the 17th century political atmosphere of France. Yet in the early years of Louis' reign, there was no other choice than falling back on

productions and artists from Italy. They failed to please Louis' artistic taste and therefore did not fulfil the need for a national artistic genre. The failure of Italian opera discouraged France's most successful composer, Italian-born Jean-Baptiste Lully, from attempting the creation of a French opera. If an operatic style was ever to be successful in France, it would have to appeal to the French passion for dance, which would also need the support of the Crown. With Lully's lack of interest in composing a national opera, Robert Cambert and Pierre Perrin, two unremarkable artists, produced in 1659 France's first musical comedy, *Pastorale d'Issy*. Although Perrin claimed that his opera "opened and smoothed the path of having discovered and cleared this new earth, and furnished to my nation a model of French comedy in music"⁶, *Pastorale d'Issy* was not a particularly genuine work; its plot, form, and verse resembled pastoral plays from the 1650s and overall, it was a collection of disorganised musical sections⁷.

Perrin's next compositions – *Ariane, ou la mariage de Bacchus*, *La Mort d'Adonis*, *Pomone or Les Peines et les plaisirs de l'amour* – intimidated Jean-Baptiste Lully, who in the meantime composed *Psyché*, and which was enthusiastically received by the Crown in January 1671. Setting aside his old conviction that French opera could never be successful, Lully asked Louis "for the privilege of creating operas alone"⁸. The King declared in his *Mémoires* that the principal duty of a ruler is "to put each particular person in the post in which he can be useful to the public" and as a result Lully was allowed to establish the Royal Academy of Music in Paris, decide its members and when required or requested, he would produce musical works to support the King and the Crown.

His first opera, *Les Fêtes de l'amour et de Bacchus*, a celebration of love, fascinated the audience with its colorful and vibrant scenery and its animated and joyful dances. By combining the extravagance of the Italian *aria* and the unembellished and simple manner of the French *air*, Lully created a convincing and clear French national operatic style. Moreover, his operas are an ideal hybrid of music and dance, both serving Louis' interests and subtly portraying the policies of the French Crown.

The dancing element in Lully's operas is so perfectly intertwined with music, so that it cannot be separated from its vocal and musical support.

As the subjects of ballets and operas are often taken from myth and historical events, in Lully's opera *Alceste*, dancers animate the scenes in

⁶ Isherwood, Robert M. *The Centralization of Music in the Reign of Louis XIV, French Historical Studies*, Duke University Press, 1969.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ Perrault, Charles. *Mémoires, contes et autres oeuvres*, [Memories, tales and other works], Paris, 1882.

every act: in the first act they play the roles of sailors who dance in honor of Alceste and Admète's wedding. In the second act, they mourn Alceste's death and in the Underworld, they evoke the ambience of Pluto's realm. When the opera ends happily, they celebrate the moment with joyous movements.

Up until Lully's time, music and dance were viewed separately. It is for the first time in history that lively ballets based on forms such as sarabandes, menuets, rigaudons and gavottes are introduced in elaborate and complex operatic productions. The quintessential Baroque sound – the slow and stately introduction followed by an energetic and lively section was created by Lully and spread across European countries as the "French Overture". The majestic structure inspired J. S. Bach to compose the "Overture in the French style" BWV 831 or G. F. Händel in his opening of "Messiah".

5. Conclusions

The proper political understanding and support from the Crown created the ideal environment for the arts to flourish, especially dancing. As a more ephemeral art than music or poetry, the art of dancing is difficult to recreate and revive. Thanks to Louis XIV's love for dance and desire to include dance in his legacy, proper notation systems were created. Since its establishment, French opera included and embraced dance and it became a new challenge for composers. For the first time in history, it was essential for them to master both music composition and dance technique. Not only were dance and music given full support from the Crown, but they were also wisely seen as political tools. Therefore, the 17th century is definitely a glorious first chapter in a long journey of the arts and serves as a powerful example of a highly functional and thriving society.

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