

DANCES IN THE ORGAN MASSES OF FRANÇOIS COUPERIN

Sarah Mahler Hughes

Dancing, both in the ballroom and on the stage, was an integral part of life at the court of Louis XIV.¹ The king himself was an accomplished dancer, appearing in ballets such as *Le Ballet de la nuit* in 1653. The balls, fêtes, ballets, and operas that imparted such luster to the cultural life of Versailles consisted largely of dances whose steps and styles were recorded for posterity in the *choréographies* of Raoul-Auger Feuillet (c. 1660–1710) and Pierre Rameau (n.d.). These dances include the courante, gavotte, menuet, bourrée, sarabande, and gigue. With their verbal descriptions, illustrations, and precise choreographic notations, the *choréographies* form the basis for current historical dance studies, and they are essential aids for musicians striving to understand the relationship between dance and musical styles in the Baroque period. The study of 17th-century *choréographies*, whether applied to music intended for actual dancing or to stylized instrumental arrangements, must result in more enlightened and musically satisfying performances.

The close relationship between dance rhythms and French organ music in this period was made explicit by André Raison in the preface to his *Livre d'orgue* (1688), in which he stated that:

It is necessary to observe the meter of the piece that you are to play and to consider whether it has some connection with a sarabandé, gigue, gavotte, bourrée, canarie, passacaille, chaconne, or the tempo of the blacksmith dance [a characteristic dance of divertissements]. You must give it the same air that you would were you performing it on the harpsichord except that you should play the movement a little slower because of the sanctity of the place.

François Couperin's *Messe à l'usage ordinaire des paroisses pour les fêtes solennelles* and *Messe propre pour les couvents de religieux et-religieuses*, published two years after Raison's *Livre d'orgue*, clearly reveal the extent to which dance characteristics had penetrated the realm of liturgical organ music by the end of the 17th century. Of the masses' combined total of 42 versets, no fewer than 20 contain dance characteristics in varying degrees. These dance elements consist of tempo, meter, rhythmic points of arrival which determine phrase lengths, and distinctive rhythmic motifs. Specific dance-types represented in the masses include, in order of the frequency with which they occur, the gavotte, menuet, sarabande, gigue, entrée, and courante. In the following discussion, dance characteristics in the mass versets will be identified and described and their implications for performance outlined.

Gavottes

The gavotte was a pastoral dance in moderate duple time whose *affekt* was one of tenderness and gaiety. The music is characterized by a homophonic texture and four-measure phrases, frequently grouped in pairs, with a strong thesis on the first beat of the fourth measure. The music almost always begins in the middle of a measure, that is, with two quarter notes. Dance steps, however, do not begin until the first full measure. Dance and music thus form counter-rhythms and the tension is released only at the common point of arrival at the beginning of the fourth measure (i.e., the end of the first phrase).

Five versets in the *Messe pour les couvents* (hereafter designated by the letter C) possess gavotte characteristics: the "Dialogue sur la trompette du Grand Clavier [*sic*], et sur la montre, le bourdon, et le nazard du Positif," "Petitte [*sic*] fugue sur le chromhorne," "Duo sur les tierces," "Trio les dessus sur la tierce et la basse sur la trompette," and the "Offertoire sur les grand jeux," third section (mm. 155–206). Gavotte-like movements in the *Messe pour les paroisses* (P) include the "Petitte fugue sur le chromhorne," "Dialogue sur les trompettes, clairon et tierce du Grand Clavier et le bourdon avec le larigot du Positif," "Dialogue en trio du cornet et de la tierce," and the "Dialogue sur la voix humaine."

The opening measures of the "Dialogue en trio du cornet et de la tierce" (P) are typical of the rhythmic and structural features of the gavotte as found in the mass versets (Ex. 1a). A dance-step sequence for a four-measure phrase is given below the music.² The striking resemblance between this theme and that of Jean-Baptiste Lully's "Gavotte pour le marié et la mariée" from the *Ballet de l'amour malade* (Ex. 1b) confirms the dancelike character of the "Dialogue." Further evidence that the "Dialogue" is a gavotte lies in its regular gavotte phrase structure of three four-measure phrases, grouped as

(4 + 4) + 4, or antecedent-consequent + *petite reprise*. Two variations, in the manner of harpsichord *doubles*, follow the opening section. Throughout the "Dialogue," rhythmic diminution, counterpoint, and registrational and textural changes occur but the underlying dance structure is never obscured.

Ex. 1a "Dialogue en trio de cornet et de la tierce" (P), mm. 1-5

v R L R v L R J v R L R v T
 hup step step rising step jump hup step step jump
 contretemps pas de bourrée contretemps assemble'
 R = right foot T = both feet together
 L = left foot v = plie' (bend knees) J = jete' (jump)

Ex. 1b Lully, *Ballet de l'amour malade*, "Gavotte pour le marié et la mariée," mm. 1-3

It is significant that Couperin chose to cast many of his dancelike versets as dialogues. This genre of organ verset, defined by its contrasts between masses of sound or solo voices, incorporates rapid and frequent manual changes that result in sectionalization (periodicity) of the music.³ Dance music is also characterized by short phrases and a periodic structure; thus the dialogue format is an ideal vehicle for the rhythms and phrase structure of the dance.

Menuets

The menuet, that "most favored" and "most fashionable dance" of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, was characterized by graceful, simple, and relaxed elegance.⁴ The menuet's musical features include triple meter, a moderate tempo, a predominantly homophonic texture, four-measure phrases, and frequent use of hemiola. The music almost always begins on the beat. Four versets from the organ masses display menuet characteristics: the "Trio à 2 dessus de chromhorne et la basse de tierce" (C), the "Dialogue sur les grands jeux" (C), the first section of the "Offertoire sur les grands jeux" (C), and the "Dialogue sur la trompette et le chromhorne" (P).

An important difference between the menuet and the other court dances described in this article is that a *pas composé*, or group of dance steps (called a step-unit by dance scholars) in the menuet equals two measures of music rather than the customary one measure. As a result, dance and musical accents do not coincide. In menuet choreography, accents fall on the first, third, and sometimes sixth quarter-note beats of a step-unit, whereas the musical accents fall on the first and fourth beats.⁵

The inherent rhythmic tension between dance and musical accents in the menuet is illustrated in the opening measures of the "Trio à 2 dessus de chromhorne" (Ex. 2), in which four measures = two step-units, and 'x' and 'y' indicate dance and musical accents, respectively. The significance of these cross-rhythms for the modern performer is obvious: one should refrain from accenting the downbeats of the second and fourth measures since this would destroy the unity of the dance phrase.

Ex. 2 "Trio à 2 dessus de chromorne" (C), *pas de menuet à trois mouvements*, mm. 1-4



v = plié
 j = demi-jeté (small leap onto ball of foot)
 ^ = élève (rise to straightened knees on ball of foot)
 v^ = demi-coupe (bend and rise)
 | = pas marche (step on ball of foot)

x = dance accents
 y = musical accents

Hemiola is a rhythmic characteristic of both the menuet and Couperin's menuet-like mass versets. It typically occurs just before a cadence where it helps to articulate the phrase ending by functioning as a built-in ritard. Compare Lully's use of hemiola (indicated by brackets in the example) at the end of the first strain of the "Menuet les divinitez des fleuves" with that of Couperin in the first section of the "Offertoire sur les grands jeux" (Ex. 3a+b). Similar instances of hemiola occur in the final phrases of the second section (mm. 10-17), third section (mm. 18-26), and final section (mm. 95-103) of the "Offertoire," as well as in the other menuet-like versets. An awareness of this phenomenon by the organist will result in a more rhythmically precise performance.

Ex. 3a Lully, *Alceste*, Prologue, "Menuet les divinitez des fleuves," mm. 6-9



Ex. 3b Couperin, "Offertoire sur les grands jeux" (C), mm. 5-9



Sarabandes

The sarabandes danced by rustic characters, Spanish dancers, and mythological or allegorical personages in late 17th-century theatrical entertainments were gentrified descendants of a fast, frequently lewd dance imported from Spain and Italy in the 1620s. Although the sarabande went out of fashion as a ballroom dance by the end of the century, it continued to appear in stylized instrumental versions for many years. Three of Couperin's organ mass versets, all from the *Messe pour les couvents*, may be described as sarabandes: the "Dialogue sur la voix humaine," "Récit de tierce," and "Récit de cornet."

Musically, these versets display the slow triple meter, irregular phrase lengths, and distinctive rhythmic pattern of the dance (Ex. 4).⁶ Meredith Ellis Little calls this pattern the "key phrase" of the sarabande, since it typically functions as a cadential phrase.⁷ The key phrase does more than articulate phrase structure, however. Sarabandes, unlike gavottes and menuets which possess characteristic dance steps (the *contretemps de gavotte* and *pas de menuet*, respectively), are choreographically undistinguished. The key phrase thus becomes the sarabande's principal identifying feature, and it seldom occurs in regular patterns. Choreographic vagueness is reflected in a correspondingly irregular phrase structure in many sarabandes, including those from the organ masses.

Ex. 4 Sarabande rhythmic patterns⁶



The "Dialogue sur la voix humaine" (Ex. 5) provides the most clearcut example of sarabande characteristics among the mass versets. The phrasal regularity of this section gives way to irregularity as Couperin combined rhythmic variants of the key phrase with hemiola throughout the rest of the piece. In the remaining two sarabande versets, Couperin paired the slow, sustained rhythms and expressive character of the sarabande with the ornamented vocal air ("Récit de tierce") and virtuosic figuration of the harpsichord *double* ("Récit de cornet") in a masterly synthesis of diverse musical styles.

Ex. 5 "Dialogue sur la voix humaine" (C), mm. 9-13



Gigues

The gigue (from English "jig") rivaled the sarabande in popularity at the court of Louis XIV. Gigues are characterized by a quick tempo, dotted rhythms, and the use of 6/4, 6/8, 3/8, or 3 meter. Additional musical features include contrapuntal texture and (perhaps as a result) irregular phrase structure.

The Italian *giga* has markedly different features from those of its French counterpart. Evidently the *giga's* faster tempo, 12/8 meter, homophonic, treble-dominated texture, and continuous eighth-note movement in the solo voice appealed to Couperin, for he composed pieces in the Italian as well as the French style. Elements of both national styles mingle in the "Duo sur les tierces" (P) and the "Offertoire sur les grands jeux" (P), third section.

James Anthony has described the "Duo" as "a gigue with the continuous eighth-note movement of the Italian form of the dance."⁸ The opening phrase of the "Duo" is shown in Ex. 6 with the Feuillet choreography of a gigue from Lully's tragédie-lyrique, *Roland* (1685).

Ex. 6 "Duo sur les tierces" (P), mm. 1-6



v = plié
 L = step on left foot
 R = step on right foot
 T = both feet land together

hop leap hop leap

The third section of the "Offertoire" (P, mm. 130-83) displays the imitative texture, dotted rhythms, and irregular phrase structure of a gigue and is also marked by the meter, harmonic and melodic sequences, and treble-dominated texture of the *giga*. It is a complex and brilliant finale to the largest piece in the organ mass.

Two other dance-types—the *entrée* and *courante*—appear in Couperin's organ masses. Since both fall outside the category of French social dances with which this article is concerned, a discussion of their characteristics will be omitted here.⁹

Conclusion

Dance characteristics appear in varying degrees in over half of the versets in Couperin's organ masses. It is even possible in some cases to match 17th-century choreography with portions of the music. This is not to suggest that these pieces are to be danced; rather, it underscores the significant, but by no means exclusive, influence of dance rhythms on Couperin's liturgical organ music and by implication, on other Baroque instrumental music.¹⁰

How does a performer translate this knowledge to the keyboard? Johann Philipp Kirnberger (1721-83) offered some advice in the preface to a book of dances for the harpsichord:

In order to acquire the necessary qualities for a good performance, the musician can do nothing better than diligently play all sorts of characteristic dances. Each of these dance types has its own rhythm, its phrases of equal length, its accents at the same places in each motif; thus one becomes accustomed to distinguishing the proper rhythm of each dance-type, defining its motifs and accents, so that finally one easily recognizes in a long piece the various and intermingling rhythms, phrases, and accents. Fur-

therefore, one becomes accustomed to giving each piece its proper expression, since each kind of dance melody has its own characteristic measure and note values.¹¹

Kirnberger's instructions, written almost 100 years after the publication of the masses, indicate that familiarity with Baroque dances had already disappeared among many musicians. How much more difficult, then, is it for modern performers two centuries removed from Kirnberger to "give each piece its proper expression"? Meredith Ellis Little suggests that:

The rhythmic vitality of the music can be heightened if the qualities of the original dance are kept in mind; performers can articulate to form their phrases as if to accompany dancers . . . Temporal qualities, including metric structure and the rhythmic patterns with their characteristic lengths and points of arrival, may be slightly exaggerated for the sake of clarity . . .¹²

In Couperin's masses, this rhythmic awareness can be used to preserve the integrity of the basic two-measure step-units of the menuet-like versets, the four-measure phrases of the gavotte-like movements with their important thesis points on beats four and eight, and the stressed second beat of the sarabande-inspired pieces. Knowing the prevalence of hemiola in menuets, sarabandes, and gigues, performers may confidently expect similar appearances of this rhythmic device in dance-related versets.

The difficult question of tempo remains. Space does not permit a discussion of the subject here.¹³ Of particular interest to musicians, however, are dance scholar Wendy Hilton's tempo interpretations because they are the result of a working knowledge of French Baroque dance choreography.¹⁴ Ultimately musicians must cultivate a knowledge of the characteristics of each dance-type as well as an understanding of the physical association between dance and music—what Couperin and his contemporaries would have called *sensibilité*.

NOTES

1. A thorough discussion of this topic may be found in Chapter 1 of the author's DMA dissertation, "Seventeenth-Century Dance Characteristics in the Organ Masses of François Couperin (1668-1733)" (University of Kansas, 1985).
2. Wendy Hilton, *Dance of Court & Theatre: The French Noble Style 1690-1725* (Princeton: Princeton Book Company, 1981), pp. 212-45.
3. Almonte C. Howell Jr., *The French Organ Mass in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1958), pp. 80-106.
4. Pierre Rameau, *Le maître à danser* (Paris: n.p., 1725; trans. Cyril W. Beaumont, London: C.W. Beaumont, 1931), pp. 52, 55.
5. Hughes, "Dance Characteristics," p. 75.
6. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, s.v. "Sarabande," by Richard Hudson.
7. Meredith Ellis Little, "The Dances of J.B. Lully" (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1967), p. 63.
8. James Anthony, *French Baroque Music from Beaujoyeux to Rameau*, rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), p. 282.
9. See rather Hughes, "Dance Characteristics," Chapters 8 and 9.
10. Other musical influences on Couperin's organ masses are discussed in Chapters 3-9 of the author's dissertation.
11. Newman Powell, "Kirnberger on Dance Rhythms, Fugues, and Characterization," *Festschrift Theodore Hoelty-Nickel* (Valparaiso, Ind.: Valparaiso University Press, 1967), p. 67.
12. Meredith Ellis Little, "The Contribution of Dance Steps to Musical Analysis and Performance: La Bourgogne," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 28:1 (Spring 1975), p. 118.
13. For a summary of metronomic equivalents of 18th-century dance tempi by 20th-century musicologists, see Judith Caswell, "Rhythmic Inequality and Tempo in French Music between 1650 and 1740" (PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1973), and Erich Schwandt, "L'Affilard on the French Court Dances," *The Musical Quarterly* 60:3 (July 1974), pp. 389-400.
14. Hilton, *Dance*, p. 266.

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THE NEW ORGANIST HYMN-BASED IMPROVISATIONS

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Have you ever needed a prelude based on the hymn of the day or one to fit a family's request for a funeral and found you had no suitable music on hand? Are you hard-pressed to learn a sufficient variety of music for the weekly service?

The purpose of this article is to suggest some solutions to these problems and to stimulate your imagination to discover others. The following ideas can be used to improvise a prelude on hymns, as well as to provide some alternative ways of hymn playing. They are not really intended for congregational singing, however, although it is possible to adapt them to fit that situation.

An improvised prelude on the hymn "Children of the heavenly Father" (Tryggare kan ingen vara), might follow this plan.

Stanza 1, solo melody: Use the chimes, an oboe, or an 8' flute.

Stanza 2, two parts: Play the bass and soprano lines on one keyboard (no pedals), perhaps with 8' and 4' flutes, or the principal/diapason 8'.

Stanza 3, in minor: To do this easily, simply change the key signature of the hymn in your mind. The key signature for D minor includes a B^b and the seventh degree of the scale is raised (C[♯]). Play the notes exactly as written, only with the new accidentals.

Interlude: An interlude between the third and fourth stanzas makes a smoother transition from minor to major. Repeat the last phrase of the hymn in minor but change the final chord to major (D, F[♯], A).

Stanza 4, hymn as written: The last stanza is a triumphant one. Use the principals 8', 4', and 2' and play all four parts, either on the keyboard alone or with the pedals, using Principals 16', 8', and 4'.

Consider the possibilities with the hymn "Of the Father's love begotten" (Divinum mysterium). This Christmas hymn is a plain-song melody and adapts well to the following plan.

Stanza 1, melody alone, using either an 8' flute played one octave higher, or a 4' flute played as written. (The melody will then sound one octave higher.)

Stanza 2, melody with a drone bass. If the hymn is written in E-flat, the drone in the left hand consists of the lowest E^b and the note a fifth above it (B^b). Use an 8' flute for the drone. Play the melody on another keyboard at the pitch written, using a Krummhorn 8' or flutes 8' or 2^½'.

Stanza 3, all parts of the hymn as written. Try the celeste (viola 8', viola celeste 8') on the manuals only, with the swell box closed.

Final stanza, hymn melody in fourths or fifths over a pedal point. Hold the lowest E^b in the pedal (with an 8' flute stop), and play the melody in fourths or fifths on the keyboard. That is, play the melody as written with the right hand. Count down either four or five notes from the melody notes, and play this part with the left hand on the same manual. For example, the first line of the melody is: E^b, f, g, A^b, g, f, g, f, E^b;

a fourth below the melody notes would include: B^b, c, d, E^b, d, c, d, c, B^b.

The fourths provide an effect quite suitable to the character of the hymn.

In creating your own preludes you are only limited by your imagination. Let the text be your guide when varying the stanzas. It is a good idea to sketch out your plan, either on the hymn book page or on a separate piece of paper, and then practice it thoroughly and carefully during the preceding week before you play it for worship. This way you will know exactly what to do and you will also be able to save the format for use at a future date.

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