

Drum Rhythms for Dance Music in the Renaissance and Middle Ages  
(FoMRHIQ 53, October 1988, Comm. 887)

The iconography of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is littered with a plethora of percussion instruments, and yet the first concrete evidence that we have for what was played on them is not found until the publication of the famous dance tutor *Orchésographie* by Thoinot Arbeau, the anagrammatic *nom de plume* of Jehan Tabourot, which was first published four hundred years ago this year, and the music of much of which was popularised by Peter Warlock in his *Capriol Suite*. The book must have been popular in its own day, for three editions of *Orchésographie* were published by Jehan des Preyz in Langres, the first in 1588, the second in 1589, and the third in 1596. There have been five modern prints of the work that I know of, the first edited by Laure Fonta and published by Bouillon & Vieweg in Paris in 1888 to celebrate the tercentenary of the first publication, incorporating a reprinted copy, rather than a facsimile, of, rather curiously, the 1589 edition; the second was a translation into English by Cyril Beaumont, with the music transcribed into modern notation, published in 1925, an edition that I've not seen; the third was again a translation into English, by Mary Evans, with a photographic facsimile of the little woodcuts and musical notation of the 1888 Fonta reprint, and I think that it derives from that edition rather than from an original; the fourth is a reprint of this third version, with various corrections (but unfortunately by no means all that should have been made) in supplementary notes by Julia Sutton, published by Dover in New York in 1966, with the addition of Labanotation of all the dances; the fifth is the only modern print that should be taken seriously, and is a facsimile of the 1596 edition with a short introduction by François Lesure, published by Minkoff in Geneva in 1972. It may be more expensive than the others, especially the Dover, but it is the only one which is not bedevilled by misunderstandings of the original text. All the references and quotations in this Comm., including the page numbers which are for rectos unless otherwise stated (only the rectos are numbered), are to and from this last edition, the original spelling of which has been retained with all its idiosyncracies and, particularly, its somewhat eccentric use of accents and punctuation.

The work is written in the familiar style of its period as a conversation between the master, Arbeau, and the ignoramus, Capriol, and it includes not merely descriptions of the dances, but details of the steps (sufficiently detailed for the Dover edition to include Labanotation of the steps, as mentioned above), and notation of the music. In one case this is in four parts but in the others it is only of the melody. Of greater importance, for me and for this Comm., some, at least, of the drum rhythms used for these dances are also written out.

Frustratingly, Arbeau gives full rhythms only for military marching and for the pavane and basse dance; for his other dances such as the allemande and the numerous varieties of branle, he gives only the melody and the steps. He does occasionally refer to percussion instruments in his descriptions of other dances, as with the morisques, presumed by all the translators to have some relationship to the English morris, for which *crotales*, which Arbeau believed were either tambourines or triangles (not 'triangular metal plates furnished with loops' as Mary Evans translated it) may be used: (p.94): ... *Crotales fussent vn petit tabourin de basque, garny de clochettes & sonnettes* [Crotales were a small tambourine, furnished with pellet bells as well as (the normal) jingles] ... *ou bien que ce fussent ce que nous appellons cymbales & fer triangulaire, garny de boucles* [or as likely were what we call *cymbales* and the triangular iron furnished with rings – i.e. the triangle still had its rings, as in the Middle Ages] *dont aulcun iouent & font vn bruict agreable pour accompagner la vielle* [with which one plays and makes a sound suitable to accompany the *vielle* (and for dancing)].

Whether at this date the *vielle* was a fiddle or a hurdy-gurdy I wouldn't know, but my guess would be the latter.

Arbeau does give basic rhythms, one for binary dance music such as the pavane (p.29): ... *vne minime blanche & de deux noires, en cette façon* [one white note and two blacks in this fashion]: " ! ! [these should have stems but my computer won't do that] and the others for such ternary dances as basse danse (p. 33v): " ! ! ! and the gaillarde (p.39v): ... *qu'elle consiste de six minimes blanches sonnees par deux mesures ternaires ainsi* [which consists of six white notes played in two ternary bars thus]: " " " / " P" [the P representing a rest] *parce que la cinquieme & penultime note & minime blanche est consummee & perdue en l'air* [because the fifth, penultimate note is wasted and lost in the air], and which we shall see shortly is the better rhythm for the taborer also.

However, he does not explain how these are applied, save in the pavane (pp. 30-32) and basse danse (pp. 33<sup>v</sup>-37) nor whether they are used in all binary and ternary dances, irrespective of their speeds. He does, though, give us two basic pieces of information which I regard as being of fundamental importance for all percussion players, and ensemble directors, involved in the performance of dance music of both the Renaissance, Arbeau's own period, and of the Middle Ages before him.

The first comes in his description of the military march. He gives (p.8) a basic drum rhythm: " " " " PPP [the P again representing a rest], describing it as: *La mesure & battement du tambour, contient huict minimes blanches, desquelles les cinq premieres sont battues & frappées scauoir les quatres premieres chacune d'vn coup de baston, feul & la cinquieme des deux battons tout ensemble, & les trois aultres sont teues & retenues, sans estre frappées. Pendant le son & battement de ces cinq blanches & trois souspirs le soldat faict vne passée, c'est a dire, il passe & extend ses deux iambes tellement que sur la premiere notte, il pose & assiet son pied gaulche, & durant les trois aultres nottes, il leue le pied droict, pour le poser & asseoir sur la cinquieme notte, & durant les trois souspirs qui equipolent a trois nottes, il releue son pied gaulche pour recommancer vne aultre passée comme auparauant.* and in my own somewhat loose translation, 'the drum rhythm consists of eight beats of which the first five are played, the first four with a single drum stroke and the fifth with both sticks together [the last stroke what today we would call a flam] and the other three are counted but not played. During these eight beats, five played and three silent, the soldier takes one pace with both feet, his left foot on the first beat and his right on the fifth.'

This is followed by some discussion of the number of paces and drum beats to the league, evidence, which is irrelevant to us in this context, that military drummers were expected to keep beating the whole time that the army marched.

Arbeau then explains the names of the various drum strokes, the Tan or Plan for a single stroke of a beater, the Tere for two strokes of, in modern terminology, a crotchet each, and the Fre for four quavers: (p.9): ... *le son d'vne minime blanche qui se faict par vn coup de baston appellons le dis-ie Tan. ou Plan. Et le son de deux minimes noires, qui se faict par deux coups de bastons appellons le Tere, & le son de 4 crochues qui se faict par 4 coups de bastos Fre.* Arbeau does not say how these are executed, but it seems to me almost certain that at any reasonable march speed, the Fre must have been played by bouncing the sticks, the modern five-stroke roll, the fifth stroke being the following Tan. With the massive side drum that he illustrates and describes (p.7) *deux pieds & demy* [two and a half feet] long and *deux pieds & demy* in diameter, and with sticks heavy enough to sound such a drum, it would be all-but impossible to play a rhythm such as the Fre hand-to-hand at anything faster than a snail's pace. In addition, the word Fre, with a rolled r, is a good onomatopoeic approximation to the sound of a five-stroke

roll.

He then goes on to give all, or almost all (my son Simon pointed out to me many years ago, when at school he first had access to a computer, that Arbeau had missed four of the possible permutations), the Tan Tere Fre Fre Tan, the Tan Fre Tere Fre Tan, the Tere Tan Fre Fre Tan, and the Tere Fre Tan Fre, the possible permutations of his basic rhythm by dividing any of the *minimes blanches* into any of these other strokes, having already stressed that the fifth beat must be left plain and unchanged, and that the last three beats must always and invariably be left silent: (p.9): *quant les battements du tambour sont diuersiffiés, ils sont plus agreables, & pour ceste cause ... quelquefois en lieu des blanches, ils mectent deux minimes noires ou quatre crochues, comme il leur vient en phantasie, mais ce pendant il fault que la cinquieme notte soit entiere blanche ... car lors il ne sont point les trois souspirs fors au dernier..* [when the drum beats are varied they are more agreeable ... and therefore instead of the minims one substitutes two crotchets or four quavers as one busks it, but always the fifth beat must be a single minim so that one can leave the three blank beats at the end].

Capriol then asks Arbeau why the three rest beats must be left silent and why the drummer cannot simply play eight strokes on the drum for each full pace, four one the left foot and four on the right: (p.14): *Pourquoy y mect on ces souspirs? Que ne fait le tambour pour chacune passee les huict minimes blanches? quatre pour le pied gauche, & quatre pour le pied droict.* Arbeau replies that if they did that the soldiers would fall into confusion: (ibid): *Si le tambour n'usoit point de souspirs, les marches des soldats pourroient tumber en confusion.* The point is that it is only the silence which tells the soldier which foot he should be using; with a steady continuous series of notes, nobody can know where they are in the bar. This is also why, in the examples above of the rhythm for the galliard, I said that the second, with its silent fifth beat, must always be preferable.

Thus this detail is of fundamental importance in playing dance rhythms as well as marches; unless the dancers can tell, without thought or hesitation, which is the first beat of the bar, confusion will be confounded and they will fall over their own feet. Arbeau's other piece of basic information comes in his transcriptions of the music for the pavane *Belle qui tiens ma vie*, and the basse dance *Iouyssance vous donneray*. For both Arbeau had already specified the drum rhythm but here he writes it throughout the dance, and what is important is that it never varies. Even though the pavane rhythm is specifically stated to be for side drum (*tambour*) and the basse-dance for side drum or tabor (*tambour ou tabourin*), though also on some pages just tabor, and thus played, on the side drum, with two sticks and not, as on the tabor, only one, nevertheless the rhythm is very plain, very simple, " ! ! and " ! ! ! ! respectively throughout, and without any of the flashy elaborations so often heard in early music performance today. I must admit to two alterations in my own performance: with *Musica Reservata* we customarily added two bars of drum introduction to set the tempo, and we always added a bar and a beat to make an ending, everybody holding the final chord for an extra bar and coming off together on the first beat of the next bar.

To my mind the latter is almost essential musically, and the former was always a help, but for neither is there any authority in Arbeau.

What is important is the steady and unvarying rhythm, which can still be heard today with taborers in southern France and the Basque country. In western Europe, we are a rhythmically backward culture and, on the whole, before the introduction of Afro-American music in the 1920s, we could not cope with much in the way of syncopation or additive rhythms. I well remember the story of the first performance in Paris of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, told to me by my first conducting teacher, Joseph Lewis, and told to him by his teacher who was the

assistant conductor on that occasion. The conductor of the orchestra said: 'What is this, five in a bar? Three I know, four I know, six I know, but what is five?' So his assistant said: 'If you beat four, sir, I will beat one', and so they did, the main conductor beating four beats and his assistant, who told Joseph Lewis this story, beating the fifth beat in every bar. Other examples are Strauss waltzes, where the drummer plays an almost incessant um-cha-cha on bass drum and side drum. Another is Latin American music for dancers in our culture, where one player at least keeps a rock steady rhythm on claves or maraccas.

One of our major problems in the early music world today is that too few of those playing in or directing ensembles have any experience of other dance musics. Any experienced dance drummer knows that the essential in a dance band is to keep the rhythm steady, plain, and simple, and to elaborate only at the points where the rhythm of other players is most obvious. My contemporaries will remember that one of the most successful dance bands of my younger days was Victor Sylvester's, and his slogan was strict tempo. We do have to remember when we are playing mediæval or renaissance dance music that this is dance music; it is not music based on dance forms, such as we meet in Bach or the composers of the classical period. It is music that was actually played for dancing, and this is how it should still be played today.

Arbeau gives us very direct evidence of what we should do: we should keep the rhythm steady and repetitive; we should always play rhythms that make it crystal clear which is the first beat; we should help dancers, even when, in concert performance, they exist only in imagination. This may make it seem dull, especially for the drummer, but anybody old enough to have heard *Musica Reservata* in performance or on record will agree that it works, and that the steady rhythms which we used added immeasurably to the effect of the performance.

For further and more detailed information on how I believe one should play early percussion instruments, and on how to make them, see James Blades's and my *Early Percussion Instruments* (now out of print) and my *Making Early Percussion Instruments* (copies of the latter are available from me at £ 5.00; it is also officially out of print, but I and the Bate Collection have a stock of the remaining copies), both published by OUP in 1976.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to Michael Morrow for all that I have learned from him in the past thirty years. Without him, I would have done little in early music and certainly would never have initiated the reconstruction of early percussion instruments in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It was Michael's attitude to authenticity of music, of both notes and their sound, that inspired me to be the first to make such reconstructions, and as a result, we were the first early music ensemble to get away from the attitude that any old drum would do.

A version of this Comm. was given, with practical demonstrations, at the Bate Collection's Quatercentenary Conference, held to celebrate the publication of the first edition of Arbeau's treatise, on October 30th, 1988.