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The Problem of Tempo: Too Slow, Too Fast, and Just Right

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“The Problem of Tempo: Too Slow, Too Fast, and Just Right.”
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Abstract

With so little guidance about tempo in early dance manuals, how can we know what tempo suits the steps in a dance? The paper will examine “Bizzarria d’Amore” from *Gratie d’Amore* and “Forza d’Amore” and “Contentezzza d’Amore” from *Nobilita di Dami* to illustrate the delicacy of the relationship between music and dance.

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The surviving dance manuals of the Renaissance/mannerist period provide minimal information about the performance of the music for the dances. Reconstructionists focus their attention on aligning the music with the dance steps and determining the proportional relationships of the various metric notations.¹ And rightly so, but we remain pretty much at a loss to know just what tempo any one dance should take. I am suggesting here that we can use a couple of Renaissance aesthetic values to guide us about musical tempo decisions in late sixteenth century court dance. We will focus on *sprezzatura* and *leggiadria*. We will conduct three case studies of musical tempo in Fabritio Caroso's "Forza d'Amore," his "Contentezza d'Amore," and Cesare Negri's "Bizzarria d'Amore." We will listen to recordings of music for these three dances and argue that the first is too fast to allow proper display of *leggiadria*, the second is too slow to allow proper display of *sprezzatura*, and the third is just right for dancers to maintain elegant *leggiadria* and demonstrate *sprezzatura*.

Let us examine our theoretical framework. I depend upon the research of Sharon Fermor for an operational definition of *leggiadria*. In her essay, "Poetry in Motion: Beauty in Movement and the Renaissance Conception of *leggiadria*," she summarizes,

the essence of *leggiadria* resided, firstly, in a movement that was even, measured and controlled, and that avoided any but the most subtle twists and turns of the body. Figures described in these terms, . . . are characterized by a deportment that is erect and

¹ See Guglielmo Ebreo, *De Practica Seu Arte Tripudii*, edited by Barbara Sparti. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 69-70; Fabritio Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance: A New Translation and Edition of the "Nobilità di Dame,"* translated and edited by Julia Sutton. (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), pp. 58-63.

composed, . . . It was a kind of movement that combined the gentlest appearance of animation and life with a simplicity indicative of inner virtue.²

The key terms to remember here are *measured*, *controlled*, *composed*, and *gentlest appearance of animation*. It is a variant of the concept of *gravitas* that we usually translate as “dignity.” The image I hold in my mind to embody this concept is da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. *Leggiadra* implicitly requires dancers to radiate the appearance of dignity when completing any steps, movements, patterns, etc. Musical tempo, then, needs to be slow enough for the dancer to maintain this appearance. Pavannes are dances that exist for the sole purpose of displaying *leggiadra*.

Sprezzatura is a widely discussed concept in Renaissance aesthetics for a variety of reasons, least of which is the fact that Castiglione gives it great attention in his *Book of the Courtier*. I think the scholar, John Greenwood, does as good a job as anyone of describing it as that effortless exertion where one aspired to “accomplish difficult things gracefully.”³ *Sprezzatura* implicitly requires dancers to be doing steps, patterns, movements, etc. that do, indeed, require a great deal of skill. Musical tempo, then, needs to be fast enough to challenge the dancers’ abilities—both their technical abilities to do all the steps and their “cool” in the process. Galliards exist for dancers to display extreme *sprezzatura*. So, we have a continuum—pavannes at the one end that display *leggiadra*, galliards at the other end for the display of *sprezzatura*, and *balli* in the middle, striking a balance between the two ideals.

²Sharon Fermor, “Poetry in Motion: Beauty in Movement and the Renaissance Conception of *leggiadria*.” *Concepts of Beauty in Renaissance Art*. Ed. Francis Ames-Lewis and Mary Rogers, (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 127-28).

³ John Greenwood, *Shifting Perspectives and the Stylish Style* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 186. See also J. R. Woodhouse, *Baldesar Castiglione: A Reassessment of “The Courtier,”* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh, University press, 1978), pp. 77-81).

Let us examine Caroso's "Forza d'Amore," a dance from his manual, *Nobilita di Dame*. I believe this music is being played a little too fast. In verse one, (0:18 on the CD) there is a sequence that calls for the dancers to complete two *ordinarii*, two *puntati*, two *passi presti*, and one *ordinario* all in the time of eight measures of triple time music (that's 24 beats). That sequence requires extraordinary technical skill, and the tempo of the music moves so fast that the dancers' legs start looking like the tines on a roto-tiller. This is fine, so long as the dancers can actually complete the steps, for it would affirm their *sprezzatura*, but what does that do to *leggiadra*? How can dancers display that composure with their legs moving in such a frenetic way? The problem only becomes worse. Immediately following the above sequence, (0:38 on the CD) the dancers must execute two *sotto piedi* and one *trabucchetto* to the left and then to the right, followed by two *spezzati*, two *trabuchetti*, two *ordinarii*, and two *scorsi*—all in sixteen measures of music (48 beats). At this fast tempo of the music recording, the dancers are moving in a herky-jerky fashion, sometimes sideways, sometimes forward, sometimes in a serpentine pattern. That sort of movement does not radiate *leggiadra*. I suggest that if the music were to be played at a slower tempo, then a dignified sense of *leggiadra* would be more evident in the performance.

The tempo for "Contentezza d'Amore" affords the dancers rich opportunity to display *leggiadra*, for the rhythm is stately, the steps are measured and the dancers move through the intricate pattern in unhurried ease. (play the CD from the start for one verse) The second and third verses--the two solo verses--allow the stationary partner the marvelous opportunity to gaze upon the other partner. The slow tempo means that the gaze can linger. This is all very well, but where's the technical challenge? Especially when you consider that the most complicated combination of steps for the dancers is a sequence of two *puntati*, two *passi gravi*, and one

ordinario. The question becomes all the more urgent in the final verse of the dance, where the rhythm shifts to triple time (2:52 on the CD). Caroso is deliberately challenging the *sprezzatura* skills of the dancers at the end of that verse with the sixteen *reprisa*, four *trabuchetti*, and the concluding *reverenza*. The tempo has to be such that the execution of those steps presents a challenge. Dancers are yearning for the tempo of this dance to move at a brisker pace, so that they can display more of that sense of *sprezzatura*, and a bit less of *leggiadra*.

I believe that the tempo in this recording of the music for “Bizzarria d’Amore” catches the perfect balance between *leggiadra* and *sprezzatura*. The choreography of this dance has a brisk forward motion about it, driven primarily by the pervasive use of the Negri *ordinario* step in every verse. (play CD from the start of verse one) The tempo of this music does call for those steps—and all the steps--to move at a lively pace. *Sprezzatura* arises out of the intricate patterns that the dancers make upon the floor, especially with the numerous counterturns that Negri loves to include in so much of his choreography. As they move with confidence over the shoulder, across the set or around the circle, they make the synchronized patterns on the floor change as effortlessly as the images in a kaleidoscope. The dancers sustain a sense *leggiadra*, because these are not difficult steps to complete, and so their erect posture and composed demeanor are never stressed.

It’s the chorus that gives us the most conclusive evidence that this tempo is just right. The chorus of “Bizzarria d’Amore” remains one of the most charming in the canon. (0:17 on the CD) The combination of two *saltini à piè pari* and two *reprisa minutia* offers a technical challenge to any dancer. The tempo is not so fast that dancers cannot complete them without landing like sacks of potatoes on the *saltini à piè pari* or without twisting their torsos on the

reprisa minutia. They can make this intricate combination look effortless and they can maintain their dignity while doing one of the silliest looking combinations in all of Negri's manual.

Those among us who toil in the vineyard of early dance research and performance cling to the precious few recordings that make up the slender canon of early dance music. The commercial music industry throws us a bone every decade or so, and we search high and low for recordings by amateur early music groups who nobly attempt to support our arcane interests. Nevertheless, the body of recorded music that comes to us seems to reflect little more than an intuitive, indirect or empirical understanding of tempo. Sometimes, they get it right, as I have suggested above. So, the next time you have the pleasure of working with instrumental musicians, test the tempo against these twin pillars of *leggiadra* and *sprezzatura*. Make sure that the musicians will be testing your skill, and reinforcing your dignity.

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