

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Dance

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## ANCIENT PERIOD

**Prehistory.** We must imagine a robust prehistory for the dance as well as for religion and art, in the pre-Christian centuries; in those areas we now call France, Spain, England and Germany. Emphasis is due, here, on the robust, for it is easily enough assumed that those 'wild lands' beyond the Roman frontier were, because without writing, also without fields of art in which to express their emotions. (The simultaneous Roman and Greek cultures, which were so proficient at the language arts, and for whom {especially the Greeks} what could be said or written was the gold standard for depth and value, tend to overshadow the dark pre-Christian ages of West Europe.)

## POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

**Erotics.** From prehistoric cave paintings, and illustrations of dance, in particular, we assume the artistic sensibility of the Neolithic pre-Europeans who were long term inhabitants of Western Europe. With the decline of the Roman Empire, which set in in the first centuries A.D., and the early Christian struggle toward institutional respectability, then toward such assertively doctrinal power as we see exercised at the Council of Nicaea (325), from those moves in history we assess the gradual disappearance of the prehistoric in Europe, that culture period summoned up for us, in our day, by such evocative novels as William Golding's *Pincher Martin*. We begin to see that an early world, in which dancing styles the Christians were largely to reject, as far too erotic, far too directed to promoting crop fertility instead of the praise of god, was—except among the 'northern heathen tribes'—to be largely purified of its pagan elements. Dance as an expression of the joy of life was on the whole proscribed by the early Christian church, which considered such jubilant dancing the work of the devil.

**Two minds.** The Christian Church, as it turned out, was of two minds about dancing, an issue which was constantly pressing in the early period of the Church. Apart from the opinions of Saint Augustine, 354-430, who was severely opposed to dancing, there was the opposite view of St. Basil of Caesarea (350 A.D.) who declared that dancing was the most noble activity of the angels, a theory later supported by the Dante of the *Divine Comedy*, a weighty endorsement from a most respected source.

**St. Vitus.** In the high Middle Ages, itself, there was a prominent kind of dance-- named for a frenzy - afflicted holy man of the third century-- which was accepted by the church for its relevance to social crisis. We are here in the time of the Black Plague, dreadful and unexplained disease outbursts, which itself, is thought to have destroyed a third of the population of Europe. (Popular opinion was that a spider bite was the source of the plague infection, whence the Italian dance name, *tarantella*, has to this day lasted as a reminder of the terrors behind it.) This holy/damned dance would express itself in masses of victims leaping and jumping in the air, with mouths foaming, and eyes red with epileptic terror.

**High Middle Ages.** In the high Middle Ages, shall we say in the time of Dante and Chaucer, the kinds of dance taking over Western Europe were of three kinds, corresponding to the three chief social classes of

the time: the nobility, the clergy, the peasantry. The clergy—with undoubted exceptions-- as can be imagined, were chiefly involved in stately processional dances, employed around the holy mass. (In African Catholic Churches of our day, the group dances at the time of 'Harvest,' circle colorfully around the nave of the church.) Among the nobles, the knights, there was already a courtly tradition of formal dancing, full of the poetry of restrained love, while among the peasantry dancing meant the round dances, often full of cavorting high jinks, erotic horseplay, and uninhibited sport. The kind of social free for all, on the peasant level, we see depicted in the paintings of Breughel!

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

**Dancing masters.** We often think of the Renaissance as the rebirth of awareness of the ancient classics, which is part of the story. But in subtle ways the Middle Ages, too, became parts of the Renaissance. By the end of the Middle Ages—say the early fifteenth century—the jongleurs of the mediaeval period, who were men of all skills where entertainment was wanted, as dancers, jokesters, stealers, cut ups—think of Jof in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*—these jongleurs were morphing into a new profession, needed from them by the new dance-loving and often quite secular-erotic Italian noblemen, who were ready to employ. This was the profession of dancing master, which will be influential throughout the development of Western European dance history. Throughout the fifteenth century many of these dancing masters, who were often highly educated, wrote manuals on the art of dancing—exercises to improve the dance skills of the nobility. Many of these instructors, incidentally, were Jewish, and brought with them, into Western culture, what we could call the harmonies of today's klezmer band music.

**France and England.** While Italy was the leading force in Renaissance dance development, there were separate and rich traditions developing in France, where from the simple *branle*, a country round dance, there emerged versions of the ballet, and of the pantomime—instance: a dinner ballet, featuring the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece, was performed at the wedding of the Duke of Milan, in 1489. In England the peasant tradition of bumptious round dances was persistent, while the court showed a thorough understanding of European dance styles, to which they hewed in grand masques or royal festivals. Queen Elizabeth I was an enthusiast for English country dance, and was gifted at dancing the galliard and the volt, leaping country dances in which the two dance partners clung tightly to each other. It was not long, be it said, until France itself opened the new direction for dance, the ballet, in courtly performances, often including the Royal Majesties, danced to the celebration of its own harmony, and of the harmony for which France—then torn apart by civil wars—had great need.

**Ballet**, as it happened, was a rich point of departure for the development of dance in Western Europe. Slipping into the seventeenth century we find that not only ballet, but house-party entertainments, and show-off occasions for debutantes were all surrounded by the display of dance. It was in this environment that Moliere's dancing master mocks himself, when addressing M. Jourdain, in *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670):

*There is nothing so necessary to human beings as the dance...Without the dance a man would not be able to do anything...All the misfortunes of man, all the baleful reverses with which histories are filled, the blunders of politicians and the failures of great leaders, all this is the result of not knowing how to dance...*

**Minuet** was the dance form most ready to follow the preparations laid for it by the country dances of England and France, by pantomimes such as flourished at the courts of England and France, by great balls and festivals in the courts of the Italian nobility during the Renaissance. The minuet, a gentle-stepped position-exchange among the powerful and elegant; what could better have typified the stability of the old order, a stability toward which the court dancing of the fifteenth century was a prelude; what could more fatefully have symptomized the Falling of the old Social Political Order, which was to be manifest in Western Europe by the end of the eighteenth century?

## NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Waltz.** While its origins antedated the 19th century, the growing and soon overwhelming popularity of the waltz, an originally German dance form, rooted in *the Sturm und Drang* cultural energies of late 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany, opened a turn toward the future, the individual, and the cultures of nascent democracy, which were profiling themselves across the backdrop of 19th century Western Europe. The waltz, a one on one dance involving freedom, character, and expressiveness, all the characteristics implicitly sought by the Romantic Movement, and the French Revolution, which had turned its back on the rigid formalisms of court dance, spread into the 19th century in all directions, populist and noble alike, to the greatest extent possible exemplifying that power of the dance form which Werther expressed, in Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1779):

*Never have I moved so lightly. I was no longer a human being. To hold the most adorable creature in my arms and fly around with her like the wind, so that everything around us fades away.*

**Ballet.** Latent as a growth direction throughout the pre-revolutionary era, was the ballet form, which, as we have seen, had its origins in court, yet spread from there into popular entertainment. Schools of ballet sprang up in all major capitols, and spokesman scholars of ballet—like Jean-Georges Noverre, an influential reformer and scholar of the ballet movement—competed with one another, throughout western Europe, for the prestige of the ballet companies which they themselves led. Among the dancers of the Romantic ballet scene, ballerinas imperceptibly took over as principals, having been better instructed and better equipped—looser garments, open toed slippers—than their male counterparts. Voila the origins of the ballet *prima donna*. During the first half of the nineteenth century there was a rage for 'spiritual' and filmy ballets, like *La Sylphide* (1836) which biopsied the crossing over points between the spiritual and the real worlds.

**Theater and ballroom.** The hunger for public entertainment grew in the second half of the nineteenth century, beginning to manifest itself in the dancing in ballroom halls and theaters. For a while it was female can shows with their much enjoyed displays of legs and genitals. Then, as public culture grew ever more in your face, there were minstrel shows, music hall reviews—Jacques Offenbach's *Gaieté Parisienne* was not staged until 1938, but think how vividly it summons up the atmosphere of nineteenth century music hall life, and of the pleasure loving (and wan) girls who sought that life, in the paintings of Toulouse-Lautrec.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Ballet,** immense and popular, was the strongest of the art forms to address the western dance public, at the outset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the fresh impulses renovating Western ballet were Russian. The influx of dances and dancers from Diaghilev's Ballets Russes were felt most stunningly on the Paris stage, from where they spread throughout the continent, giving Western European ballet a glimpse of such transcendent dancing as that of Nijinsky, or directing on the level of that of Michel Fokine (1880-1942). (Interestingly enough the dancers of the Ballets Russes never performed in Russia, where they were seen as worse than bourgeois.)

**Jazz.** As the twentieth century unfolded, Latin-American and Jazz dances, imported from Afro-American and African cultures, and passing often through Spain, whose native culture was receptive, entered into the European dance world. That world was already opening out from inside into such civilized, and calmly bourgeois pleasures as tango teas, dance clubs, family style dance holidays. The English Style of dancing, as it came to be called, sanctioned five standard dances, which would be the hits of the first half of the century: quick step, waltz, foxtrot, tango and blues. My Mt. Vernon Iowa, U.S.A., neighbor, Dale—and his wife, Eileen—are my age; their chief recreation is trying to figure out how to handle these steps at dance night uptown every Friday. I can't hold a candle to them; scary octogenarians.

**Folklore.** The urbanization of major European cities, the invasion of radio and eventually television, into the sphere of the man on the street's musical life; all these factors militated against the traditions of folkdance which were rapidly enough fading in the Europe ripped from its roots by two World Wars. There

were pockets of historical resistance, throwbacks reminding us of the old world—Basque country, Hungary—but soon (like right now) they had little left except to be ‘picturesque.’

**Academia.** Interestingly enough, although there is much more to say about the explosions in dance theater, ballet ensembles, and intercontinental blending of ballet companies, bringing to the hometown in Europe strands of another and usually fascinating performance culture, it is less observed that in University cultures, from one point in Europe to another, there have been hitherto little noticed experiments, researches, and historical inquiries into the nature and history of dance that ‘Departments of Dance’ have become broadly staffed and innovative origin points for new understandings of dance in our lives. Does the work carried on in those centers suggest the kind of pause for rethink, of the nature of the Humanities, that the Enlightenment century offered to the European cultural conscience in general?

### **Suggested reading**

Harman, Carter, *A Popular History of Music: From Gregorian Chant to Jazz*, New York, 1956.

Hoppin, Richard, *Mediaeval Music*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1978.

Kilmer, Crocker, Brown, *Sounds from Silence*, Bit Enki, Berkeley, Cal, 1976.

Merker, Brown, Steven, eds., *The Origins of Music*, MIT Press, 2000.

Reese, Gustave, *Music in the Renaissance*, New York, W.W.Norton, 1954.

Schwartz, Eliot and Godfrey, Daniel, *Music since 1945*, New York, W.W.Norton, 1993.

### **Discussion Questions**

Is dance, par excellence, the art that requires a public audience’s attention, in order to realize itself? Can you dance with yourself? I know I am suggesting that this is impossible, but cannot we not, taking wings from the Werther we cited above, ‘sing internally?’ What, after all, is given to the dancer by the public, as a reward for displaying himself.

Does dancing reflect the historical moment in which it occurs? Or is it more a byproduct of changing and regressing styles, which interweave with one another? The waltz, we might say, has ‘something to do with the Romantic movement.’ But what does the Minuet have to do, as a dance form, with the French court? If we do see a certain ‘having to do with’ relation, should we say that the dance style influences the expression of its moment, or is influenced by that moment?

Is dancing one of the ‘high arts’—that is, does it carry the same degree of ‘spiritual weight’ we might attribute to fine literature, painting, or even music? Or is the corporeal of dancing a downdrag in it, which keeps dancing from serving as our highest level of expression?