

A few notes on progression

by Cécile Laye

English dances are not the only ones including progressive movements – Branle de la Montarde is built on a progression, with dancers moving down the chain then coming back to their starting point. However they often include such movements, much appreciated by dancers.

From the time the dances get organised at the end of the 16th century, progressive movements appear in different forms. In the first dance of the 1651 edition of the « *Dancing Master* »⁽¹⁾ « *Upon a Summer's Day* », the three couples progress, ending the dance in their original places. Progression is clearly stated in « *The Shaking of the Sheets* », also called « *The Night Piece* », an important dance mentioned in Act II of a 1577 play, « *Misogonus* »⁽²⁾, and also mentioned in Thomas Heywood's play, « *A Woman Killed with Kindness* », published in 1603 (reminder: Elizabeth I's coronation 1558, William Shakespeare's birth 1564). *Longways* for three couples, « *The Shaking of the Sheets* » has dancers move down and up the *set*, but at the end of the third and last part, the first couple is at the bottom of the *set*⁽³⁾

1 The dance is recorded in “Le choix d’Amarillis”, Chestnut’s second CD, and described in the assorted booklet.

2 According to James Cunningham, the play dates back to 1577, but Margaret Dean Smith puts it at 1560. In any case, here is the quotation, out of Act II scene 4:

Misogonus : “*What Countrye dauncis do you here daily frequent*”

Cacurgus : “*The vickar of s.fooles I am sure he would crave to daunce of all other I see is bent*”

Sir John : “*Faythe no I had rather have **shaking oth sheets** or catching of quales*”

3 The same thing happens in « *Millison's Jig* », another dance out of the first edition (cf the CD and booklet « *Les Oubliées* ») but we decided to play the dance three times so that each couple leads in turn, as in a *wholeset dance*.

The Night-piece, or The Shaking of the Sheeps. Longways for 8x. ©©©
 >>>

Lead up a D. forwards and back. The middle Co. fall back and slip up, while the first and last Co. change places. That again. That again.

Sides all. That again. First Co. cross over, fall into the 1. place, cross again, fall into the last, the next Co. as much, the next Co. as much.

Arms all. That again. First man change places with the 1. wo. first wo. change with the 2. men, while the last changes with his own: Then change with the last wo. your wo. change with the last man, while the other changes with his own: Set all and turn S.

Original score of *The Night Piece*

The « *Dancing Master* », 1651 edition, includes about 38 *longways for as many as will*, all with a progression that gives them a complicated structure and a great length – a difficulty for dancers and musicians alike.

Here are two examples:

1. « *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* ».

A *longways for as many as will* recorded in our « *Sugar and Spice* » CD ; couples 1 and 2 do the non progressive figure during the two **A** parts. Progression occurs during the 8 measures of the two **B** parts; the B parts have to be repeated until all dancers are back where they started, meaning **6 times** for a 3-couple *set* - **9 times** for a 4-couple one (as suggested by the Playford diagram most of the time) - **12 times** for a 5-couple *set* ... Find out for yourself how many repeats are needed with 6 couples as in « *The Countrey coll* » or 9 couples as in « *Step Stately* ». The first two couples then dance the second part, followed by a progressive figure that slightly differs from the first one but needs the same number of repeats and the dance ends with a last figure, still danced by couples 1 and 2, with a last progression like the second one, leaving all dancers back where they had begun.

Better make sure your musicians are in great shape and fully awake! The dance is interesting for the first two couples, not so for the others who are restricted to a supportive action.

2. « *A la mode de France* », a variation of « *Nonsuch* ».

This other *longways for as many as will* is in two parts, **A** and **B**, both 8 measures long, including : 1st introduction / progressive movement / 2nd introduction and 2nd figure / 3rd introduction and 3rd figure / hey (another progressive movement, shorter than the first one). We reach a total of 15 repeats if the dance is meant for 8 dancers, as suggested by the choreography and the little diagram showing where the dancers are placed, in the third part of the Playford score.

Fifteen years after the first edition of the « *Dancing Master* », Samuel Pepys in his diary for 1665 gives examples of private parties where groups of 8 to 12 persons meet in order to dance:

« 26th October 1665 - and there saw them dance very prettily, Captain Ferrer and his wife, my wife and Mrs. Barbary, and Mercer⁽¹⁾ and my landlady's daughter, and then little Mistress Frances Tooker and her mother... come to see my wife. Anon to supper, and then to dance again (Golding being our fiddler, who plays very well and all tunes) till past twelve at night. »

« 8th December 1665 - Thence by water down to Greenwich, and there found all my company come; that is, Mrs. Knipp, and ... her husband, ... Pierce and his wife, and Rolt, Mrs. Worshipp and her daughter, Coleman and his wife, and Laneare, and, to make us perfectly happy, there comes by chance to towne Mr. Hill to see us. Most excellent musique we had in abundance, and a good supper, dancing. »

On other occasions there are fewer dancers, as in the evening of May 1663: only narrator Samuel Pepys, his wife, her lady-in-waiting and Pembleton the dancing master:

« Then home and to supper, and while at supper comes Mr. Pembleton, and after supper we up to our dancing room and there danced three or four country dances, and after that a practice of my coranto I began with him the other day... Late and merry at it, and so weary to bed. »

On the other hand the « *Inns of Court* » gather in solemn celebrations a number of dancers closer to what we now have in small-sized balls. Thus at Gray's Inn in 1594 for the Christmas Revels:

*« his Highness... called for the Master of the Revels and willed him to pass the time in dancing : so his gentlemen-pensioners and attendants, very gallantly appointed, in **thirty couples**, danced the old measures, and then galliards, and other kind of dances, reveling until it was very late.»*

From the last third of the 17th century, when Henry Playford replaces his father, and all through the 18th century, progressive *longways* prevail over the many older forms. A few moves linked to the older forms simply disappear, such as *siding - arming* as introductions to the characteristic figures of a given dance. One thing however remains from older times: the notion that only the first two couples are active at first, and that the other couples become active only after making contact with the first couple. Not so nowadays: each couple's part is determined from the start by its position in a group of 4 dancers for *longways duple minor sets*, or in a group of six dancers for *longways triple minor sets*. All dancers start at the same time and wait out one sequence or two according to *longways* type when reaching the top or bottom of the *set*.

Choreographies have been getting ever shorter, but by no means less difficult; some remain a real challenge for the dancers. Progression is always the peak moment of the dance but there are so many ways of progressing, so many different moments for it!

When choosing the program for the « *Toddler* » we tried to include examples of some progressive figures, although by no means all of them.

Some progressive figures are fairly easy because they take place within a long sequence – those in particular deriving from an inside or outside promenade. Other dances are built on a series of short sequences (4 measures, sometimes only 2 measures) with few repetitions; such dances are best suited to experienced dancers who can use them to check their reaction time!

This time we have left out a widely used figure: the « *cross and half figure eight* » because our previous recordings include several dances showing it (see « *Wright's Humour / Les oubliées* », « *The Cuckoo / Le Choix d'Amarillis* » and « *Charming Maid / Sugar and Spice* »).

As for the moment progression takes place, it also varies with the type of dance.

In « *Mad Robin* » and « *Vienna* », progression occurs all through both **A** phrases.

In « *Bonny Cate* » and « *Ormond House* », it takes place through both **A** and **B**, in particular from the point where the dancers stand *improper*.

In « *Nancy's Fancy* », « *Northdown Waltz* », « *Nobody's Jig* », « *Enfield Jig* », progression is prepared by a promenade and takes place during the last two measures of the 1st **B**.

In « *Doway* », it comes at the beginning of the 2nd **B**.

« *Slaughter House* », « *Country Farmer* », « *Old Noll's Jig* », « *Greenwich Park* », « *My lord Byron's Maggot* » and « *Dorset Triumph* » are all cases where the sequel to be repeated ends with a progression.

Sorry, dancers – no rule you can rely on!

1 Mary Mercer was Elizabeth Pepys's lady-in-waiting, famed as a very good dancer.