

Traditional Dance in France

by John Wright

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A striking impression on anyone travelling in France is the infinite variety of landscape, climatic conditions, vegetation and architecture concentrated into a relatively small area. The culture of France's people reveals a similar variety despite a long tradition of highly centralized government administration.

Standard French, although the official language since the 16th century, was spoken as a mother tongue by less than half of the population until the beginning of this century. In the North, communities spoke Flemish, in the North-East, Alsatian – a German dialect – and in the West, Breton – a Celtic language related to Welsh and Old Cornish – while almost the entire Southern half of the country spoke Occitan (*Langue d'Oc*). Additionally, in the Pyrennées, Basque and Catalan were spoken, and in Corsica dialects of Italian and Sarde. Despite the vigorous efforts of public educators to eradicate their use in France, these languages remain vital to this day and contribute greatly to the cultural diversity of the country.

A study of some French dances and their music can provide useful insight into this diversity, for it brings into relief patterns of relationship within the French society, as well as the society's reaction to outside influences. A good picture of the latter can be gained through publications in dance history, for France was always in the forefront of this field. A large number of dance collections and dance tutors have been published since the 16th century which provide adequate information for comparison between distinct folk cultures in France.



Probably the most ancient dance form in France is the *branle*, which dates back at least to the Medieval period. It is a group dance in which people link hands or arms to form either a ring or a chain, moving in a gradual progression to the left. Although musical instruments are used (e.g., *biniou* [bagpipe] and *bombarde* [double-reeded shawm] in Brittany; *saloubet* [pipe] and *tambourin* [tabor] in Provence), the most important musical regulator for these dances are the unaccompanied voices, most often in responsorial-singing, where the lead-singer intones a line which the crowd then repeats. This lengthens the duration of a song sufficiently to provide a good long dance. Such dances have survived mostly in the West and are usually associated with Brittany, although *branles* are also found in Normandy, the Vendéen *Marais* or Fenlands, Gascony, Bearn and Provence. Traces of the *branle* are also found in Berry and the Massif Central.

Various musical forms are used for the *branles*. The tunes are often quite narrow in range, sometimes no more than a fourth or a fifth and rarely exceeding an octave, but an amazing number of rich forms can be constructed from four, five or even three-note melodies. Where the dance-steps are more complex, the tunes tend to follow the rhythmic pattern of the dance, but simple steps are often compensated for by intricate polyrhythms resulting from the melodies, such as four or six beats being danced to tunes based on units of five or seven beats.

Another dance form which also reflects the cultural diversity of France is the *bourrée*. Throughout the mountains of the Massif Central (Auvergne, Limousin, Velay, Rovergne) and the Central Provinces of Berry, Bourbonnais and Marche, the *bourrée* still reigns supreme. Scholars disagree as to the antiquity of this dance, but in any event it is quite old. In its basic form, two men "size-up" each other while displaying suppleness and invention. The *bourrée* is also sometimes danced with a larger number of participants forming a ring, more often than not without hand or body contact. A long tradition of regional costumed folk-dance groups has resulted in many of these *bourrées* becoming somewhat codified and stilted, but older dancers still show tremendous invention, especially in their footwork and use of available space. In Auvergne, the *bourrée* is always in 3/4 time, its tempo about the speed of a fast waltz, but its performance with much more lift to it. Melodically it usually consists of two repeated phrases, while the number of bars in a phrase varies. (Three and four are the most common today, though five or six-bar phrases are often played by older musicians.) In the Central Provinces, *bourrées* are often in 2/4 time and consist almost exclusively of four-bar phrases.

At one time folk dances were often led by a singer who did not take part in the dance proper, as there were no responses. Instead, he stood to one side and marked time by pounding a staff on the ground (*mener au bâton*). But today more sophisticated musical instruments accompany the dance. In Auvergne, for instance, the *cabrette* bagpipe is the favorite instrument for the *bourrée*, but there are also several other varieties of bagpipe in the Central Provinces. (There are probably more different types of bagpipe in France than any other country, except perhaps Poland.) Berry and Bourbonnais favor the *vielle à roue* (hurdy-gurdy) for accompaniment, where Northern Auvergne and Corrèze use the fiddle. More modern instruments, such as the melodeon and chromatic accordions, play an important part in keeping these dances alive as well. In regular Saturday night dances the *bourrée* still has its place among *tangos*, *paso dobles*, *marches* and the like.

A very important urban influence throughout the French countryside was that of the *contredanse*, equivalent to the English country dance in the 17th century and adopted by the French at the beginning of the 18th century. In this dance the emphasis is on the relative positions of the dancers and the constantly changing figures they form. Originally there were a number of basic figures or sets, but where the English eventually adopted the long sets almost exclusively, the French preferred the square sets. These became the ancestors of the square dances of America and Quebec.

Towards the end of the 18th century the French *contredanse* became more and more a play between the opposite sides of the square, which eventually gave rise to the *quadrille*. This latter form consisted of sequences of set figures,



Maximin Rambaud, a French fiddler from the province of Poitou, plays music for quadrilles and contre dances. Photo courtesy of Catherine Perrier and John Wright.

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Suggested reading

Arbeau, Thoinot. *Orchesography*, trans. Mary Stewart Evans. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967.

Guilcher, Jean-Michel. *La Tradition Populaire de Danse en Basse Bretagne*. Paris: Mouton, 1963.

Guilcher, Jean-Michel. *La Contredanse et les Renouvements de la Danse Française*. Paris: Mouton, 1969.

Lancelot, Francine. "Ecriture de la Danse: Le Système Feuillet," *Ethnologie Française*, Revue des ATP no. 1, 1971.

Suggested recordings

"Folk Music of France." In *The Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*. CBS 91A02003.

Musiques Traditionnelles des Pays de France. Chant du Monde LDX 74516.

Violoneux et Chanteurs Traditionnels en Auvergne (Cantal). Chant du Monde LDX 74516.

Vielleux du Bourbonnais. Hexagone 883030.

Ellebore: En Avant la Baptist Garraud! Ell.02.

Kan Ha Diskan en Pays Vannetais. Vol. I, Arfolk TH 704, Vol. II, Arfolk SB 378.

Frères Pennec: Biniou, Bombarde. ALG 566.

Chez Maximin, Violoneux. UPCOOP 020.

each of which had a distinct name and tune – *en-avant deux*, *la poule*, *balancé*, *galop* and others. These forms spread all over the country and still survive in the Western Provinces (Poitou, Anjou, Normandy and Eastern Brittany) and in the South, especially Savoy and Corsica. In these areas the newer dances replaced the older repertoires, but in the regions where the *bouurrée* reigned people adapted many of the *contredanse* figures to that dance. It is interesting that in the Western Provinces one figure, the *avant-deux*, has become detached from the *quadrille* to become a distinct dance, similar stylistically to some of the 2/4 *bouurrées*. (Another late 18th century influence was the *pas d'été*, a sort of military virtuoso hornpipe introduced into many of the Western villages by retired army dancing masters. This military influence is also very strong in the Basque dances.)

The 1850s witnessed yet another big change in dance fashions – the couple-dances of mostly German or Polish origins. The first of these to reach the rural areas were polkas, schottisches, mazurkas and waltzes. The waltz, historically the oldest of these, seems to have arrived late and is associated more with 20th century repertoires of *javas* marches and Latin American dances. Sheet music edited by the Dupeyrat firm (founded in 1874) among others contributed to spreading these repertoires throughout the country, as the music was sought by brass bands, ballroom orchestras and, at the end of the chain, local musicians who usually learned the melodies by ear. The earlier tunes were easily assimilated by musicians accustomed to the older modal scales, but the Latin American and popular tunes of the 1930s were very different and few of the old fiddlers, for instance, were able to assimilate them into their repertoires. At the same time, the chromatic accordion, which demands a very different musical mentality from fiddling, has completely taken over for popular dancing.

In any general picture of dances and their music in France, one fact stands out: the penetration of outside influences into different social groups operates in an infinite number of ways. Some groups almost totally reject outside influences, while others accept them. Where Lower Brittany conserved very archaic forms until very recent times, the Western Provinces completely adopted 19th century dances and instrumental music, as did the North and Wallonie, who were always very up-to-date with all the latest Parisian developments. Nevertheless, Lower Breton musicians were always receptive to new good tunes and adapted a considerable amount of urban material to their own idiom, and in the Western Provinces fiddlers still play the more recent repertoire but use a very archaic-sounding drone technique. Moreover, in all these areas, the melodic tradition of songs not intended for dancing remains largely modal. But between the two extremes, one finds a host of nuances, for example the coexistence in certain parts of Upper Brittany of sung *branles* and 19th century *quadrilles* and couple-dances.