

THE BRANLES de MALTE

When the Knights of St. John came to Malta from Rhodes in 1530 they introduced a variety of music styles. A number of them were Rhodiots and some Aegean influences were introduced at the time. A document shows that a Greek, Aloysius Canard gave lessons on the leudi sive citharas twice a day to one Antonio Marmara. It is likely that the lute, lyre guitar, cittern, vihuela, French four course guitar, and indeed all kinds of stringed instruments would have been imported by the multinational Knights, who came from the leading noble families of Europe and introduced the latest fashions in music at the Grandmaster's court. The branles are group dances with several couples in a line or in a circle. Originating in France many centuries ago, there are many illustrations in medieval times depicting round dances, but the term branle is rarely found before 1500. The English called the branle the brawl. The branle de Poitou is in triple time, 9/8, or 9/4 metre, although sometimes found in 6/4, or even both these metres in alternation. Mary Stuart and her entourage introduced the branles d'Escoce in the French court in the middle of the 16th century. In 1551, the Branles de Malte were composed and presented to the Court of France by a group of young French Knights of Malta. This was a ballet of several movements and can be traced to an event at the French court. Thoinot Arbeau in his *Orchésographie* published in Paris in 1588 says that this was a mimed (*morgué*) dance in Turkish costume for male and female dancers. It is the custom today at Carnival time in Malta to dance what seems to be a legacy of these court masquerades, where participants dress up in Turkish or Knights of Malta costumes in line or round dances.

We have no direct evidence that these branles were danced at the Grandmasters' court in Malta during the middle to late 16th century but many European courtiers were dancing the branles including the Branles de Malte. The Knights took vows of celibacy on their initiation, and women were not allowed in the Auberges. Some certainly took an interest in dances, which, Arbeau, who was a Canon of Langres, regarded as an honest exercise. The first documentary evidence of carnival in Malta dates back to the time of the Knights of St John circa 1535. Some Grand Masters encouraged Carnival dancing, balls and revelry, while others, of a stricter religious leaning, regulated it. There is evidence of a ball being organised on the marriage of Marie Antoinette to the dauphin in 1770, and this lasted till the early hours of the morning. Jean Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher and composer, writing in 1766 described the branle as a strong gay round dance like a Rondeau with a repeated refrain at the end of each couplet.

The victory of the Order in the Great Siege of 1556 over the Turks was celebrated throughout the courts of Europe and the Branles de Malte were the height of fashion from the middle to the latter part of the 16th century. The threat to the island from the Turks diminished after the naval battle of Lepanto in 1571 in which the Order took part. The *raison d'être* of the Military Order, which had been set up to fight the enemies of Christendom had served its purpose and the Order then went into a period of slow decline until it capitulated to Napoleon in 1798.

Many of the Knights would have been influenced by the dance fashions in Europe. These dances would have permeated from the courts of Europe down the social strata and the publication of their arrangements first by Jean d'Estrée in 1559, then by Adrian Le Roy in 1567, and later by Thoinot Arbeau in 1588 in Paris. These publications would have been intended for a wider section of the population including educated middle class amateurs for home entertainment.

Jean d' Estrée (b early 16th century – d 1576) was a composer, dance arranger and oboist and a member of the French Court musicians. He arranged four books of dances for the Parisian music

publisher Nicolas du Chemin. Five Bransles de Malthe are published in the Tiers Livre de Danseries.1559. Originally in four parts, for vocal or instrumental performance, only the Superius and Bassus parts of the first three books are extant. The branles number 2 and 5 are in compound triple time and the other three are in duple time. All of his arrangements have harmonic bass lines that stress crucial harmonic chords.

There is an absence of some sharps in the music of this period. Editorial accidentals have been indicated in parenthesis. In modern editions of early music this is sometimes overdone and may in some instances be made to sound more palatable to the tonal ears of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, their insertion may not always be supported by any historical scholarly evidence. In the arrangement of d' Estrée's branles in general, a reduction of the note values by half has been employed. In the case of music of this period the music is too varied and involved to always allow for general principles to apply. There are no barlines in d' Estrée's music as was the custom with music of this period. No text is extant in both d' Estrée's and Le Roy's music, which is not unusual as different lyrics would have been added by performers. The main difficulty in transcribing all these works is one of meter or correct barring. Tempos that are not specified in early music are the subject of much controversy but there are solutions: Arnold Dolmetsch says that the tempo of a piece of music can usually be discovered by an intelligent musician knowing the instrument, and having a sympathy with its style. ⁱ

In the sixteenth century harmony was looked at by musicians as a series of concordant intervals. It is not correct to assume that music was dominated by modal harmony. By 1600 the major scale had virtually absorbed the Lydian and Mixolydian modes, whereas the minor scale had supplanted the Dorian and Phrygian modes.

Adrian Le Roy (b c.1520- d 1598) was a music printer, a virtuoso lutenist, guitarist, cittern and composer of chansons. In 1553, King Henry II gave him and Robert Ballard the privileged title of royal music printer. His establishment was one of the foremost in the field and continued until the middle of the 18th century. He was a person of influence in court circles.

The earliest known documents in French lute tablature are by Pierre Attaingnant who published two books in 1529. Three systems of lute tablature were in use: Italian, French and German. The strings of the lute with letters and numbers indicate the positions of the fingers for each note required. The works of Le Roy use the French system.

In 1551 Le Roy published Premier livre de tabulature de luth (Paris: Adrian Le Roy and Robert Ballard) and Premier livre de tabulature de guiterre (Paris: Adrian Le Roy and Robert Ballard.) This was for the four course guitar with three double courses and a single chanterelle, the highest string. Among other lute books competing with Le Roy we find Le Premier Livre de Chansons, Gaillardes, Pavannes, Branles.... by Guillaume Morlaye published in 1552. (Robert GranIon and Michel Fezandat. Paris). Morlaye had also written a Guitar tablature book in 1550.

In 1567, Le Roy published Instructions pour Luth, which contained four Branles de Malte. This edition is no longer extant but in 1568 an English edition appeared in London entitled A briefe and easye Instruction to learne the tablature to conduct and dispose thy hand unto the Lute / englished by J. Alfred Londonor.

The four branles in Le Roy's book are in lute tablature. Le Roy found these models from D' Estrée's Tiers Livres de Danseries. Daniel Hertz, the noted American musicologist, mentions in 1962 ⁱⁱ that it is largely through the

merit of the printed works of Le Roy that the music for all the ballet has been preserved. He also says that it is probable that Le Roy had taken these arrangements directly from Jean d' Estrée. Le Roy's arrangements are more varied and florid with more elaborate ornamentation and multivoicing. They also give Otherwise /autrement arrangements, for more professional performers of the lute.

Thoinot Arbeau (b 1520- d 1595) published his dance manual: *Orchésographie* in 1588. His book describes many of the social dance types of the period. This included the melodic notation and the dance tablature and movements to the *Branles de Malte*. He describes the origin of the dance as being devised by a group of French Knights for a court masquerade forty years before dressed in the Turkish fashion and that the air and movements were slow and in duple time. Throughout this period dance manuals found their way into instrumental collections for the educated amateur. Sackbuts, recorders, pipe and tabor, violins, transverse flutes, spinets, hautboys and all sorts of instruments are listed by Arbeau.

Arbeau says that every time this branle is repeated, new expressions and gestures must be made, such as touching the hands on one occasion, raising them on another in pretended admiration, head uplifted: and so on with other gestures, as it pleases the dancers to devise. He said that some dances were becoming rather old fashioned by the end of the century but the dance never lost its rustic roots and by the 19th century the less formal branle metamorphosed into the contredance or contradanza from the English country dance, and together with the waltz is the most popular dance at this time.

Antonius de Arena writing in 1519 describes three kinds of branles: double, simple, and coupé: Arbeau describes four branles.

The branles de Malthe were composed as dance music and the order of the melodies in actual performance as described by Arbeau are four branles, which would normally be made to follow the opening sequence of 16th century balls which would be:-

1. Branle Double (the general character would be: sedate, duple, 2+2 bars)
2. Branle Simple (sedate, duple 2+1 bars, with a characteristic three phrase structure)
3. Branle Gay (lively, triple 2+1 bars)
4. Branle de Bourgogne. (very lively mixed, irregular)

The suggested tempos to each branle in both d'Estree and Le Roy are indicated in each piece. Arbeau writing in 1588 says that the old are able to dance the initial slower branles (branle double and branle simple) the young married couples then dance the branles gayz, whilst the youngest dancers can enjoy the liveliest, presumably d' Estrée's Branle de Malthe number 5, which is marked *dit furieux* . The suggested tempos to each branle in both d'Estree and Le Roy are indicated in each piece.

The sources on which these transcriptions for guitar have been based are the Bibliothèque Sainte Genevieve, Paris, which supplied the Superius Part and the British Library for the Bassus Part of Jean d' Estrée's branles. The British Library was the source for the branles in *A briefe and easye Instruction.... of Adrian Le Roy and Thoinot Arbeau*. Anna Borg Cardona's admirable book: *A Musical Legacy*. Malta related music found in foreign libraries, sparked my interest in transcribing the *Branles de Malte* for guitar. She has transcribed Jean d' Estrée's *Branles de Malthe* for keyboard.

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Book References:

Willi Apel. *The Notation of Polyphonic Music 900-1600* (The Medieval Academy of America, Cambridge, Mass. 1953)

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Diana Poulton: *Lute Playing Technique*.(London. Lute Society 1981.)

Notes:

- 1) Arnold Dolmetsch. *The Interpretation of the Music of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Novello and Co.)
- 2) Pierre Jansen. *Fantaisies et Danses*. (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique 1962)

A Note on Ornamentation.

Though ornamentation, which is used primarily to embellish the melodic line, was an essential feature in vocal and instrumental music from at least the Middle Ages, and of course later periods, in the middle of the sixteenth century it was very much left to the individual performer to decide exactly how and when to execute an appoggiatura, trill, mordent, turn etc. The difficulty of interpretation of ornaments in the sixteenth century is made more difficult as many countries, for example, France, Italy, Germany and England, had different interpretations of how to execute ornaments. Ornaments were eventually written out and eventually standardized during the Baroque era, though later periods had different ways of interpreting them. The pictographical signs used for ornamentation used in these transcriptions of the *Branles de Malte* are those of the Baroque and later periods. They show the placement of signs and also the suggested fingering of ornaments. These are personal suggestions. The execution of a trill in the sixteenth century, for example, may be shown to start on the note above or on the main note depending on the context of the musical passage, the instrument and also the interpretation of the performer.

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