Chapter 5

Dance From Court to Theater: The 18th Century

# Overview

Eighteenth-century France was volatile, with many social and political events that influenced the arts and dance. Dance at court reflected the sophisticated and superficial society of the court and the historical events that were taking place around them. The French Revolution had an immense effect on France and the arts. Eighteenth-century dance in the court and the theater underwent many changes.

During the 18th century a division developed between the social dances executed in the ballroom and the ballet steps performed on the stage. Ballet developed as an art performed in the theater. Professional male dancers took the leading roles in the ballets. Professional female dancers contributed costume innovations that would enhance their roles in the ballets. Ballets were vehicles for the technical accomplishments of both male and female dancers. Dancers expanded their technique beyond the court dances by adding beats, turns, and extensions. The 18th century was a boiling pot in the political arena and in theater as ballet began to emerge as an artistic form. At the end of the 17th century, the Paris Opéra was established as a theater and France remained the ballet center of Western Europe. Dancers toured and performed in London theaters, a secondary center, and other theaters in France, Italy, Germany, and Austria.

Ballet themes changed from mythological to realistic with humanistic elements by the end of the century. Choreographers embraced ballet d’action and developed the principles to support the new ballets they created.

# Activities and Assignments

## Activity 1. Viewing an 18th-Century Dance

View a video of a baroque dance from the early part of the 18th century. After watching the dance performance, do the following:

* Describe the dance. What did you see? Describe the dance (steps, directions, figures, form, music).
* Did the male and female perform the same steps?
* Was the dance difficult to perform?
* What were the arm gestures?
* What was the quality of the dance?
* What were the formal bows and curtsies (honors) used in the dance?
* Describe both the male and female honors. When were they performed and what influenced or determined these types of movements?

## Activity 2. Introduction to Historical Dance Notation

Eighteenth-century dance masters wrote manuals recording the dances and how they were to be performed. Manners and presentation were important in dancing during the 18th century. One dancer and author published a notation system begun in the 17th century. Raoul Feuillet’s notation system was based on the work of previous dance masters from Louis XIV’s court. Kellom Tomlinson provides a look at the dances of the period here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/20010870/>.

How is this type of notation for dance different from how people recorded dances in earlier times (rock art, hieroglyphics, Ebreo)? Write a summary paragraph about the recorded dances, then a summary paragraph that includes your findings as to how this type of notation is different from earlier times.

Find an example of Arbeau’s notation from the late 1500s. Compare and contrast these two forms of notation. At the back of Arbeau’s book, translated by Julia Sutton, dances are notated in Labanotation. Compare and contrast Labanotation to Arbeau and Feuillet notation forms. Write a one-page paper that compares and contrasts notation forms and then a summary paragraph that includes the findings from your study.

## Activity 3. Reading Dances

Reading notation is like trying to break a code to get the message, in this case learning to read a dance. To train as an 18th-century dancer, you had to know several basic steps that were used in a variety of dances.

See the Library of Congress dance instruction manuals for Kellom Tomlinson’s work here: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920/?q=tomlinson,%20kellom&fi=name>. Read the steps, learn to execute these steps, and memorize the symbol(s) that represent the step. In the notation score, the symbol for a man looks like a black derby; the symbol for the woman looks like a half hoop skirt. Students execute each of the steps; a student volunteer leader or teacher can teach the steps to the group.

Read the steps that make up the figure for the dance, then put the dance to music.

## Activity 4. Performing 18th-Century Dance

Your instructor will divide you into two groups. One group will read a dance from the first half of the century, the minuet, and the other group will read a dance from the second half of the century, a contradance. Compare and contrast the two dances and relate them to the social and political setting in France. Each group writes a one-page summary of their findings. Include photo or video clip examples from the dance activity. Post your summary in the classroom or on the class website.

Learn the steps and figures, execute them to music, and rehearse the dance for class performance. Select a member of the group to introduce the dance to the audience, explaining the background of the dance and the most important characteristics of the dance (the *who, what, when, where,* and *why*). Include in the brief presentation how the dance was part of the society of the times. After the group performs the dance, the group spokesperson should be prepared to answer questions from the audience regarding the dance.

## Activity 5. 18th-Century Ballet

View a reconstruction of a late-18th-century ballet by a 20th-century choreographer. *La Fille Mal Gardée* is one of the ballets discussed in the book. Before viewing the ballet, read the information in Report of a Live or Recorded Performance (see web resource, WebQuests and Research Projects). These are the characteristics of the ballet that you should observe. When you have finished reading the form, ask questions before viewing the video performance.

View the video production of *La Fille Mal Gardée* and answer the following questions:

* What is the story line?
* Who are the characters and groups? Include a brief description.
* What is the mood of the ballet?
* How many acts does the ballet have?
* Describe the dance steps and style of each major character or group.
* How do you think the reconstructed video performance was different from the original ballet?
* Which of the principles of ballet d’action were apparent during the ballet?
* Why is this ballet important?

# Web Links

Baroque music  
[www.baroquemusic.org](http://www.baroquemusic.org)

Late 18th-century social dance  
<http://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/dihtml/diessay5.html>

Scottish country dances: jigs, reels, and strathspeys  
[www.rscds-sf.org/resources](http://www.rscds-sf.org/resources)

Scottish country dance technique—figures  
[www.scottishdance.net/scd/technique/Figures.html](http://www.scottishdance.net/scd/technique/Figures.html)

Easy country dances  
[www.scottishdance.net/dances/#Easy](http://www.scottishdance.net/dances/#Easy)

Scottish country dances for the dancer with some experience  
[www.scottishdance.net/dances/#Moderate](http://www.scottishdance.net/dances/#Moderate)

Rococo costumes  
[www.historical-costumes.eu/en/05\_rococo.html](http://www.historical-costumes.eu/en/05_rococo.html)

Rococo—dance dress  
[www.historical-costumes.eu/en/05\_rococo\_dance\_dress\_silver.html](http://www.historical-costumes.eu/en/05_rococo_dance_dress_silver.html)

History of the Paris Opéra House  
<https://www.operadeparis.fr/en/artists/discover/the-paris-opera/history>

Theater from Restoration through the 18th century  
<http://www3.northern.edu/wild/th100/CHAPT14A.HTM>

*La Fille mal gardée*<https://national.ballet.ca/Tickets/Virtual-Museum/La-Fille-mal-gardee>?

Ashton’s 20th-century production of *La Fille mal gardée*, with video clips  
[www.roh.org.uk/productions/la-fille-mal-gardee-by-frederick-ashton](http://www.roh.org.uk/productions/la-fille-mal-gardee-by-frederick-ashton)

Rameau translated into English by Essex—digital copy  
<http://baroquedance.info/sources/rameau>

Kellom Tomlinson, *The Art of Dancing Explained*<http://baroquedance.info/sources/tomlinson>

Library of Congress: Kellom Tomlinson, *The Art of Dancing Explained*  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/20010870/>

# Review Questions

1. What was society like during the 18th century?
2. Who were the dancers and other contributors to dance during this period?
3. What were the dances, music, and other arts that supported dance during this period?
4. What were the significant dances, ballets, and literature of the period?

# Vocabulary

Age of Enlightenment

assembly room

ballet d’action

Camargo, Marie

*Choréographie*

contradance

Dauberval, Jean

Dupré, Louis

Feuillet, Raoul Auger

*Fille Mal Gardée, La*

French Revolution

Gardel, Maximilien

Gardel, Pierre

*Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets*

Lullist

minuet

noble savage

Noverre, Jean Georges

opéra-ballet

pannier

Paris Opéra

Prévost, Françoise

Rameau, Jean-Philippe

Rameau, Pierre

Ramists

reels and strathspeys

rococo

Sallé, Marie

Vestris, Auguste

Vestris, Gaetan

Weaver, John