

***Courante***. A triple-meter court and theater dance, the *courante* is of obscure origin. In Baroque music, there are two distinct types, although the names are not used with discrimination: the slow French *courante*, and the faster and differently structured Italian *corrente*. The earliest known musical examples date from the mid-sixteenth century. The earliest known dance is a lively duplemeter *courante*, with a springing step-pattern given in Thoinot Arbeau's *Orchesography* (1589). Arbeau says that an earlier version of the dance, popular in his youth, contained an element of mime, after which partners danced away helter-skelter.

The oft-repeated theory that the name derives from the Latin *currere*, “to run,” may well be applied to these early examples, and to the *corrente* for which dance evidence is scant, but not to the seventeenth-century *courante* popular at Louis XIV's court, which was the slowest and most noble of the triple-meter *danses à deux* (couple dances).

The eight *courantes* extant in Beauchamps/Feuillet notation have two essential characteristics: a rhythmic liveliness in the interplay of triple and duple elements, and an inherent nobility.

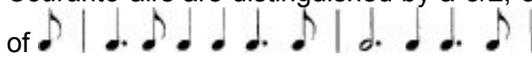
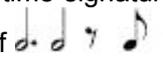
Almost one hundred years separate the two dance treatises in which appreciable space is devoted to the *courante*: François de Lauze's *Apologie de la danse* (1623), published soon after the *courante* became fashionable, and Gottfried Taubert's *Der Rechtschaffener Tantzmeister* (1717), written long after it began to lose its place of favor to the minuet during the 1660s. In 1725, in *Le maître à danser*, Pierre Rameau wrote about the seventeenth-century *courante*, the dance Louis XIV preferred above all others. Unfortunately, none of these accounts is comprehensive.

*Courantes* are dances for the connoisseur. To the uninitiated, they may appear simple and technically undemanding, but, in practice, they require unwavering concentration and considerable physical control. Above all, they demand the bearing and presence of an aristocrat. Perhaps the most famous *courante* is “La Bocanne,” composed to an air by Jacques Cordier, a famous dancing master and violinist known as Bocane or Bocanne. An example of a popular ballroom dance beginning with two figures of *courante* is Guillaume-Louis Pecour's “La Bourgogne.”

There are two types of *courante*: the *courantes simples*, in which dancers circle the dancing area performing only the basic steps of the dance, and the *courantes figurées*, with developed spatial figures and step-sequences.

The *pas coupé* and the *temps de courante* are the characteristic steps of the dance. They are the only Baroque steps in which the ball of the foot glides gently along the floor before weight is put on it, an action that expresses the sustained, flowing quality of the *courante*. The other actions used are *pliés* (bends of the knees), which always precede and rhythmically lead to the *élevés* (rises up from the bends). The *élevés* are the strongest rhythmic moments in the steps; they usually coincide with the strongest beats in the musical measures. An *élevé* used at the end of a measure becomes the smallest possible spring from one foot to the other.

*Courante* airs are distinguished by a 3/2, or occasionally a 6/4, time signature with the recurring rhythm

of  and a duple pulse of  in the concluding measures of strains. The *courante* is usually in binary form, and in the notated dances the musical strains are most frequently composed of a number of measures divisible by three.

The *courante* is built upon three basic metric principles: the triple-dactyl foot, the iambic foot, and *proportio sesquialtera*. In stanza 69 of his poem *Orchestra, or A Poeme of Dauncing* (1596), Sir John Davies writes:

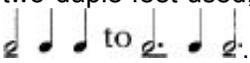
What shall I name those current traverses

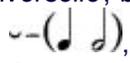
That on a triple dactyl foot do run

Close to the ground with sliding passages,

Wherein the dancer greatest praise hath won.

The triple-dactyl foot was evolved to facilitate medieval polyphonic writing, which made use of six *modi*, later named after the metric feet of Greek verse. The only two duple feet used, the dactyl and the

anapest, were made triple, the dactyl being extended from .

In *Harmonie universelle*, book 2 (1636), Marin Mersenne says that the air of a *courante* is measured by the iambic foot, , and that its movement is called *sesquialtera*, or triple. *Sesquialtera*—one whole plus its half—was a musical proportion in which three notes were introduced in the time of two of the same kind. Thus, a change from duple to triple time was facilitated, the length of the measure remaining constant. *Sesquialtera* was most often employed with minims and denoted by the time signature 3/2, meaning three in the time of two: etc. *Sesquialtera* does not necessarily imply an interplay of two against three, but in the *courante* this is used as a significant element.

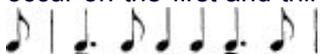
The relationship of the above elements in a measure is: In the final measure of a strain of *courante*, the duple element of *proportio sesquialtera* and of the two iambs in a measure emerges unencumbered.

All the above elements are reflected in courante step-patterns. The *courante's* structure of one whole plus its half is found in Raoul-Auger Feuillet's explanation of the notation of the dance contained in his *Chorégraphie* (1700):

It is to be observ'd, nevertheless, that in Courante Movements, two Steps are put to each Barr or Measure; the first of which [a whole unit] takes up two parts in three of a Measure, and the second [half unit] takes up the third part.

The *courante* is the only dance in which one whole and one half step-unit are performed in a measure. (In most dances, one step-unit is performed in a measure.) This is indicated by the line of liaison that joins step-symbols to show that together they form a step-unit. A measure of courante should be notated with the half step-unit detached from the whole unit: a whole unit + a half. The whole unit is composed of a *pas coupé* and the half is composed of a *demi-coupé*. (The *demi-coupé* is performed as a *demi-jeté*, a very small spring from foot to foot.) The whole step-unit might be a *temps de courante*. This step, the slowest and most sustained of the Baroque step-units, has only one weight change, but it nevertheless equals the time taken by the *pas coupé*.

In *courantes*, *élevés* and *sautés* have equal rhythmic strength. When executing the step-units, the simple steps (the weight changes) will occur on the three half-note beats, but the additional actions divide these beats to the quarter-note level. The rhythmic stresses in the basic courante step-patterns occur on the first and third half-note beats, just as they do in the fundamental music pattern:



The more complex rhythmic characteristic of the courante is a constant interplay of duple and triple elements. The basic one-and-a-half unit step-pattern of *coupé—demi-coupé (jeté)* provides a total of three single steps per measure, yet each unit is danced in duple time: Occasionally the half unit will be placed first: Frequently two whole step-units are used in a measure giving a double beat, while the execution of the units is in triple-meter:

As has been shown, the rhythm of each of the above step-patterns has its musical equivalent. These do not, however, always occur simultaneously, the most common juxtaposition being:

Writing twenty-five years after Feuillet, Rameau (1725) describes the courante steps differently. According to him, the last single step in a measure (the half unit), and the *pas coupé* in the following measure (the whole unit), combine to make a *pas de courante*. The performance, the rhythmic values, and the notation of the steps are unaltered.

See also **Ballet Technique, History of**, article on **French Court Dance**.

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