

Minuet. The term *minuet* (Fr., *menuet*) usually denotes a French court and theater dance in moderate or slow meter, but it can also refer to a musical composition or a symphonic movement. The origin of the minuet is obscure, but the scores of Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687), which contain some ninety pieces titled *menuet*, indicate that the rhythm was used increasingly during the 1600s and soon predominated. The *menuet ordinaire* superseded Louis XIV's favorite dance, the *courante*, and remained the most popular ballroom *danse à deux* (couple dance) in aristocratic society until the years following the French Revolution in 1789. Michael Praetorius wrote in *Terpsichore* (1612) that the minuet was a descendant of the dance called “Branle de Poitou,” and Pierre Rameau expressed the same opinion in *Le maître à danser* (1725).

Supporting this theory is the structure of the triplemeter “Branle de Poitou” and the “Branle à Mener de Poitou,” in three-measure phrases, and the existence of similar early minuet music (in the Philidor manuscript). Lully wrote one or two minuets of this type, but almost all minuet music has phrases of two $\frac{3}{4}$ measures, sometimes notated as one measure of $\frac{6}{4}$. According to Gottfried Taubert (1717), the *menuet* was the daughter of the *courante*. The two dances have the structural similarities of rhythmic interplays of two against three, and step-units of unequal length within a $\frac{3}{2}$ measure of *courante* and a $\frac{6}{4}$ measure of minuet. Without further knowledge of the development of the early minuet and how it compared with other dances, the often expressed theory that it is so called because of the smallness of its steps cannot be substantiated.

After 1700, in treatises describing dance during the reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715), considerable space was devoted to the minuet. The clearest descriptions of the dance, including its steps and rhythms, occur in Rameau's *Le maître à danser* and *Abbrégé de la nouvelle méthode* (1725) as well as in Kellom Tomlinson's *The Art of Dancing* (1735). Tomlinson gives an earlier version of the dance with an S shape as the main figure, while Rameau describes modifications made by Louis Pecour—primarily the regulation of the S into a Z—a shape to which the two dancers could more readily conform.

The minuet had enormous social significance. Even those who did not particularly enjoy dancing were expected to practice the minuet until they could dance it with ease and, as Rameau constantly stresses, without affectation. Thus, the English statesman and writer on manners Lord Chesterfield (1694–1773) wrote to his son:

As you will be often under the necessity of dancing a minuet, I would have you dance it very well. Remember that the graceful motion of the arms, the giving of your hand, and the putting on and pulling off your hat genteelly are the material parts of a gentleman's dancing. But the greatest advantage of dancing well is that it necessarily teaches you to present yourself, to sit, stand and walk genteelly; all of which are of real importance to a man of fashion.

Tomlinson indicates moments in the dance where the hat can be most appropriately removed and replaced.

Technically, the minuet is the easiest of the *danses à deux*. It incorporates only a few steps and the main arm motions are an unaffected taking of hands. Yet, as Tomlinson writes, this very simplicity renders it the hardest to perform, “through the Plainness of the Step and the Air and Address of the Body that are requisite to its Embellishment.”

For the two dancers alone on the ballroom floor, the minuet was all-revealing; the quality of their air, poise, and presence while dancing was held to reflect their breeding, education, and character. As

Sarah, duchess of Marlborough, observed, “I think Sir S. Garth is the most honest and compassionate, but after the minuets which I have seen him dance ... I can't help thinking that hee may sometimes bee in the wrong.”

The minuet consists of an introduction and four figures: the S or Z figure; the presentation of right hands; the presentation of left hands; the S or Z figure and the presentation of both hands. The dance is preceded and concluded by Honours to the Presence (the person or persons of highest social rank) and by partners to each other.

While other *danses à deux* are choreographed to specific music, the minuet can be danced to any suitable minuet air. Its unique characteristic among the baroque dances is flexibility. The S or Z figure may be repeated as often as the gentleman chooses; the dance may be performed throughout with the same *pas de menuet*; certain other steps may sometimes be substituted as embellishments; the Z may be lengthened by one *pas de menuet*, and the gentleman may choose to circle more than once when presenting hands. The choices made can greatly alter the length of the dance. Rameau suggests that five or six Zs be danced the first time and three or four the second, which means that the dance will last for about seven minutes. Tomlinson says that the shortest option is to dance one S or Z each time.

Whatever its origin, the minuet is a refined expression of ritualistic courtship. The dancers face each other almost continually; they approach, pass, and retreat, and their only physical contact is holding hands at arm's length while circling.

When dancing the minuet, a gentleman must lead with consideration. Tomlinson explains that the speed at which the man performs the Honours will dictate where the couple begins the dance, within the music; it is also the man's responsibility to see that he and his partner commence on the first beat of a pair of 3/4 measures, whether during a musical strain or at its beginning. He must indicate in advance his intention to change from the Z figure to the presentation of hands lest the lady dance past him—and, while holding both hands, circling, and looking at the lady, he must keep sight of the top of the room for fear of opening out in the wrong direction, and thus bowing with his back to the Presence.

According to Tomlinson, it was preferable to begin in the middle of a strain: “Instead of standing to wait the Close or Ending of a Strain of the Tune, begin upon the first Time that offers, in that it is much more genteel and shows the Dancer's Capacity and Ear in distinguishing of the Time, and from thence begets himself a good Opinion from the Beholders.”

In general, minuets composed either to accompany dancing or for purely instrumental purposes have strains of an even number of 3/4 measures. Dance music has most frequently strains of eight or sixteen measures or an eight-measure strain followed by one of twelve, the length of Pecour's Z figure.

The various *pas de menuet* consist of four changes of weight and different numbers of *mouvement* (movements). A *mouvement* is a *plié*, a bending of the knees, which is followed by an *élevé*, a rise, a straightening of the knees usually extended onto [*demi*]-*pointe*. The *mouvements* provide the rhythmic accents within the dance—the *pliés* leading to the *levés*, which give the accents that usually coincide with the musical downbeats. *Pas de menuet* always begin with the right foot. Both Rameau and Tomlinson describe the two most commonly used steps: the *pas de menuet à deux mouvements* and the *pas de menuet à trois mouvements*. Each *pas de menuet* takes two measures of 3/4 time. The most characteristic relationship between steps and music has the cross-rhythm:

Music	[crotchet]	[crotchet]	[crotchet]	[short barline]	[crotchet]	[crotchet]	[crotchet]
Step	[crochet tenuto]	[crotchet]	[crochet tenuto]		[crotchet]	[crotchet]	[crotchet]
	<i>plié</i> rise	<i>plié</i>	rise				

Some masters give rhythms for these *pas de menuet* in which the cross-rhythm is avoided, the two rises coinciding with the two downbeats.

In appropriate places, certain other steps can be substituted for *pas de menuet*. Rameau names the *contretemps de menuet*, which contains three small springs and one step, and is performed without a

cross-rhythm; the *pas balancé*, which marks both downbeats; and the *temps decourante* and *demi-jeté*, which is danced so that the *demi-jeté* coincides with that of a *pas de menuet à trois mouvements*. Tomlinson gives other step-units from the common step vocabulary, such as two *pas de bourrées*, each danced to one 3/4 measure.

One other frequently used step, the *pas de menuet à la bohémienne*, is found in English scores of individual minuets. According to Tomlinson, this step was no longer danced in the *menuet ordinaire* “through Alteration of Fashion which varies in this respect as in Dressing, etc.” He writes that the *pas de menuet à trois mouvements* was fashionable in England, whereas in France it had largely been replaced by the *pas de menuet à deux mouvements*. The minuet figures were danced with little variation throughout the eighteenth century, but steps of embellishment were introduced, thus giving the dance an individual flavor in different locales.

In addition to the *menuet ordinaire*, ballroom minuets were choreographed to specific airs. For instance, “Le menuet d'Alcide,” Pecour's new *danse à deux* for the year 1709, is composed to a minuet from *Alcide* by Louis de Lully and Marin Marais. Some ballroom *menuets à quatre* combine the S-figure with country dance figures. Country dance minuets for “as many as will” are also documented.

Edmund (or Edward) Pemberton's *An Essay for the Further Improvement of Dancing* (1711) contains minuets by various masters, including Josias Priest, for three to twelve young ladies. The spatial figures of the dances are given but, for the most part, the step sequences are left to the discretion of the interpreter. They are followed by a “Chaconne/Minuet” for a woman by Mr. Isaac. The minuet is particularly attractive, with various *pas de menuet*, the *contretemps de menuet*, and other steps from the general vocabulary which are danced to one 3/4 measure.

Several minuets performed by famous dancers are extant: Pecour's “Entrée pour un Homme et une Femme,” published in 1704; a *menuet rondeau* from *Omphale*, by Destouches, danced by Ballon and Subligny; “The Submission” by Tomlinson (1717), performed in London by “Monsieur and Mademoiselle Salle, the two French Children”; and Anthony L'Abbé's “Menuet performed by Mrs. Santlow,” published c. 1725. A solo for a man, “Le Menuet de Mr. Ballon,” contained in an undated manuscript, begins with one basic minuet step and then uses other, more complex theater steps.

The minuet was danced with slight variations in different locales and times. Some changes in use by 1779, at least in Italy, are given by Gennaro Magri in his *Trattato teorico-prattico di ballo*. The responsibility for initiating the Honours, starting correctly with the music, and taking hands, had passed to the lady. Discreet arm motions might be introduced. The step used, the *pas de menuet à deux mouvements*, danced without the cross rhythm, had slight, yet stylistically significant differences. Magri advised his amateur pupils to study at various schools to avoid being surprised in public by a partner dancing with a different style.

Magri's instructions toward an impressive performance of the minuet echo those of earlier masters. A dancer should have a languid eye to display humility, a slightly smiling mouth, unaffected hands, and “a majestic carriage ... with an easy air above all devoid of anything false.”

Among professional dancers, Magri singles out Monsieur Lepieg (*sic*), whose performance of a theater minuet had the “quintessence of good taste.”

During the nineteenth century, new minuets were composed in the style and technique of the time. With their more sentimental air, high arm positions, pointed toes, and tilted heads, these minuets, while at their best very beautiful dances, have nothing in common with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century minuets. It was these later dances that served as the models for the twentieth-century choreographic corruptions offered in motion pictures and in the productions of period plays.

See also **Ballet Technique, History of**, article on **French Court Dance**; and **Social Dance**, article on **Court and Social Dance before 1800**.

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