

# CHOREOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE IN THE DANCES OF CLAUDE BALON

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## Introduction

In his “recueil” of dances for the year 1712, the dancing master Dezais published two ballroom dances by Claude Balon, renowned dancer of the Paris Opera and future dancing master to Louis XV.<sup>1</sup> In his introduction, Dezais cited “the enthusiasm that the public had always expressed for the works of M. Balon.”<sup>2</sup> These two dances, *la Silvie* and *la Dombe*, were the first of eighteen dances by Balon that Dezais would publish in the ten years that followed.

In addition to these published dances, there are five dances by Balon that have survived in manuscript. Two, the *Entrée* and the *Menuet*, are male solos; the other three are couple dances. All of the extant dances by Balon are listed in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

As a choreographer, Balon is notable for his astute use of repeated step sequences that correspond to musical repeats. There are several possibilities for repeating a given step sequence.<sup>4</sup> The sequence can be repeated exactly, on the same foot and with the same floor pattern, or it can be repeated on the opposite foot, with the floor pattern mirrored. A sequence involving two dancers can be repeated with the same floor pattern but with the partners having exchanged places. The sequence of steps can also be repeated with the floor pattern altered: a familiar example of this sort of repetition is the opening of Pécour’s *Bourrée d’Achille*. This afternoon I will discuss some of the ways in which Balon uses repeated step sequences in relation to musical repeats.

I will also point to uses of question-and-answer in Balon’s work. In question-and-answer passages, one dancer waits, typically for a measure or two, while the other moves; then roles are exchanged, with the first doing the steps the second had done while the second waits in turn.<sup>5</sup> Though they do not necessarily correspond to musical repeats, question-and-answer passages offer yet another way to repeat material in the dance. Over half of Balon’s couple dances involve at least one instance of question-and-answer (see Table 1).

Question-and-answer might be considered a primitive form of canon for two dancers. Balon also uses canon in slightly more developed form. Two of his dances, *la Gavotte du Roi* and *la Lorraine*, include short sections of canon—six bars in *la Gavotte du Roi*, eight bars in *la Lorraine*. A third dance, *la Czarienne*, involves an eight-bar section that can be thought of as a sort of canon/question-and-answer hybrid.

## Dance examples

Let us look now at specific instances of repeated step sequences that correspond to musical repeats. In the first dance we will show, the *Paspie Princesa*, the very opening involves a repeat: on the first strain, the dancers loop outwards, then move apart and together. On the repeat of the strain, the dancers do the same steps but looping inwards rather than outwards.

This passepied is to binary form music (AABB); since the music is played through four times rather than just once, there is the possibility of a sort of “interrupted” repeat, with a step sequence repeating not immediately, but when the strain to which it corresponds reoccurs. In fact, Balon employs such an interrupted repeat in the *Paspie*: the second and third times through the music, the steps and figure for the B strain and its repeat are identical, but with the man and woman having exchanged places. In this figure, the dancers begin on a diagonal, loop towards one another and take both hands, and circle around until they are side by side; then one dancer leads the other in a circular crack-the-whip figure typical of passepieds. (Carol Marsh will no doubt discuss this figure in her presentation tomorrow).

The fourth time through the music, there is another repeated step sequence, this time for the A strain and its repeat. The dancers do a balancé, move apart, and then approach and change places, whereupon the sequence is repeated.

[DEMONSTRATE: figures 1 & 2, 6 & 7, and 11 of *Paspie Princesa*, followed by entire dance]

Our next dance, *la Silvie*, is a multipartite choreography; that is, the music has sections in different meters or of different dance types, in this case a slow triple meter section followed by a passepied and bourrée in alternation. Looking at the musical structure of *la Silvie*, we can imagine the possibilities for corresponding repeated step sequences: an immediate repeat at the repeat of the first strain, or an interrupted repeat at the repeat of either the

passepied or bourrée, or both. At the repeat of the first strain, Balon uses a two-bar plus two-bar question-and-answer; he does not repeat the opening sequence. But he does use a lengthy repeat of both the passepied and the bourrée, yet again with the dancers having exchanged places. (In the final three bars of the repeat, the steps and path are modified, moving the dancers into place for the end of the dance.)

[DEMONSTRATE *la Silvie*]

Two other dances by Balon—*la Dombe* and *la Modene*—have musical structures similar to *la Silvie*, but different choreographic repeat structures. In *la Dombe*, published in the same recueil as *la Silvie*, the choreographic approach is the inverse of that in *la Silvie*: the step sequence of the first strain is repeated, with spatial changes,<sup>6</sup> at the musical repeat, but the remainder of the dance is through-composed. In *la Modene*, Balon combines the two approaches: the opening step sequence is repeated, with altered spatial pattern, at the musical repeat, and the step sequences for the bourrée and passepied sections also repeat. But there is a choreographic problem with *la Modene*: the first bourrée section is notated with the woman beginning and ending on the left, the man on the right, but the first passepied section shows them beginning on opposite sides. This presumably is a typographical error; but given what follows, this instantaneous change of places is in fact necessary in order for the dancers to end as they began the dance, with the man on the woman's left. In the passepied they change sides, in the repeat of the bourrée they remain on the same sides, and in the repeat of the passepied they change sides again; so at the opening of the first time through the passepied, they must be on the sides of the stage where they wish to finish.<sup>7</sup> Apparently Balon or Dezais neglected to proofread this dance carefully enough before it was published, and we are left to wonder how dancers and their dancing masters dealt with this flawed notation.

The music for the next dance we will show, *la Melanie*, has a triple-meter rondeau section followed by a duple meter section in binary form. The refrain of the rondeau repeats at the beginning, but Balon does not repeat the opening step sequence immediately. He does repeat it at each subsequent return of the refrain.<sup>8</sup> He also uses repeated step sequences in the duple section of the dance. The first strain has a parallel structure of four bars repeated, and the choreography for each playing of this strain uses a four-bar step sequence repeated with changed floor pattern or direction. Balon uses question-and-answer twice in the duple section of *la Melanie*, once at the beginning of the second strain and then again near the end of the dance.

[DEMONSTRATE *la Melanie*]

Our next dance, *la Gavotte de Seaux*, also has music in rondeau form, with the refrain having a parallel structure of four bars repeated. The refrain is played twice at the beginning and at the end of the dance. Rather than using the same step sequence for different occurrences of the refrain, as in *la Melanie*, Balon has here taken a different and less strictly repetitive approach. The steps of the first four bars, but not the entire strain, are repeated at the first repeat of the refrain, before the first couplet. This opening sequence is contretemps, coupé battu, contretemps, assemblé. The next occurrence of the refrain begins with a somewhat different, but arguably related, four-bar step sequence: contretemps, coupé ouvert, contretemps, coupé (for the man) or coupé ouvert (for the woman). A different four-bar step sequence begins the refrain that follows the second couplet, and this time the dancers repeat the sequence—two pas de sissone, pas de bourrée, coupé<sup>9</sup>—on the other foot. The final occurrence of the refrain begins with a four-bar step sequence—contretemps, coupé to first, pas de rigaudon—that seems clearly related, though not identical, to the sequence that began the dance.

[DEMONSTRATE *la Gavotte de Seaux*]

The first section of *la Clermont* is also a rondeau, both musically and choreographically.<sup>10</sup> Balon uses the same sequence of steps, with altered floor pattern, for all three occurrences of the refrain. (The refrain is not repeated before the first couplet or after the last.) He employs question-and-answer for the first four bars of the refrain, the dancers alternating the same step for one measure each. The second, binary, section of *la Clermont* has a repeated step sequence, with space and final step altered, at the repeat of the first strain: two chassés, a pas de bourrée, a contretemps, and then either a contretemps or an assemblé.

[DEMONSTRATE *la Clermont*]

In addition to *la Melanie*, *la Gavotte de Seaux*, and *la Clermont*, four other dances by Balon use music in rondeau form: *la Poitevine*, *la Transilvanie*, *la Brissac*, and, with an abbreviated rondeau form (ABA), *la Czarienne*. For all of these, Balon uses an opening step sequence that is repeated at least once during the dance. The repeat structures of *la*

*Transylvanie* and *la Brissac* are similar to the rondeau section of *la Melanie*, in that the opening step sequence is repeated after the first couplet and again after the second. In *la Brissac*, the spatial pattern is the same for each repeat. In *la Czarienne*, the spatial pattern is retained but with the dancers having exchanged places. In *la Transylvanie*, the direction and path differ for each repeat: the first time, the dancers head downstage; the second time, upstage; and the third time along L-shaped paths. (I'll discuss *la Poitevine* shortly.)

The music for *la Lorraine*, our next dance, is in binary form. For the repeat of the first strain, Balon uses a repeat of the opening step sequence, mostly on the opposite foot and with the path altered.<sup>11</sup> At the close of the second strain, the first time through, Balon includes the eight-bar canon that I alluded to earlier. The step sequence used for the canon, with a pas de rigaudon at the beginning and the end, has the effect of an of elaborated question-and-answer sequence, with the dancers performing pas de rigaudon in alternation. [DEMONSTRATE eight-bar canon.]

[DEMONSTRATE *la Lorraine*]

Our final dance, *la Poitevine*, opens with an intriguing variant on question-and-answer. The woman dances alone for two bars, and then is joined by the man for two bars. The sequence is then repeated, but with the man beginning and the woman joining him. Another sequence of question-and-answer occurs at the refrain following the first couplet: three different steps performed alternately for a total of six measures, followed by two measures in unison. At the final refrain, the opening sequence is repeated, with adjustments in the last two measures to move the dancers back to place for the close of the dance.

[DEMONSTRATE *la Poitevine*]

## Conclusion

This afternoon we have shown seven of Balon's dances, almost one third of those that have survived. We have focused on some of the ways he employed repeated step sequences that correspond to repeats in the music, and we have noticed his frequent use of question-and-answer. Both of these devices, repeated step sequences and question-and-answer, offer a choreographer ways of reusing material within a dance, and we may wonder whether Balon was exceptionally efficient as a choreographer, or merely lazy. Certainly his dances reflect a keen sense of musical structure; and I believe they display real cleverness at times. But there's also some evidence of arbitrariness or inattention, as in the case of *la Modene*, which cannot be danced as published.

Though I haven't said anything about it, you will have seen that in many of his dances, Balon's step-vocabulary is noticeably constrained. This afternoon you have seen the same two- or four-bar step sequences—two glissés and a coupé ouvert, a pas de rigaudon followed by a pas de gavotte, and so on—several times over. I'm inclined to believe that the limited vocabulary has more to do with Balon's or Dezais's estimation of his clientele than with laziness or ineptness. It is also possible that some of Balon's choreographies reflect the preferences or learning abilities of his young student, king Louis XV.

As I've said elsewhere, it may be that Balon's choreographic approach also reflects changing tastes in the ballroom, a movement away from the through-composed style of Pécour to a style more closely dependent upon the structure of the music, and more repetitive.<sup>12</sup> But with so small a sample of dances, skewed so heavily toward ballroom dances that were marketed as, and that were hoped to be, popular, it's impossible to draw any firm conclusions. In any case, we should be wary of the notion that the typical baroque dance is through-composed,<sup>13</sup> and take note of the repetitive, and well-made, choreographies of Claude Balon.

**Table 1**  
**Extant dances by Balon**  
(dances to be demonstrated marked with an asterisk)

Dance (LMC #; FL #) <sup>14</sup>	Musical type, time signature, and structure (pr = “petite reprise”)	Includes step- sequence repeats corresponding to musical repeats?	Includes any question-and- answer or canon?	Year <sup>15</sup>
<i>Entrée</i> (3000, Ms05.1/04)	[loure] (6/4): AABACpr	no	no	
<i>Menuet</i> (5700, Ms17.1/36)	menuet (3): AABB	no	no	
<i>The Mattelott</i> (5440, Ms13.1/06)	[marche] (6/8): AAB	no	no	
<i>la Gaillarde</i> (4840, Ms17.1/35)	gaillarde (♩): AABB x 2	no	yes	
* <i>Paspie Princesa</i> (6460, Ms19.1/04)	passepied (3/8): AABB x 4	yes	no	
* <i>la Silvie</i> (8060, 1712.1/01)	gravement (3): AA passepied (6/8): B bourrée (♩): C passepied (6/8): B bourrée (♩): C	yes	yes	1712
<i>la Dombe</i> (2500, 1712.1/02)	courante ([3/2]): AA [bourrée] (2): B [passepied] (3/8): C [bourrée] (2): B [passepied] (3/8): C	yes	no	1712
* <i>la Melanie</i> (5480, 1713.1/01)	(3): AABACA (2): DDEE	yes	yes	1713
* <i>la Gavotte de Seaux</i> (4880, Ms08.1/01)	gavotte (2): AABACAA	yes	no	1714
<i>Rigaudon</i> (7360, Ms08.1/02)	rigaudon (2): AABBCCD	yes*	yes	1714
<i>la Transilvanie</i> (8140, 1715.1/01)	[branle] (2): AABACAA	yes	no	1715

Table 1 (continued)

Dance (LMC #; FL #)	Musical type, time signature, and structure (pr = “petite reprise”)	Includes step- sequence repeats corresponding to musical repeats?	Includes any question-and- answer or canon?	Year
<i>la Gavotte du Roi</i> (4920, 1716.1/01)	gavotte (2): AABprBpr	yes**	yes	1716
<i>la Bouree Nouvelle</i> (1540, 1716.1/02)	bourrée (2): AABBCDD	no	yes	1716
* <i>la Clermont</i> (2100, 1717.1/01)	(6/8): ABACADDEE <sup>16</sup>	yes	yes	1717
<i>la de Bergue</i> (2440, 1717.1/02)	[bourrée] (2): AABB	no	yes?***	1717
<i>la Brissac</i> (1640, Ms11.1/01)	[branle] (2): AABACAA	yes	yes	1718
<i>la Czarienne</i> (2420, Ms11.1/02)	lentement (3): ABA rigaudon (2): CD	yes	yes	1718
<i>la Montpensier</i> (6100, 1718.2/01)	gavotte (2): AABB 2e gavotte (2): CCDD	no	yes	1719
* <i>la Lorraine</i> (5220, 1718.2/02)	rigaudon (2): AABB	yes	yes	1719
* <i>la Poitevine</i> (6860, 1720.1/01)	(6/4): AABACA	yes	yes	1720
<i>la Modene</i> (6060, 1720.1/02)	(3): AA bourrée (2) passepiéd ([6/8]) bourrée (2) passepiéd ([6/8])	yes****	no	1720
<i>la Villeroy</i> (8400, 1722.1/03)	(2): AABB	yes	yes	1722
<i>la Bouflers</i> (1440, 1722.1/04)	gavotte (¢): AABCCDDA	yes	yes	1722

\*But not much: first half of A = first half of A'.

\*\*The same two-measure step throughout.

\*\*\*Both dancers have a rest at the same measure—presumably a copying error.

\*\*\*\*But there is a problem with repeats as written: the dancers cannot get to the correct positions. See discussion in text, and note 7.

## Notes:

*I am grateful to Annette Fern, of the Harvard Theatre Collection, who helped me track down information about Balon; to Patricia Rader, of the New York Public Library, who was extraordinarily helpful in providing me with copies of two dances by Balon; to Stephanie Jordan, of the University of Surrey, Roehampton, who provided impetus for research related to this afternoon's presentation by inviting me to speak on a related topic; and especially to Susan Liu, my partner for this afternoon's dance demonstrations, who has graciously and capably learned many dances in little time.*

1. Many authors give Dezais's first name as "Jacques", but "Joseph" may be more likely: Michael Barnard and Mary Hunter note that "Campardon identified Jacques Deshayes with Joseph Dezais (fl 1710-22), a choreographer at the Opéra who taught dancing and published collections of dances, but this claim has never been proved." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Stanley Sadie, ed., 2nd ed. (New York: Grove's Dictionaries, 2001), 7:237. For more on Balon (also spelled Ballon), see Régine Astier, "Ballon, Claude," in Selma Jeanne Cohen et al., eds., *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1:355-6.
2. Dezais, X. *Recueil de Danses pour l'Année 1712...* (Paris, 1712). A year later, in the *Recueil* for 1713, Dezais introduced another dance by Balon with the note that the merit and beauty of Balon's dances had attracted applause from "connoisseurs and persons of taste". Dezais no longer had the right to publish dances by Pecour: see Meredith Ellis Little and Carol G. Marsh, *La Danse Noble: An inventory of dances and sources* (Williamstown: Broude Brothers Limited, 1992), 112-13.
3. For detailed information about these dances and their sources, see Little and Marsh, *La Danse Noble...*, and Francine Lancelot, *La Belle Dance* (Paris: Van Dieren, 1996).
4. I discuss these at greater length in Ken Pierce, "Repeated step-sequences in early eighteenth century choreographies," in *Structures and Metaphors in Baroque Dance: Proceedings of the Conference at the University of Surrey Roehampton, March 31, 2001* (Centre for Dance Research, University of Surrey, Roehampton: 2001), 52-59.
5. The best-known example of question-and-answer in baroque dance is surely in Pécour's *Aimable Vainqueur*, when first the woman and then the man does a turning contretemp followed by a coupé ouvert. This is followed by what might be termed a "double question-and-answer"; see discussion in Pierce, "Repeated step-sequences...", 54-55.
6. The woman's part is rotated 90° clockwise, the man's is mirrored and rotated 90° counterclockwise.
7. Both the passepied and the bourrée begin and end with the dancers equidistant from, and on opposite sides of, the center line. Any combination in which each of these sections occurs an even number of times will necessarily return the dancers to the sides where they began, whether or not they exchange places in a given figure. Balon has made not merely a typographical, but a theoretical, error.
8. There's a minor difference in the final measure of the woman's part in the refrain following the first couplet. Presumably this is a typographical error, since as written it leaves the woman with the wrong foot free.
9. On the repeat, the woman does another pas de bourrée instead of a coupé.
10. Lancelot, *La Belle Dance*, appears to be mistaken in treating the second section of the dance as part of the rondeau.
11. The pas de rigaudon for the man, meas. 5-6, and the pas de gavotte, meas. 7-8, are on the opposite foot from what might have been expected.
12. Pierce, "Repeated step-sequences...", 58.
13. For other counterexamples see Pierce, "Repeated step-sequences..."
14. Numbers give references to entries in Little and Marsh, *La Danse Noble...* (LMC) and Lancelot, *La Belle Dance* (FL).
15. Year of the *Recueil* in which the dance was published.
16. See note 10.