Contrapassi in Fifteenth-century Italian Dance Reconsidered

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REVIEW RESPONSE

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In their exhaustive survey of *contrapassi* and '*doppi* on one foot' in fifteenth-century Italian *balli* in the last volume of *Dance Research*,[1] Lo Monaco and Vinciguerra present a novel and thought-provoking model for the development of these puzzling steps. Its great value lies in opening up new ways of looking at the detailed organisation of steps in such dances; but whether this has any relevance to *contrapassi* is quite another matter, and many will remain sceptical.

MAKING TWO OR MORE *SEMPI* ON THE SAME FOOT

Their starting point was the nature of the *passo doppio*, which by its very name is implied to be twice a *passo sempio*. If you make two *sempi* on opposite feet, they remain merely two *sempi*, but if you choose to make two *sempi* on the same foot, some elaboration must take place. Your weight must be briefly transferred to the other foot, to allow the foot previously used to be used again. Hence, the regular occurrence in a *passo doppio* in *bassadanza* of a small enabling step between the two *passi sempi* of which it is essentially composed.

It may be helpful to comprehension if this sequence is represented in a formula using the following notation: upper case is used to indicate a full step of two counts; lower case for a shorter step of one count; and a point to mark the upbeat. (Domenico tells us that a *tempo* of *bassadanza* begins on the upbeat, so I place the corresponding symbol at the front.) The formula for a *passo doppio* is accordingly:

$$\cdot \mid \text{L r L.} \tag{1}$$

This analysis of the *passo doppio* is speculative but plausible, though over-simplified. In fact, there are at least three ways to make the transition between the first of two *sempi* and the second. It would be sufficient just to close the feet, and this is the simplest (though not the only) way to make successive single steps when they are made sideways in a ring-dance. In forward movement, the steps flow more readily if you insert an intermediate step between the *sempi*. When this is done to music in triple time (as in *bassadanza* and *saltarello*), it is natural for this intermediate step to be kept small, in accordance with the dotted rhythms usual

when dancing to such music. When, on the other hand, the music is in duple time (as in *quadernaria* and *piva*), the intermediate step is normally equal in length to the two steps between which it lies. Of these three possibilities it is the second that is appropriate to the fifteenth-century Italian *bassadanza*, and it is encouraging to find, as Lo Monaco and Vinciguerra rightly point out, that in *bassadanza* and *saltarello* Cornazano specifically described the intermediate step as '*corto*' or short.

All this is speculative, but inherently probable. There is no knowing how long ago the concept of a 'double step' came into being. All we can say is that, at the earliest period for which we have detailed knowledge of dance-steps in western Europe, namely the second half of the fifteenth century, the common use of 'singles' and 'doubles' seems to be universal – not only in Italy, but in England, France (including Burgundy and the Netherlands), and the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain.

The foregoing analysis identifies a guiding principle according to which a number of *passi sempi* on the same foot can be linked together into a continuous series by inserting a complementary sequence of intermediate steps on the other foot. In the *passo doppio* this process is limited to one *tempo* of music, but there is no reason why it should not be extended to two *tempi*, as in the following formula:

$$\cdot \mid L \; r \; L \; r \mid L \; r \; L. \tag{2}$$

This is a sequence that does in fact occur in Domenico's *basse danze*, and I shall return to his description of it later. There are thus no grounds for doubting that this principle was a practical method of creating new dance-steps or step-sequences. Yet Lo Monaco and Vinciguerra have applied this principle to the vexed problem of *contrapassi* and '*doppi* on one foot' in Italian fifteenth-century dance, in an exposition that involves some special pleading that appears, on the face of it, to be contrary to logic.

In summary, their argument goes like this. Creation of the archetypical *passo doppio* is essentially the doubling of a *passo sempio*. When you extend the *doppio* by adding a third *sempio*, you are effectively doubling the first *sempio* again; and if you add a fourth *sempio* (as in formula 2), you are doubling it for the third time. All this is true enough, though the reference to three successive 'doublings' seems contrived. The authors go on to equate these three 'doublings' with three '*doppi* on one foot' (i.e. *contrapassi*). This will not do, as like is not being compared with like. *Passi doppi* (whether made on the same foot or not) are individual dance-steps equivalent to two *passi sempi;* two of them would be equivalent to four *sempi*, and three to six *sempi*. The sequence shown in formula (2) is like that in formula (1) made twice – *not* three times. The 'doublings' referred to by Lo Monaco and Vinciguerra are theoretical constructs useful in explaining the character of a particular type of step -sequence, but they are not themselves dance-steps. In any case, by original definition each such 'doubling' corresponds to only one half of a *doppio*.

MAKING TWO OR MORE *DOPPI* ON THE SAME FOOT

At this point it is useful to remind ourselves what Domenico himself (or his editor) called the sequence of steps given in formula (2) where it occurs in 'Mignotta vechia': '*uno dopio allinançi col pe senestro poj uno passo sempio sul pe dritto nel uodo con uno dopio inançi sul pe senestro*' ('a *doppio* forwards on the left foot; then a *passo sempio* on the right foot on the upbeat, with a *doppio* forwards on the left foot').[2] That seems straightforward enough and makes no mention of '*doppi* on one foot'. In this dance, as in 'Mignotta noua', Domenico chose to link two ordinary *doppi* with a small intermediate step made on the upbeat, which he specifically mentioned. In 'Corona' he made such a linkage instead by means of a *cambiamento* or simple change of foot. In both contexts the *doppi* are indeed made on the same foot, yet they are not '*doppi* on one foot' in the technical sense that Domenico was accustomed to use.

This distinction is very clearly made in 'Corona', where the two ordinary *doppi* linked by a *cambiamento* mentioned immediately above are directly preceded by two *doppi* made 'on the right foot'. Whatever that expression really meant, the way that the steps were linked together was coded in the form of words used, while the way that the steps were performed was clearly distinct from ordinary *passi doppi* that happened to be made on the same foot (and were therefore linked by a *cambiamento*).[3]

This brings us to the dilemma fully described and documented by Lo Monaco and Vinciguerra that has long exercised commentators on quattrocento dance. When *doppi* are described by Domenico as being made 'with' a certain foot (as opposed to 'starting with' a certain foot), they have their own special mode of execution that causes three (or later, four) of them to be performed in the time of two ordinary *doppi* and, more curiously, two of them in *bassadanza* to take the time of $1\frac{1}{2}$ ordinary *doppi*. This can only mean that these special *doppi* (later known as *contrapassi*) are either shorter or quicker than normal, though still having the character of *doppi*. If we reject the interpretation of these steps given by Lo Monaco and Vinciguerra, that a group of three had the same composition as in formula (2), what solution can we offer?

IN *BASSADANZA*

Different mechanisms are possible when dancing to music in triple or in duple time.

In *bassadanza*, ordinary *doppi* take up one *tempo* of six counts each, so two can be made in a total of twelve counts. This then is the total actually available for a group of three '*doppi* on one foot', so it follows that each of these can take up no more than four counts. The manner of performance has to achieve appropriate compression, while at the same time accommodating the change of foot necessary for making each step on the same foot.

There are alternative ways of achieving this. One is to perform the step as normal over the first three counts, then use the fourth count both to step for the

third time and also to make a *cambiamento*. This is not impracticable, but it does reduce the third component step, which originally had the same importance as the first, to not much more than half the time of the second (intermediate) step. Another approach, not acceptable to all practitioners, is to accept that the whole point of introducing these special steps was to introduce a different rhythm as a pleasing variation, and that the three steps of the *doppio* should be equal (being made on the first three counts), leaving count 4 for the *cambiamento*. This solution can be presented in the following formula (using *c* to indicate the *cambiamento*):

$$\text{l r l } c \text{ l r } | \text{ l } c \text{ l r l } c. \tag{3}$$

(There is no upbeat indicated, because this sequence of steps has abandoned the conventions proper to triple time.)

When the same procedure is applied to just two '*doppi* on one foot', they will properly occupy eight counts, leaving one count over to complete the $1\frac{1}{2}$ *tempi* that they are allowed in practice. It happens that, in all cases when *doppi* of this kind are made on the left foot, the subsequent step is to be made on the right; so, after the *cambiamento*, it will be necessary to transfer the weight back onto the left foot again in order to make that step, thereby using up the ninth count. (The same principle applies *vice versa* when the *doppi* are made on the right foot.)

In Domenico's dances there were never groups of more than three '*doppi* on one foot', and clearly it made no sense to ask for only one. After Domenico, the same steps were called *contrapassi*. In three Florentine manuscripts (those known as FN, FL and NY)[4] *contrapassi* were sometimes grouped in fours where other sources had them grouped in threes. This appears to mean that each *contrapasso* now took only three counts, with the *cambiamento* sharing the third count with the third component step of the *doppio*. In other words, these *contrapassi* were now occupying half the time of normal *doppi*, as postulated below for *contrapassi* in *quadernaria*.

There are also examples of single *contrapassi*! These occur in 'El gioioso fiorito', an ornamented version of 'Rostiboli gioioso', found in the Viterbo MS.[5] The dance is a *ballo*, but the special steps are to be found in the long *bassadanza* section. There it is clear from their context that these too only took three counts, two *contrapassi* in the ornamented version corresponding to one normal *doppio* in the original choreography. The fact that single *contrapassi* existed at all is a strong argument that they had their own distinctive and individual form, and this we have inferred to be a combination of moving at abnormal speed and ending with a *cambiamento*.

IN *QUADERNARIA*

When the music is in duple time, it is no longer possible to make room for extra steps merely by abandoning an original dotted rhythm. (The conversion from 2×6 to 3×4 is no longer available.)

The most natural way to achieve the required acceleration is to make '*doppi* on one foot' or *contrapassi* at double speed. Three such steps will then occupy the

time of $1\frac{1}{2}$ normal *doppi*, in most cases leaving a half-*tempo* over for some concluding movement such as a *riverenza* ('Giloxia', 'La fia guielmina' for 4) or *posada* ('Lionzello nouo'). The latter is described as being made on the upbeat, but still has to be followed by a *mezavolta* (half-turn, also occurring on the upbeat), so must have taken up an appreciable amount of time after completion of the third *doppio*. A *mezavolta* also occurs in 'Verçepe' that could have been performed on the upbeat, but could equally well have been placed in the spare half-*tempo*. (It should be remembered that, when steps are taken at this speed, the 'upbeat' becomes so brief that its very existence is somewhat notional.)

Other solutions have been offered by other commentators.

Diana Cruickshank took the view that each of these *doppi* effectively required three counts (the change of foot being incorporated into the third component step of each *doppio*), so the eight counts available would accommodate $2\frac{2}{3}$ *doppi*, which would leave the third *doppio* incomplete, but still keep the left foot free for the following steps.[6] This interpretation has a kind of mathematical cogency, but inevitably leaves us with the feeling that we have been short-changed! Cruickshank's response is that in Cornazano's description of 'Figlia guilielmino' for four dancers he has a sequence of three *contrapassi* in *quadernaria* such that '*finiscono el terço in una riuerentia de uno tempo*' (they finish the third in a *riverenza* of one *tempo*). The reader must decide whether this actually makes good the deficiency previously identified, and also whether this interpretation can be applied more widely, to embrace all examples of *contrapassi* in *quadernaria*.

Barbara Sparti, for her part, proposed that three '*doppi* on one foot' should be danced over the full length of two *tempi* of *quadernaria*, giving two-thirds of a *tempo* to each.[7] Not only does this leave no room for additional steps such as *riverenza* or *posada*; it requires the dancer to make three steps that correspond so poorly to the rhythms of the music, as generally understood, that the beginnings of *doppi* 2 and 3 do not coincide with a note (actual or implied) of the known tune. It is difficult to believe that such an exercise was routinely required even of expert dancers at the Italian courts.

It is because of the difficulties or deficiencies noted in the previous two paragraphs that I have proposed the simple solution of taking *contrapassi* in *quadernaria* at double speed.[8]

IN PIVA

There is only one known instance of '*doppi* on one foot' in *piva*, and that occurs in 'Iupiter'. These go one per *tempo* and are described by Domenico as *presto* (brisk). This timing is exactly equivalent to that proposed above for *quadernaria*.

NOTES

1. Lo Monaco, M. and S. Vinciguerra: 'The *passo doppio* and the *contrapasso* in the Italian *balli* of the fifteenth century: problems of mensuration and a conjectural reconstruction'. *Dance Research* 23(1), Summer 2005: 51–78.

2. All original texts cited can be found in A. W. Smith: *Fifteenth-century Dance and Music: twelve transcribed Italian treatises and collections in the tradition of Domenico da Piacenza*, 2 vols. (Dance and Music Series, 4, Stuyvesant, NY, 1995).

3. Wilson, D. R.: '"Corona", a *bassa danza ala fila* by Domenico.' *Historical Dance*, 4(1), 2004: 23–8.

4. Fn, Fl and NYp in Smith 1995.

5. Sparti, B.: 'Rôti Bouilli: take two 'El gioioso fiorito".' *Studi Musicali*, 24(2), 1995: 231–61.

6. Cruickshank, D.: 'The passo doppio in 15th century balli and basse danze; some possibilities of interpretation', in C. Brack and I. Wuyts (eds.), *Dance and Research: an interdisciplinary approach* (Louvain, 1991): 29–39.

7. Sparti, B.: 'How fast do you want the quadernaria? – or – Verçepe and Gelosia revisited: the tale of three contrapassi in quadernaria', in M. Inglehearn (ed.), *The Marriage of Music and Dance* (NEMA, Cambridge, 1992).

8. Wilson, D. R.: *The Steps used in Court Dancing in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge, the author, 2003): 16, 19–20.