

# The Salterello and Quadernaria steps in 15<sup>th</sup> Century Italian Dance

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This is an attempt to reconstruct the "saltarello" and "quadernaria" steps found in the 15th century Italian dance treatises, and to provide you with enough information that you can judge these reconstructions for yourself, or construct your own.

I am working from A. William Smith's translation and concordances in "Fifteenth-Century Dance and Music: Twelve Transcribed Italian Treatises and Collections in the Tradition of Domenico da Piacenza" (1995). The translations quoted here are Smith's.

We have dance treatises from Domenico da Piacenza, the model on which the others are based, from ne'r do well renaissance man Antonio Cornazano, and from the shameless Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro, who after converting to Christianity chose to be known as Ambrosio.

The dance treatises from 15th century Italy omit to describe many of the basic steps of their dances, taking these as common knowledge. They instead present a case that dance should be considered a worthy art, concentrating on how to dance with great refinement, and describing a set of dances for special occasions. The implication is that normal dancing did not always follow a set choreography, perhaps being improvised to a given tempo.

We have multiple copies of many of the 15th century Italian dances, often with minor variations in description. These may be true variations, or may be descriptions of the steps as normally danced.

## Basics

Based on the music, the saltarello is danced in what we would now call 6/8 time (occasionally also in 3/4 time), and quadernaria in 4/4 time. The treatises confirm this for quadernaria, but are contradictory for the saltarello, and I was unable to make sense of them.

Domenico writes:

"Remember that the movement of the saltarello is a doppio with a salteto and that of the quadernaria is a doppio with a frappamento that is longer,"  
(PnD, line 314)

Antonio Cornazano originally wrote his treatise for the benefit of a ten year old girl, Ippolita Sforza, and thus, unusually, provides us with a dance manual for the benefit of a lady. He writes:

"Saltarello is the most cheerful dancing of all, and the Spaniards call it the "altadanza." It consists only of doppi, ondeggiato as a consequence of elevating during the second short step which touches down in the middle of the one tempo and the next, and campeggiato by the motion of the first step which carries the torso-- as is stated earlier. Quadernaria is properly called the saltarello tedesco consisting of two sempi and a ripresetta beaten after the second step, transversely."  
(Rvat, line 180)

I will be treating the saltarello tedesco as synonymous with quadernaria.

# Some words

## **campeggiato**

Wiktionary: To stand out of a picture. Also, to camp.

Perhaps relating to stance, rotation of the shoulders and body.

## **frappamento**

An ornament that can be added to a doppio, requiring a quarter of a tempo according to Domenico (PnD, line 110).

If it can be added at will, it should not result in a change of weight. Appears to be used interchangeably with *represe* or *mesa ripresa* in describing the saltarello tedesco. Perhaps two small steps (step, undercut), or two small kicks.

## **ondeggiato**

Wiktionary: to ripple, to flutter, to wave or sway, to waver or hesitate.

Perhaps a raising and lowering of the body, with a hesitancy of forward movement.

## **salto**

Wiktionary: jump, leap, spring, bound

Domenico states that a salto requires half a tempo (PnD, line 107).

## **tedesco**

German.

## **tempo and misura**

A tempo is a unit of time. A doppio requires one tempo. Its duration depends on which misura the dance is in: bassadanza, quadernaria, saltarello, or piva.

## **vuoto and pieno**

Wiktionary: Vuoto means empty, vacant, a vacuum. Pieno means full.

The dance masters have much to say on this topic, it's clearly important to them. Domenico says:

"..., I call the vuodo the silence and the pieno the sounding. I call the vuodo that between one tempo and the next. I call the pieno that within the tempo."  
(PnD, line 95)

Cornazano helpfully explains:

"What the vuodo and pieno are, Illustrious S. Sforza, I would have written for you; but they are things that cannot be expressed by words. I am sure, if you used your intellect, and had those misure played for you, you would understand it better than I could explain it. Therefore I excuse myself from such labor."  
(Rvat, line 1156)

and with that his treatise ends. Here and also in ondeggiato and campeggiato the feeling of it may be the important thing, as in method acting.

# Clues from music

The attitude to written music in 15th century Italy was different to ours. Musicians would have used the written music as a basic structure, to which they would add ornaments and improvise lines of counterpoint. A musician was always also to some extent a composer.

We have tenor lines for several bassadanza, and these can also be used for saltarello according to Cornazano. However, these give no indication of the correct saltarello rhythm. We also have several saltarello and quadernaria sections from the balli. These give much more information, although the exact rhythms are somewhat open to interpretation. The notation lacks bar lines, and the notated lengths of notes interact with the lengths of preceding and following notes according to the complex conventions of mensural notation. The notation of what we now call time signature is haphazard.

Along with the lack of bar lines, the notion of vuodo and pieno lends itself to a blending of the end of one pieno into the start of the next vuodo. A tempo need not be strictly bounded by the bar lines of modern notation.

Below, "\*" represents a beat, and "-" no beat.

## Saltarello

### Main rhythm pattern:

\* - \* \* \* - seen in Belriguardo, la Ingrata, Mercanzia, Sobria, Tesara, Vercepe.

This is always notated in the same distinctive way: a semibreve, a minim, a dot, a minim and a semibreve.

### Variants:

\* - - \* \* \* seen in la Ingrata.

\* - \* \* \* \* seen in Mercanzia.

\* - \* \* - \* seen in Vercepe.

\* - \* - \* - seen in Sobria, Tesara.

\* \* \* \* \* \* seen in Colonnese, Legiadra.

\* - - \* - - phrase ending seen in Belriguardo, la Ingrata, Tesara, Vercepe.

\* - \* \* - - phrase ending seen in Mercanzia.

Sobria and Tesara are interesting for mixing 6/8 and 3/4 rhythms. I've only listed the main

variants seen in Sobria above.

Spero begins with saltarelli todesco, but the music is in 6/8. I'm not sure what is going on there.

## Quadernaria

### Main rhythm pattern:

I'm less certain here.

\* - \* \* \* - \* - seen in la Ingrata, Voltati in Ca Rosina, Anello (but described as saltarello / saltarello in tempo of piva).

### Variants:

\* \*\*\* \* \* \*\*\* \* seen in Gelosia. Note that this is a double-speed version of the main pattern.

\* - \* \* \* - - - seen in Grazioso. Note similarity to saltarello main pattern.

\* - \* \* \* - \* \* seen in Lioncello, la Marchesana.

\* \* \* \* \* - \* - seen in Gelosia and as a phrase ending in Anello, Lioncello, la Marchesana, Voltati in Ca Rosina.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* seen in Giove.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* - phrase ending seen in Giove.

\* - \* - \* - - - phrase ending seen in Voltati in Ca Rosina.

\* \*\*\* \* \* - \* - phrase ending seen in la Ingrata, Gelosia. Again, note double-speed main pattern.

Legiadra contains a quadernaria section, but the correspondence to music is unclear (see reconstruction in "Joy and Jealousy").

Sobria contains a rather complicated quadernaria section, not listed.

# Descriptions in the Dance Treatises

## Saltarello

In a couple of dances, a saltarello section is said to begin with a salto.

### Sobria

"each performs a salto and a tempo of saltarello beginning with the right foot"

In one version, this is a salto and a "doppio".

### Verceppe

This dance is for five people in a line: man, woman, man, woman, man.

"The man who is in front performs a meza volta on the left side.

He performs four tempi of saltarello weaving among the women after performing a salto at the beginning. He uses one tempo to reach the woman's right side, a tempo to reach the middle man's left side, a tempo to reach the right side of the woman in the rear, performing a meza volta. He began with the left foot and ended with the right."

He began with the left foot, ending on the first woman's right side. Since he is facing the opposite direction, this is his left. Thus diagonal movement in the direction of the leading foot, however this is probably specific to this dance.

### Mignotta

"Two tempi of saltarello beginning with the left foot," is in one source "a doppio forward with the left foot then a sempio on the right foot in the vuoto" twice.

Perhaps this is a variant which doesn't alternate feet.

### Confusion over the number of saltarelli in a section

There is sometimes confusion about the number of saltarelli.

La Ingrata begins with 9 tempi of saltarello, 12 in one version. This corresponds to 5 bars worth of music, repeated.

In Prigionera "They perform three more tempi of saltarello beginning with the right foot" is in one version "two tempi of saltarello and a doppio on the right foot".

In Mercanzia "11 saltarelli with an initial movimento" is in one version 12 saltarelli, corresponding to 4 bars worth of music repeated 3 times.

Vercepe also begins with "eleven tempi of saltarello with a movimento at the beginning", corresponding to 4 bars worth of music repeated twice.

## Quadernaria / saltarello tedesco

We saw earlier the quadernaria described by Domenico as a doppio with a frappamento, and by Cornazano as two sempi with a little ripresa. This suggests to me the following equation in terms of number of steps:

$$\text{a doppio} + \text{a frappamento} = 3 + 2 = 2 + 3 = \text{two sempi} + \text{a ripresa}$$

Domenico on the distinction between bassadanza and quadernaria:

"Note that for the bassadanza, which is major imperfect, one begins the tempo in the vuoto and completes it in the pieno. The quadernaria, which is minor imperfect, is the opposite: you begin the tempo in the pieno and complete it in the vuoto, and here is proof. Note that when a musician begins to play a misura of bassadanza, he begins the soprano rather than the beat of the tenor. That soprano with which you begin is the vuoto and the beat of the tenor is the pieno. And in the quadernaria, which is minor imperfect, the opposite is done. The musician always would begin the beat of the tenor and that of the soprano together."  
(PnD, line 165)

Cornazano confirms this (Rvat, line 1147).

So our written music for both bassadanza (we only have unornamented tenor lines for this) and quadernaria begins with the pieno.

Domenico on how quadernaria is danced in tempo of bassadanza:

"I advise you that the frappamento of the quadernaria when placed in the misura of bassadanza is placed in the pieno, and that frappamento of the bassadanza is performed in the vuoto. This is the distinction between the one and the other, and characterizes the first difficult action."  
(PnD, line 281)

I read this as saying that ornamental frappamenti are placed differently in bassadanza and quadernaria. In bassadanza they are placed in the emptiness between one doppio and the next (in modern terms, the upbeat), in quadernaria they are inserted right in the middle of the doppio.

## Giove

"In the beginning they perform three tempi of saltarello tedesco beginning on the left foot, that is, three steps and a frappamento a little to the side."

## **Prigioniera**

"They perform four tempi of saltarello tedesco beginning with the left foot, requiring a doppio and a ripresa per tempo."

## **Rossina**

"They perform two doppi with the meze riprese,"

In Voltati in ca Rosina, this is "In the beginning, two doppi in the misura of quadernaria,"

## **Angelosa, from a German source**

"It begins with four baßduppeln, each with a repreß."

This corresponds to four tempi of saltarello tedesco in Italian sources.

## **Spero**

"In the beginning four tempi of saltarello tedesco beginning with the left foot, beating the tempo forward, and they stop."

Later:

"two tempi of saltarello tedesco beginning with the left foot, beating the tempo in gallone."

Gallone means flank. So there is a point of emphasis in the saltarello tedesco step, perhaps the beginning of the pieno.

Saltarello tedesco is literally German saltarello. One might suppose it is similar to the allemande, described by Arbeau, but I can't see any correspondence in the descriptions beyond them both being in 4/4 time.

## Proposed reconstruction

Rosina, in "Joy and Jealousy", reconstructs the saltarello, both in 6/8 and 4/4 time, as a doppio with a hop at the end, similar to a hopped allemande double, and reconstructs the saltarello tedesco as a doppio with a quick two step sideways movement at the end.

These reconstructions are entirely plausible.

I offer the following alternatives mainly because our true level of uncertainty is not well represented by a single reconstruction. When reading through the original sources it's useful to have several possibilities in mind, so that you can think "does this support this hypothesis, or that one?"

## Saltarello

On the left: A hop with the left foot in the air. As you hop, turn the body to bring the raised foot forward. Then three quick steps moving forward (step, undercut, step).

On the right, the mirror image of this.

Ladies may omit the hop, merely performing a preparatory rotation of the shoulders and body, as per my first quote from Cornazano's treatise.

Here is the arrangement of two measures of saltarello in time:

L	hop*	. step*	. step*	.	. step*	.	. (hop*...)		
R	.	.	. step*	.	. hop*	. step*	. step*	.	.

(The action of a step occurs in the empty space before the beat. Don't worry, you already do this automatically, it's only an issue when you're trying to describe things.)

## Quadernaria

On the left: A leap a little to the left, three quick steps moving forward and right, and a final step forward (preparatory for the leap of the next tempo).

On the right, the mirror image of this.

Here is the arrangement of two measures of quadernaria in time:

L	leap*	. .step*	.	.step*	.	.step*	.step*	.	. (leap*...)
R	.	.step*	.step*	.	.	.leap*	.	.step*	.

I would suggest dancing this quadernaria step if quadernaria or saltarello tedesco is explicitly mentioned in the text. A doppio in 4/4 time would remain simply three steps.

Alternatively, you might consider the final step as belonging to the next tempo, making the motion: step, leap, step-step-step. This would make sense of many of the descriptions quoted above, and has a more natural flow to it.

As always, you should not face straight forward when performing these steps, but rather angle your body to best show off your magnificence. Let yourself be moved by the music, let it raise and lower you, and move you swiftly or slowly.

# Ferretra

From source Sc lines 3355-69. Smith's translation is:

Ballo called Ferretra, for two:

In the beginning, one performs four tempi of saltarello;  
the fourth tempo  
back.

Then perform that same sequence another time.

Then perform two tempi of saltarello, one forward and the other back.

Then perform four tempi  
and six contrapassi with the left foot  
with a tempo of saltarello, back;  
and then this same sequence another time  
with a tempo of saltarello back.

The end.

So,

3 saltarelli forward  
1 saltarello back

3 saltarelli forward  
1 saltarello back

1 saltarello forward  
1 saltarello back

6 contrapassi forward in 4 tempi of saltarello  
1 saltarello back

6 contrapassi forward in 4 tempi of saltarello  
1 saltarello back

and let's add a reverenza at the end to finish.

There is no music to go with this description, so I have put together something that should work. As far as I was able, I kept to the rhythmic patterns and style seen in the existing music.

## Digression: contrapassi

One issue here is how to perform the contrapassi. This is a whole subject of itself. Personally, I think "contrapassi" is a play on words:

con tre passi -- with three passi  
contra passi -- contrary/juxtaposed passi

See for example the confusion of description of the contrapassi in *Gelosia*.

Musical examples can be seen in *Gelosia*, *Lioncello*, *Belreguardo*, and *la Marchesana*, although sadly there are no examples of contrapassi in misura of saltarello. In the music for *Gelosia* and *Belreguardo* there is clear a repetition of the same pattern three times, each time taking half a bar.

It has been noted by Monaco and Vinciguerra (2005) that contrapassi in later manuscripts correspond to sequences of passi "on the one foot" in Domenico's treatise. Monaco and Vinciguerra's interpretation of this is that three doppi on one foot, or contrapassi, refer to a sempio in some sense "doubled" three times yielding a  $1+2+2+2=7$  step sequence. This is seen as contrary for continuing to use the *same* leading foot.

Rosina's interpretation in "Joy and Jealousy" of three contrapassi is of three doppi, each starting on the same foot, and each requiring an extra beat at the end to shift weight. This is contrary in that in 6/4 time it is contrary to the metrical structure of the music, a hemiola. In 4/4 time, it fits in 1 1/2 bars and is not contrary to the meter.

In keeping with the theme I have of inserting little three step movements everywhere that I can squeeze them in, I will here reconstruct 6 contrapassi in saltarello misura as:

kick left, step-step-step, step-step-step, step-step-step,  
kick right, step-step-step, step-step-step, step-step-step

With each group of three steps turn the body a different way, first with the left shoulder forward, then the right, then the left, and in the second group of three, right, left, right . This is contrarian because of the quick alternation of shoulder and body position (campeggiato).

To address the issue of the doppi on one foot: I interpret doppi on the one foot to mean doppi in the one phrase, in the one rising and falling movement (ondeggiato). Since each doppio takes half a bar, there is a half bar left over at the start or end of the sequence to achieve a change of weight if this is required to make sense of following steps in a dance. In *la Marchesana*, source Sc explicitly describes a set of 12 contrapassi as being "three on the left foot, three on the right and three more on the left with three more on the right" (Monaco and Vinciguerra, 2005).

Of course, I am cheating a little here by composing music to fit my hypothesis.

# References

M. L. Monaco and S. Vinciguerra (2005). The passo doppio and the contrapasso in the Italian balli of the Fifteenth Century: Problems of Mensuration and a Conjectural Reconstruction, *Dance Research*, Volume 23, Pages 51-78.

A. W. Smith (1995). *Fifteenth-Century Dance and Music: Twelve Transcribed Treatises and Collections in the Tradition of Domenico da Piacenza*. Volumes I and II. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press.

- these two volumes are available from amazon.com

V. Stephens and M. Cellio (1995). *Joy and Jealousy: A Manual of 15<sup>th</sup>-Century Italian Balli*. [http://sca.uwaterloo.ca/~praetzel/Joy\\_Jealousy/](http://sca.uwaterloo.ca/~praetzel/Joy_Jealousy/)