

Dances from the German Letter

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<http://gratzioso.net> (work in progress)

In 1517 Johann Cochlaus visited Bologna sent a letter home to Willibald Pirckheimer about some of the dances he witnessed. This letter provides us an interesting view of what the dance tradition started by Master Domenico da Piacenza had evolved into in the early 16th century. There are descriptions of seven dances in this letter, named L'Amorosa, L'Angelosa, Bellregwerd, Leoncell, Mercasan, Rostibin and Vite de Colei. Today we will be dancing L'Amorosa, L'Angelosa, Leoncell and Vite de Colei. All of these are couple dances. All but one of these seems to be similar in name and choreography to dances in the manuscripts by Domenico, Guglielmo/Giovanni and Cornazzano.

The step descriptions in this letter are generally not as detailed as those found in some of the earlier Italian sources, especially since this was not an attempt to expound on theory of dance. In order to reconstruct the steps I used the information in the earlier sources as well as considering what we know about trends in music and in European dance elsewhere around 1517. In general, the steps seem to be similar to those familiar to us from earlier Italian sources.

Steps in the German Letter:

- *contrapass*- similar to the Italian *contrapassi*, 3 doubles done in the time of two. In the dances in the letter, this is only ever used in sets of three, which are always described as “2 *contrapass* and 1 with a *repress*.” I am interpreting this as 3 *contrapassi* doubles, that is quick doubles in 4/4 measures, and a close on the final leftover beat. This means that you would start each set of three doubles on the left foot, which matches the language about *contrapassi* being on the same foot that is sometimes found.
- *basssimpel*- This appears to be the equivalent of a *sempii* or single step.
- *bassduppel*- This appears to be the equivalent of a normal *doppio* or double (three steps in one measure). At times in the letter it is describe as a “*bassduppel* with a *repress*” which I am interpreting as a double with a close. There are also times where it is described as fast that I am assuming are basically a *piva*.
- *altzada*- German for “to rise”, equivalent to a *movimento* or *schosso*.
- *repress*- Similar to the Italian *riprese*, a sideways step.

L'Amorosa

Amoroso is a very popular dance (at least in my home kingdom of Atlantia). It first appeared in a later version of “*De pratica seu arte tripudii*” by Guglielmo/Giovanni Ambrosio and it also appears in a few of the later manuscripts. The version most commonly danced in the SCA is from a copy of *De Pratica* in the New York Public Library which has on it a note that it is the copy of “Maestro Giorgio”. Whoever Giorgio was, his descriptions of the dances are noticeably different from the originals, including a tendency to state they will be repeated with the woman leading the second time through. The version in this letter resembles that version, but with somewhat simpler steps. I find these to work quite well when the music is played at a spritely tempo.

Entrance: 8 fast doubles (*piva*)

Chase 1: Man leaves with 2 fast doubles & 1 slow double. Woman catches up with the same.

Chase 2: same as chase 1!

Leave and Return:

- The man leaves with a set of *contrapassi* (3 doubles and a close) and faces the woman at the end of it.

- Bow to each other

- Man returns to the woman with 2 fast doubles & 1 slow double.

- The woman leaves and returns with the same steps.

Repeat the dance with the woman leading.

L'Angelosa

This is a dance that does not appear in many sources, just this letter and two fragmentary copies of *De pratica*. The most complete version is in that same copy of *De pratica* owned by the mysterious Maestro Giorgio. None of the have music, so I have written a tune for it and arranged it with some help. I would love to see this dance spread in the SCA, so you are welcome to copy the music as long as you leave the attribution.

The earlier versions of Angelosa are fairly similar to that found in this letter, other than the introduction. The saltarello step appears to have fallen out of favor, and instead of 4 saltarelli as the entrance, one enters with simple closed doubles. The other difference is in the middle section where you leave your partner and return. The description in this letter of that section seems slightly confused, and does not add up to the same amount of music as the original. For now, I am using the original description to flesh out this section, until I come to a clearer conclusion on what is being stated in the letter.

Entrance:

- 4 Doubles forward and quick bow
- 1 double backwards and bow
- Repeat the entrance

Flirtation:

- Take right hands, change places with 1 double
- Take 3 doubles away from your partner, look back at them with emotion
- Return to your partner with a set of *contrapassi* (3 fast doubles and a close)
- Take right hands and bow on the right
- Repeat the flirtation, taking left hands and bowing left instead

Circle:

- Take right hands and circle with 4 fast doubles
- Take left hands and circle with 4 fast doubles

Leoncell

Leoncello may have been the longest lasting dance of this tradition, having been composed by Domenico da Piacenza in honor of his patron sometime before 1455, and continuing to be mentioned in reports of ball throughout the rest of the 15th and into the early 16th centuries. It appears in almost all of the extant manuscripts of early Renaissance Italian dance. Of all of the versions, the one found in this letter is actually my favorite. In many ways it stays true to the original choreography but I particularly like the processional section here. As in Angelosa, the *saltarello* step has been abandoned, this time in favor of *contrapassi*.

Entrance:

- Holding hands, enter with 3 sets of contrapassi doubles.
- Man rise, woman rise.
- Man turns over the left shoulder with 1 double.
- Woman rise, Man rise.
- Woman turns over the left shoulder with 1 double.**

Strut:

- Man leaves with 4 singles and 1 double.

— Woman catches up with the same.

Fast Chase:

— Riprese (left, right).

— Man leaves with 1 set of contrapassi doubles.

— Woman catches up with the same.

Turns & Procession:

— Take right hands and circle clockwise with 2 singles & 2 doubles.

— Take left hands and circle counter-clockwise with 2 singles & 2 doubles.

— Riprese (left, right).

— Together forward with 2 singles & 2 doubles.

— Riprese (left, right).

Finale:

— Man rises, woman rises.

** Alternate reconstruction of the Entrance: Holding hands, enter with 3 sets of contrapassi doubles. Man rise, woman rise. Man goes around his partner with 1 double. Woman rise, Man rise. Woman goes around her partner with 1 double.

Vite de Colei

This dance does not appear in any other source. There is a somewhat similarly named dance, Vita di Cholino, but they are completely different choreographies. This is a fun little dance, which I intend to write music for in the future. In the meantime, it can be done to any appropriately spritely music, such as a piva tune.

Entrance:

- 8 fast doubles, in the last, turn face to face
- Take both hands and bow, then turn forward
- All that again

Showing Off:

- Man leaves with 2 closed doubles and returns with 2 more
- Take both hands, bow
- Woman leaves with 2 closed doubles and returns with 2 more
- Take both hands, bow

Circle:

- Take right hands and circle with 4 fast doubles

- Take left hands and circle with 4 fast doubles
- Take both hands and bow

Sources

Apel, Willi. *The notation of polyphonic music, 900-1600*. 5th ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953/1961.

Elys, John. "A Hands-On Introduction to Early Notation." Class, Known World Dance and Music Symposium X, Saratoga Springs, June 22, 2013. (*This class really jumpstarted my understanding of period music notation and how it changed, and led to further research on the subject.*)

Lessault, Maurin. "Amoroso by the Book." Class, Pennsic War 42 from Society for Creative Anachronism, Slippery Rock, July 26, 2013. (*Lord Maurin's class looking at the different descriptions of Amoroso in the manuscripts in different versions helped cement my interest in the same sort of approach to reconstructing other dances.*)

Nevile, Jennifer. *The eloquent body dance and humanist culture in fifteenth-century Italy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004.

Smith, A. William. *Fifteenth-century dance and music: twelve transcribed Italian treatises and collections in the tradition of Domenico da Piacenza*. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 1995. (*The first volume provided important information on putting dance in context, while the comparison charts of the Italian manuscripts in the second volume was what made a lot of my research possible. It also contains the Nürnberg letter. His translations of Italian and German were of some help, although I did some of my own translation as well.*)

Sparti, Barbara. *Guglielmo Ebreo of Pesaro: on the practice or art of dancing*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
A Hands-On Introduction to Early Notation.