“Contredances are the most absurd dances in the whole world, because in them there are thousands of chimeras that encourage a lascivious life.”\footnote{KIB MS 339, 240: “Contradants äro the absourdaste af alla dantser i hela werlden ty theruti gifwes tusende chimerer som beforderer ett kichtieft lefwerne.”}

This description of dance is given by Carl Linnaeus in a lecture in dietetics in 1742. It was taken down as lecture notes by a student and was later copied by Carl Friedrich Schultz (1709–1769) in 1748. Dances occur sometimes as examples in the lectures given by Linnaeus. Even if we cannot be exactly sure of which dances Linnaeus refers to, it is safe to assume that it is some kind of social dance for several couples, of the type that was popular and widespread over Europe at the time. The term contradance can refer either to a so-called longway (formation with dancers in two long rows/lines, each person with the partner opposite) or possibly to a square-formation. However, the longway was more common during the first half of the eighteenth century. In the Leufsta-collection there are three books with dance music, all three purchased in the 1730s by Charles de Geer the Entomologist and printed by Witvogel in Amsterdam. These books contain a mix of dances that were popular at the time. They
have different themes according to the titles: collection of “contre-dances”, collection of “country” dances (literally “farmers dances”) and collection of “serious” dances. None of the dance books contain descriptions of the dances, but only the music. Melody, a bass line and a figured bass is given in the print. The dances have names in several languages, mainly Dutch but also titles in French and Spanish (even if the Spanish names are also common types of dances).

Country Dances, Contredances and Serious Dances

It is not so easy to see a clear difference between the dance themes, but there are some differences in the selection of dances in the three volumes. The volume with country dances or farmers’ dances has a large proportion of dance names including names of places in the Netherlands. Such examples are ‘t Inkomen van Harderwyk, Den Dom van Utregt or ’t Beleg van Doornik. Most dances have names in Dutch, but there are some with French names. Even if the names of the dances in this volume sometimes are written in French, they do not seem to be dances of a type that originated from France. There were a number of popular and fashionable dances that originated from France, such as the minuet, bourré, passepied or gigue. The other two volumes both have a variety of that type of dances. There are for example Menuet en quatre, De Oude Passepied, De nieuwe Passepied and several bourées and gigues. Most likely this kind of repertoire was considered not as pertaining to farmers and the country but to other social contexts. This does not mean that

2 Original titles: Versameling van eenige contra dansen met een bas continuo vermeerderd en onder malkander gedrukt, om voor de clavi-cembalo, viool, dwars fluit, en andere instrumenten te gebruiken. Eerste deel STCN 405335164;
Versameling van eenige boere danssen met een bas continuo vermeerderd en onder malkander gedrukt, om voor de clavi-cembalo, viool, dwars fluit, en andere instrumenten te gebruiken. Eerste deel STCN 405335067;
Versameling van eenige serieuse danssen met een bas continuo vermeerderd en onder malkander gedrukt, om voor de clavi-cembalo, viool, dwars-fluyt, en andere instrumenten te gebruiken. Eerste deel STCN 405335288.

3 The term “boer” might also refer to all inhabitants in the Dutch inland. See Koning (2010:2), p. 129
“farmers” are absent in the volumes with contredances and serious dances. There are six dances included where the title of the dance somehow includes “farmer” (in one case “paisane”). Some examples of these are De Dolle Boer, ’t Boere Ballet, De Boere Mariée and De Boer op Klompen.

This interest for music and dance associated with the countryside and farmers was not unique for these three tune books. Somewhat earlier, in 1651, John Playford (1623–1686/87?) published the first edition of The English Dancing Master. Another eighteen editions were then published to which dances were added as well as new steps and formations. The English Dancing master aimed to present “country dances”. It is not likely that John Playford documented what was actually danced in the countryside, rather this is a repertoire that was used by the elites and in towns. Dancing “country dances” was a fashion and some types of dances were considered faster, more lively
and “rural”. John Playford’s collection of dances became very popular; not only was it published in many new editions, it was also spread across Europe and the dances also spread in various social groups in society. However, as far as I know, no copy of Playford’s collection exists in any Swedish archive or library. This does not mean that Playford-dances or country dances did not reach Sweden; the three tune books in the Leufsta collection is one evidence that they did.

Playford via Amsterdam to Leufsta
In two of the three tune books, there are dances with the same titles and music as in the Playford books. Most of these dances have the titles translated into Dutch, but in one case there is a dance that has a French name. It is called Carillon d’Oxford and it was introduced in the Playford-collection in 1679 under the name Christchurch Bells in Oxon. If this implies that this originally was a French tune/dance or that it was copied from some collection printed in France into the Dutch book is unclear. Many of the dances were spread all over Europe, but there is no information in detail on either exactly how Playford compiled his collections or how the printed collections in the Leufsta collections were compiled. It has been suggested that the difference between the volume with “farmers dances” and the other two is that the “farmers dances” were based on Dutch melodies.4
This may be largely so, but at least one melody was published in 1695 by John Playford. Most likely tunes were chosen from a selection of collections and copied into these editions. Sources used could for example be Raol Auger Feuillet’s Recueil de dances or Recueil de contredances.5 It is also possible that Playford, Witvogel and other editors were sent, given or in other manners collected new material for the collection of dances to be printed. Some melodies occur in other collections than the two mainly compared here, and some can be dated earlier than the publication of Playford’s first book. It would

---

be possible to trace the music in the three Leufsta volumes in more
detail, but the present aim is to focus on and identify the dances that
also occur in John Playford’s publications. In all there are at least
twelve Playford-dances in the Leufsta books, and all but one is found
in the book with contredanses. One is in the volume with country/
farmers dances. The total number of dances in the volumes are 48
in the contredanse volume, 36 in the country/farmers dance volume
and 37 in the serious dance volume. It is worth mentioning that the
identification has been made mainly by comparison of the titles and
if they match the music has been compared. (I have not compared all
the tunes, possibly there are a couple more that can be found if this
is done.) The Playford dances in the Leufsta books are the following
(year in bracket indicates in which edition of Playford’s book the
dance was first published):

From the contredance book:
De Buffcoat/Buff coat (1670)
Carrillon d’Oxford/Christchurch bells in Oxon (1679)
Excuse moy/Excuse me (1686)
The With Farewel/Whitneys farewell (1695)
Martens lane/St Martins Lane (1696)
De Soldjer en de Seljer/The soldier and the sailor (1696)
Prince Eugene’s march (1710)
Welhouse/Wellhouse (1710)
Cerff Blanc/White heart cabbages (1718)
De Nagtegaal/The Tuneful Nightingale (1718)
De dolle Sergeant/John the Mad Man (1726)

From the country/farmer’s dance book:
Ret house/Red house (1695)

Four of these dances are longways with progression involving three
couples. The earlier longways have progression involving two cou-
ples, but towards the end of the seventeenth century the slightly
more complicated progressions for three couples became more popular and many versions of such dances evolved and were spread. It may be that type of dance that Linnaeus refers to when he describes contredances as “absurd” and encouraging a “lascivious life.” One explanation may be that you dance with more partners with that type of progression, or possibly they looked chaotic on the dance floor, particularly when they were new and the dancers were not used to the dance form and did not know it well enough. There are very few sources giving us information on how these dances were practiced or how a social dance event was actually performed. We can be pretty sure that the De Geer family did dance and that dancing occurred at dinners and festivities at Leufstabruk. Unfortunately there is very little or no information on when and how this happened. There are, however, some hints from other occasions and families. There is for example a very brief description of a social evening from the early eighteenth century given by a friend of the Moraeus family in Falun. Carl Linnaeus married Sara Elisabeth Moraea (1716–1806) in 1739. The brothers Axel and Gustaf Reuterholm (1714–1763 and 1721–1803) kept a diary, and in one entry they describe an evening hosted at Korsnäs by Sara Elisabeth’s maternal grandmother in 1736. During the evening they danced the dances in a particular order: minuet, polonaise (polska), longway (långdans) and contredance. After the dance, the guests performed a comedy together. It is likely that this or similar orders of dancing were widespread practices. The list of dances also includes many of the most popular types of dances from the time, including the well-known minuet. The minuet was danced by all social groups and was spread geographically and also danced well into the nineteenth century. The longway and contredance may have been dances of the type represented by the Playford dances in the Leufsta collection.

Playford Dances Today

Playford dances are danced today and there are various styles of interpretation and choreographies. Anyone who looks for video clips of Playford dances will find everything from dancers in fantasy clothing at renaissance faires to dance scenes in film adaptions of Austen novels or ballroom dancing in contemporary clothing. An important step in the modern tradition was Cecil Sharp’s editions of the Playford dances from the early nineteenth century. Today there are several websites listing all editions of *The Dancing Master* (the original title *The English Dancing Master* was later changed to *The Dancing Master*). One of the major sites gives both original dance descriptions, musical notation, and often modern interpretations of the choreographies. Even if we cannot know if the De Geer family actually used the tune books for dancing, or what it in that case looked like, we can get an idea of what dancing at the time may have been like.⁷

For Uppsala University Library’s quatercentenary in 2020/2021 a film was produced with the Uppsala dancegroup Branicula and musicians Cajsa Ekstav on *nyckelharpa* (keyed fiddle) and Roger Tallroth on guitar. Three of the dances from the Leufsta collection occur in the film, one French minuet and two Playford dances: The Soldier and the Sailor and Well house. The choice for this recording was to let Cajsa Ekstav and Roger Tallroth interpret the music from their angle and deep knowledge of folk music traditions from the Lövstabruk area, whereas the choreographies were kept as close to the originals as possible. The dancers also performed in costumes based on eighteenth century clothes. In this way the tune books from

---

⁷ It is likely the books have been used, but it is not possible to know if dancing took place while the music was played or not. There is also a book in British Library with contredances published in 1723 in Haarlem by Gillis Lambert, *Een rechte en gemak- kelyke Wegwyezer der Contra Danssen*. This has both music and dance descriptions in text, in Dutch and French. Some of the dances seem to be similar or the same as in the Leufsta books, but since this was brought to my attention very late during the work with this article is has not been possible to examine Lambert’s publication in any detail. This may however be one key to how some of the dances were interpreted and performed in the Netherlands.
the Leufsta collection can be used to add to a living dance tradition with roots in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

List for Further Reading


Lambert, G. *Een rechte en gemakkelyke wegwyzer der contra danssen, Un veritable et facile guide des contre dances, Verrykt met de muzyk, etc.*, Haarlem, van Hulkenroy, 1723 (copy in British Library).


Websites

https://playforddances.com

UUB400 film with dances from the Leufsta collection

https://youtu.be/aGJnLLBiqKg

De Nederlandse liederenbank

www.liederenbank.nl

Links to the Digitized Dance Books

*Versameling van eenige contra danssen…*


*Versameling van eenige boere danssen…*


*Versameling van eenige serieuse danssen…*