

TWO *BALLI* JEWEL-LIKE DANCE AND MUSIC IN MID- FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

By A. William Smith

The *balli Mercantia* and *Sobria* are from the earliest extant dance repertoire of western civilization that has step-by-step written instructions and associated notated music.¹ *Mercantia* representing a vice (perhaps that of a woman selling love) and *Sobria*, its corresponding virtue (that of a woman who resists social advances or, perhaps, advances of love) are instructive of the relationship between dance movement and its music in fifteenth-century Italy. These dances reflect in their construction a commonly seen pattern of organizing artistic elements — with diverse parts that make up a whole. The *balli* require only a few minutes for each of their performances, but they are whole in themselves — cleanly cut miniature jewels of symbolic and dramatic theatrical expression. Similar to rich examples from other arts of the same period, such as gilded altarpieces with diverse painted panels, the dances are multifaceted. These gems of spatial relationships and subtle dance movement merit study by today's dancers, musicians, and like-minded cultural historians.

Mercantia, a dance requiring one woman and three men, has at its dramatic core the woman who dances, in turn, with each of the three men. Like a merchant who does business with various clients, she, in the center of a spatial triangle, "receives" the men each time the dance is repeated. She does not dance only with the man she was originally paired with at the onset of the dance as does the woman in *Sobria*, rather, upon each repeat of the opening section of the music with its corresponding dance action, she has a different partner.

In contrast to *Mercantia*, *Sobria*, a dance requiring one woman and five men, is about a woman who remains loyal to her original partner. She goes to the middle of a square spatial formation at whose corners stand four men. Two by two, they try to entice her to dance with them, but she resists their symbolic advances and remains true to her consort by dancing only with him. The woman is finally led out of the square by her

partner who has spent the greater part of the dance outside the square and facing away from the woman.

The notated music associated with each dance corresponds to the overall structure of the dance, by consisting of small parts or episodes. Much different in concept than that of modern music, the transcribed musical notation for these *balli* reflects short phrases—usually four-bars long of a specific meter with its associated tempo — that are often repeated and are followed by phrases of different meters. A *ballo* can be a mixture of four different rhythms and usually begins with the skip-like rhythm *saltarello* (often transcribed as 3/4 or 6/8) although a *ballo*, at times, can begin with the faster *piva* (2/4 or 6/8) or the apparently slower *quaternaria* (4/4). The rhythm considered the most elegant, the *bassadanza* (6/4), is the slowest, and a phrase of it is almost always found in a *ballo*.

In the dance repertoire of Domenico da Piacenza and his students Antonio da Cornazano and Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro, there were two major types of dances for which choreographic descriptions exist: *balli* and *bassadanza*. A *bassadanza* essentially requires the sounding throughout the dance of a *bassadanza* 6/4-rhythm (or an equivalent) like a waltz in modern society requires the sounding of a waltz rhythm. Although the *bassadanza* is not of concern in this present study, it can be considered homogeneous, or generally even in musical texture, as opposed to a *ballo* which is heterogenous.

That *balli* can have as many as four different rhythms parallels patterns of "fourness" seen in other aspects of fifteenth-century Italian constructions and thought. The world at that time was still seen as having four elements: earth, water, air, and fire. The conception of the four temperaments also existed. Emerging in music in the mid-fifteenth century were four-voiced composition where previously the norm had been those of three

voices. The need to harmonize elements in music, figurative of other aspects of the time, led to a decrease in dissonance and a new style of composing by points of imitation. This sense of integration seen in music, or people's general need at the time for coherence of artistic elements, is represented in the grouped and connected short sections within the *balli* — a reflection

of the moderated use of diverse elements instead of an excessive use of a single element.

In his dance treatise, of which various extant copies are scattered in repositories throughout the world, Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro acknowledges this conception of fourness:

★

155 ma e conforme Impero che da quat-ro
concordanti e principal voci for-
mata e composta alle nostre quattro
principal compositioni corrispondente

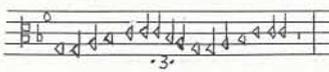
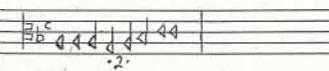
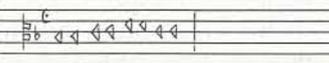
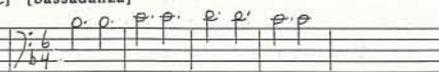
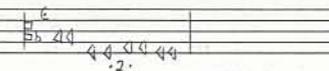
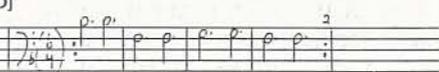
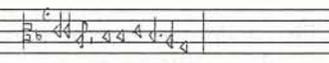
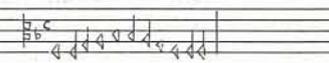
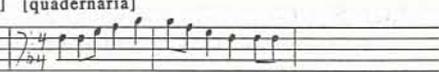
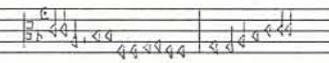
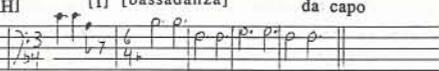
155 ... that from four
harmonious and fundamental voices
(music) is formed and correlated to our four
fundamental aspects²

★

During Guglielmo's period, an individual was considered healthy if the "elements" within her/him were balanced with others or moderated. It is likely that a *ballo* could function as a small reflection of this macroscopic vision of humanity and world order.

numbers) follows of all the Italian words and fifteenth-century musical notation corresponding line-by-line to the original in Antonio da Cornazano's treatise.³ Face to face with this transcription is an English translation and a modern interpretation of the musical notation. In brackets are letters both above the modern transcription of the music and within the English translation so that the reader can see the sectionalization of music and dance action.⁴

In order to acquaint the reader with the five-hundred year old dance materials fresh and relevant even today, a transcription of selected passages (with added line

| transcribed fifteenth-century musical notation of <u>Mercantia</u> | hypothesis of modern musical notation |
|---|---|
|  | [A] [saltarello]  |
|  | [B] [quaternaria]  |
|  | [C] [bassadanza]  |
|  | [D]  |
|  | [E] [F]  |
|  | [G] [quaternaria]  |
|  | [H] [1] [bassadanza] da capo  |

- 510 Vegniro mo a quelli balli et basse-
danze che son fora del vulgo fa-
bricati per Sale signorile e da esser
sol danzati per dignissime madonne
et non plebeie
- 515 Mercantia in canto
[Music notation] Intrata
Mercantia e ballo appropriato al
nome che una sol donna danza
con tre homini e da audientia a
520 tutti gli ne fossero pure assai co-
me quella che fa mercantia d' a-
manti. Et comincia cosi. La donna
e a mano con uno homo inanzi al-
tri dui homini detro loro a mano
525 a mano. In tale ordine fanno un-
deci tempi di saltarello et ferman-
si. Appresso gli homini che son de-
tro ala donna se allargano con
sei riprese in traverso l' uno a man
530 sinistra l' altro a man dritta. Poi
la donna da meza volta da lato
mancho et l' homo suo compagno
va innanzi con tre doppi comenzan-
do col sinistro. L' homo che e a man
535 dritta della donna riscontro si par-
te con doi passi sempi et uno dop-
pio comenzando col sinistro et va
a tocchare la mano ala donna e
senza perdere tempo si volta a mano
540 dritta con dui sempi et uno doppio
comenzando col dritto e torna al
suo loco come era. Appresso lo suo
compagno ch' e a man sinistra fa
lo simile et la donna ogni volta
545 che ciaschun di questi dui gli ha toccha-
ta la mano mentre che 'l torna al
suo loco da una voltatonda. Poi
l' homo che e di sopra da meza volta
dal canto dritto com' e chiamato.
550 Poi quelli homini che sono di sotto
se pigliano per le mani et fanno doi
sempi et un doppio col pie dritto
inanzi e si scambiano di posta. Ap-
presso quello homo che e di sopra
555 si parte con dui tempi di saltarello
comenzando col sinistro et se ne va
presso la donna. Poi subito la donna
com' e chiamata si volta in verso l' ho-
mo e l' homo gli toccha la mano con
- 510 I will now present those **balli** and **bassadanze**
which are beyond the mundane, made
for elegant halls, and only to be
danced by very proper ladies,
not by those of the lower classes:
- 515 The notated music for **Mercantia**:
- The **Mercantia** is a **ballo** befitting its
name in which only one woman dances
with three men and gives her attention to
520 each one-as though there might be very many,
much like a courtesan who trades lovers.
(A) It begins like this: the woman
is hand in hand with a man, ahead of the
other two men holding hands in the rear.
525 In this formation, they perform eleven
tempi of the **saltarello** and stop.
(B) Then the men who are behind
the woman spread out with
six **riprese** to the sides, one man
530 to the left and the other to the right. (C) Then
the woman gives a **meza volta** from the left
side, and her partner
goes forward with three **doppi** beginning
on the left foot. (D) The man who is to the
535 right of the woman "makes eye contact with her"
and departs with two **sempi** and a **doppio**,
beginning with the left. He goes to
touch the hand of the woman.
Without losing time, he turns to the
540 right, and with two **sempi** and a **doppio**,
beginning with the right, he returns to
his place as he was. Then, his
companion who is on the left side does
the same. The woman executes a **voltatonda**
545 every time that each of these two men
has touched her hand while
he returns to his place. (E) Then
the man who is forward performs a **meza volta**
from the right side as he is called.
550 (F) Then those men who are to the rear
take each other by the hand and perform two
sempi and a **doppio** with the right foot
leading, and exchange places. (G) Then
that man who is in front
555 departs with two **tempi** of **saltarello**
beginning with the left, and goes up to
the woman. (H) Immediately as she
is called, the woman turns towards the man.
(I) He touches her hand with

560 una riverentia sul pie sinistro e
 due continentie comenzando dal
 pe' senestro. Appresso quello me-
 desmo homo va da man sinistra
 della donna et con dui sempi et
 565 uno doppio va a pigliare l' homo che
 e di sotto a man dritta e quello ch' era
 a man sinistra viene a pigliare
 la donna con quelli medesmi pas-
 si e rimane lui con la donna si
 570 che ciaschum si trova la sua volta
 con lei et incomincia.
 Sobria come d' inanzi e detto e
 ballo tutto contrario della mer-

560 a **riverentia** on the left foot and
 two **continentie** beginning on
 the left foot. Then this same
 man goes from the left side
 of the woman. With two **sempi** and
 565 a **doppio**, he goes to take the man who
 is in the back on the right side. He who was
 on the left side comes to get
 the woman with the same step-units
 and remains with her.
 570 Each man has his turn
 with her. It repeats.
 The **Sobria**, as was mentioned earlier, is a
ballo entirely opposite (thematically) to the
Mercantia.

transcribed fifteenth-century musical
 notation of Sobria

hypothesis of modern musical notation

[A] [saltarello]

[B] [quadernaria]

[C] [piva]

[D] [bassadanza]

[E] [piva]

[F] * [saltarello]

[G] [saltarello]

[H] [piva] da capo

* [called quadernaria in line 932,
 probably is bassadanza]

- 890 cantia nel quale la donna s' attiene a colui solo che prima l' ha condotta in ballo et fa ssi in sei cinque homini et una donna a dui a dui ala fila e la donna e di sopra a
- 895 mano a mano con uno homo. In tale ordine fanno el saltarello et ferman si. Poi quelli quatro homini di detro se allargano con quatro riprese et fanno uno quadrangulo. Alhora l' homo di sopra piglia la mano della donna et fanno tutti dui a torno a torno in piva una voltatonda et come
- 900 l' homo ha finita la volta lassa la donna et va in piva lei continuando in mezo di quelli quatro et si ferma voltando si verso el suo compagno. Poi gli due primi homini fanno uno doppio comenzando col dritto et una riverentia porgendo la mano ala donna per toccar gli la et ella non volè ma si tira alquanto in detro et tutti tre insieme si voltano le spalle
- 905 l' un l' altro et gli omini pigliano uno salto et tornano con quello medesimo doppio al suo loco et la donna intanto che loro fanno quello doppio da una volta.
- 910 El simile proprio fanno gli altri dui di sotto et cosi la donna a loro. Poi l' homo di sopra si volta et viene con dui sempi et uno doppio incontro ala donna et ella a lui con quello proprio comenzando col sinistro e gli tocca la mano senza prendere et tornano tutti dui al suo loco con dui doppi comenzando col dritto et si venghono a voltare le spalle tutti dui poi gli dui primi homini fanno tre tempi di saltarello in quaternaria passando per la posta l' uno dell' altro et venghono detro alle spalle
- 915 della donna et quello da mano dritta cegna al compagno che tempi la donna et ello cegna ad esso in questo la donna si volta come coruciata et elli con lei et
- 920 pigliano uno salto et tornano a le poste l' uno in quella del' altro con uno doppio. Questo medesimo fan-
- 890 In this, the woman attends only to the man who originally led her to the dance. (A) It is done with six: five men and a woman, two by two in a column, the woman in front, hand-in-hand with a man. In this formation they perform the **saltarello** and stop. (B) Then those four men who are behind widen with four **riprese** and make a square.
- 895 (C) Then the man in front takes the hand of the woman, and both execute a **voltatonda**, turning around each other in **piva**. When the man has finished the turn, he leaves the woman.
- 900 Continuing, she goes in **piva** into the middle of the four men, stops, and turns toward her partner. (D) Then the first two men perform a **doppio** beginning with the right and a **riverentia**, offering the (ir) hand (s) to the woman for the purpose of touching hers. She does not oblige, but withdraws somewhat. All three turn their backs to each other. The men do a **salto** and return with a similar **doppio** to their places. While they do this **doppio** the woman executes a (meza?) **volta**.
- 905 The other two men to the rear perform exactly the same (sequence), and the women does likewise (her sequence) toward them. (E) Then the man in front turns and comes with two **sempi** and a **doppio** to meet the woman, and she does the same to him, beginning with the left. She touches his hand without taking it, and both return to their places with two **doppi**, beginning with the right.
- 910 They end up having their backs to one another. (F) Then the first two men perform three **tempi** of **saltarello** in **quaternaria**, passing through the place of the other. They come up behind the woman's back, and the man on the right hand gestures to his companion to tempt the woman, and he gestures (back) to him. At this, the woman turns as if offended, and they (turn) with her,
- 915 doing a **salto**, and return to each other's place with a **doppio**. The other two men

no gli altri dui et il simile gli fa
 la donna et pigliano presto l' ho-
 945 mo di sopra e la donna el tempo
 in saltarello et vanno circondan-
 do la donna quelli dui di sotto
 et l' homo quelli dui di sopra et
 venghono tutti dui in mezo a scon-
 950 trar si et si toccano la mano et sen-
 za perdere tempo l' homo torna in
 detro con dui altri tempi al suo lo-
 co et in quello la donna da una
 voltatonda. Poi gli omini tutti
 955 quatro insieme fanno tre tempi
 di piva l' un nella posta dell' altro com-
 pagno et uno passo sempio come
 sono gionti nella posta l' un dell' al-
 tro et l' homo di sopra da intanto
 960 in piva una voltatonda et questi
 dui di sopra senz' altra indugia van-
 no pur cosi in piva in la posta di quel-
 li di sotto et quelli di sotto in lalo-
 ro et mentre che loro fanno cosi
 965 la donna da la sua voltatonda inpi-
 va et lo compagno suo la va a pren-
 dere in piva e la mena fora in piva
 mentre che quelli quatro di sotto si
 stringhono in riprese l' uno appresso
 970 l' altro et incomincia.
 Ditti sono tutti gli balli solemni
 e singolari fatti ultimamente
 per lo Re dell' arte mio solo maestro
 et compatriota Misser dominichino
 975 no da piacenza cavagliero avra-
 to per la sua perfetta et famosissima
 virtute.

These dances continue to delight modern audiences with their clarity and succinctness in dance action and associated music. Combined with this clarity, the heterogenous natures of the *balli* in relationship to their lengths make these dances distinct from the dances from

¹ There are approximately one hundred extant choreographic descriptions often found with variations when two or more sources convey the same dance. The eight choreographic descriptions of *Mercantia* (the first four sources below, at Paris and Roma, have the associated musical notation) are found in the following sources: Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, fonds it. 972, 973, and 476; Roma, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, codice Capponiano 203; Siena, Biblioteca Comunale, L.V.29; Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Magliabecchiana-Strozziana, XIX, 88; Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Antinori 13; New York Public Library, Dance Collection, Lincoln Center, MGZMBZ-Res., 72—254. The two choreographic

perform the same (sequence), and the
 woman treats them the same way. (G) The man
 945 in front and the women immediately “take
 the tempo” in *saltarello* and go circling;
 the women (around) the two in the rear,
 and the man (around) the two in front.
 Both come into the middle to meet one another,
 950 touch hands, and, without
 losing time (a musical beat), the man returns
 to his place with two more *tempi*,
 as the women executes a
voltatonda. (H) Then the four men,
 955 all together, perform three *tempi*
 of *piva*, each (going) to the place of his companion
 and a *sempio* in order to
 (finally arrive there);
 meanwhile, the man in front executes
 960 a *voltatonda* in *piva*. The two men
 in front go without further delay,
 still in *piva*, to the places of those
 on the rear and vice versa.
 While they do this,
 965 the women executes a *voltatonda* in
piva, and her partner goes in *piva*
 to join her. In *piva*, he leads her out
 while the four behind
 draw close together in *riprese*.
 970 And it repeats.
 All of the most formal and
 extraordinary dances — recently choreographed
 by the king of the art, my only teacher
 and countryman, master Dominichino
 975 da Piacenza, an honored courtier
 known by his perfect and very famous
 virtue — have been described herein.

★

any other historical period of Western civilization. They continue to be worthy of our interest. They are jewel-like miniatures of human interaction with cleanly-cut facets of dramatic episodes. ■

descriptions of *Sobria* are found in Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, fonds it. 972, and Roma, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, codice Capponiano 203. Both of these sources have the accompanying musical notation for the *balli*.

² Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, fonds it. 973. (Present author's English translation and line numbers added for the reader's convenience).

Roma, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, codice Capponiano 203.

⁴ Some of the author's interpretations of the dance steps can be found in "Studies in Fifteenth-century Italian Dance: *Belriguardo in Due*; a Critical Discussion", in the *Proceeding Dance History Scholar Tenth Annual Conference*, Irvine, California, February 13—15, 1987; and "Una Fonte Sconosciuta della Danza Italiana del Quattrocento", in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi sul Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro*, Pesaro, Villa Miralfiore, July 16—18, 1987. Many fine studies with reconstructed steps in Labanotation can be found elsewhere, including Ingrid Brainard's *Three Court Dances of the Early Renaissance* (New

York: Dance Notation Bureau, 1971) and Emma Lewis Thomas's "Music and Dance in Boccaccio's Time-Part II", in *Dance Research Journal* X/2 (1978). There are many practicing dance historians such as Barbra Sparti, Andrea Francalanci, Alessandro Pontremoli, Patrizia La Rocca, Madeleine Inglehearn, and Diana Cruickshank, all of whom have hypotheses on the proper performance of the dance steps of this fifteenth-century dance repertoire. None of us fully agree regarding the significance or the proper arrangement of the factual material supporting the various hypotheses.

★

Glossary for Italian dance terminology and hypotheses for reconstruction:

two *continentie*, beginning on the left in *bassadanze* (6/4): rise and step on the left ball to the left side and sink 3 beats, step on the right ball to the right side and sink 3 beats

doppio (on the left in *bassadanza*): step on ball of left foot 2 beats, step right ball beat, step left ball and slowly sink 2 beats, pose nobly 1 beat

mezavolta half turn usually done as a pivot during the

ripresa (on the left in *bassadanza* 6/4): while the right leg holds the weight the left leg circles counterclockwise one and a half revolutions 2 beats, weight is transferred while sinking on the left 3 beats

ripresa (in *piva*): (the concept is the same as that for a *ripresa* in *quadernaria* but twice as fast, the leg gestures only 1/2 circle before receiving the weight)

ripresa (on the left in *quadernaria* (4/4)): while the right leg holds the weight the left leg circles counterclockwise one and a half revolutions 2 beats, weight is transferred while sinking on the left 2 beats and the right foot is closed gracefully

riverentia (on the left foot in *bassadanza*): step side on the left 3 beats, sink while sliding the right back and sharing weight on both feet 2 counts, transfer weight to the right foot that is behind 1 count

saltarello (step-sequence in 3/4) on the left: step left 1 beat, step right and hop and land 1 beat, step left 1 beat; or step left 1 beat, step right and hop 1 beat, land and step left 1 beat

saltarello (step-sequence in 3/4) when performed in *quadernaria* (4/4) (on the left): step left 1 beat, step right and hop 1 beat, land 1 beat, step left 1 beat

salto (jump): this is performed by jumping off and landing on two feet, and sometimes requires a turn in mid air; it may take an entire measure or only part of one

two *sempi* (on the left in *bassadanza*): step on left ball and gracefully lower taking 3 beats for the action, likewise for 3 beats step on right ball and gracefully lower

tempi: one meaning of a *tempo* is that of the equivalent of a modern measure or bar

voltatonda (in *bassadanza*): there are several species of these whole turns, but the most common requires two *sempi* beginning on the right and a *ripresa* (see descriptions of two *sempi* and a *ripresa* above)

voltatonda (in *piva*): use the *piva* step-sequence and turn clockwise, unless specified in the description of a dance, around a point in space, (see description of *piva* above)

Examples of Labanotated hypotheses for a modern reconstruction of mid-fifteenth-century Italian dance steps:

a) *saltarello* step-sequence on the left foot (3/4) b) *ripresa* on the left foot in *quadernaria* (4/4), c) *mezavolta* at the end of *doppio* in *bassadanza*, d) *doppio* beginning on the left foot in *bassadanza*, e) two *sempi* beginning on the left foot in *bassadanza*, f) two *continentie* beginning on the left foot in *bassadanza*, g) "typical" *voltatonda* in *bassadanza*, h) *riverentia* on the left foot, i) *piva* step-sequence on the left foot (2/4).

