

An analysis of the characteristic meter of French courante based on the dance literatures of the first half of the 18th century.

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The interchange of duple and triple meter has been regarded as one of the most important characteristics of French courante in the baroque era. Indeed this dance has ambiguous rhythm that often confuses players. But close investigation of dance literatures and choreographies of the 18th century reveals that the ambiguous meter of courante corresponds to the actual movement of this dance.

The most common way to dance courante is to repeat the basic step unit called pas de courante. Dance literatures tell us that this step consists of two steps. The first step occurs on the third beat and the second step occupies the first and second beats of the next bar. This way of dancing courante was called courante simple, and we can find one accompanying melody in choreographies of courante simple. This melody consists of the repetition of one basic rhythmic pattern. So we can find the relationship between dance and the music in courante by comparing the movements of pas de courante and the rhythmic pattern of the accompanying melody.

The melody for courante simple always has a dotted quarter note on the third beat. This note corresponds to the first step of pas de courante and makes it clear that the step unit begins on that beat. On the other hand, there is a long note on the first beat and this note is followed by conjunct motion into the next beat. This motion of the melody emphasizes the majestic character of the second step. This step is a long glide and it is unclear about when it ends. Therefore the accompanying melody doesn't show the second beat clearly and also expresses the endlessness. And the absence of the second beat makes the meter of courante ambiguous.