

International conference
Celebrating the 300th anniversary of the publication of
“Le *Maître à danser*” by Pierre Rameau (1725)

“Teaching the Manner of Performing all Steps...”
The Technical Dance Treatises (1700-1750)

11 and 12 December 2025

Paris, Bibliothèque musicale La Grange-Fleuret (Fondation Royaumont)

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The year 2025 will mark the 300th anniversary of the publication of a major work for the understanding of the dance of the 18th century: *Le Maître à danser. Qui enseigne la manière de faire tous les différens pas de danse dans toute la régularité de l'art, & de conduire les bras à chaque pas* [English: The Dancing-Master which Teaches the Manner of Performing all the Different Steps in Dancing in All Regularity of the Art and How to Move the Arms with Each Step] by Pierre Rameau (1674-1748). Around the same time, he also published his *Abregé de la nouvelle methode, dans l'art d'ecrire ou de tracer toutes sortes de danses de ville* [Summary of the New Method in the Art of Writing or Tracing All Sorts of Ball Dances]. *Le Maître à danser* was disseminated widely, was republished multiple times until 1748 and translated into English by John Essex in 1728 and adapted into Spanish by Ferriol. It exerted strong influence on many subsequent publications, in France as well as elsewhere, whether in treatises on French dance technique or in articles on dance in encyclopaedias or dictionaries. Today it is considered one of the central sources for the reconstruction of Baroque Dance.

On the anniversary of this publication, we wish to review the history and the content of the *Maître à danser*, but also the circumstances of its creation, situating it more generally in the history of treatises on dance technique during the first half of the 18th century. The conference will also cover practices of which the treatise merely bears traces of, which have only been revealed in recent research. The objective of this colloquium will thus be twofold: To gain a fuller picture of the role of this work in the 18th century and its effects on current practices in the reconstruction of Early Dance.

The **first axis** of the colloquium covers the historical and social context of *Maître à danser*: The main stages of the life and career of Pierre Rameau, active in Lyon, Strasbourg and Paris, as well as prosopographical aspects have already been scrutinized, yet we still require a better understanding of his practice as a dancing master, his students and the contexts of his own education. The study of conserved copies of his works in the main libraries, but also the analysis of the didactical approach employed by Rameau in his treatises, permits us to renew and deepen different forms of enquiry: Who were the readers and especially the users of Pierre Rameau's works? In which pedagogical contexts were they used? What can the texts and images of Rameau's treatises convey about the practices of dancers and distinguished persons of the 18th century? The learning of good manners and civility, which occupies many chapters of the work, merit a deeper enquiry and comparison with other sources, aimed at a better understanding of its modalities of application.

A **second axis** of the conference is interested in the exposition of technique by Pierre Rameau. While the moral, apologetic, generic or aesthetic dimensions of dance treatises have been the subject of many studies, this is less the case for the subject which is at the heart of their specificity: They are texts orientated towards the description or the prescription of danced movement. Regarding this elusive object, it is the complex and instantaneous combination of heterogeneous elements (space, time, energy, body weight...) which one must seize. By which processes and by which means are movement, its continuation, and its synthesis, each of which operates in its own parameters, consigned, organised, regulated, abbreviated or – conversely – overly determined? Of what does the production of choreographic technical text consist, a setting into words of actions but also of intentions and qualities? Of what does it bear witness – of a global, systematic approach to dance and its transmission? In what bandwidth of possible choices of method, of a “manner of teaching”, does it reveal an analysis or an understanding of how to view a form of thinking about movement? What links can one establish with contemporaneous dance notation systems? What musical understandings are manifested by these teachings, and what are their rapports with contemporaneous forms of musical practice, theory, and repertoire? What criteria precede the choice of musical and choreographic examples? How do the treatises bear witness to historical perceptions of the particularities of the body, space and time, as well as anatomical, physical and physiological, geometric, and more general currents of thinking of the early 18th century? Another essential point for the understanding of this source type is what the underlying and unspoken matters of a technical treatise consist of: What aspects can it tacitly pass by as everyone in the period is aware of them? How do we uncover these implicit matters, these pieces of evidence of forgotten practices? More generally, what conceptions of dance are conveyed

by the technical texts, especially relating to its function, to those who dance or to a culture of the body which supports a strongly developed form of self-representation? In what ways is a treatise of technique a bearer of norms as well as of innovations, and how – within the defined scope – can it propose processes of composition and the latitude of interpretation?

A **third axis** replaces the close examination of Rameau with that of a much larger group of newly produced works dedicated to dance practice throughout Europe – to writings dealing with forms of notation, but even more to treatises focused on the execution of ballroom dances and specifically the “dances de ville”, before the dance books shift to an almost exclusive coverage on the minuet and the country dances in the mid-18th century. Most of the German sources, particularly the writings of Behr (1703, 1709 and 1713), Bonnefond (1705), Bonin (1712), and Taubert (1717), appeared before the publication of Rameau’s works in 1725, but afterwards multiple works in the Low Countries (Sol, 1725), in England (Tomlinson, 1735), in Italy (Dufort, 1728) or in Spain (Ferriol, 1745) offer new models of explanation or illustrations of the steps and even of arm movements. Many approaches can be investigated: The influences of *Maître à danser* on the writing of other dance treatises, or, more generally, the different forms that European treatises took, their particularities, motivations, contexts, their audience, etc. How do we interpret these specificities – do these works constitute the elaboration of an individual style, be it national or not? What degrees of filiation or parentage can one discern between different treatments? The comparisons on technical details can prove crucial to establishing the constants, variants, deviations, systems, and adaptations, while questioning the way these circulations, influences, transfers, and appropriations transform a form of dance of French origin towards a more or less uniform European style. The choice of musical and choreographic repertoire used as pedagogical examples, as well as their circulation, can also provide an important space for comparison.

A **fourth axis** looks towards the reception of the works of Pierre Rameau, in order to evaluate how the publication of these books impacted the more general history of dance, its transmission, its social impact and its institutions. Le *Maître à danser* was re-issued many times and is present in a large number of libraries, and certain of its formulations were taken up textually in later publications, notably the Encyclopédie edited by Diderot, d’Alembert and Jaucourt (1751-1772) or also the Dictionnaire de la danse of Compan (1787). This dissemination gave space to simplifications, adaptations, and new combinations. Here one may undertake a more than exhaustive search of citations in other sources, and in determining the contexts and strategies one may observe how the conservation of technical descriptions neither fully corresponds to a permanence nor to a rapid evolution of practices in the same period. The reception of *Abbrégé* allows us to approach the fierce polemic by dancing master Hardouin about changes to the form of notation set down by Feuillet in 1700; in observing the course of this conflict, one may reach new conclusions regarding the implied role of the Académie royale de Danse. This polemic contributes to a clarification of the position of Rameau vis-à-vis his readership as well as his colleagues. Finally, his late re-edition of the “dances de ville” in his new system of notation invites us to question the permanence of this specific repertoire and the later echo of the annual publications to which it is linked: The annual publication of the notations of these figured ballroom dances is interrupted the same year as Rameau published his works, namely in 1725.

A **fifth and final axis** of the colloquium concerns the current applications of the *Maître à danser*, from its first (re-) readers of the 20th century up to current analyses by choreographers and dancers engaged in the practice of reconstituting ancient ballroom and stage dances. How should we define and elaborate on our reading of ancient technical texts? How does one support re-enactment by a contextualisation of formulations, by a history of vocabulary, and by a tracing of implicit notions? Must this appraisal of the reinterpretation into action of treatises be accompanied by re-readings, adaptations of statements for interpretation, experimentations with varied and novel solutions, and a constant back and forth between text and action? How does the reading of Pierre Rameau contribute to a manner of re-enacting by way of movement, in a current technique, and in a sense of reconstituted practices?

A conference of two days (11-12 December 2025), at the Bibliothèque musicale La Grange-Fleuret, centered on scientific papers.

A half-day with a round table on baroque dance today, with danced presentations of the repertoire notated or mentioned by Pierre Rameau – notably together with Early Dance professionals (Federation ProDA).

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