

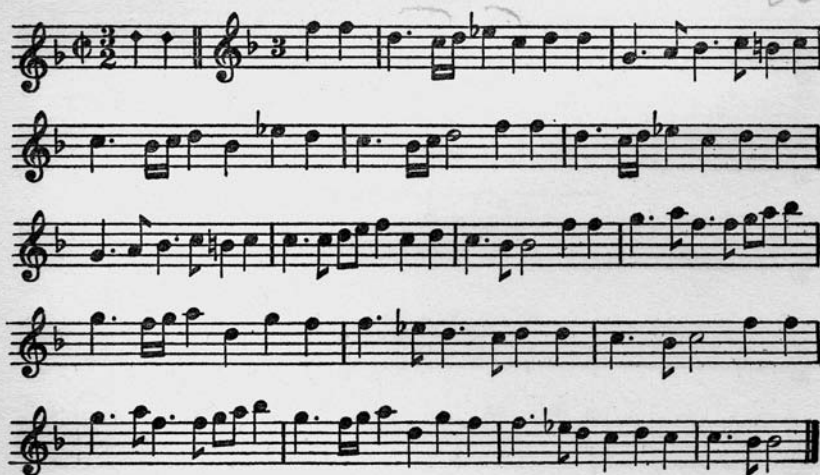
## **A Manual, a Model, and a Sketch** **The “Bransle Gay” Dance Rhythm in Stravinsky’s Ballet *Agon***

by Mark D. Richardson

When discussing Stravinsky’s ballet *Agon*, musicians frequently marvel at the composer’s ability to combine the work’s diverse movements – movements that range from centrality to serialism – into a coherent and unified whole. The diverse changes in pitch organization from the centric passages in “Pas-de-Quatre” to the dodecaphonic “Bransle Double” were the result of Stravinsky’s adoption and refinement of serial techniques in works such as *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas* (1954) and *Canticum Sacrum* (1955) that were written during the years intervening between *Agon*’s inception (1953) and completion (1957). Equally remarkable, however, is Stravinsky’s intense interest in incorporating a variety of Renaissance dance forms and rhythms within *Agon*.

Stravinsky’s decision to include Renaissance dances within his “concerto for the dance” was influenced by Lincoln Kirstein, the director of the New York City Ballet, who along with the ballet’s choreographer George Balanchine commissioned *Agon*. In an effort to encourage Stravinsky to incorporate courtly dance models within his new work, Kirstein sent the composer a newly published edition of a sixteenth-century dance manual by Fernand De Lauze entitled *Apologie de la Danse*.<sup>1</sup> The new edition not only contained an English translation of the De Lauze text, but also presented the editor’s clear comparison of the specific dance descriptions of De Lauze to those of other dance instruction texts of the day, including Thoinot Arbeau’s *Orchésographie* and Marin Mersenne’s *Harmonie universelle*.<sup>2</sup> Of particular value to the composer (due to the flowery and often ambiguous language of the dance master) was the inclusion of Mersenne’s description of the specific rhythmic pattern (likened to the strong and weak accentuations in Greek prosody) as well as tempo, meter, and dance steps for each dance. Also included were Mersenne’s musical examples of several Renaissance dances discussed in the text, including dance forms for which Stravinsky created his own like-named dance: the Bransle Simple, Bransle Gay, Bransle de Poitou (renamed “Bransle Double” in *Agon*), Sarabande (“Saraband-step” in *Agon*) and the Galliard, which proved to clarify the defining musical characteristics of each dance. This discussion piqued

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Example 1: Fernand De Lauze, *Apologie de la Danse: A Treatise of Instruction in Dancing and Deportment*, ed. by Joan Wildeblood (London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1952), p. 155, with annotations by Igor Stravinsky (Igor Stravinsky Collection).

Stravinsky's interest, as evidenced by the annotations he made in red pencil, underlining passages in the text (*Example 1*). Moreover, Stravinsky's copy of the De Lauze text (which is catalogued among the vast collection of Stravinsky's personal books and scores at the Paul Sacher Foundation) reveals that the composer not only marked sections of the text that interested him, but he also studied Mersenne's musical examples carefully. In her discussion of the Bransle Gay, Joan Wildeblood clarifies that Mersenne's four-step dance rhythm (U U — —) would be completed within one measure of music in  $\frac{3}{2}$  meter. As *Example 1* illustrates, Stravinsky notated in pencil the Bransle Gay rhythmic pattern (U U — —) above the opening measures of Mersenne's musical example for this dance, comparing the abstract rhythmic pattern with the musical passage illustrated by Mersenne. The example also shows Stravinsky's slur markings above the notes within beats one and two to indicate grouping as components of the long value (half note; symbolized by —) of the rhythmic pattern. The dance rhythm can be applied consistently to the remainder of Mersenne's example by noting characteristics in rhythmic durations and/or melodic motion on successive beats. A long duration of the pattern may be signified by a relatively large melodic interval (a leap between quarter notes, as in m. 1) or a rela-

tively long rhythmic value (a dotted-quarter/eighth-note combination, as in m. 2). Short durational values (quarter-note pairs) are associated with beat three, signaled either by pitch repetition or melodic stepwise motion.

Previous studies have referred to Stravinsky's use of the De Lauze dance manual while composing *Agon*.<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, however, this source has not been studied in combination with Stravinsky's sketches for information relevant to the ballet's rhythmic structure. A facsimile of an early sketch for the "Bransle Gay" reveals the significance of the dance's characteristic rhythmic pattern in the movement's construction. As revealed in *Example 2*, Stravinsky notated the Bransle Gay dance rhythm on the top left corner of the sketch draft, and the rhythm is found as an ostinato throughout – most often notated on the middle staff of each system where it is later labeled "cast.-dance" as a reminder that the rhythm will be played by the castanets. The notation of the rhythm above the staff of the second system before the ensemble re-enters illustrates his plan for the ostinato to sound continually. Stravinsky took great care to align rhythmically the dance rhythm (maintained in a constant  $\frac{3}{8}$  meter) with the constantly changing meter of the ensemble (frequently changing from  $\frac{3}{8}$  to  $\frac{7}{16}$  or  $\frac{5}{16}$ ), as shown by the solid and dotted bar lines. Curiously, Stravinsky has crossed out a portion of one measure of the castanet ostinato near the end of the second system; it seems he decided even at this early stage of sketching that the castanet rhythm would be heard in isolation only in between phrases, and he planned the interplay between the dance rhythm ostinato and the music of the remainder of the ensemble so they coincide metrically at the ends of phrases. Measures containing only the castanet ostinato were inserted between the fourth and fifth measures and following the final measure of the music of the third system, marking the ends of phrases that will open and close the movement. Stravinsky included choreographic instructions with these insertions: the solo female dancer is to turn her head toward a male dancer each time the dance rhythm is stated.

While the Bransle Gay dance rhythm is obviously present in the castanet ostinato, the music of the remaining ensemble is based on the same pattern, if rests are included as rhythmic events (*Example 3*). Here the original dance rhythm can be distinguished along with its rotated permutations, expansions, and truncations. For example, both the original rhythm (U U — —) and its rotation (U — — U) occur in the flutes (mm. 311–13). The second flute part also contains an expansion of this rhythm (U — — —) in measure 314. The first bassoon part contains the original rhythm at the beginning and end of the opening phrase (mm. 311–14) with an expanded version (U U — U U) stated twice in between. In measure 314, the harp's motive is a truncated version of the original in which the final eighth note is shortened to a sixteenth note. Such manipulations (rotation, expansion, and truncation) are common in the ballet, being applied to both surface rhythms and ordered pitch-class segments.

Handwritten musical score for "ΑΓΩΝ" (Agon) by Stravinsky. The score includes a piano introduction and a section for castanets. A box at the bottom left contains the title "ΑΓΩΝ" and the subtitle "Ballet for twelve dancers". To the right of the score, there are handwritten notes: "Dance only turning her head to see of the male dancers". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

As revealed in *Example 3* and the final score, the two strands of polymer align at the downbeat of measure 315 where the castanet ostinato sounds in isolation. These measures containing only the castanet ostinato mark the division of the opening section into two phrases (mm. 310–14 and mm. 315–19) and the division between the first and second sections of the movement (m. 320). The return of opening phrase (this time without its

Example 2:  
Igor Stravinsky,  
"Bransle Gay"  
from *Agon*  
(1953–57),  
short score  
(Igor Stravinsky  
Collection).

The image shows a handwritten musical score for Igor Stravinsky's "Bransle Gay" from the opera Agon. The score consists of several staves of music, including a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The notation is dense and includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings. There are several handwritten annotations in the lower right section of the score, including the words "solo", "dancer", "her head -", and "do another", along with some numerical markings like "7", "5", and "3/8". The score is written in ink on aged paper.

cadential measure) and castanet ostinato creates a “rounding” effect, contributing to the overall phrase structure of A, A', B, A. Moreover, the truncated version of the original rhythm presented by the harp in measure 314 (U U — U) also appears at the phrase-rhythm level. That is, a comparison of the duration of each phrase in sixteenth-note values reveals the same pattern: A = 30 (mm. 310–14), A' = 30 (mm. 315–19), B = 61 (mm.

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Flute I, Flute II, Bsn. I, Bsn. II, and Harp, spanning measures 310 to 315. The time signature starts at 3/8 in measure 310, changes to 7/16 in measure 311, 5/16 in measure 312, and returns to 3/8 in measure 315. The Flute parts have complex rhythmic patterns with notes and rests, often with 'U' markings above or below. The Bsn. I part has 'expansion' markings under measures 312 and 313. The Harp part has a 'truncated' marking under measure 314. The Bsn. II part has a long note in measure 314.

Example 3

320–31), and A = 23 (mm. 332–35). Thus, the Bransle Gay dance rhythm is felt throughout the movement from its surface rhythms to its formal construction.

A thorough study of Stravinsky's sketches and the dance resources and musical examples he studied while composing *Agon* can yield new insights into how the composer drew upon and reinterpreted earlier models of Renaissance dance rhythms and gestures. Stravinsky's annotations in the De Lauze dance manual and on sketch drafts offer clues to his use of Mersenne's dance descriptions and rhythms as models for the composition of *Agon*. Exploring the rhythmic details of each dance from the sketches to the final score and their relationship to corresponding Renaissance dance rhythms is the first step toward understanding *Agon*'s rhythmic organization and Stravinsky's process of musical borrowing – a process that imposed limits yet complemented the variety and unity achieved within the work's evolving pitch language.

<sup>1</sup> Fernand De Lauze, *Apologie de la Danse: A Treatise of Instruction in Dancing and Deportment*, ed. by Joan Wildeblood (London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1952).

<sup>2</sup> Thoinot Arbeau, *Orchésographie et traité en forme de dialogue, par lequel toutes personnes peuvent facilement apprendre et pratiquer l'honnête exercice des dances* (Langres, 1588; reprint, Hildesheim etc.: Olms, 1989), English edition translated by Cyril W. Beaumont (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Dance Horizons, 1925); Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle contenant la théorie et la pratique de la musique* (Paris: Sébastien Cramoisy, 1636–37; reprint, Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> References to Stravinsky's use of the De Lauze manual are also found in: Laurence E. Sherr, "The Genesis of *Agon*: Stravinsky, Balanchine and the New York City Ballet" (DMA Thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1988), 22–49; Susannah Tucker, "Stravinsky and His Sketches: The Composing of *Agon* and Other Serial Works of the 1950's" (Ph. D. Dissertation, Oxford University, 1992), 141–81; and Charles M. Joseph, *Stravinsky and Balanchine: A Journey of Invention* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2002), 228–54.