

Cascarde for Fencers: Weaponizing Gracca Amorosa

A well bred Italian gentleman in the 16th century would be expected not only to be skilled with the sword, but also at dancing. In fact, the dance master Cesare Negri mentions two Milanese individuals who were both dance and fencing masters. (Pugliese, p. 1) It seems logical, therefore, that the lessons learned in one would be applicable to the other, especially in the case of footwork. In Fabritio Caroso's *Nobiltà di Dame* (1600), he says that a man wearing a sword during lively dances "should hold it with his left hand, so that it will not wave around wildly; also if he finds himself dancing in a very small space, he should hold it [still] with his left hand, turning it a bit by that hand so that the point will hang forward in order to avoid offense to those seated behind him." Similarly he notes that some men wearing cloaks "wrap themselves up as if swaddled, which has two unfortunate consequences: first that they cover their swordhilts; and the other that the swords are so obstructed that if they should be needed, they could not be [got at], thereby endangering their lives, which is a bad and perilous habit".

For the purposes of this dance we will look at the steps in the dance *Gracca Amorosa*, which is described in Caroso's 1581 *Il Ballarino*. This is a dance done relatively frequently in the SCA, and is of a type known as a *cascarde*. *Cascarde* are set for a pair of dancers, with a verse and chorus structure that makes them easy to learn.

Choreography for Gracca Amorosa

Facing the man, and the lady, after done together the Riverenza minima, will do 4 Seguiti spezzati, 2 in the wheel, and 2 turned to the left, with 4 Trabuchetti facing, starting each thing first with the left, then with the right: after they will follow with 1 Seguito spezzato with the left, and meza Riverenza with the right to the left flank; similarly by opposite they will do to the right flank another Seguito spezzato with the right, and meza Riverenza with the left: then back they will do 2 Seguiti spezzati flanked, and 3 Riprese, with 1 Trabuchetto with the left, turning the left flank inward; they will return then to do 2 other Seguiti spezzati flanked back, with 3 other Riprese, and 1 Trabuchetto, as of above, turning the right flank, and starting with the right.

In the second time, in the wheel they will do 4 Seguiti spezzati, 4 Trabuchetti, and 2 Seguiti spezzati turned to the left, with 2 Scambiate, 1 to the left, the other to the right. They will return then to do the 2 Seguiti spezzati flanked back, with the 3 Riprese, and the Trabuchetto, turning the left flank: they will do the same another turn by opposite, as yet is said in the first time.

In the third time, the man alone will do 2 Seguiti spezzati flanked forward, 4 Trabuchetti, 2 other Seguiti spezzati turned to the left, and 4 other Trabuchetti facing, 1 Passo with the left, and meza Riverenza with the right, turning the body a little to the left flank: he will do then another Passo with the right, and meza Riverenza with the left, turning the body to the right flank. After that they will return to do 2 Seguiti spezzati flanked back together, with 3 Riprese, and 1 Trabuchetto, turning the left flank inward; they will do the same things another turn by opposite.

In the fourth time, the lady alone will do the same change which the man will have done: then together they will do the prestatèd spezzati, as of above.

In the fifth time, together they will do 1 Seguito ordinario to the left flank, 2 Riprese, 2 Trabuchetti, 1 with the right, and the other with the left: they will do the same to the right flank by opposite: then they will do 1 Passo with the left foot, and meza Riverenza with the right, touching the right hands together: they will do the same another turn by opposite: they will return also to do the 2 Seguiti spezzati flanked back 2 turns, with the Riprese, and the Trabuchetto, as they will have done to all the other parts: they will finish the Ballo finally with the Riverenza grave facing.

Step Descriptions from *Il Ballarino*

Riverenza

The Riverenza minima is done in four half times, that is in four beats of music; therefore when it begins the sounding, stand half a beat of time in perspective; in the other half beat push the left foot back, accompanying this as was done in the Riverenza grave diminishing some with the body; and in the third half beat bend the knees with grace; widening them a little; and in the fourth, and final, finish with bringing the feet together.

The *riverenza* is equivalent to taking your fighting stance. Take note that this is not a bow; the torso remains upright throughout, rising and falling only by bending the knees.

Seguito Spezzato

This Seguito spezzato is done in two ordinary beats, in this manner; first (finding the body with feet even) in the first beat it is done to push the left foot half a palm's width forward, and two inches distant from the right, keeping it well flat on the ground; then in the beginning of the second beat, move the right foot, raising first the heel, and with the point of this approach the heel of the left foot; and in the same time which you put the point of the right foot on the ground, raise both the heels and the body together some; then in the end of the beat lower the left heel together with the body. Then in the start of the third beat, pass forward with the right in the same manner which was done with the left: and this Seguito is named spezzato, wherefore in the time in which a Seguito ordinario is done, breaking it, is done two of the above named.

The *spezzato* is a quick step, and quite small as described. In practice it often is done covering more distance, closer to the 15th century *piva*. In a fencing context, the length of the step is determined by the immediate need of maintaining or changing measure with regard to your opponent. The rhythm of the step is the more important: a step with the leading foot, a gathering step with the back foot, and then an immediate further step with the leading foot. This results in a fast advance in two steps rather than a single large step or lunge.

Trabuchetto

One does the Trabuchetto grave in this manner, that is; Finding the body with feet even, widen the left foot 1 hands span distant from the right to the flank in the manner of a hop; and in the same time which the left rests on the ground, raise the right, arriving it about 2 inches near to the left gracefully on the points of the feet, holding both the legs well extended, not touching therefore the ground with the right foot; then withdrawing the right foot to the place where it was found, return with the left to do the effect which will have been done with the right: be careful to wantonize some at each Trabuchetto, and to do it with agility and dexterity of the body: and avoiding doing it as others are accustomed to, the which after having in the start done the hop with the left foot, in accompanying, as was said, the right to that, throwing it with the point of the foot as much clumsily behind the left, which appears most quickly to throw thrusts, which the other: and doing the same then with the left: the effect of which is to guard oneself: and the use of which we owe to correct, and to amend. The time of each of these Trabuchetti is one perfect beat of music.

When performing *trabuchetti*, which are typically found in alternating pairs of left and right, the weight does not fully settle on the left foot before performing the second step. The effect of this is a bouncing hop between the two feet. This can be translated to a quick retreat onto the back foot, and then springing forward into a step or lunge, rather than retreating and settling the weight fully on both feet.

Ripresa Grave

The Riprese grave are done finding the person with feet even, moving first the left foot 4 inches distant to the flank from the right, and raising both the heels a little: then bringing the right even to the left, diminish both together: and each perfect beat will do one Ripresa, as you are able to see in the music: doing more and less, second to what you will find in the Balli.

Ripresa Minima

The Ripresa Minima is done in the time of one beat minima, as shall be demonstrated; therefore mincing it: the which is done, holding the left foot 2 or 3 inches forward of the right, and only one inch or a little more distant from that, and both flat on the ground: then move the heels together towards the left, or right, whichever you have to do, and after those the points with the same method: proceeding to do as many as the dance will command. And be careful to keep the legs extended, and the body straight, without doing any motion of hands or of head.

Scambiata

The Cambio, or Scambiata, which we wish to tell, is done thus, finding the body with feet even, move the left foot, and push it as much forward of the right, which the heel of this would almost stand straight to the point of the right; but distant one half palm's width from that, keeping the left foot well flat on the ground, and the legs straight; then moving the right foot, cross it about to the left, with the point of the right attached out of the heel of the left. Then raising the left foot 3 inches high of the ground, and that having pushed forward in a straight line three more inches from the point of the right, returning it back, has of to equal the right: and all at one time stooping the knees a little and widening them some, finish it gracefully with a Balzetto with feet even.

While the *scambiata* is not a particularly useful step in its pure form, it does introduce the notion of sideways motion by crossing the trailing foot behind the lead foot. If done in a more forward flanking motion, it is not dissimilar to Joachim Meyer's description of the “*zwifachen triß*” (“double step”):

Do a double step thus: when you have stepped with your right foot to his left, and your technique requires that you should step yet further around, then step with your left foot after the right one, outwards or past behind your right foot; then before you have scarcely set the left down, you can step forth with the right, to double the [step].

Meyers' description also draws a parallel between the idea of a “double step” meaning a figure consisting of three steps (rather than two) in both a dance and fencing context. (Pugliese, p. 2)

Seguito Ordinario

The Seguito ordinario is done similarly in 3 Passi, and in 4 ordinary beats; and true, which at the final beat one stands all that space of time with the body settled: and it is done in this manner; It is started in the first beat with the left foot, pushing it forward on the point of the foot as much that the heel arrives at the point of the right, and about two inches distant from that; then advancing the right foot in the second beat, it is done similarly of pushing it forward on the point of the foot, and as much distant from the left as was done with the left: then in the third beat the left is pushed forward in the same manner; except resting with both feet level on the ground, right as is owed when a person is found standing in the perspective of doing the Riverenza: and in this manner one has to try, as it was said, in the space of the fourth beat. Then in the starting of the fifth beat, it follows anew, pushing the right foot forward after the manner stated in the left: be careful that with each Seguito one has with the body to wantonize oneself some.

The *seguito ordinario* is, as its name implies, a quite basic traveling step. Worth noting is the mention of stepping “on the point of the foot”, rather than stepping heel first. This allows for a greater ability to adjust step size and change direction quickly.

Passo

The Passo grave in the Balletti is done all in one beat of time, moving the left foot, and pushing it forward, as right to is named in the Puntata grave; then passing the right foot, it will do the same which is done by the left: and all with grace, and beauty, accompanying it some with the body, and wantonizing: be careful to carry the points of the feet straight, and the knees well extended.

The Passo presto in the Cascarde, is done as above, except, which they are done in one beat of time, and this in half, and quickly.

Figures in the Dance

In addition to individual steps, combinations and patterns of steps within the dance may be examined for their application to fencing.

Moving “In the Wheel”

The first two verses of the dance feature a series of *spezzati* done “in the wheel”, which is to say that the two dancers are moving around a central point between them. This movement is not dissimilar to matching the lateral movement of your opponent with a matching movement in the opposite direction, maintaining a consistent distance and facing to avoid being flanked.

Flanking Spezzati in the Chorus

In the first part of the chorus section, the dancers perform a *spezzato* flankingly backward to the left, so that their right shoulder is pointed toward their partner. Next they must pivot on the left foot and rotate their body clockwise so that they can then do a *spezzato* flankingly back to the right. This sort of pivot can be useful to change the angle of one’s attack. For example, stepping forward on the right foot, and then stepping toward the right with the back foot, pivoting on the front foot to perform a compass step and attack from a new angle. Note that this pivot is easier to perform when stepping on the toes of the lead foot rather than on the heel or flat footed.

Riprese and Trabuchetto in the Chorus

This figure is repeated often during the course of the dance: three small sideways steps followed by a hop, similar to a series of quick advances followed by a lunge.

Conclusions

While not all dance steps have direct application to the art of defence, there are certainly benefits to be gained. Posture and carriage can be improved by the practice of dance, and conscious precise placement of the feet is certainly valuable. Regular practice of dance develops muscle memory for the rhythms of more complex figures, so that they may be executed more quickly. Finally, dancing provides strength and endurance. It is my hope that those who seek success on the fencing field will employ dance as a tool to improve their technique.

Sources

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Gracca Amorosa

Il Ballarino, Fabritio Caroso, 1581

Taught by Lorenzo Petrucci

Gracca Amorosa is a *cascarda* from Fabritio Caroso's *Il Ballarino*. The dance has a strong verse/chorus structure that makes it easy to learn, though the verses are complex enough to require some practice to memorize them. The set is a single couple, beginning with the man and woman facing, standing close together.

Steps Used In This Dance

Passo (pl. *passi*): A single step.

Seguito spezzato (pl. *spezzati*): Step forward on lead foot. Bring the trailing foot behind the lead foot, touching the heel, and rise on both toes. Lower the heels to complete the step.

Seguito ordinario: An unornamented double: three steps followed by a pause. Each step should bring the foot just in front of the other.

Trabuchetto (pl. *trabuchetti*): A small jump to the side.

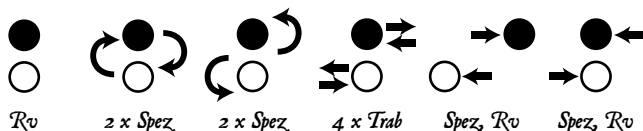
Reverenza minima: A two bar reverence.

Meza riverenza: A one bar reverence.

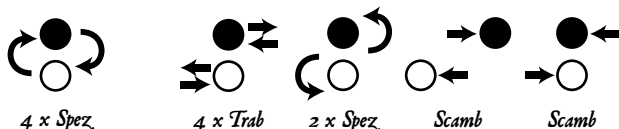
Ripresa (minima): With feet side by side and close together, move both heels to the side, then move both toes to the side. The whole step unit takes one beat (half a measure of music).

Scambiata: Slide the left foot forward just past the right foot. Slide the right foot around behind the left, touching the right toe to the left heel. Bring the left foot back together with the right and end with a hop.

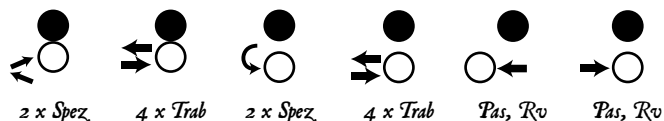
Verse 1



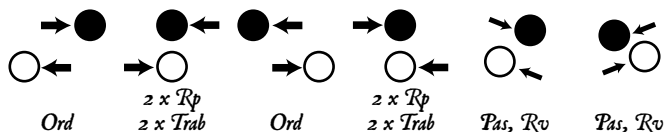
Verse 2



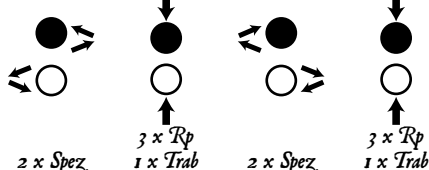
Verse 3 & 4



Verse 5



Chorus



Verse 1 "Honors" (Couple together)	
1-2	Riverenza minima on the left foot.
3-4	2 spezzati, circling clockwise.
5-6	2 spezzati, turning over the left shoulder, to end facing.
7-8	4 trabuchetti, starting to the left and alternating left and right.
9-10	A spezzato on the left foot, moving to your own left, and a meza riverenza on the right foot.
11-12	As above, but starting on the right foot.
Chorus	
1	A spezzato on the left foot, moving diagonally backwards to your left.
2	Turn your right shoulder away from your partner, and do a spezzato on the right foot, moving diagonally backwards.
3-4	3 riprese and 1 trabuchetto to the left, moving back in towards your partner.
5-8	Repeat bars 1-4 above, starting with the right foot instead of the left.
Verse 2 "Circling" (Couple together)	
1-4	4 spezzati, circling clockwise.
5-6	4 trabuchetti as before.
7-8	2 spezzati, turning over the left shoulder, to end facing.
9-10	Scambiata on the left foot.
11-12	Scambiata on the right foot.
Chorus	
Verse 3 "Man's Solo"	
1-2	The man approaches the woman with 2 spezzati, flanking towards the left then right.
3-4	4 trabuchetti as before.
5-6	The man does 2 spezzati turning over his left shoulder.
7-8	4 trabuchetti as before.
9-10	A passo to the left, followed by a meza riverenza on the right foot.
11-12	As above, starting on the right foot.
Chorus (man and woman both do the chorus).	
Verse 4 "Woman's Solo"	
1-12	The woman does the same as the man did in the previous verse.
Chorus (man and woman both do the chorus).	
Verse 5 "Ending Honors" (Couple together)	
1-2	Seguito ordinario on the left foot, moving to your own left. Turn to face forward again at the end.
3-4	2 riprese to the right, followed by a trabuchetto to the right and one to the left.
5-8	Repeat bars 1-4, starting on the right foot.
9-10	A passo diagonally forward to the left, followed by a meza riverenza, touching right hands.
11-12	As above, starting on the right foot and touching left hands.
Chorus	