

THE HISTORIES OF THE MORRIS IN BRITAIN

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Edited by Michael Heaney

**Rank Outsider or Outsider of Rank:
Mr Isaac's Dance 'The Morris'**

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Rank Outsider or Outsider of Rank? Mr Isaac's Dance 'The Morris'

Francis Isaac (c.1650s-1721) was an English dancer who had trained in France – indeed within polite society in London he was often referred to as 'Monsieur' Isaac, in recognition of that early training and of his prestige as a dancing-master. He had returned to London in the 1670s and became an acclaimed dance teacher in his own version of the style developed by the French royal academies and known as 'noble dance' or '*la belle danse*'. In London he numbered among his pupils many high-ranking members of the royal court, and after his death a colleague wrote of him: ¹

The late Mr Isaac, who had the Honour to teach and instruct our late most excellent and Gracious Queen when a young Princess, first gained the Character and afterwards supported that Reputation of being the prime Master in England for forty Years together: He taught the first Quality with Success and Applause, and was justly stiled the Court Dancing-Master.

This description immediately associates Mr Isaac with a particular category of polite society, and one which by the early eighteenth century seems no longer to have had any connection with morris dancing even in court entertainments. Mr Isaac is best known today for his sophisticated dances created either to celebrate the birthdays of Queen Anne or as new repertoire for the coming year's season of private and public assemblies. His twenty or so surviving dances are nearly all duets for a man and woman, and they survive because they were written down in a French system of dance notation known as Beauchamps-Feuillet notation; this in itself reduces the likelihood that 'The Morris' had any affiliation to morris dancing, since Beauchamps-Feuillet notation did not work well for group dances. The notated dances were engraved and sold to dancing-masters and

¹ John Essex, *The Dancing-Master: or, The Art of Dancing Explained ... done from the French of Monsieur Rameau* (London: Essex & Brotherton, 1728), p. xi.

members of the public as teaching aids, souvenirs, and examples of prestigious ballroom repertoire (Figure 1).

The duet called 'The Morris' dates from towards the end of Mr Isaac's career and was the last dance he created that still survives. Its notation was sold as 'a new dance for the year 1716', and four engraved copies of it are known: one in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House and another in the British Library (both lacking the dated title page), and two more (still with the title page) in Dundee City Library and the Houghton Library at Harvard.² The two extant title pages read 'The MORRIS a new Dance for the Year 1716 Compos'd by Mr: Isaac. Writ by Mr Pemberton & Sold by him against Mercer Street Long Acre'.

It has been suggested that Mr Isaac's 'The Morris' was a unique form of 'élite morris', which itself had close connections with country dancing as practised by polite society in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England.³ There are indeed steps within this duet that are also found in French and English country dances of the time: for example, sequences of hopping, springing and jumping the feet together.⁴ Such steps however also appeared in many ballroom and theatrical dances, and did not necessarily reflect morris dancing traditions. For example, all but the first and last sections of 'The Morris' duet end with some form of *coupé assemblé* (step and jump the feet together), which is found in many country dances and also in theatre dances for such characters as Spaniards, sailors, and peasants.

² London, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, QL.5.4; London, British Library, h.801.c.2; Dundee, City Library, G10.440.H; Cambridge Massachusetts, Houghton Library, Harvard Theatre Collection, TS 552.13.51.

³ John Forrest, *The History of Morris Dancing* (Cambridge: James Clark, 1999), p. 322.

⁴ See Raoul-Augur Feuillet, *Recueil de contredances* (Paris: chez l'auteur, 1706), préface, and its English translation by John Essex, *For the Further Improvement of Dancing* (London: Walsh & Hare, 1710), pp. 11-12.

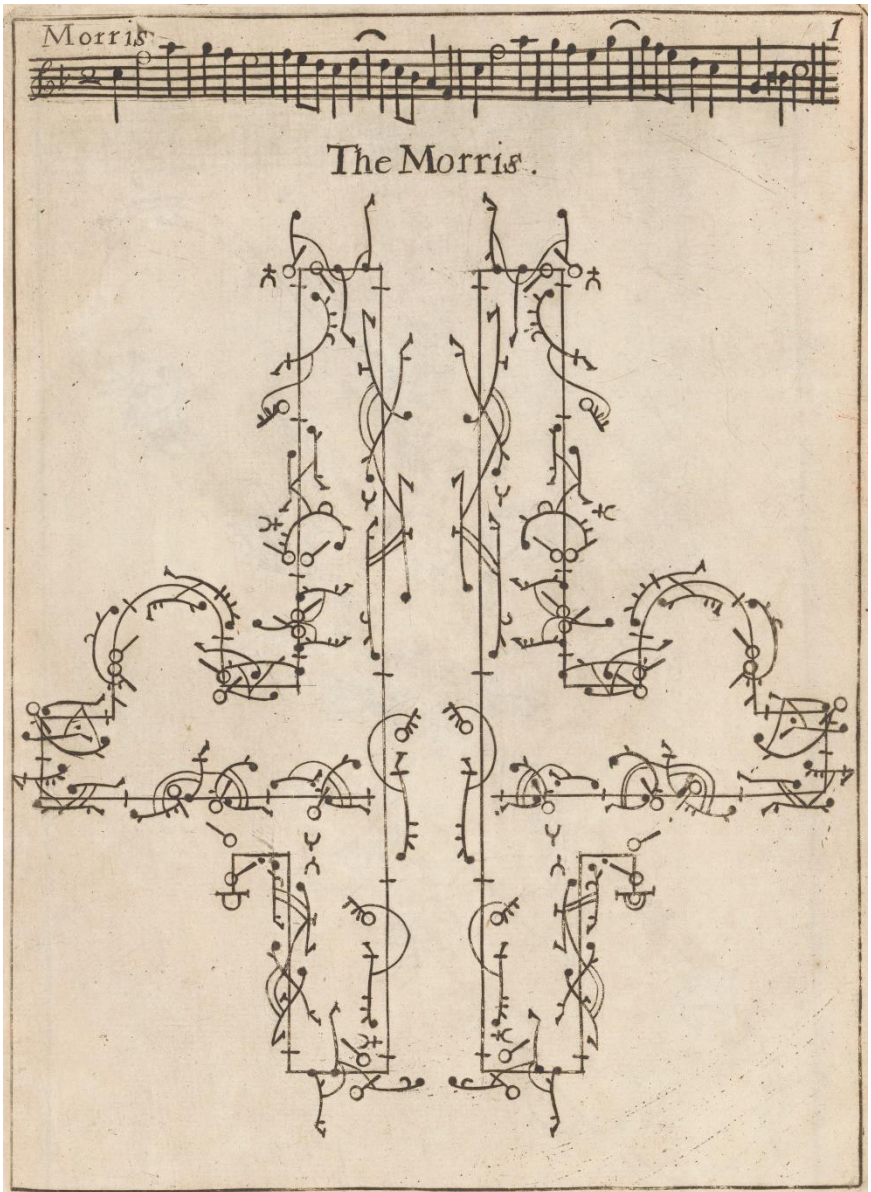


Figure 1: The first page of notation of Mr Isaac's 'The Morris' (Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, QL.5.4).

Two longer sequences of steps in Mr Isaac's duet have a very strong sense of theatrical 'character' dancing. The first is the intricate four-bar sequence of 'footing' in the first section of the dance (bars 13-16), during which the heel is placed on the floor, without putting any weight onto it, to end bar 13 and to begin bar 16. This timing is

unique in Mr Isaac's extant dances, although several of his other duets employ stepping onto the heel in the middle of the step known as *pas de bourrée*. Complex sequences of 'footing' with cross rhythms do exist in morris dances today, of course, as some valuable discussions with Barry Honeysett and John C. Lewis revealed at the Histories of Morris conference, but the eighteenth-century evidence indicates a clearer alignment between the example in Mr Isaac's 'The Morris' and some of the peasant steps published in Nuremberg by Gregorio Lambranzi in 1716. Placing or striking the heel on the ground for comic effect was also part of the opening 'salutation' of two French theatrical dances for Harlequin, and a dance for two French country (as in rustic) men, all of which date from between c. 1700 and 1720.⁵ So, perhaps, less a reflection of English morris dancing and more a tribute to rustic and comic theatrical dance popular in Europe at that time.

The second 'theatrical character' sequence in 'The Morris' reinforces a notion of French interpretations of 'Germanic' dance. Its unusual and distinctive arm positions are described verbally below the notation on page 4:

At ye 2^d. Bar set the Arms a Kimbow, & at ye 5th. ye left hands behind, & wth ye right hand Arms with each others left, joyning the inward parts of ye right arms together.

When the sequence is repeated on page 5, the instructions merely say 'The same as in the Preceeding Couplet [page], only Arms with ye contrary Hands'. In other words, the dancers come together to link arms in an 'allemande hold', circle round clockwise with arms so linked, and then part (eight bars), before repeating the steps anti-clockwise (eight bars). Since Mr Isaac rarely re-used his own, or copied other people's, choreography in his extant dances, this section of 'The Morris' must be significant, and its purpose was probably to

⁵ Gregorio Lambranzi, *Neue und Curieuse Theatralische Tanz-Schul*, 2 vols (Nuremberg: Wolrab, 1716), I, 4, 8, 9, 11; 'Chaconne d'Arlequin de Monsieur de la Montagne', Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), Rés 817/7, bars 1-4 <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k8599563>> [accessed 25 October 2017]; F[erdinand] Le Roussau, 'Entrée for Two French Countrymen' (bars 58-59) and 'Chaconne for Arlequin' (bars 1-2), in his *Collection of New Ball- and Stage Dances, 1720* (facs. of Edinburgh University Library MS La.III.673, with introductory notes by Jennifer Thorp (Morrisville, NC: Lulu.com, 2008), pp. 64, 69).

honour or flatter the new Hanoverian King, George I, with a sequence of dancing perceived as typically 'Germanic'. The figure and steps are almost identical to part of Guillaume-Louis Pécour's stage dance named 'L'Allemande', published in Paris in 1702 and subsequently enjoying a long life in the ballroom; the distinctive linked arms in 'allemande hold' were drawn in a thumbnail sketch beneath the relevant notation, and would appear again later in Jean-Baptiste Pater's oil painting of c. 1725, *Fête Galante with a Dancing Couple*, now on display at the Wallace Collection in London.⁶ In fact neither Pécour's 'L'Allemande' (and thus the relevant section of Isaac's 'The Morris' also) nor Pater's painting bore much relation to genuine Germanic dance steps or music; and while the perception may have been significant for the public in Paris and London, it would have been less meaningful for the Hanoverian royal family.⁷ It did nevertheless capture the growing sense of 'genteel-pastoral' which came to typify much of English Arcadian culture under the Hanoverians in later years. But it had nothing to do with morris dancing.

Although the notation of Mr Isaac's 'The Morris' was published for the ballroom, it was also performed on stage in London. Michael Heaney has made the valuable point that various forms of morris and associated country dancing were seen on stage and at masquerades during the eighteenth century.⁸ Mr Isaac's 'The Morris', however, was a stand-alone duet deriving from the French style of noble dancing, and was recognised as such at the time. Thus it followed many of the conventions of the French style that London's polite society admired in the early eighteenth century. That is to say, it had an extensive and complex step vocabulary, and it used progressions of symmetrical figures, its two dancers starting in mirror symmetry (that is, making the same steps but on opposite feet), then changing to co-axial sym-

⁶ I am grateful to Ricardo Barros for drawing my attention to this painting, which may be viewed on the Wallace Collection's website <<http://www.wallaceprints.org/image/322985/jean-baptiste-pater-watching-the-dance>> [accessed 25 October 2017].

⁷ See Rebecca Harris-Warrick, 'Allemande' in Selma Jean Cohen (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Dance*, 6 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), I, 45-47, and Jennifer Thorp, 'Pécour's *L'Allemande* 1702-1765: how 'German' was it?', *Eighteenth-century Music* 1.2 (2004), 183-204.

⁸ Michael Heaney, 'Folk Dance and Theatrical Performance in the Eighteenth Century', *Folk Music Journal* 11.2 (2017), 6-16, with thanks to Ian Cutts for drawing my attention to this article.

metry (that is, both starting their steps on the same foot, and often facing and circling round each other, as in 'L'Allemande'), and returning to mirror symmetry towards the end of the dance. Like several of its French counterparts, 'The Morris' sometimes included dance steps associated with the lower ranks of society, for it was fashionable for the upper classes to sometimes copy the lower classes (albeit in a very genteel way) just as the lower classes often copied 'polite' dancing – the appeal worked in both directions.⁹ But the social functions of the dances were different, and it seems more likely that these different worlds of dance – theatrical, polite, urban lower-class, rustic, morris, folk – did not merge completely, but existed in parallel, happy to borrow now and again from each other but nothing more than that. Perhaps it is only today that we strive to find meaningful links between the genres, whereas people in the early-eighteenth century did not think much about it. For instance, we can read too much today into the closing sequence of Mr Isaac's *The Morris* – a two-hand turn and cast out. It is reminiscent of a country-dance manoeuvre for progressing down a set, but is actually just a visually pleasing way to end the duet, and has none of the characteristics of social interaction implicit in a progressive country dance.

None of this however answers the question why Mr Isaac's duet was called 'The Morris' if not deriving from morris dancing. Mr Isaac named one or two of his dances after events (for example, 'The Union' (1707), referring to the Act of Union between England and Scotland), but he named no fewer than eight of his dances after people (for example, 'The Marlborough' (1705) after the military duke, or 'The Spanheim' (1706) after the Prussian ambassador to London).¹⁰ He did call a few dances after named dance types, such as 'The Rigadon' in 1706, or the 'Chaconne and Minuet' in 1711 but, in their steps and musical characteristics, they are more recognisably associated with rigaudons, chaconnes and minuets than 'The Morris' is with

⁹ Extant stage- and ball-dances in the French noble style incorporating rustic and comic elements for peasants, shepherds, and commedia characters are catalogued in Meredith Little and Carol Marsh, *La Danse Noble: An Inventory of Dances and Sources* (New York: Broude Bros, 1992).

¹⁰ Discussed further in Jennifer Thorp, *Mr Isaac, Dancing-Master to the Court of Queen Anne* (forthcoming).

morris dancing. It may be therefore that 'The Morris' was not named after a dance type at all but after a person, a proposal also suggested by events that occurred during the Jacobite Rebellion in the winter of 1715/16.

In March 1715 the Earl of Mar had raised a rebellion in Scotland to recognise James Stuart, 'the Old Pretender', as the rightful king of Britain, and by October some of the Jacobite forces were ready to march south into England. They got as far as Preston in Lancashire before meeting regiments loyal to King George.¹¹ The Battle of Preston began on 12 November, and proved a significant success for the government forces. The Jacobites surrendered early in the morning of 14 November and one of the British Generals immediately sent word of the victory to the royal court in London. The messenger he sent, who must have almost killed himself making the long journey in two-and-a-half days, was Colonel Maurice van Nassau, whose family were kinsmen of King William III and had settled in England as the Earls of Rochford. As a younger son, Maurice had taken up a career in the British Army.

Mr Isaac by this date was quite elderly and no longer had the direct connection with the Court that he had enjoyed throughout the reigns of William and Mary and Queen Anne. Moreover, because of his even earlier links with the Restoration Court, Mr Isaac had been hounded throughout his London career as a papist. It could be that, by 1715, terrified of also being thought a Jacobite, he saw the Battle of Preston as an opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty to King George by creating a dance to celebrate the news of the Jacobite defeat. He may have had good reason for his fears, for hints provided by Jacobite correspondence even before 1715 frequently referred to individuals by code-names – often theatrical characters, singers, actors, or people connected with public events whose names would seem innocuous within apparent references to the theatre or ballroom. In particular the 'trimmer' Earl of Cromarty, who had shifted his allegiance towards and away from the Jacobites several times over many years,

¹¹ See John Baynes, *The Jacobite Rising of 1715* (London: Cassell, 1970).

was code-named 'Mr Isaac'.¹² This may have been simply a coincidence, but since it was common knowledge that such ciphers were in use, and if Francis Isaac was aware of their form, his anxiety would be understandable.

The news of the Government victory at Preston reached London on 16 November and occasioned much celebration, as Lady Cowper noted in her diary: '1715, November: The 16th came the News that the Rebels had surrendered to the King's Forces at Preston [...] The surrender of these Prisoners filled the Town [London] with Joy.'¹³ It is not difficult to imagine that, as soon as he heard about it, Mr Isaac determined to create a dance to honour the occasion. Since he no longer had any standing at court, he looked to have the dance published and sold for the upcoming ball season. Thus Edmund Pemberton, his dance notator at that time, took out a newspaper advertisement at the end of November that 'On Monday next will be published *The Morris*, a new dance for the year 1716, Compos'd by Mr Isaac. Writ by Mr Pemberton, and Sold by him against Mercer-Street, Long-Acre', and on 6 December it was duly reported as 'Just publish'd'.¹⁴ By now Colonel Maurice van Nassau's name must have been widely known in London, but it would have been tactless to call a dance designed to flatter the Hanoverian King after a member of the Dutch dynasty that had supplied one of his predecessors; and it would have been pointless to try to interest London's high society in a dance named after a far-distant Lancashire town. Thus, feasibly, the dance was named 'The Morris', with suitably anglicized spelling of the Colonel's forename; and perhaps also – if the mid-eighteenth century colloquial expression was in use as early as 1715 – it provided a gentle pun on the verb 'to morris', meaning to decamp or rush off in a hurry, as Colonel Maurice van Nassau surely must have done for his epic ride from Preston.¹⁵

¹² *HMC Report on the Manuscripts of the Earl of Mar & Kellie* (London: HMSO, 1904), pp. 553-56.

¹³ Mary, Countess Cowper, *The Diary of Mary Countess Cowper...1714-1720*, ed. by Spencer Cowper, 2nd ed. (London: Spottiswoode, 1865), pp. 56-57.

¹⁴ Advertisement placed in the *Evening Post*, 29 November to 1 December 1715, 6 December 1715. It could still be purchased from Pemberton's shop several months later: see *Evening Post* 24 May 1716. I am most grateful to Mike Heaney for these references.

¹⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term 'morris' in this sense back to c.1765, but it could well be older.

There is no evidence that the dance ever did get taken up by the Court, but it was performed on stage at Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre, probably on 18 November 1715 (two days after the news reached London) and certainly on 10 January 1716, in a performance by Mr Isaac's former protégé Charles Delagarde and Mrs Ann Bullock dancing the same programme as on 18 November 1715, 'particularly a New Dance call'd The Morris, composed by Mr Isaac'.¹⁶ The January performance reflects a resurgence of interest in Colonel Maurice Nassau as the talk of the town, for it fell only four days after the Old Pretender had arrived in Dundee to find that support (and money) for his cause had well-nigh vanished, and by 10 January that news was all round London. The rumour machine was probably also working, and a few days later a grateful Treasury did indeed authorize a large reward to the Colonel; this resulted in the King signing a warrant, on 31 January, for £500 (approximately £40,000 today¹⁷) to be given to Colonel Maurice Nassau for 'coming express from General Wills with an account of the defeat of our rebellious subjects at Preston in Lancashire'.¹⁸ In the first week of February the music publishers Walsh and Hare scrambled aboard the bandwagon and advertised the music of 'The Morris' as a 'French Dance for 1716', in a publication promptly pirated by Daniel Wright; a sure sign that it was attracting public interest.¹⁹

The country dance named 'The French Morris', which was first published c. 1726,²⁰ was not by Mr Isaac, for he had died some years previously, and it simply re-used the tune of his duet. The composer of

¹⁶ *Daily Courant*, 10 January 1716.

¹⁷ Comparative data from The National Archives, 'Currency Converter', <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/>> [accessed 25 November 2017].

¹⁸ *Calendar of Treasury Books: Preserved in the Public Record Office*, ed. by William Shaw, 32 vols (London: HMSO, 1904-57), XXX, 2, 94.

¹⁹ Walsh and Hare's publication of 'All the newest Minuets, Rigadoons with the new Morris and Shepherds French Dances for 1716, price 6d.' was advertised in *The Post Man & Historical Account*, 2-4 February 1716: see William C. Smith, *A Bibliography of the Musical Works Published by John Walsh 1695-1720* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1968), p. 142, no. 490. Walsh's publication does not survive, but a unique copy of the pirated version by Daniel Wright is extant (London, Royal College of Music Library, F32), albeit with folio 3 (music for the 'new Morris') torn out.

²⁰ John Young, *The Dancing-Master: or, Directions for Dancing Country Dances, with the Tunes to each Dance for the Treble-Violin: The Third Volume* (London, William Pearson, [c.1726]), p. 195. I am grateful to Nicholas Wall for confirming the accuracy of the directions from VWML, ref. QS 35.4.

the music is not known, although in earlier years Mr Isaac had worked closely with the French-born court and theatre musician Jacques Paisible (c.1656-1721). It is in AABB form, consisting of eight-bar and twelve-bar phrases respectively. The dance directions in Playford (which are problematical in places) are as follows:

The French Morris: Longways for as many as will. Note: Each strain twice over.

The first and 2d. Men, and the first and 2d. We. all 4 fall back Sides, and the Men cross over in-to their Partners places, and the We. into their places at the same time; and the first Man go round till he comes into his own place, the other three follows till they come to their places [sign for end of A strain]. Then the first Cu. cross over and half figure at top [sign for end of repeated A strain].

The first Man cast off below the 3d. Man, and the first Wo. cast up above the 2d. Wo. and then they cast both round into the 2d. Cu. place, then the first Cu. lead up thro' the 2d Cu. and turn till they come on their own Side [sign for end of B strain]. Then first Cu. cast up at top, and cross over and half Figure at top, and lead thro' the 3d. Cu. and turn your Partners once round [sign for end of repeated B strain].

But was it yet a morris dance? It was the seventh out of eleven Playford country dances with the term 'morris' in their titles, but without better knowledge of how morris dancing was performed in the early eighteenth century we cannot be sure of any connection. Was it French? There is a hint of a French influence, for this country dance has a highly unusual opening – 'The first and 2d. Men, and the first and 2d. W[om]e[n]. all 4 fall back Sides, and the Men cross over in-to their Partners places, and the We. into their places at the same time.' The directive 'fall back sides' as an opening figure is very rare, possibly non-existent, in English country dance sources of the time, but it had appeared in 1712 as the opening to three French *contredanses*

published in Paris by Jacques Dezais.²¹ Yet the other figures of 'The French Morris' include standard English country-dance manoeuvres such as 'half-figure', 'casting off', and 'leading through', and as such it took its place in English country-dance collections up to the 1750s. By this time however all memory of Mr Isaac or any hint of a morris connection, had long since disappeared and the tune was re-used for a new country dance named 'Blazing Star' published to coincide with the appearance of spectacular comets in 1737 and 1745.²²

²¹ Le Sieur Dezais, *II^e Recueil de nouvelles contredances* (Paris: chez l'auteur, 1712), pp. 37 (*La Conti*), 173 (*Plaisirs sans crainte*) and 21 (*La Badine*, the 'sides fall back' being preceded by a *pas de rigaudon*).

²² See *The French Morris* in Walsh's *The Compleat Country Dancing-Master Volume the Third* (London: J. Walsh, 1745), p. 221 and ...*Volume the Fifth* (1755), p.165; and *Blazing Star*, in Walsh's *Caledonian Country Dances 1737-1755* editions and in J. Johnson's *Two Hundred Country Dances*, 1742 and 1755 editions.