

# THE NORDIC MINUET

## ROYAL FASHION AND PEASANT TRADITION

EDITED BY PETRI HOPPU, EGIL BAKKA  
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A New Chapter in European Dance History



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# 3. The Minuet as Part of Instrumental and Dance Music in Europe

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From the second half of the seventeenth century until the end of the eighteenth century, the minuet was, by far, the most popular ballroom dance in Europe and was thus the only Baroque form of dance that survived until the end of the Baroque era. Its origins lie in France, and its big break beginning around 1650 when it was introduced at the court of King Louis XIV. The oldest-known minuet music was created by Jean-Baptiste Lully, dated 1653. Until his death in 1687, Lully was able to compose ninety-one minuets for his operas and ballets and thus contributed significantly to the spread of the new fashion.<sup>1</sup> Like the *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande*, or *Gigue*, the minuet was also established as a type of instrumental music. From early on, composers distinguished between minuet tunes intended as an accompaniment for the dance and more stylized minuet tunes intended solely for listening. The minuet became an important tool for instrumental pedagogy, and music teachers used it to teach the fundamentals of composition.<sup>2</sup>

## Characteristics of the Music

While the minuet could be performed as a ballroom dance to any music, the choreography for more formal performances was always tailored to a specific piece. As the fundamental minuet step took six beats to complete, it would run across two  $3/4$  bars. Many melodies were thus built around common two-bar

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1 Carol Marsh, 'Minuet', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 29 vols. (London: Macmillan, 2001) vol. 16, pp. 740–46.

2 Eric McKee, *Decorum of the Minuet, Delirium of the Waltz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), pp. 3–5.

phrases, but this was not always the case. In the early history of the minuet especially, irregular structures were relatively common. Lully's first minuet, for example, had an asymmetric form with nine bars in the first part and eight in the second part.<sup>3</sup> Later, Lully wrote sixteen- and thirteen-bar sections, and his colleagues Louis Marchand and Louis Couperin experimented with five- and three-bar phrases.<sup>4</sup>

Sebastian Brossard, in his influential *Dictionnaire de Musique* (1703), recommended that the first part contain four or eight bars and end on the dominant or minor parallel, while the second part should consist of eight bars and should lead back to the tonic.<sup>5</sup> In 1768, Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated in his *Dictionnaire de Musique* that the number of bars in each of minuet's repeated sections should be four or a multiple thereof.<sup>6</sup> One of the minuet's key characteristics is a basic rhythm in triple time, usually noted as a 3/4 bar, more rarely as a 3/8 bar or 6/4 bar. Another characteristic is that it follows a two-part form, with each part being repeated exactly. The harmonic structures are relatively simple. The first part often leads to the dominant and the second part back to the tonic. Minuets can begin at the full bar and on the upbeat. In Mozart's famous works, minuets can be found which begin on both the full bar and also which begin on the upbeat.

Undoubtedly, the minuet was one of the simplest and shortest instrumental forms of the early eighteenth century. Thus, in order to accompany long dances, musicians had to either improvise or bring together several pieces of music. Lully introduced the custom of combining two minuets that contrast in key and content, using an A–B–A pattern. In other words, the first minuet would be repeated at the end of the dance performance.<sup>7</sup> Since the second minuet was characterized by a three-part texture (with two melody parts and one bass part), the name 'trio' was applied and became prevalent.<sup>8</sup>

The basic tempo of the minuet seems to have varied significantly and may also have changed frequently over time. Brossard described it in 1703 as 'very lively' and its tempo as 'very fast'. Johann Mattheson, in his *The Perfect*

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3 Karl Heinz Taubert, *Das Menuett. Geschichte und Choreographie* (Zürich: Pan, 1988), p. 118.

4 Marsh, p. 743.

5 Sebastian de Brossard, *Dictionnaire de musique contenant une explication des termes Grecs, Latin, Italiens & François les plus usitez dans la musique* (Paris: [n.pub.], 1703), p. 45, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1510881v>

6 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Encyclopédie*, 28 vols (Paris: Diderot et d'Alembert, 1765), vol. 10, p. 346.

7 Monika Fink, 'Menuett / Menuet / Minuetto', in *Das Große Tanzlexikon* (Lilienthal: Laaber, 2016), pp. 375–77.

8 Eric Blom, 'The Minuet-Trio', *Music & Letters*, 22 (1941), 162–80 (p. 163).

*Chapelmaster* (1739), however, advised that the minuet be played only with 'moderate mirth'. Rousseau, in 1768, quoted Brossard only to contradict him: 'on the contrary: the character of the minuet is elegant and noble simplicity, its forms of tempo are extremely temperate rather than fast'.<sup>9</sup> These changing views might indicate that the tempo became slower during the eighteenth century, but one must be careful not to draw a definitive conclusion from only three sources.

## The Triumph of the Minuet

With Lully's first minuet in 1653, the genre's triumphant march across Europe began. It gained dominance, for a time, over all other musical forms in all countries. Lully's successor, Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764), composed at least seventy-six minuets for the music to be performed at the theatre. As early as 1670, the minuet entered the suite, an important musical form in the Baroque era: Jean Jacques Champion de Chambonnières (circa 1601–72) published a minuet as the last piece in the second volume of his *Pièces de clavecin, Suites for harpsichord*.

In England, at the end of the seventeenth century, Henry Purcell (1659–95) used the minuet more often than any other dance in his stage works. Well-known examples of English orchestral music are the two minuets in the *F major suite HWV 248* from *Water Music* (1717) by Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759).<sup>10</sup>

Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) was the first in Italy to integrate the minuet into art music, or more precisely, into chamber music in the *Sonata da Camera*. In the works of Alessandro Scarlatti (1660–1725), the minuet appeared in various opera overtures, some of which were also published separately as *Sinfonia*. The Italian minuet style differed significantly from the rest of Europe's tradition: a faster tempo was preferred, which led to the use of 3/8 or 6/8 time. In addition to this variation, the musical phrases in the Italian style were significantly longer and often included eight bars.<sup>11</sup>

In the German-speaking world, Johann Pachelbel (1653–1706) added several minuets to the standard dances of some of his suites, including the *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande*, and *Gigue*. At the same time, Georg Muffat (1653–1704) wrote a minuet in Salzburg in 1682 for his chamber sonata.<sup>12</sup> Muffat had studied with Lully in Paris and, therefore, was very familiar with the French tradition. His minuets were motivically and contrapuntally designed in a 'specific artistic

9 Rousseau, p. 346.

10 Wolfram Steinbeck, 'Das Menuett in der Instrumentalmusik', in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997), pp. 126–32 (pp. 127–28).

11 Marsh, p. 743.

12 Taubert, p. 31.

way' but held fast to the simple formal structure. Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) wrote approximately thirty minuets for works of various types and thus proved the versatility of the dance in instrumental music. Minuets appear, for example, in his *1st Brandenburgischen Konzert BWV 1046* from 1721, in 1722–23 *Piano Booklet for Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (BWV 841–43)*, in the *Music Booklet for Anna Magdalena Bach* from 1725, and in the *English Suite F-Dur BWV 809*, written between 1722 and 1724.<sup>13</sup>

Of particular interest are also some of Bach's cantatas, as they demonstrate the minuet's influence on vocal music. The basic characteristics of the minuet—a moderate tempo in triple time, simple harmonic structures, four- or eight-bar regular phrases—appear in his *Unser Mund und Ton der Saiten BWV 1*, *Hochgelobter Gottessohn BWV 6*, and *Man halte nur ein wenig stille BWV 93* *quiet BWV 93*.<sup>14</sup>

The minuet's final triumph as inclusions in large instrumental compositions began in the mid-eighteenth century and culminated in Viennese Classicism. The Viennese composer Matthias Monn (1717–50) was the first to include a minuet in his *D Major Symphony* in 1740.<sup>15</sup> But it took nearly fifteen years before the minuet was established as an independent portion of the symphony in the musical centres of Mannheim and Vienna. Credit for this development goes to the Mannheim School composers related to the Stamitz family and to the composers of the early Viennese school led by Georg Christoph Wagenseil (1715–77).<sup>16</sup> The establishment of the minuet as a part of the classical symphony also created a distinction that was reflected in the use of terminology: the 'Italian overture' now signified something very different than the 'symphony', whereas previously these titles had been used interchangeably.<sup>17</sup>

## The Viennese Classic: From the Dance Minuet to the Stylized Minuet

Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) composed approximately four hundred minuets and, more than his contemporaries, valued this dance above all others. From 1765 onward, he never composed a symphony that did not include at least one. Haydn gave the minuet a symphonic expression without renouncing its characteristically simple harmony and cheerful character. He adapted the symphonic form by extending its three movements to four movements, with

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13 Marsh, p. 743

14 Ibid.

15 Taubert, p. 31.

16 Ibid., p. 120.

17 Frederick Niecks, 'Historical Sketch of the Overture', *Sammelbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft*, 7 (1906), 386–90 (p. 386).

the minuet as the final portion.<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, this new symphonic form differed from *divertimentos* and serenades which already consisted of five movements (two of which were minuets). Indeed, Haydn famously removed one of these two minuets from the *divertimento* in order to create a musical form called the 'string quartet'. This resulted in a four-movement form with the minuet as the third movement. Although this structure corresponds to that of the symphony, both genres have very different origins and developmental paths.<sup>19</sup>

Haydn also included the minuet into the *Piano Sonata* and the *Chamber Music Sonata*. However, because the sonata continued to consist of three movements throughout Haydn's lifetime, he chose to substitute one of these three movements for the minuet. It is sometimes found as the middle movement and is, therefore, a slow(!) minuet. At other times, it appears as the final movement and is called a *Tempo di Minuetto*. Indeed, the concerto was one of the only compositional forms in Viennese classical music into which the minuet was not incorporated.<sup>20</sup>

## Mozart and the Minuet

The life of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91) is an excellent illustration of how closely the work of a musician and composer can be linked to the minuet. Not only did Mozart learn to play the piano by practising minuets, but, on 16 December 1761, at the age of five, he composed his very first minuet. This was followed by five more in subsequent months. He created approximately one hundred and thirty minuets for different occasions and musical forms during his short life. These were all in two parts, had a length of sixteen to twenty-four bars, and they did not have a trio. In 1768, Mozart's father Leopold drew up a list of all the works his twelve-year-old son had already written and notes that it included 'Many minuets with all sorts [of] instruments'.<sup>21</sup> These early compositions were dance music, but they are unfortunately lost. However, in later years, Mozart wrote further dance minuets, often composing whole series for particular occasions.

While these dance pieces are now largely forgotten, Mozart's stylized minuets for instrumental performance are firmly lodged in the classical concert repertoire. As with Haydn, the minuet played an essential role in his symphonies. Apart from one exception from 1780, he composed no symphony without a minuet.

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18 In Western musical terminology, a *movement* means a complete, independent section of a larger work such as a symphony or sonata.

19 Steinbeck, p. 130.

20 Ibid.

21 *Mozart in der Tanzkultur seiner Zeit*, ed. by Walter Salmen (Innsbruck: Helbling, 1990), p. 87.

Interestingly, when he reworked his *Symphony No. 7 in D Major* to produce the overture of the opera *La Finta Semplice* (1768), he dropped the minuet, marking the aforementioned difference between an overture and symphony. Also, in his quartets and quintets, Mozart established the form permanently as the third movement. These minuets often followed a simple harmonic structure but were significantly longer than the dance minuet and were not danceable due to their complicated rhythms and syncopation.<sup>22</sup> His departure from the dance form culminated in the *Jupiter Symphony* of 1788. Each of its two parts consisted of forty-three bars, and only the dance-related theme and the Minuet–Trio–Minuet sequence resembled the original dance music.

After 1766, Mozart also composed movements called *Tempo di Minuetto*, a term often used for fast final movements of three-movement works such as sonatas or concertos. The earliest example can be found in the *Sonata for Piano and Violin* KV 30. Here, the composer freed himself from the traditional minuet form's constraints, while still using the dance's charm and character for his music. Interestingly, despite the title, these movements were not presented in the minuet tempo, but in a much faster time scale. As early as 1802, the music theorist Heinrich Christoph Koch pointed this out in his musical encyclopaedia:

However, because minuets of this type are not intended for dancing, [...] one has deviated from the original arrangement of the minuet with regard to the tempo, [...] and they also perform it in a much faster tempo than it can be danced to.<sup>23</sup>

Several of Mozart's opera arias are also called *Tempo di Minuetto*, but these utilized metrical structures and, often, the eight-bar division that recalled the dance movement. The earliest example was in the *Singspiel* entitled *Bastien and Bastienne* from 1768, followed by arias in *La Finta Semplice* (1768), *Lucio Silla* (1772), *Zaide* (1780), *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1785/86), and *La Clemenza di Tito* (1791).<sup>24</sup> A particular case is the world-famous minuet which Mozart composed in 1787 for *Don Giovanni*. The minuet presents the aristocratic way of life and captivates with its simple, elegant beauty, which corresponds to the traditional minuet ideal. In the same scene, a *Contredanse* and a *Deutscher* are also sung. In the same year, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe describes a scene within his masterpiece, *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther*, which includes a ball where the minuet also follows an *Englischer* and then a *Deutscher*.<sup>25</sup> This description confirms that the

22 Marsh, p. 744; François Filiatrault, 'Maestrino Mozart: Youthful Operas', trans. by Sean McCutcheon (Les Boréades, 2021) <https://www.boreades.com/en/maestrino-mozart-youthful-operas/>

23 Salmen, p. 92.

24 Ibid., pp. 93–94.

25 Taubert, p. 123.



exciting combination of these three forms were part of the danced reality at that time. However, only two years later, revolutionaries in France turned against everything courtly and instigated a revolt with consequences that shook Europe and made impossible the minuet's continuation as a ceremonial dance.

## Loss of Meaning and Reflection: The Minuet in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Even in instrumental music, the minuet lost its importance after the French Revolution and during the transition from Viennese Classicism to Romanticism. In Ludwig van Beethoven's (1770–1827) *oeuvre*, only thirty-eight minuets are known, almost one hundred fewer than in that of the only slightly earlier Mozart. Although Franz Schubert (1797–1828) can boast about seventy minuets, he wrote roughly fifty of them as dance music for piano whereas only twenty are orchestral works.

In Haydn's and Mozart's times, the minuet had already begun to evolve in various ways, resulting in three subtypes. The first was the traditional, moderate dance movement with all the minuet's standard features, while the second was a livelier dance set that anticipated the waltz. The third was an often rapid, highly stylized concert set, which later developed into a *scherzo*. While Haydn called pieces of all three subtypes a 'minuet', Beethoven and Schubert use this title only to describe compositions of the first type. This terminological discrepancy may explain why there are far fewer works labelled 'minuets' in their *ouevres*.<sup>26</sup>

In early nineteenth-century music, the minuet developed the connotation of having an outdated style, and thus it became rarely used. Among the few surviving examples are the minuet in the *Serenade op. 11* by Johannes Brahms (1857/58) and the two minuets by Georges Bizet—one in the *L'Arlésienne Suite* (1872) and the other in his *Symphony in C* (1860–68). However, at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, when classical and neoclassical tendencies began to influence music, the minuet regained some of its earlier status. In France, Claude Debussy (*Suite Bergamasque* (1890)), Maurice Ravel (*Menuet Antique* (1895) and *Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn* (1909)) and Gabriel Fauré (*Masques et Bergamasques* (1919)) utilised the minuet. In Hungary, it played a role in Béla Bartók's work *Nine Little Pieces* (1926). In Germany, the minuet was rediscovered by Arnold Schönberg (*Serenade op. 24* 1920–23 and *Suite op. 25* 1921–23). These later minuets were characterized by atonality, which signals how a fashionable dance can change over time. Even

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<sup>26</sup> Steinbeck, p. 131.

two hundred and seventy years after its creation, the minuet form continues to appeal to composers and audiences.

In summary, the minuet has been a musical form in European art music for more than three hundred years, and it has appeared in various contexts from baroque dance suites and classical symphonies to impressionist and expressionist orchestral works. It plays an important role in masterpieces by great composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach, Georg Friedrich Handel, Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, Claude Debussy, and Maurice Ravel.

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