

THE NORDIC MINUET

ROYAL FASHION AND PEASANT TRADITION

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A New Chapter in European Dance History



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**NORDISK
KULTURFOND**



Front cover: Pierre Jean Laurent, *Veiledning ved Undervisning i Menuetten* ['Guidance for Teaching the Minuet'], ca. 1816, Teatermuseum, København. Photo: Elizabeth Svarstad.

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8. The Minuet in Denmark 1688–1820

Anders Chr. N. Christensen

The minuet was not only a dance, as Johann Mattheson (1681–1764) from Hamburg established in the 1730s. Three different sorts of minuets existed—those which were meant to be played, those which were meant to be sung, and those which were meant to be danced. He added that the best minuet melodies for the dance were found in France.¹ Mattheson's view is not surprising as the French dances were viewed as superior among the dances of that time.

The Minuet's Arrival in Denmark

It is unknown precisely when the Danish court took up the minuet. By 1700, it possessed more than twenty folios of French music, several of which contained minuets; however, the minuet was undoubtedly danced at the court before this time. At the introduction of absolutism in 1660 ², the court was very French-oriented and, as early as 1664, the Royal Chapel hired six French violinists. The earliest record of the dance is from 1663, when the young Prince Christian, later Christian V, entered into marriage with the princess Charlotta Amalia of Hessen-Kassel. A tribute poem for the occasion, written by Claus Hansen Bang to the French melody 'Le muneve' mentions the minuet.³ The oldest Danish music source is from 1688, a tabulature book of dance music that includes five minuets composed by the organist Johan Lorentz. A Danish noblewoman, Christiana

1 Jens Henrik Koudal, 'Tradition og innovation', in *En Vänskrift till Märta Ramstens 60-Årsdag den 25 December 1996*, ed. by Gunnar Ternhag (Stockholm: Språk- och Folkeminnestitutet, 1996), pp. 49–55 (p. 50).

2 The Danish king took absolute power over the country through a coup.

3 Nils Schiørring, *Det 16. og 17. Århundredes Verdslige Danske Visesang Bind I* (København: Thaning & Appel, 1950), p. 351.

Charlotte Amalia Trolle, registered no fewer than fifty-one minuets in her piano book dated 1702.⁴

King Frederik IV of Denmark, who reigned in the early eighteenth century, danced the minuet. Elisabeth Charlotte, Duchess of New Orleans, wrote in a letter dated 2 May 1709:

I know the King of Denmark well.—He is very fond of dancing but has no ear and dances very badly. He jumped strangely around in the minuet—put his hat too low at his neck, started the minuet in one corner of the ballroom, and ended it in another. You cannot describe it as funny as he did it. You cannot resist laughing, being ever so sad when seeing this King dance.⁵

This unflattering portrait of the King of Denmark demonstrates how important it was to know how to dance the minuet at this time.

From the writing of Ludvig Holberg, we see that the Copenhagen bourgeoisie experienced 'minuet madness' from the 1720s. In 1734, the *Stadsmusikant* (town musician)⁶ in Odense had three 'Menivet' books in his collection, which shows that minuet music had also reached the bourgeoisie in the provinces.⁷ Holberg stated that, by 1750, intricate dances such as the *rigaudon* and *folie d'Espagne* were no longer used, rather '[o]ne finds only Taste for Minuets, English and Polish Dances, because these happen with more indolence, as those rather are like dancing on stilts'.⁸

But it seemed that during this period in Denmark, nearly everybody wanted to dance the minuet. In 1736, the pietistic King Christian VI⁹ who disapproved of dancing, requested that the police perform a systematic search of houses in Vesterbro and Frederiksberg outside Copenhagen's ramparts. During this search, the authorities found 'a couple dancing the minuet' among the guests at the Frederiksberg Inn. From this account, we know that the ordinary population danced the minuet at the pubs in the suburbs of Copenhagen.¹⁰

4 Koudal, *En våndskrift*, p. 50.

5 Ralph Holm og Klavs Vedel, *Folkedansen i Danmark* (København: Vort Land 1947), p. 37.

6 A musician licenced by a town to provide all music there.

7 Jens Henrik Koudal, *For Borgere og bønder—Stadsmusikantvæsenet i Danmark* (København: Museum Tusculanum: 2000), p. 421.

8 Ludvig Holberg, *Epistler V*, comments by F.J. Billeskov Jansen (København: H. Hagerups Forlag, 1951), p. 36.

9 Pietism was a seventeenth-century movement for the revival of piety in the Lutheran Church.

10 Koudal, *For Borgere*, p. 475.

It may seem remarkable that the minuet spread so quickly to the peasants, but several examples point to this being the case. A teacher from the parish Sønder Omme in Western Jutland reported that his grandparents danced the minuet ‘at fine occasions’ in the 1740s. And a 1759 lawsuit involving people from a village near Roskilde noted that the youth demanded ‘Minuets and Polish Dances’ from the musicians at their summer party but were dissatisfied with a Stadsmusikant’s apprentice who could only play minuets ‘badly’. These demands at a mid-century party testify that the minuet caught on well with peasants in the area around Roskilde.¹¹

Count Otto Ludvig Raben from Ålholm participated in feasts with his own peasants and mentioned several times what was danced. In 1768, he attended a peasant’s wedding and ‘danced the minuet with the bride’.¹²

Peasants Danced the Minuet

Over the course of the eighteenth century, the dancing preferences of the court of the Roi Soleil found their way to the pubs of the towns and the celebrations of the peasants. A parallel development can be seen in the way that the trumpet spread from the princes’ courts to the peasants’ villages. Lorents Berg complained in 1782 in his music textbook:

It has happened to this Royal Instrument as to other magnificent things that only ought to be for the distinguished, *Zirater* [decorations] etc. The trumpet is misused in several places by poor people wanting to join in. In Denmark and Holsten, the peasants dance the minuets for 4 skilling in their clogs to the sounds of the trumpets.¹³

The organist Johan Ludvig Dauer seems to have shared this sentiment. The Stadsmusikant (town musician) Gorrisen from Sønderborg in 1761 had leased him the right to provide the music on the island of Ærø but Dauer continuously had problems with dabblers playing at events without seeking permission or paying the fee required by law. Dauer normally charged four marks for playing for a dance event lasting twelve to fourteen hours. Instead of this, he was offered two marks, after which two dabblers played. Dauer grumbled about

11 Koudal, *En vānskrift*, p. 51.

12 Jens Henrik Koudal, *Grev Rabens Dagbog—Hverdagsliv i et Adeligt Miljø i 1700-tallet* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2007), p. 130.

13 Lorents Nicolai Berg, *Den første Prøve udi Instrumental-Kunsten* (Christiansand, 1782), p. 65.

the conditions on Ærø, writing in his letter of complaint: 'Elsewhere a musician apprentice can earn three to four rigsdaler, here on Ærø not even four marks'¹⁴.

A music book from 1772, the one which Dauer used as an instructional text to teach Niels Gottlob to play the violin, has been preserved. The book confirms the minuet's strong position on Ærø in 1700, as thirty-nine out of the one hundred and six melodies are minuets. Some of these are still published in music books from the present time. Most impressive is that one of the few Ærø melodies having survived up to today, No. 53 in Dauer's book, has been used for more than two hundred and twenty-five years.¹⁵

Several sources report on the popularity of the minuet in the country in the late 1700s. Niels Blicher published in 1795 an ethnographic description of the parish in central Jutland Vium, where he was a priest. About the dance at a wedding, Blicher wrote:

When the meal is finished, the tables are removed, and the dance starts and lasts the whole night. One of the most distinguished in the party first dances the minuet with the bride and then neatly leads her to the groom, after which the wedding couple dances first the minuet and then the Polish.— Later, two couples at a time dance and continually alternate between these two dances. The way of dancing seems cheap but funny enough to watch [...] for a while. The females move smoothly and quietly and sometimes drop out of step, looking modestly towards the floor most of the time. On the other hand, the males have their own and quite the opposite manners. Who can the best curtsy, stamp, hop, clap their hands, bow, lean sideways, and do artistic turns here is the greatest master of the dance.¹⁶

As Blicher reported, the peasants at the end of the 1700s had started to dance two couples at a time—a practise called minuet *en quatre*—except when the bride danced the ceremonial minuets.

Joachim Junge, who was a priest in Blovstrød north of Copenhagen, gave a similar description in 1798:

The peasants [...] always dance the minuet *en quatre*, except when there is a bride who must step forward. She then has the floor alone, first with the groom and after that with more, as she passes from hand to hand so that even lads sometimes must do villeinage in a minuet, first with smooth and later with some steps called Polish steps, which two peasants elsewhere name cheese and bread.—In the jumping dances you

14 Jens Henrik Koudal, 'Tradition og innovation', in *En Vänkskrift till Märta Ramstens 60-Årsdag den 25 December 1996*, ed. by Gunnar Ternhag (Stockholm: Språk- och Folkeminnestitutet, 1996), pp. 49–55 (p. 50).

15 Jens Henrik Koudal, 'Dansemusik fra Struensees tid' in *Årsskrift 2000* (Ærøskøbing: Ærø Museum, 2000), pp. 21–24.

16 Niels Blicher, *Topographie over Vium Præstekald* (Viborg, 1795), pp. 196–97.

never see more than two couples, because the English or here so-called row dances are not known by the peasants.¹⁷

The King Asks a Young Girl to Dance the Minuet

The minuet danced by the bourgeoisie and the one danced by the Royal family were not dissimilar, and this is illustrated by an anecdote describing events in the 1790s. Frederik Barfod writes that his stepmother, Christine Charlotte Guldberg (1777–1826), was walking on the rampart with a friend and met King Christian VII (1749–1808). The king was schizophrenic and known to deviate from the standards of expected behaviour. He stood in front of the girls and, looking from one to the other, shouted to his adjutants, ‘A pair of damn pretty girls—look at her how lovely she is’, pointing to Guldberg. Finally, the king departed, and the girls fled from the rampart. Sometime later, there was a *bal paré* [masked ball] in the banqueting hall of Christiansborg. It was a custom that the townspeople would walk in the galleries during a *bal paré* to watch the dance and listen to the music.



Fig. 8.1 Minuet in the great hall on Christiansborg. It is probably the minuet that the royal couple is dancing at the picture, showing the celebration in the great hall at Christiansborg at the wedding of Christian VII to Caroline Mathilde on 8 November 1766. Engraving by Bradt after drawing by Jardin. Kobberstiksamlingen, Statens Museum for Kunst, <https://open.smk.dk/en/artwork/image/KKSgb8824>, public domain.

Guldberg was walking in the galleries during this ball with a family named Leth. It was not usual to dress up for this gallery walk since the purpose was to watch and not to be seen. Soon after arriving, however, she was spotted by

¹⁷ Joachim Junge, *Den Nordsjællandske Landalmues Character, Skikke, Meeninger og Sprog* (Kjøbenhavn: Sebastian Popp, 1798), p. 180.

Christian VII who sent an adjutant up to bid her to come down immediately and dance the minuet with the king. Guldberg had to descend to the great hall and dance the minuet with the king: in her daily suit, a linsey-woolsey dress. She remembered seeing that the crown prince and the princess were both on the dancefloor but did not remember any other of her fellow dancers. The minuet had hardly ended before Guldberg hurried home, and she nevermore sat foot in Christiansborg. This account suggests that there were no significant differences between the minuet danced by the bourgeoisie and at the Danish royal Palace. It also indicates that, in the 1790s, the minuet was no longer danced by one couple at a time since Guldberg remembered dancing alongside the prince and princess but also other couples.¹⁸

The Dance Teacher and the Minuet

Dance classes were advertised frequently in the earliest Danish newspapers, revealing the dance repertoire at the time in question.

In 1792, the former ballet master Johann Joseph Ehlenberger from Mecklenburg advertised in *Faber's Fynske Avertissements-Tidende*. He offered a dance class in Odense in the winter of 1792 with the following description:

When 12 cavaliers meet and select 12 ladies, then the cavaliers will pay for 16 lessons 2 Rdlr, but ladies are free. For this fee are taught 1) Menuette ordinaire, 2) Menuette figureuse, 3) Menuette Quarrée, 4) Menuette á la Reine, 5) Menuette Angloise, 6) Quadrille, 7) Angloise ordinaire, 8) Angloise with Pas francoises, 9) Quadrilles with Pas francoises, 10) Allemande figureuse, 11) Cosaque, 12) the German dance called The Waltzes, 13) the big Contredance called Oberon of 64 tours.

Ehlenberger offered yet more:

I also teach my pupils the choreography or the art of drawing the tours of the Angloises as well as the Quadrilles, just as my music, being really good and exquisite, is at their service for them to copy. In anticipation of the compliance with my wishes, I hope to acquire general applause soon.¹⁹

Ehlenberger (b. 1753 in Mecklenburg-Strelitz) was a former ballet master who choreographed several dance performances. He and his wife were part of a German dance troupe called Fribach's that was touring Nordic countries and had performed a few times in Odense. In the spring of 1792, the troupe

18 'Ole Skov, *Menuettens oprindelse 2—Danmark—Dansens og musikkens rødder 16'*, *Hjemstavnsliv*, 5 (1997), 12–15.

19 *Fabers Fynske Avertissements - Tidende*, nr. 63 (Odense, 1792).

was failing to attract sufficient spectators, so most of its members returned to Germany. Ehlenberger, however, remained in Odense and established a dance school. It is not known whether he had many pupils.²⁰

As the building of a new theatre in Odense had recently finished, Ehlenberger was hired as a ballet master. The theatre had to close after only its second season, and Ehlenberger left the theatre in April 1796 and went to Hamburg to work. His wife and five children stayed in Odense. Unfortunately, however, his wife died on 15 May the same year, so Ehlenberger returned to Odense to restart the dance classes. Besides arranging one ballet for the theatre, he kept the dance school and taught the young people of Odense the art of ballroom dancing following a program similar to the one he advertised earlier. He continued teaching until he died in 1814.²¹

In October 1801, Stahl, a dancer at the theatre in Copenhagen placed a newspaper advertisement in which he announced 'that he informs both children and adults of the minuet, English dances, minuet en pas de grave, French contradances, waltz with figures of the arms, Scottish dances, and in fencing.'²²

Later, in May 1807, Stahl advertised his services in the *Aarhus Stiftstidende* as a teacher of 'the minuet and the latest good ballroom dances'. Stahl also taught in Roskilde in 1807. A local person recalled that

[i]t was a great and strange event in our town when this 'dancing master', a figurant Stahl from the Royal Theatre, appeared in Roskilde.—Stahl had brought along wife and children. He was treated as a great welcome artist, and parties were given for him and the family.

At the end-of-season dance the pupil's parents presented Stahl with a silver-teapot.²³

The Minuet in the Danish Clubs

The laws governing the clubs can be good sources for dance historians. This is the case even for the minuet. The earliest club laws were established at the end of 1700, when the minuet had disappeared from the repertoire of the bourgeoisie. By this point, the minuet had developed into a dance for many couples and not a dance for one or two couples at a time.

20 Ole Skov, 'Danse- og musikhistorie. Lidt om danselærere i 17–1800 tallet', *TRIN & TONER*, 87.4 (2016), 18–19 (p. 18).

21 *Ibid.*, 19.

22 Henning Urup, *Dans i Danmark—Danseformer ca. 1600 til 1950* (København: Museum Tusculanum, 2007), p. 159.

23 Urup, p. 162.

According to the laws of 'The United Musical Company' from 1796:

The balls should open with three minuets, to which the ball inspector should invite older persons who were not participating in the English dances. The inspector should also watch that the seats of the elderly are not occupied by others while the elderly are participating. If English-dancers refuse to leave the seats when requested by the aforementioned minuet-dancers, they must pay a fine of 2 Rd. to the company box.²⁴

Moreover, the club laws stated that, while the lead dancer in the first 'Quadrille' was to signal with both hands the completion of the dance, only the ball inspector could ask for the minuet to be brought to a close. The rules further specified that after the first three dances had been danced, three 'English Tours,' then two 'Minuets' and so on were to be played. A 'Contra-Tour' could be danced too but, since this was known to last for some time, it was advised to always make this the last dance.²⁵

In the laws of 27 June 1800 of 'The Harmonic Musical Company', it was recorded that 'of contradances only one may be danced on each evening,' probably because the steps were too complicated. If a Quadrille row exceeded twenty-four persons, it was the habit to form two rows. Dancers at the top of the row should take a position near the bottom in the next dance.²⁶

Peasants and Citizens Lost Interest in the Minuet

Although the minuet largely fell out of fashion in the 1800s, conservative clubs continued to dance it. Bishop Kristian Hjort explained in a letter from 1817 that he had

participated in an old-fashioned ball here in the club and danced my six English dances and three minuets without any aching tendons during the next days.²⁷

One night in February that same year, 1817, there was a ball in the club in Ribe. It was announced that 'by prior agreement, only minuet, English dance, contra dance, and simple waltz are allowed to dance'. It seems that this 'nice' club, which mostly consisted of married couples, had banned the Scottish dances,

24 *Love for det forenede Musikalske Selskab* (Kiøbenhavn: Sebastian Popp, 1796), pp. 176–77.

25 Anders Chr. N. Christensen, 'Klublivet som dansehistorisk kilde', *Folkdansforskning i Norden*, 25 (2002), 34–37 (pp. 35–36).

26 *Love for det forenede dramatiske Selskab* (Kiøbenhavn: Niels Lund, 1802), pp. 44–45

27 Helga Stemmann, 'Biskop Viktor Kristian Hjort', *Fra Ribe Amt*, 17 (1919), 141–92 (p. 187).

Wiener- and so-called zweित्रitt-waltzes, for being harmful to health and morality.²⁸

In 1809, the dean Claus Mønnich in Lønstrup in Northern Jutland preached a sermon about the Bible story of the wedding at Cana, and is reported to have concluded in the following way:

And when he had led the groom, he had to dance with the bride. And what did he dance? The minuet? (Here, the dean grabbed his dress, spread it out to the side, made a step to the right, a step to the left and a step to the rear, at the same time setting the beat and tone by the words), Tinterlintint! Tinterlintint! Tinterlintint! But how do you dance? Firetur, Kehraus (here he did some hops and tramps to illustrate these peasant dances with disapproval), Hopetohop! Hopetohop! Therefore my devout fellow Christians, when you come to a feast and must and will dance, dance the minuet and not firetur or Kehraus because otherwise, the devil dances Kehraus with all of you right into hell. Amen.²⁹

From this, we surmise that the Firetur, Kehraus, and other dances were overtaking the minuet in popularity, much to the great irritation of dean Mønnich. He associated the graceful steps of the minuet with heaven and the wild hopping of the Kehraus with hell.

The Minuet of the 1800s

The dance teacher Jørgen Gad Lund (1796–1848) occupied a particular position as publisher of dance books. He was a dance student at the Royal Theatre under the tutelage of Antoine Bournonville until 1820. Later, he himself became an itinerant dance teacher, travelling all over the country. Lund published *Terpsichore, or a guidance for my dance pupils to keep in their memory steps and tours that they have examined by me* (1823), a book later expanded and republished in four editions. In *Terpsichore*, we find the earliest printed description of the minuet in Denmark. Lund detailed the minuet, step by step, as it was danced in the 1820s.³⁰

Lund's description shows that the minuet changed at the beginning of the 1800s. The steps were unlike those of the Baroque: the steps went over two bars;

28 Peter Riismøller, 'Klasseskel, kroer og klubliv', in *Dagligliv i Danmark—Menigmand Får Mæle 1790–1870*, ed. by Axel Steensberg (København: Nyt Nordisk Forlag, 1963), pp. 285–308 (p. 299).

29 Anton Jakobsen, 'En Prædiken i Maarup Kirke 1809', in *Vendsysselske Aarbøger* (Hjørring: Historisk Samfund for Hjørring Amt, 1929), pp. 154–59 (p. 158).

30 Urup, pp. 176–77.

the first bar was stepped forward with the weight on the right foot during the whole bar, after that, three quick steps (left, right, left), and after that the weight on the left foot, then right, left, right and so on.

After giving these details of the minuet, Lund emphasized the character of the dance:

If you first can dance this with grace and dignity, then all the other dances will be easy. Every dance is dependent on fashion. But if even stormy dances have displaced the minuet, it certainly is and stays the most beautiful of them all.³¹

Among the dancers who worked as choreographers at the Royal Theatre was Poul Funck. He was appointed principal dancer in 1815 and, in 1828, created the dances for Heiberg's festive play *Elverhøj*.³² The last act opens with a minuet, followed by several dances corresponding to the contradances of the 1800s. In the minuet initiating the celebration, he included typical minuet and contradance figures.³³ This minuet from *Elverhøj* is likely one of the best-known minuets today that are considered part of the Danish Royal Theatre's national repertoire.

Funck's version of the minuet has been danced in a slightly simplified version at dancing schools, folk high schools, and in folk-dance associations. It was published, among other things, by Else and Kristian Krogshede.³⁴

Concluding Remarks

Danish peasants lost interest in the minuet in the first half of the 1800s. Two sites in Denmark, however, are known to have kept the minuet tradition alive until the mid-twentieth century—namely, the Randers area and the island of Ærø south of Funen. In the Randers area, the dance was called 'Monnevet' and, on Ærø, the 'Mollevit'.

31 Jørgen Gad Lund, *Terpsichore, eller En Veiledning for mine Danselæringer* (Maribo: Schultz, 1823), p. 24.

32 Urup, p. 153.

33 Ibid., p. 241.

34 Else and Kristian Krogshede, *Folkedansen, Anstandsdanse og Menuetter* (Odense 1937).

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