



*Nobuko Yuasa examines the use of castanets in baroque dance within elements of historical context and 'classical' folk styles*



## *Castanets in Baroque Dance*

Such evidence as follows tell us that castanets were used in baroque dance from an early stage:

- 'Here the Princesses and the other ladies danced several sarabands, with castanets...' read from the prologue of the stage directions for John Crowne's *Calisto*, at Whitehall in 1674.
- In Lully's ballet, *Le Triomphe de l'Amour*, in 1681, Mademoiselle Nantes, daughter of Louis XIV, and Madame de Montespan danced and played the castanets. The Parisian newspaper, *Mercure Galant*, wrote that the little princess '...played the castanets and displayed her ability for all sorts of dance.'
- Richelieu, the cardinal under Louis XIII, danced saraband in the presence of Anne of Austria, mother of Louis XIV, with castanets and bells, wearing green velvet breeches.

How did they play the castanets then?

In his book, *Chorégraphie* (1700), Raoul Auger Feuillet gave notations of the castanets for '*16 bars Folies d'Espagne*', '*9 bars*

*Chaconne de Phaeton*' and *'20 bars minuet'* with the music. It is almost the only and presumably accurate information, but he didn't explain how to play the castanets in practice.

Since early times, people have used varied instruments of the castanets family all over the world. What particularly interests me is that 'the castanets **were first attached by the thumb** and became the obligatory accompaniment to all Spanish dances at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the bolero and classical Spanish dance schools were born', although 'Flamenco...did not require castanets.' (ref: Flamenco Shop website) Before then, castanets were tied to the four fingers or only to the middle finger. In my view, attaching castanets by the thumb allowed other fingers the flexibility to play the castanets, improved castanet technique in Spanish dance (which was unique to Spanish dance, as evolution has not happened to the style of other castanet families), and led to a new technique of 'roll'.

How is the 'roll' performed in baroque castanets? It has caught my attention from the beginning of my castanets experience.

In Spanish classical castanet playing, a 'roll' is called 'caretilla', which is to scratch castanets with the four fingers starting from the little to the index finger. Helen Gower Chadima, in her paper *The Use of Castanets in Baroque Dance* (1983), concludes that 'caretilla' should be used for 'roll', because the classical technique of holding (being "fastened on the thumb") and striking castanets ("with the middle and ring finger") is the same as the technique in the baroque period, which was described in the documents such as *Traité de Instruments Musique* (1640) and some writings by Furetière (1690) and Richelet (1710). Feuillet used a term "roller sans frapper" (roll **without striking**) for 'roll', which I think can be understood that the roll should be done by a different way from striking.



The George Chaffee collection, Harvard Theatre Collection

Some baroque dancers today use the two fingers of the index and middle finger for 'roll'. I learned this technique in America. The style is the same in the folk dance in Mallorca. In this case, in my understanding, the dancer should use the index and/or middle finger for striking so that it is not necessary to change the holding position. It would contradict, however, the style suggested in the above three baroque documents or in some portrayals of the baroque dancers holding castanets (e.g. in *Dance and Music of Court and Theatre* by W. Hilton, 1997). In the portrayals, some dancers strike castanets with both the middle and ring fingers, and other dancers just use the middle finger.

In the classical "caretilla," each 'roll' functions as a swift ornament for the following note. It sounds like a bunch of small bells. The tremolo-like sound with the 'roll' done by the index and middle fingers, I think, fits better to baroque music rather than the rapid "caretilla". The roll with the two fingers reminds me of the long ornament of trill in harpsichord music. Feuillet gave notations of all 'rolls' using a breve or dotted-breve, tied or otherwise, and showed almost all 'rolls' on two hands. In classical technique, "caretilla" can be continued by putting a left-hand-strike after



Example of castanet patterns for La Folia  
El Noble Arte de Danzar a la Francesa y Española. Pablo Mingué Madrid 1758.

each right-hand "caretilla." You can do it continuously without a strike if you want, although it is not the classical technique. I trained myself playing with both hands, a continuous "caretilla" to see its effect.

If you look carefully at the dancers in the pictures, you will see that they are holding castanets by the thumb with **one string**. Today, however, we tie a string on either side of the first joint of the thumb. This gives **two strings** on the thumb. If you try to play castanets with one string over the lower side of the joint as in the baroque portrayals, the castanets would not be attached to the thumb in such a stable manner as with two strings over the thumb, and would make less rebound of the shells. Therefore, it would not allow so acute a sound and creates a softer one. In this way, "caretilla" sounds lighter and gentler.

If the classical "caretilla" were to be used for a 'roll', I would prefer one with a modest speed, which sounds lighter and gentler than a rapid one continuing without a strike. Also I like to use the both hands alternatively without a gap. Since Feuillet had no suggestion for a 'roll,' it could be a possibility. Today, either type of 'roll' - "caretilla" or a two-fingers 'roll', would be suitable, as long as they are used appropriately and effectively.

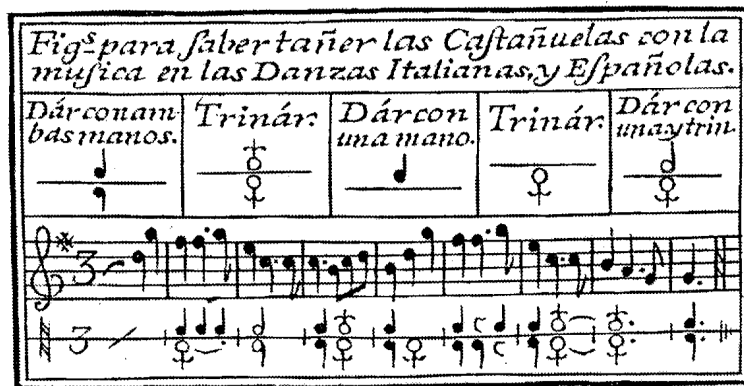
Finally I would like to comment on some practical points for those who are going to try castanets for the first time.

The two castanets in a pair have a pitch difference. The one that has a third higher pitch is called *hembra* (female) as opposed to *macho* (male), and should be held on the right hand. 'Female' can be distinguished from 'male' by the notch carved on top of the ear (upper part).

The rhythmical pattern that Feuillet notated looks to have its own rules which do not particularly depend on the rhythm of

whichever dance is being performed. Each pattern ends with a strike on both hands to emphasise the end of the phrase. Almost all the bars start with a simultaneous strike with two castanets, followed by a **right hand strike**, another simultaneous strike, two hands 'roll', or nothing (as a result of one breve or dotted-breve strike in a bar). When a 'roll' is done by one hand and strikes are done by the other hand, the latter should be done by **the right hand**.

Figures to explain how to play castanets with the music of Italian and Spanish dances.  
To strike with both hands, trill with both hands, strike with one hand, trill with one hand, strike with one hand and trill with the other.



Music from an Entrée Espagnole with example for castanet patterns  
El Noble Arte de Danzar a la Francesa y Española. Pablo Minguet Madrid 1758.

From this I infer that the right hand has a leading role, with maintaining the beat, which is different from the classical style today.

The rhythmic pattern is basically to go along with music or dance steps, but sometimes makes a sort of cross rhythm to them. Feuillet described the arm movements (with the arm notation) with castanets rhythm in his *Chorégraphie*. You would realise the wrists are less free with the castanets and the arms move with different timing from the usual arm movement.

I am sure you will discover how entertaining it is to play castanets. I would completely agree with Trichet, who wrote that "it is hardly worth looking for anything more percussive and entertaining". In this vein, more than one visitor to Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century commented on the lascivious nature of the dancing which was aided by the use of the castanets and tambourines. Pablo Minguet, in his 'The noble art of dancing in the French and Spanish style' (Madrid 1758) advises "Take care in dancing that your figures, movements and poses are of an honourable amusement, as with good reason the preachers complain, knowing how pernicious that some of them are." All these writers realised how much expression could be added to the dance by the use of the arms and the castanets.

In concluding this essay, I would like to leave a following mystery with you. When Weaver translated Feuillet's *Chorégraphie* into English in his *Orchesography* (1706), he omitted the very three pages on castanets!!



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I will be giving a workshop on castanets at the 2003 Consort de  
Danse International Summer School of Baroque Dance in Cardiff.



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*Nobuko Yuasa has attended many UK summer schools mainly  
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