



REVIEW: BOOK

The Viennese Ballroom in the Age of Beethoven

Erica Buurman

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022

pp. xiv + 193, ISBN 978 1 108 49585 1

Joseph Fort

Department of Music, King's College London, London, UK

joseph.fort@kcl.ac.uk

'Better not to live than not to dance!' So Johann Friedel summarized the prevailing mood across Vienna in 1784 ('Ja lieber nicht leben, als nicht tanzen': Friedel, *Galanterien Wiens: Auf einer Reise gesammelt, und in Briefen geschildert*, two volumes (Vienna, 1784), volume 1, 145). The Irish tenor Michael Kelly went further, describing the city as 'dancing mad', so much so that rooms were made available in the public dance halls in which pregnant women could give birth. Even imminent childbirth supposedly could not keep people from dancing (Michael Kelly, *Reminiscences*, ed. Roger Fiske (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 102). Given the popularity of dancing as a key part of social and cultural life in late eighteenth-century Vienna, it is perhaps surprising that English-language musicology has shown such reluctance to engage with it, despite the fact that scholars readily agree with the basic principle that an understanding of this dance culture is important for an understanding of the music of this period. Enter Erica Buurman, whose book *The Viennese Ballroom in the Age of Beethoven* paints a vivid – and quite necessary – picture of dancing practices in Beethoven's Vienna.

The fact that this area of research is something of a *tabula rasa* presents its own challenges. In short: how does one go about rehabilitating this history in a way that truly brings it alive for the reader? Key to Buurman's success in this task is the structure of the book: the seven main chapters combine a logic in their organization with considerable freedom to investigate their defined topics. Following an opening, scene-setting chapter on Vienna's ballroom culture, the next three chapters take in turn the main dances performed in the city during this period – the waltz (in an early form), the minuet and the contredanse. Although there is some conformity across these three chapters (each begins with a description of the dance's choreography, for example), Buurman ultimately teases each in a different direction, allowing her to focus on whichever aspect of the dance in question she deems most worthy of further exploration. The chapter on early waltzes considers the choreographic origins of this dance (with a very fine exploration and clarification of the relationship between the German dance and the *Ländler*); she subsequently focuses on the minuet, critically examining this dance's capacity to act as a signifier of nobility in the music of this period; and the contredanse chapter devotes attention to the question of who actually performed it.

Having focused the first half of the book on the dances, Buurman turns in the second half of the book more explicitly to music. The final three chapters display a similar degree of freedom within a common theme: while a 'dance repertoire' thread loosely ties this part of the study together, each explores quite different features of the music that was performed in Viennese dance halls of the period. The first considers the widespread practice of arranging popular operatic melodies as danceable music, the second examines pronounced military references in waltzes (particularly in their codas) and the third surveys music associated with the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815). Just as with the previous three chapters, the author remains free to focus on any aspects of the repertory that she

considers relevant and interesting, united simply by the fact that they were performed in the city's dance halls during this period.

The result of this fairly free approach to topic selection within the broad categories of dance and music – as opposed to a multi-stage argument sustained across several chapters of a monograph – is that, in a sense, the book reads as a series of case studies all united around a single topic. This approach enables Buurman to survey the historical scene and pick out those aspects she considers the most fascinating and relevant for musicological study, thereby (to get back to my initial question) bringing it alive for the reader in a particularly compelling manner. This is aided further through a judicious choice of geographic and temporal focus points. Rather than attempting to cover all of Vienna's (at least) fifty public dance halls that had sprung up by the end of the eighteenth century, Buurman hones in on the Hofburg Redoutensaal, which had a rich history and for which there exists an extensive archival repository. Moreover, selecting 1770–1830 for the time span of the study offers more than a convenient parallel with Beethoven's lifetime. First, it covers a period of intense growth in the dance industry, made possible by Joseph II's legislative reforms from the early 1770s onwards. More importantly, though, it allows for a careful take on each of the dances that Buurman considers: stopping at 1830, just before the 'golden age' (her term, page 1) of the waltz, allows the earlier forms of this dance to be considered in their own right and not as precursors to its 'final' version. Extending back to the 1770s enables the author to examine the minuet while it was still current for contemporaries, and not just in the rear-view mirror.

There is a further way in which all seven chapters of the book are unified, though, and this lies in Buurman's claim that 'the ballroom repertoire of Beethoven's lifetime connected with virtually every aspect of Viennese musical life, from opera and concert music to the emerging category of entertainment music' (2). It is in the observations showing the impact of Viennese dance culture on the city's concurrent musical life where I feel the full force of this study, and where its implications for other musicological matters might be most readily perceived. A few examples will suffice here. The book offers a productive complicating of topic theory's inability to accommodate more than one simultaneous social reference, especially in relation to the contredanse's ability to exist in quite different social settings. Elsewhere, Buurman makes a highly convincing argument that Martín y Soler's *Una cosa rara* owed its popularity to waltz arrangements of some of its melodies, with an explanation of the associated dances that is both expert and clear. The author also draws some suggestive conclusions about the nature of musical listening in various contexts. In the chapter on 'battle waltzes', for instance, she argues that because the 'obvious pictorial references [to militaristic music] did not require intellectual effort on the part of the listener', these military depictions found a natural place in a dance setting (144); from this she submits that programmatic music and dance music overlap more than they do in the case of purely instrumental music regarding the modes of listening that they require from their audiences.

This last point is illustrated by several examples, in which 'the divide between music for listening and music for dancing was not always clear-cut' – perhaps one of the most compelling and far-reaching claims of the book, which succeeds in breaking down a somewhat binary view of the two repertoires (8). Yet I wonder whether it might be possible to take this insight further, when thinking about listening practices. Buurman considers there to be two distinct modes of engaging with the music – as a dancer and as a listener – and does not admit much overlap between them. She describes audiences responding to music 'more as listeners than as dancers' (30), or 'switch[ing] between modes of listening' (145), for instance. But might not bodily knowledge of the dance have allowed listeners to adopt something of a dancer's perspective in their listening approaches, even with minuets intended for concert settings? Indeed, considering the repertoire from a dancer's perspective might have allowed for further insights where traditional musicological approaches seem to fall short. When Buurman openly struggles to reconcile a 'foursquare, functional' and harmonically unadventurous waltz by Joseph Wilde (1778–1831) with the rapturous reception it was reported to have received, in-depth consideration of the sheer bodily pleasure generated by dancing to this music might have offered a fruitful line of enquiry (167).

The book's success owes much to the depth of the archival research on which it is founded. It might centre on 'the age of Beethoven', but Beethoven is just one of many musicians considered here. Buurman makes frequent reference to the music of numerous non-canonical composers and arrangers from the period; the appendix lists the names of over twenty-five individuals whose dance compositions the author consulted, for the most part in their original editions. This richness of musical reference is aided through generous musical examples – some thirty-four in total – that are well integrated into the discussion. (Hopefully it will be possible to rectify the placement of examples 6.5 and 6.7 in a future print run, as they have been accidentally swapped at some point.) The book is further informed by a wide array of written texts from the period, with particular reference to dance treatises and accounts of public balls from travel writers. Buurman positions these well throughout the book, drawing on them in all their richness to provide a vivid picture of each scene, but never allowing the sources themselves to become the story, which can be the danger in a historical reconstruction that relies so heavily on primary documents and archival materials.

Any reconstruction of a historical scene will rely on some speculation, and it is inevitable that different people might read sources in different ways. I might quibble, for instance, with the claim that Joseph Karl Rosenbaum's diaries 'rarely mention dancing, in which he himself did not participate', adduced in support of the notion that dancing at the Hofburg Redoute was limited (27). In fact, in diary entries between 1801 and 1804 Rosenbaum describes dancing minuets at a family wedding, at a ball during *Fasching* (Carnival) and at the Esterházy residence in Eisenstadt, as well as his wife learning to dance the minuet and his son dancing a German dance at an orchestral rehearsal. I might also be slightly less inclined to take dancing masters, such as Carl Joseph von Feldtenstein, at their word when they optimistically proclaim that 'all classes' dance the minuet (58). Indeed, inferring from this that 'it was widely understood that the middle and lower classes danced it too' (58) perhaps is to take the dancing master's claims (keen to sell copies of his treatise) too readily at face value, especially when considering levels of literacy amongst the lower classes at this time. Yet these are minor points for a book that is so successful in conveying the richness and energy of this neglected area of study, and whose impact in other areas of musicology will no doubt be keenly felt.

Joseph Fort is College Organist & Director of the Chapel Choir and Senior Lecturer in Music at King's College London. He took up this post in 2015 upon completing his PhD at Harvard University. His book 'Haydn's Minuets and Eighteenth-Century Dance' will be published by Cambridge University Press in late 2024.