

Pereira, José / Martins, Micael.

1987 (?).

Goa and its Music. No. 4.

In:

Boletim do Instituto Menezes Bragança, No. 154, pp. 41-48. Panaji, Goa.

GOA & ITS MUSIC

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(Continuation from N.º 153)

CHAPTER VIII

THE MANDO DANCE

I. THE ORIGIN OF THE DANCE

The dance was an art form in India from very early times. In no other known civilization has rhythmic movement been so highly valued; for its philosophers dance was the supreme form of art (1), for its artists visual dance patterns impressed themselves on almost every moving figure they produced. This was stage dancing, however, and the crown of its types was the Bharata Natyam. Social dancing of a sort was also popular, but not among the upper castes, who learnt it only from the West, and seemingly not before the second quarter of the nineteenth century. (2)

In this land of the dance, consequently, its stage forms had no noticeable influence on the formation of the only (in the modern sense of the word) social dance form evolved on its soil — the Mando. It was mainly the trends in Europe, from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, which formed it and helped it to acquire its character. Each of Europe's focuses of social dancing left some mark on the Mando's structure — Italy, Spain, England, France and Portugal. Some of Negro America's rhythm also seeped through the screen of European dance, mainly the Portuguese. Unlike the other countries mentioned, Portugal was at no stage of its history the arbiter of dance taste in Europe. New dance forms from all over the continent converged on

France, who sifted and reshaped them ; they were then taken over by Portugal and given a local colouring ; finally these and others of Portuguese make were shipped to Goa — usually after their popularity had waned in their original centres of activity.

The distance of Goa and Portugal from these centres explains the tardy transplantation. Portugal was often out of the mainstream of Europe's cultural life, and borrowed forms persisted there long after they had been ejected from the midstream. Its Indian colony was still further off, a solitary island of a Western way of life in an Indic world, when Goa was conquered by Albuquerque in the sixteenth century, Europe was going through a dance experience that Latin India was to be ready for only centuries afterwards. Italy was still the hub of European culture, but the leadership in the dance was being taken over by France. (3) Italian courtliness, exemplified in Baldassar Castiglione's courtier, was almost a cult object ; into this hero's decorum Spain infused a flavour of the exotic and romantic. (4) France, in turn, invested this blend with a cold formal elegance all her own (5), softening the violence and angularity of early dances into the glide and the bend of the *douce manier*. (6) In the terms of the Bharata Natyam, the *tandava* was discredited and *lasya* became the sole criterion of the dance. (7)

The local flavour of European dance — as evolved in that continent's different nuclei — does not by itself sufficiently account for the Mando ; important also were the trends that pulsed through Europe as a whole. Two of these, which arose in the age of the Baroque, are vital for the understanding of the Mando. The first was the rejection of mixed forms (8), in the seventeenth century we have perhaps for the first time in history a clear division between the active and passive in human culture, between creators and spectators, between artist and audience. (9) Symptoms of this trend were the separation of vocal forms from the instrumental (10), and the increased differentiation between the serious and lively forms of the dance. The former became simpler, graver and more stately — a ceremonial procession devoid of levity in which at court and state functions kings comported themselves "like bishops and cardinals". (11)

Now freed from the tyranny of courtly solemnity, young people felt free to look for satisfaction in the more lively folk dances. (12) This brings us to our second trend, the evolution of sophisticated dances from folk forms. The younger nobles went to the peasants for fresh and exhilarating dances,

which in the course of their handling were imperceptibly transformed by the aristocratic tastes of their sponsors into something courtly, to be swept away in their turn by a new inrush of gay folk forms.

These trends can be seen at work in the Minuet — for its contemporaries the very perfection of the dance. It was indeed the most technically accomplished social dance hitherto known, and, though somewhat rigid, it surpassed all previous dances in clarity, regularity, balance and the refined systematization of its figures. Yet its origins had been “ugly, insignificant and lowly” in “spite of which it became” so splendid (*pomposo*) in the course of time that one entirely forgot its humble birth.” (13) A ceremonial dance, stately and detached, with all emotional ardour and expressiveness chilled out of it by a transfusion of formal elegance, the Minuet established steps and bodily movement as the essentials of court dancing. It also embodied fully the age’s new sense of movement, which had “grandeur, repose and fulness without the haste of angular movement, without the impact of the tense outline of the body.” (14) This pure close movement, after 1650, became, as *douce manier*, the guiding principle of all dance.

The men and women who went through the intricate and accomplished ritual of the Minuet found that its technical perfection did not quench any deep emotional urge — such as seeing the most exciting personal relationship among themselves, love, vividly dramatized. This want they found supplied, in the eighteenth century, by the Contredanse. (15) More than any other European dance it stylized courtship and the love combat, with their motions of approach and retreat, their contrasting patterns of female coyness and masculine dash and forwardness. Like the Minuet, it originated as a *country dance*; indeed, the motif underlying it can be traced as far back as the Early Stone Age; so also can the two basic forms of choral dance, the circle and the file. (16) Our dance, a variety of the latter, was found all over Europe, but the version current in England, when couple after couple enter to form the file was felt to be the most satisfactory, as it was a pleasing combination of the choral dance and the single-couple dance. (17) Its aristocratic performers refined it of its peasant dress and toned its original simplicity with a variety of figural nuances. (18)

Though older than their oldest European opposite numbers by at least half a millenium, the aristocracy of the “Old Conquests” of Goa (for some time converted to Christianity) may have been expected to consider them-

selves privileged if they happened to have been graciously admitted to the *fidalgos'* social evenings. (19) Thus they may have had a chance to see the Portuguese nobleman trying out their dance figures. But they do not seem to have learnt any themselves — at least, not before the nineteenth century, when both the courtly Minuet and the Contredanse had become obsolete, and had been supplanted by the bourgeois Waltz. In this latter dance, the accent was on the natural and the exuberant, both of which qualities the older dances had curtailed by a severe discipline. (20) But the proud and self-conscious Brahmins, as also the principal Tsad-ddi families, had less use for the new-fangled forms than the older ones which were the expression of the life — as theirs was — of a stately and sedate aristocracy.

There was also their preoccupation with love, which had in truth been an obsession with their ancient Sanskrit literature: the texture of *kavya* poetry was woven through and through with amorous imagery. The double file of the Contredanse, with its movement of stylized courtship, seemed to be an exciting new frame for the old picture. The participation of many dancers in both the dances was important to the spectator because it supplied constant occupation and satisfaction for his eye "through the variety and arrangement and movement of lines in geometrical designs. (21) The solemnity of the Minuet fused with the vitality, passion and charm of the Contredanse brought to light the dance of courtly courtship, India's *ballo nobile* (22), the Mando.

The double trend in the dance so crucial to the development of that form of art was modified in Goa by the cultural background. India was the land of mixed forms; it was impenitently Baroque, yes—but only in exuberance not in compartmentalization. That is why it succeeded in fusing the Minuet and the Contredanse, and also in using the same compound for both sophisticated and folkloric effects, which can best be studied in its description.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE DANCE

More sumptuous than any in the Portuguese colonial world were the mansions which the wealthy members of the Goan aristocracy built for themselves. As in the Assembly Rooms of nineteenth century Europe, two parts of the building were set aside for receptions—the card room and the ballroom. The latter was the most richly furnished area in the mansion. Elaborate

chandeliers, a shimmer of prismatic crystal, were suspended from fretwork ceilings. Porcelain of Chinese workmanship but of Indian design glistened on polished rosewood tables, whose lustrous black surfaces were intricately laced with twining floral designs. (23)

Weddings were the highest moments in the history of these halls; it was then that the greatest number of feet scraped their floors. The whole village seemed to converge on them on those days, even if most of it was kept outside. (24) Among the crowd one often could not fail to hear the mortified wails of the girls who had been rejected by the rich bridegroom within, and who would thus never be asked to sing the wedding *mando* in the hall. (25) Not a little of the noise came from the lighting of the firecrackers (26), a din which was added to by the children — who more than others relished all the hubbub and commotion.

Inside, the ceiling resounded with chatter in Konkani and bad Portuguese. (27) The receptions often took place in the evenings; then the chandeliers were lit and filled the room with “the lustre of stars and diamonds” (28) from the waxes on the tables and window sills came “the perfume of jasmines and chrysanthemums”. (29) In this hall the guests would gather to display themselves, make polite conversation and to gossip, while from the adjoining card room one could hear the quarrelsome shouts of the doorway, *gumott* in hand. (30) A resounding thump on its lizard skin surface would freeze the uproar, and the man would announce that the *Mando* was about to begin.

The Mando was danced among the other dances of European origins like the Contredanse, Lancers and Caledonians. A piano usually stood at one end of the hall, and musicians with string instruments could be seen hovering near it. There were the singers too, at the best only highly skilled amateurs, tensely waiting to start. They did not go in for vocal effects; the melodies they had trained their voices to sing were simple and spontaneous, without complicated and difficult vocalizations, elaborate technique, or stylization. It was not their ambition to attempt vocal *tours de force*. Two voices, ideally one male and one female, were selected to sing the melody, while a mixed group of voices would repeat the chorus. Often the voices were either both women, or both men — as when in 1877 or 1878 Arnaldo de Menezes and Milagres Silva together are said to have performed in the presence of the Governor António Sérgio de Sousa.

When there were singers like Arnaldo present the thump on the *gumott* was a hint for the card players to drop their cards and make a dash for the hall, where the dancers were getting ready for their performance. It had become a custom in several places in Goa for a man to hand a woman a

card with the name of the dance which he wished to dance with her written on it (31) — a procedure no doubt followed in the case of the Mando too. This was a habit, which like so many others, the Goans borrowed from the West; yet they were curiously conservative about how their women dressed. While they themselves followed the current European fashions, they expected their women to dress like their grandmothers — for which inconsistency we can feel nothing but gratitude. So while they trooped to the centre of the ballroom, arrayed in grey and dark suits, to form their side of the Mando dance file, their women would move alongside in a column of figures dressed in the *torhop baz* (32) — a costume of silks and velvets, often stiff with bands and flower patterns in gold thread, standing against the men's sombre colours in brilliant contrast. It was fashionable to hold fans of ostrich feathers, so that the file of women became also a long flutter of white.

In the expectant silence, the first notes of the Mando melody, infused with the sadness of old India and the solemnity of plainsong, would gently impel the files into motion. To the lilt of its caressing and sorrowful melodies, their hushed movements were first those of advance, turning now to the right, now to the left, now facing each other in front views or in three-quarter views. When almost face to face halfway in the middle of the hall they would retreat to their starting points; advance would be followed by a recession, but with the same figures. Another advance soon after, with the men and women gliding forward towards each other again, and the whole pattern of movement was rounded off by a crossing and interchange of places.

The motions were thus those of the Contredanse; but the "tormenting of the body" (33) which the partisans of the Minuet in the eighteenth century saw in it was substituted by the suave bydily movements of the *douce manier*. French elegance rounded the angular edges of English awkwardness. In the Mando, further, the drama of courtship that is the essence of the Contredanse was suggestively performed. Demure and modest, the women dancing it continually assumed attitudes of stylized wooing. With a sideward inclination of the head, half challenging, half shy, they would open their fans and let them fall lazily, hide their faces under their curling ostrich-feathers in simulated bashfulness, thus shielding themselves from the mock-ardent glances of the men. They would then remove their fans provokingly and fan themselves coyly. All these, and others, were gesticulations of ambush, invitation and refusal. They would also bashfully toy with a lock of hair, and dart coquettish glances in the direction of their partners, thus continuing the dialogue of courtship in the subtler language of the eyes.

More actively passionate were the parts played by the men. Theirs were the movements of chase; they were expected to make ritual passes at the women. Enthusiastically they would flick their handkerchiefs, and cut

figures with them held out in both hands. Every gesture was tried, such as soldier-like salutes, strange adjustments of the top hat (if they had one on), arching of knuckles, placing the arms akimbo — all depending on how excited they got. Fuel for this excitement was the cadenced clapping of the hands of the lookers-on beating the Mando's rhythm. Old men who saw the Mando danced in its high days still recall the *song* (34) or Mando madness that possessed them as the singing and dancing progressed. Anon, this mounting craze would transform the Mando dance into the Dulpod dance.

Here, then, was a synthesis of the Minuet and the Contredance, a perfect dance form which summed up the high points of both. In fact, however, it never came to actualizing its possibilities, but remained a brilliant sketch from beginning to end. As a kind of modified Minuet — a dance of a type dear to the French heart — one would have expected it to be rationalized and methodically ordered. This never happened; no specialists ever developing its figures and to drawing out the maximum subtlety from its basic movements. The instinctive (35) dominated its interpretation to the end of the Mando's period — which boded no good for its technical development. Highly adept though the Indians were at codifying their dance forms, and to an astonishing degree of minuteness — as in the Bharata Natyam and Kathakali — the Mando's structure never came to be clearly defined. The only conceivable reason of why this happened is the fact that no Indian cultural form in Goa had the prestige necessary to make the trouble seem worthwhile. The snob appeal of Portugal and the West was represented in the ballrooms by a clique of over-dressed dandies, who stood aloof pooh-poohing the whole thing, though they too could not help but catch the fever that waxed with the growing pace of the dance. (36)

The Mando's vagueness of structure made it possible for it to move with greater ease from the sophisticated to the folkloric, from the stately to the gay. In Goa, as in Europe, the aristocracy was intrigued by peasant dances. Their composers wrote in a folkly style too, in the Dulpod (37). In dance sessions, the lordly *mandos* were followed by cascades of *dulpods* and periods of melodic solemnity and gloom were rounded off by an orgy of spasmodic and scintillating tunes. The Baroque period in Europe had sharply distinguished the grave from the merry, in having a different type of dance for each mood. Dedicated as it was to mixed forms, Indian music often indicated the change of emotion through variation in tempo. But the dance motions themselves remained the same.

All subtlety, however, vanished from its movements. No longer did the woman dancer assume those "lovely sculptural poses, producing an infinity of silhouettes" that moved serially before the onlookers' eyes, "some more elegant, others more delicate". (33) The timing would gradually mount to something like a gallop. Even the most *blase* in the hall, which meant snobs,

were affected by the general enthusiasm, which now reached its *crescendo*. "In the whole extent of the hall the palms [would] burst out vibrant and loud, [and] the delicate mezzo-sopranos collapse under the explosions of sonorousness". (39) Art was no longer what was wanted. Now everyone craved for "a fear-arousing din, a vigorous orgy of drumming" (40) soon to be mixed with shouts, cries and whistles.

In this maelstrom of sound, the singers and dancers would engage themselves in a tussle, in which the latter usually lost. Those less agile on their feet were forced to give up, which they did by the man making a profound bow to his partner and taking her to her seat. Only the most expert pair stayed on. The singers, accompanied by the impetuous sounds from the *gumott*, spread no effort to discomfit them by sudden changes of tempo to which the dancers reacted with affected poses of disdain. All they now did was to advance and recede. (41) Finally the woman would find it was all too much for her and stop, and the man, wiping off the sweat from his forehead, would triumphantly lead her back to her seat. Clowns and practical jokers here found an opening for the expression of their vulgar tastes, choosing old men and other weak persons as their victims, to everybody's amusement. The farce would ultimately dissolve in a climax of exhaustion.

The wildness of tempo also found a channel in the Deknni — which was sometimes brought in among the *dulpods* — the dancers trying to mimic the dance movements of the Hindu temple girls (*Kolyonts*). Popular Hindu music also has a proneness for powerful and reverberating sound; in it and in the *dulpods* the old *tandava* spirit so far kept in check by *lasya's* compelling elegance, raised its turbulent head again. The dyptich-like character of Indian classical dancing (*lasya-tandava*) (42) thus reappeared in the Mando-and-Dulpod combination. (43)

As in ancient India, the dance in Goa helped to bring to the surface the land's deepest aesthetic urges. Before social dancing became common there, the region's music had permanently acquired the qualities of grandeur and mischief, and had dealt imaginatively with the problems of God and the oddness of this world. But the love between the sexes had not been given its due, though the preoccupation with it was there all the time. The rhythm already established did not have the needed softness and enchantment. Now the Mando dance provided the composers with a stylized visual drama of the exchanges of love; its gentle motion of advance, recession and crossing inspired them to mould their melodies into tranquilly undulating patterns, giving us in consequence the loveliest and most emotionally moving forms of all Konkani music, the Mando.

(To be continued).

Pereira, José/ Martins, Michael.

1988

Goa and its Music

(Refer to No. 144, pp. 75-82,

No. 145, pp. 19-112 , No. 153, pp. 89-108,

No. 155, pp. 41-72, Nr. 156, pp. 25-40 and No. 169, pp. 67-77)

in:

Boletim do Instituto Menezes Bragança, No. 154, pp. 41-48

Panaji, Goa