

Reviews

BOOK

This excellent book is indeed “a new chapter in European dance history.” The eleven contributors to this volume are all experts in dance research and their chapters clearly show the depth of their research and knowledge on the Nordic minuet.

Egil Bakka’s contribution on situating the minuet in history, discussing the name and how the emerging dance genre is traceable in historical texts, sets this volume up extremely well. As a fellow ethnochoreologist, I particularly welcomed the outlining of various historical standpoints of earlier minuet research, and how these have generally omitted the dancing of the lower classes. This volume greatly puts this to rights, highlighting that “different classes and different kinds of dancing existed simultaneously throughout history [...] that although there were socioeconomic divisions and specialisms, people of various groups were part of the same world and did interact.” (p. 28) Bakka further asserts “it is crucial to understand dancing and dances as belonging to paradigms, each of which relies on specific organizational conventions. Seeing dances as parts of certain paradigms yields a safer hypothesis about their genesis and development than drawing comparisons between isolated traits of dances not studied in context.” (p. 28)

We get a succinct view of the minuet’s central role and spread around Europe to courts and other social strata. The core position of dancing masters in disseminating both the music and the movements is clearly traced and laid out. For example, Anne Fiskvik quotes Elizabeth Svarstad who points out that “the minuet seems to have served a sort of foundational educational purpose; if one showed sufficient discipline to learn its steps, he or she was likely capable of learning more of the contemporary, modern dances that were evolving.” (p. 81) The minuet’s central role in the Nordic countries as the first dance performed at a wedding and the strict local rituals of who danced with whom, in what order, and so forth, plus its symbiotic relationship with the polska, is analysed in detail by several contributors.

Both Bakka’s and Opielka’s overviews situating the minuet dance and music in Europe, omit reference of the transmission of the minuet to the rural population from the urban centres in Scotland. The Scottish dancing masters taught the minuet to all social classes, and over time a dance named the strathspey-minuet emerged, according to George Emmerson’s *A Social History of Scottish Dance* (1972). Little is known about the strathspey-minuet character, but it seems to have contributed to formation of the strathspey (4/4 time), a uniquely Scottish form of dance for all classes of society. It is possible that the minuet transformed into aspects of the strathspey tradition, but only further research will reveal details on this. It does, however, suggest that minuet filtered across to all social classes at least in Scotland.

The Nordic Minuet

Royal Fashion and Peasant Tradition. A New Chapter in European Dance History

Petri Hoppu, Egil Bakka & Anne Margarete Fiskvik (eds.)

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MATS MELIN

DOI: [10.62779/puls.10.2025.33901](https://doi.org/10.62779/puls.10.2025.33901)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6450-963X>

The various authors expertly trace the minuet in each Nordic country and through different time periods, which are clearly discussed and analysed. It becomes clear how cross-border interactions of dancing masters, musicians, and ordinary people shaped the development of local variations, how steps and movements morphed, and how minuet melodies over time have been adapted into other traditional tune forms such as polskas, meaning that many minuet melodies are still part of the current repertoire in some places.

Chapters show in great detail how earlier researchers and diary writers experienced the minuets of their times at various locations and social settings, how they noted down the dances, learnt the material placed in front of them, and learnt to understand the music they danced to. It brought to mind my own research experiences and how difficult it can be to accurately understand what you see, hear, and feel when dancing. It is easy to misunderstand the flow of movement if one is not deeply familiar with the local tradition. The people you see dancing may, for example, not hear the music as you do, and thus move to a different pulse. They may perhaps not start a movement motif where you expect it, with your outsider knowledge dictating your first impressions. There are several comments on how notators and commentators of the past struggled with these sorts of interactions. Some persevered and did their best to notate exactly what they saw whilst others seem to have given up their efforts of understanding what they experienced with all their senses.

Anne Fiskvik, in her short overview of the Nordic dancing masters during the eighteenth century, laments the fact that there is a lack of in-depth studies of their profession. There is a similar lack of research in the British Isles and Ireland for the same time period. The importance of the minuet on the theatre stage is made clear, as is the foundational position of the minuets for dance education. The last sentiment was, for example, stated in 1805 by Aberdeen dancing master Francis Peacock, who regarded the minuet as the most important step and dance to learn properly. Perhaps source material did not allow, but I would have loved to read more information about the struggles of the female dancing teachers of that time. Fiskvik also lends her expertise to another chapter, with Bakka and Elisabeth Svarstad on the minuet in the theatre. Although a brief chapter, it gives plenty of information on where to look for more detailed studies.

Six out of 18 main chapters are authored by Gunnel Biskop, covering aspects of minuet dancing in Sweden, Swedish-speaking parts of Finland, Finland, and Norway. Nordic forms of the minuet are also outlined. She provides a significant contribution to this volume. Biskop has an engaging writing style that draw me in. She navigates a multitude of contexts, locations, and dance scenarios provided by her historical sources. One of the main sources she references is Admiral Carl Tersmeden (1715–1797), whose detailed memoirs give detailed first-hand observations of minuet and other forms of dancing among both higher and lower social classes. He lived in many different places in Sweden, Finland, and abroad, which gave him a great perspective on his time. Tersmeden's recollections are interwoven with a good number of other contemporary sources. Thus, a very good overview, with many detailed event descriptions, is provided by Biskop. All her chapters

provide similarly detailed descriptions. The chapter includes several specific examples of the minuet's central part in wedding rituals. Her chapters left me wanting to know more as I believe there is more information she can share.

The minuet in Denmark between 1688–1820 is briefly outlined by Anders Christensen. The information provided is very interesting but again I kept wishing for more.

Petri Hoppu joins the aforementioned authors in authoring the five chapters analysing historical and theatre-based minuet dancing as well as giving us detailed snapshots of early collecting of Minuet dance data in the Nordic countries. The step notations are a great addition to the text as are the many quotes from the first-hand collectors mentioned.

The five chapters looking at the minuet as movement patterns are by their nature the most detailed in analysis and for those interested in movement analysis and notation this is a great resource. I think there is perhaps room for a publication of its own on this particular investigative strand. A personal highlight is in the chapter where Siri Maeland joins Bakka and Svarstad in discussing "how the knowledge about the Nordic folk minuet, made available in this book, may give a broader basis for interpreting the historical sources regarding the basic French eighteenth-century minuet step." (p. 433) I would welcome the several proposals given at the end of this "New Perspective" chapter seeing the light of day in future publications and projects.

The last three chapters see Biskop, Hoppu and Svarstad, joined by Anna Björk and Göran Andersson, as authors looking at the area of constructions, reconstructions, and new forms and contexts for Nordic minuets. These chapters all bring the minuet into the present day. They provide a wealth of information about the people who kept the minuet alive or recreated it for modern use. It is an area of interest I feel should be explored and encouraged more.

The many clear minuet step motif and dance pattern descriptions give a great opportunity to dance for those who would like to analyse the various motif variants described. The QR codes pointing to video links are a great asset. The chapters on understanding earlier dance notations and the pitfalls concerning recreated step and dance notations, relying on the viewpoints of the earlier authors, is greatly welcomed.

This publication is a joy to read, and I feel it should become part of the core reading lists for the study of dance in the Nordic countries. The contributors and editors should be congratulated on producing an easily readable, yet deeply analytical, volume. May it spurn further research in years to come, not only on Nordic aspects of the Minuet. Whether there are parallel paths elsewhere in Europe mirroring the Nordic scenario is worth investigating. ■