

Dancing Keys: Through the Centuries

Dancing Keys is a project to compose pieces of moderate to advanced difficulty for piano, to serve as new repertoire for performers and act as an educational guide to the principal dance styles used by composers through the ages. Each set of 24 pieces covers all the major and minor keys, providing good technical practice for advanced learners. The plan was to write a piece each week throughout 2018, which proved an interesting challenge! I hope to secure publication in due course too.

This collection of pieces traces some of the major dance styles of the past six centuries or so. A second set of 24 focuses more on the dance styles of different countries around the world.

Naturally, these pieces are composed in a pastiche style, so they are supposed to sound a bit like other pieces without actually borrowing tunes. I have not consciously lifted material from other people's work, but if you spot anything I have accidentally copied, please let me know!

Peter Banks

Peter read music at Oxford before moving to Wales to teach music, including piano, singing, theory, and A level. Peter works extensively as an accompanist for vocal and instrumental exams, choirs, dancing, worship and as a hotel pianist. His theatre work includes directing many shows in the Dolman Theatre, Newport and the Everyman and Playhouse theatres in Cheltenham, in addition to numerous school and Stagecoach shows. Peter sings with the Priory Singers and directs the St. Julians Primary choir and Just Sing! As a composer, Peter has written a number of children's shows including *The Magic Tree*, *The Travelling Musicians* and *Beatrix Potter and the Tailor of Gloucester*, a Mass, a Flute Sonata and many art songs, plus jazz and worship songs.

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Medieval (up to c1500)

The dance styles at this time would have been mainly played by small bands of instrumentalists, sometimes including a keyboard, so I have adapted the musical style for solo keyboard, trying to preserve much of the original sound and feel of the dances along the way. Most dances of this time period are divided into 'low' dances in which feet basically remain on the floor, and 'high' dances involving leaps. The name **BASSEDANCE** suggests feet remaining on the floor: this one is built on a cantus firmus of a medieval song 'Dame Douce Jolie' played in long notes through the middle of the texture, with the original song played at the end. It is paired with a lively Italian 'high' dance, the **SALTARELLO**, its name again suggesting leaps (sautes).

Renaissance (1480-1620)

The pairing of high and low dances continued through the Renaissance, and the **PAVANE** became the most important slower, graceful dance, often with a lively **GALLIARD** to follow, a dance popular with Queen Elizabeth I. These examples are in the late 16th century English style typical of Byrd, Dowland and John Bull; each dance section is repeated with decorations, and the Galliard is based on the music of the Pavane.

Baroque (1600-1750)

Several dances popular in the Baroque period originate from earlier: The Alman, Coranto and Hornpipe were all frequent features of the Renaissance. This **HORNPIPE** is a triple-time dance much favoured by Purcell, and quite different from the nautical version in 2/2 featured in 'Last Night of the Proms' which became popular later.

The later Baroque period saw the development of a Dance Suite, with many examples by Bach, Handel, Telemann and other contemporaries.

Often beginning with a Prelude, some of the more commonly used dances appear here in a typical sequence. This collection uses a number of different styles of composition: the German **ALLEMANDE** pays homage to Bach's unaccompanied cello suites in a one-handed texture, the French **BOURRÉE** is a canon, the running steps of the **COURANTE** are presented as a fugue, and the Spanish-origin **SARABANDE** is a theme and variations. The lively **GAVOTTE** contains a bagpipe-drone Musette in the middle, and a British-origin **GIGUE** in 9/8 time and sonata form rounds off the Suite.

Classical (1730-1830)

The key dance of the Classical period is the **MINUET**, which originates from the Baroque era. A graceful, gentle dance in triple time, it became a standard movement in symphonies and sonatas where it is followed by a Trio section - in this example a nod to the energy of Beethoven. The late Classical Minuet became more vigorous and evolved into the German **LÄNDLER**, a strong rustic dance that in turn seems to have been a forerunner of the Waltz.

Romantic (1810-1910)

The 19th century was an era of nationalism, and one of the ways composers advanced their local heritage was through folk dances, some of which became standard across Europe. The **POLONAISE** is the national dance of Poland, a strong, proud promenade dance, and is followed here by another Polish example, the snappy and melancholic **MAZURKA**. Chopin was the most important composer in the development of both dances. Bohemia is represented with the **POLKA**, a lively 2/4 dance much used in ballet and operetta. However, the key dance of the 19th and early 20th century is the Waltz, of which there are two principal types, now both standard ballroom smooth dances. The **VIENNESE WALTZ** is faster, conducted 1-to-a -bar and often in fact a chain of waltzes, while the **BALLROOM WALTZ** is slow enough to

be conducted 3-to-a-bar. In this collection, the former is inspired by Johann Strauss II and the latter by Brahms.

The **SICILIANA** is unusual in this collection as little is known about it as an actual dance. Its lilting 6/8 pastoral feel has been used by many composers ranging from Scarlatti and Mozart to Rachmaninov and Faure, mostly in instrumental contexts.

Modern (from 1900)

Up to the 20th century, dances were generally exported from Europe across the Atlantic, but from around 1900 the tide turned and the Americas have provided many of the newer dance styles. Alongside the Waltzes, the **TANGO** has become a staple ballroom dance: its origins are Argentinian. With the growth of popular music and the recording industry, new dances caught on more quickly. The **CHARLESTON** was a tremendously popular 1920s dance with its distinctive pushed second beat, while a decade later the **FOXTROT** reached its height of popularity. This is a slower version known as a Slowfox, as opposed to the faster Quickstep. This collection finishes with the first world-wide dance craze in the late 50s and early 60s - the **TWIST**, and a **BOOGIE-WOOGIE** of the same era which would often be used for dancing a Quickstep or Rock and Roll.

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Soli Deo Gloria!