

A Medley of Tunes from Playford on Hammered Dulcimer

Festival of the Passing of the Ice Dragon
March 17, AS XLI (2007)
Barony of the Rydderich Hael

Description

A medley of two tunes selected from John Playford's *English Dancing Master* and arranged for hammered dulcimer, an instrument well-known throughout Western Europe by the mid-15th century, and popular in England across class boundaries in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The Hammered Dulcimer – origins and popularity in England

The hammered dulcimer was once generally thought to have been developed in the Middle East, and to have gradually moved westward. Current theory, as argued by Paul Gifford in his work, *The Hammered Dulcimer: A History*, holds that the dulcimer developed simultaneously from two different instruments: in France from the psaltery, and in Germany and the lowlands from the string-drum.¹

The *doulcemèr* peaked in popularity in France in the latter half of the 15th century among the nobility, and was most often played by women of the court, or male entertainers at court. In Germany, the *Hackbrett* was perceived as a folk instrument, and was played primarily by the rural population and by professional minstrels, peaking in popularity in the early 16th century. Although the instrument retained its class-associations on the continent, in England, the instrument seems to have enjoyed popularity among the nobility, the middle class and the peasantry alike.²

The dulcimer was known in England as early as 1474, when an entertainment given at Coventry for Prince Edward included "the minstrelsie of harpe and dowsemeris". English literary references from the 16th century include Stephen Hawes's chivalric allegory *The Passetyme of Pleasure* (1509 and reprints until 1555), while Welsh and Scottish poetry of the same time refer to *dwsmer* and *dulsacordis*.³ The King James translation of the bible used the English word *dulcimer* to translate the Hebrew *nebel*. A ship's log of 1609 records the shipment of a hammered dulcimer, along with a violin, to Jamestown, Virginia, presumably from England.⁴

John Playford's *English Dancing Master*

Social dances of the Renaissance may be grouped into two broad categories: those for couples, and those for sets of couples. The former, represented by the galliard and the volta, rely for interest on individual skill in executing complex steps. The latter style of dance relies less on proscribed steps and places more importance on figures – the path that dancers follow on the dance floor, regardless of the steps that carry them along that path. This latter style, known as *Country Dancing* in England, was the prototype of New England contra dancing and Appalachian square dancing.⁵

The with growing popularity of country dancing through the first half of the 17th century, the time was ripe for an entrepreneur to create an authoritative dance manual. John Playford (1623-1686), a yeoman of the Stationer's Company (and so a publisher rather than a dance master), published the first English dance manual of its kind in 1651. This first edition of *The English Dancing Master* was a great success, and the

¹ Gifford.

² Kettlewell, ch. 3.

³ Kettlewell, ch. 3.

⁴ *Musica Antiqua*.

⁵ Keller and Shimer, p. viii

second edition appeared the following year. Ultimately, Playford and his successors expanded the work, with the eighteenth (final) edition of 1709 stretching to three volumes.⁶ Although tunes were added and dropped from edition to edition, a total of 535 tunes appeared of the course of its publication.⁷

Arranging for the Hammered Dulcimer

Despite ample evidence for the *existence* of the hammered dulcimer in period, no known record survives of how the instrument was played. No instructional materials have come to light, and no period arrangement specifically for the dulcimer is known. Arrangements for polyphonic instruments such as the lute and virginal give us insight into the harmonic tastes of the time, and multi-part settings give evidence of the degree to which the taste for counter-point had developed. Ultimately, however, the nature of the instrument itself must be embraced in creating arrangements for it. If we assume that the modern tuning is the same as that in period, what naturally flows from the instrument now should be an excellent guide.

One of the challenges of arranging for the hammered dulcimer is its long sustain. Harmonic coloration must be very deliberate and selective. Especially in the lower courses, where the sustain is the longest, a supporting harmony note must harmonize pleasantly with a full measure or two of melody.

Playford gives only the melody line of each tune. The supporting harmonies are therefore open to interpretation, and indeed some of the tunes shift between major and minor modes over the course of the eighteen editions. My arrangements are influenced by my prior familiarity with SCA settings of these same tunes. My primary purpose was to be able to play for SCA dancers who were also already familiar with these arrangements, and so I chose not to deviate too strongly from the harmonic scheme of those settings. When setting them for dulcimer, I began by learning the melody, and selectively added supporting notes and counter-melodies that seemed to give the same harmonic color and “feel” as the prevalent SCA wind arrangements.

The Suite

I have selected two tunes that remain popular among SCA dancers: “Hole in the Wall” (Barlow No. 377) and “Gathering Peascods” (Barlow No. 27).

“Hole in the Wall” appeared first in edition 9B in 1698, rather late by SCA standards.⁸ None the less, it make a pleasant opening tune with a restful three-quarter tempo and a major key signature colorized by periodic minor harmonies.

“Gathering Peascods” dates from the first edition and so is the earliest tune in the suite.⁹ Its major key and lively cut-time tempo make for a bright finish to what I hope is an enjoyable set.

⁶ Keller, p. ix.

⁷ Barlow.

⁸ Barlow, p. 89.

⁹ Barlow, p. 22.

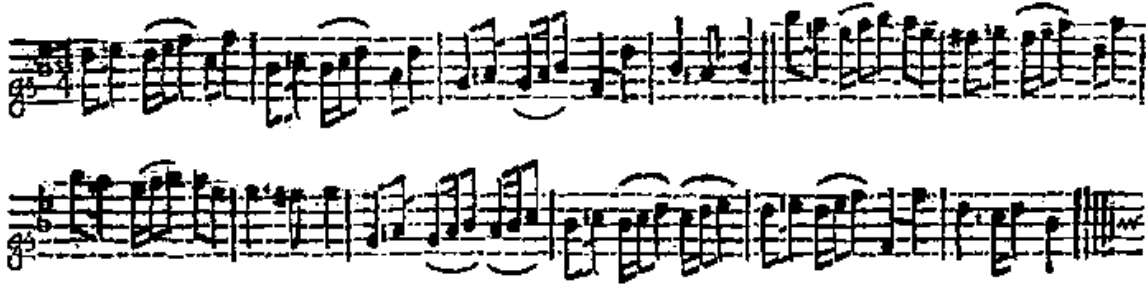
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ISBN: 0810839431
- Keller, Kate van Winkle and Genevieve Shimer, *The Playford Ball: 103 Early English Country Dances* (Northhampton, Mass.: The Country Dance and Song Society, 1994)
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- Kettlewell, David, "The Dulcimer." (WWW: David Kettlewell, 1976, 2006) [URL <http://www.new-renaissance.eenet.ee/dulcimer/>]
- Musica Antiqua, "Hammered Dulcimer" (WWW: Musica Antiqua, 2007)
[<http://www.music.iastate.edu/antiqua/dulcimer.htm>]

Appendix A – facsimile graphics from various editions of Playford’s
Dancing Master

Hole in the Wall.

Lengthways for as many as will.

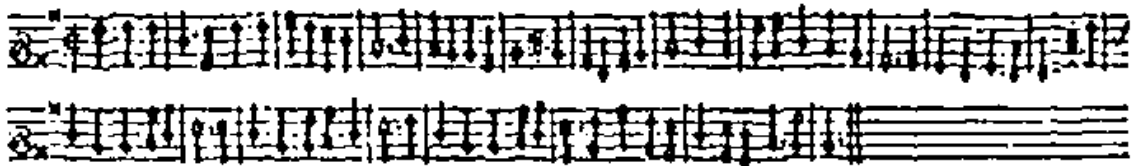


The 1. cu. cast off below the 2. cu. and lead up in the middle. The 2. cu. cast up and lead down the middle.

The 1. Man crosses over with the 2. Wo. and the 1. Wo. with the 2. Man, so all four hands half round, and so cast off into the 2. cu. place, the rest do the like.

Gathering Peascods.

Round for as many as will.



Go all 2. doubles round, turn S. That back a- gain	Men hands, and go round in the inside, and come to your places we as much	Meet and clap hands, we. as much, while the men go back, men meet again and turn S. we meet, men meet, while the we. go back, we. meet again and turn S.
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Sides, turn S. That a- gain	As before, the we. going first	As before, the we. meeting first
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Arms all, turn S. That again	Men hand as at the first.	Men meet as at the first time
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from Robert M. Keller’s *The Dancing Master 1651-1728: An Illustrated Compendium*.