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French Society Abroad: The Popularization of French Dance throughout Europe, 1600-1750

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Abstract

This paper explores the dissemination of French dance, dance notation, and dance music throughout Europe, and it explains the reasons why French culture had such an influence on other European societies from 1600-1750. First, the paper seeks to prove that King Louis XIV played a significant role in the outpour of French dance and the arts. Next, the paper discusses prominent French writers of dance notation who influenced the spread of French dance literature and training throughout Europe. Finally, the paper delineates European composers and their involvement in the development and production of French dance music. Using academic, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and other scholarly sources, this paper seeks to accurately present the information in an orderly fashion. The paper contains visual evidence of dance and music notation to assist the reader in understanding the subject matter. Additionally, theories of contemporary authors as well as authors from the time period are discussed to present concrete evidence. The two main types of dance discussed in the paper are ballroom and court dances, which were prominent within the French royal court. One major finding of the research is the fact that French court and ballroom dances were specifically designed to communicate the power and prestige of King Louis XIV; consequently, other European countries were influenced to strive for similar prestige. Another finding is that many forms of French dance notation were translated and published in other countries, which increased the use of French dance throughout Europe. Musically, European composers such as Handel and Mozart included elements of French dance music in their compositions, and thus played a significant role in prevalence of French dance music throughout Europe. Overall, this paper proves that French dance received wide recognition due to political influence, availability of dance notation, and the involvement of prominent composers.

Keywords

French dance, King Louis XIV, Branle, Courante, dancing-master, Beauchamp-Feuillet, Feuillet, French court dance, seventeenth-century dance, Handel, Mozart, Bach, dance notation, French dance music

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A historical and current truth: humans seek popularity, beauty, recognition, and societal success. These goals are pursued in various ways, including fashion, art, language, culture, education, and employment. Specifically, then, how does art influence the ways in which people seek recognition? By today’s standards, this question may be judged in light of contemporary music, modern art, or other forms of modern expression. However, trends of society differ significantly from culture to culture. Consequently, for the trends of one society to permeate another, they must be substantial indeed. In the mid-seventeenth century, King Louis XIV prompted a movement in French society that significantly influenced other societies throughout Europe. This “movement” was literal—the movement of French dance. King Louis XIV highlighted the French ideals of sophistication, prestige, and high status by promoting the development of French court and ballroom dances. These elegant dances served as examples of the beauty of French society and simultaneously communicated France’s political power. The qualities of French elegance and power gained recognition throughout Europe and influenced other societies to attain comparable qualities. In his treatise on opera written in 1755, Italian writer Francesco Algarotti states that “the French are the acknowledged masters in this school of the imitative arts [dance], nor ought any other nation to be ashamed to take lessons from them in this article of polite accomplishment.”¹ In the years which followed the rule of King Louis XIV, French dance continued to influence other countries through the migration of dancing masters and dance notation writers, as well as through the involvement of several prominent European composers. These factors made possible the incredible movement of French dance abroad. Documentary

¹ Jeffrey Giles, “Dance and the French Enlightenment,” *Dance Chronicle* 4, no. 3 (1980): 260, doi:[10.1080/01472528008568805](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472528008568805).

evidence shows that styles of French dance and dance music between 1600 and 1750 were influential throughout Europe due to King Louis XIV's use of dance styles as a political influence, the development of various dance and dance notation styles, and the involvement of prominent European composers with French dance music.

A significant aspect of French dance from the seventeenth century involves ballet and ballroom dancing within the French royal court. Dance had already become a significant part of French culture by the early seventeenth century. In the early sixteenth century, King Louis XIII participated in court ballets, which promoted the view of dance as a high art.² Court ballets often combined dance, music, opera, and other subjects.³ In fact, they usually carried high political influence and ultimately communicated impressive idealizations regarding the king, his family, and the power of the monarchy.⁴ French dance strongly promoted other countries' attractions to French court styles because of its ability to refine and advance one's self-image and societal standing.

When King Louis XIV began his personal rule of France in 1661, he promoted the growth of French dance even more than his predecessor, Louis XIII. One such promotion was the installation of the *Académie Royale de Danse* (Royal Academy of Dance) in 1661, which sought to prepare people for involvement in the high society of the French court.⁵ Louis XIV also contributed to the influence of French dance because his superb dancing abilities promoted various publications of dance notation.⁶ This played an important role in the dissemination of French dance as other countries gained access to translated copies of dance notation and instructions.

Two genres of dance were common in the court of Louis XIV: ballet and ballroom dancing. These types of dance were heavily focused on etiquette, prestige, high society, and on bringing glory to France.

² Sharon Kettering, "Favour and Patronage: Dancers in the Court Ballets of Early Seventeenth-Century France," *Canadian Journal of History* 43, no. 3 (2008): 392, doi:[10.3138/cjh.43.3.391](https://doi.org/10.3138/cjh.43.3.391).

³ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 400–401.

⁵ Moira Goff, "'The Art of Dancing, Demonstrated by Characters and Figures': French and English Sources for Court and Theatre Dance, 1700–1750," *British Library Journal* 21, no. 2 (1995): 202, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42554411>.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 206.

Interestingly, the dancers at court balls “were selected in advance and represented only a small proportion of the people in attendance.” These selected dancers were given special seating and expected to dress more ornately than the spectators.⁷ These distinctions reflected King Louis XIV’s push for prestige within his court. Social balls were quite a spectacle, and they were stylistically united with the court ballets of the same era. Rebecca Harris-Warrick says, “Theatrical and social dancing were allied art forms which overlapped each other in terms of step vocabulary, dance types, choreographers, and manner of presentation.”⁸ These shared aspects displayed the political influence of Louis XIV’s court and created high standards for dancing in other European countries. Ceremonial balls and ballets played a role in carrying out French political goals. These political nuances were elusive yet effective. Meredith Little explains: “Not only did [ballets] impress and delight a sophisticated audience, but the King was frequently presented allegorically as a noble and valiant leader, powerful in battle and righteous in peace.”⁹ These political subtleties were performed with extravagance and grandeur, and they presented the prestige of the King in a sophisticated and non-threatening manner.

Louis XIV, as an excellent dancer, commanded the attention of other nobility in the court. His dancing abilities greatly influenced his subjects to strive for the same perfection. Moreover, this prompted rulers of other countries to desire the same level of influence within their courts.¹⁰ Louis XIV often danced branles: ceremonial dances in the seventeenth century that were used to begin a court ball. Branles contributed to the high social standing of the court. Furthermore, branles, along with other French dances, were exported to other countries and incorporated in English, Swedish, German, and Italian courts.¹¹ A second dance used to communicate nobility was the courante. In regard to Pierre Rameau (an author of French dance notation in the early eighteenth century), Fiona Garlick says: “Rameau writes that the courante was Louis XIV’s

⁷ Rebecca Harris-Warrick, “Ballroom Dancing at the Court of Louis XIV,” *Early Music* 14, no. 1 (1986): 44, doi:[10.1093/earlyj/14.1.41](https://doi.org/10.1093/earlyj/14.1.41).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹ Meredith Ellis Little, “Dance under Louis XIV and XV: Some Implications for the Musician,” *Early Music* 3, no. 4 (1975): 332, doi:[10.1093/earlyj/3.4.331](https://doi.org/10.1093/earlyj/3.4.331).

¹⁰ Fiona Garlick, “Dances to Evoke the King: The Majestic Genre Chez Louis XIV,” *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 15, no. 2 (1997): 10–11, doi:[10.2307/1290886](https://doi.org/10.2307/1290886).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

preferred dance and the one in which he excelled. The courante was...one which more than any other inspired an ‘air of nobility.’”¹² Overall, the branle and courante were useful in displaying the power and nobility of King Louis XIV, prompting other European courts to do the same.

As Louis XIV promoted French fashion and art through dance, other countries sought out similar prestige. England and Spain were particularly affected by this French cultural invasion. Even though England was often at war with France, English citizens still adopted French ideals of fashion and art in order to achieve French cultural skills. French dance even affected English courts as well as the English middle class because, in the early eighteenth century, the employment of French dancing masters (private dance instructors) became an essential aspect of English society.¹³

When Phillip V, the grandson of Louis XIV, took control of Spain in 1700, he paved the way for the inclusion of French dance in the Spanish court. During Philip V’s reign, Louis XIV periodically sent gifts to the Spanish court, which contributed to the influence of French fashion in Spain.¹⁴ Eventually, Philip V hired a Parisian dancer, Michel Gaudrau, to teach French dance to nobles and royal children in the Spanish court.¹⁵ This increased France’s political and social influence in Spain. Consequently, Philip V’s rise to power in Spain contributed significantly to the French influence and further promoted Louis XIV’s political goals.

In addition to King Louis XIV’s assistance in the dissemination of French dance in England and Spain, the development of dance notation assisted in the dissemination of French dance throughout the rest of Europe. Pierre Beauchamp and Raoul Feuillet were two prominent figures credited with the development of French dance notation. Beauchamp, Louis XIV’s dancing master, developed a notation style that enabled dance steps to be recorded, transmitted, and preserved. The high quality of this notation was worthy to be used by other dancing masters

¹² Garlick, “Dances to Evoke the King,” 25.

¹³ Jennifer Thorp, “‘Borrowed Grandeur and Affected Grace’: Perceptions of the Dancing Master in Early Eighteenth-Century England,” *Music in Art* 36, no. 1 (2011): 10–11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41818678>.

¹⁴ Clara Rico Osés, “French Dance in Eighteenth-Century Spain,” *Dance Chronicle* 35, no. 2 (2012): 134, doi:[10.1080/01472526.2012.685011](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2012.685011).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 137–138.

and experts throughout Europe.¹⁶ Moreover, Louis XIV ordered Beauchamp to create a dance notation system for ballroom and theatre dances. This system made it possible for dancing masters and their students to adequately and efficiently learn dances.¹⁷

Later, Feuillet used Beauchamp's system to publish *Chorégraphie*, a work containing various notated dances. Because Feuillet's publication reflected Beauchamp's previous work, this style of notation later became known as the Beauchamp-Feuillet system.¹⁸ This system is notated as if the dance is being viewed from above, with the front of the dance at the top of the page (Figure 1). The desired path for the dancers to follow is communicated by symbols that describe in which direction the foot should move or which types of jumps and turns should take place.¹⁹ Due to its effectiveness, Beauchamp-Feuillet notation became a popular system in England, especially attractive to wealthier people whose dances would have been performed in the court or on stage.²⁰ Additionally, many French dance manuals and treatises appealed to the dancing masters in England who sought knowledge of the sophisticated French style. This knowledge, in turn, attracted wealthy English patrons.²¹

¹⁶ Little, "Dance under Louis XIV and XV," 337.

¹⁷ Ken Pierce, "Dance Notation Systems in Late 17th-Century France," *Early Music* 26, no. 2 (1998): 287, doi:[10.1093/em/26.2.286](https://doi.org/10.1093/em/26.2.286).

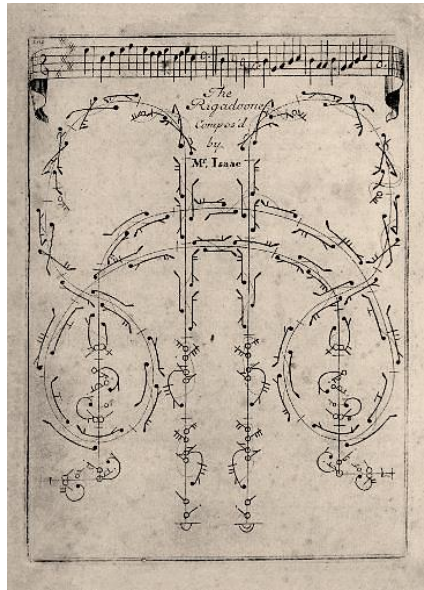
¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 288–289.

²⁰ Thorp, "Perceptions of the Dancing-Master," 14–16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

Figure 1: Example of Beauchamp-Feuillet notation. Notice the intricacy of lines, dots, and symbols used in communicating the dance.²²



Although the Beauchamp-Feuillet notation was the first widely available system for dance notation, it is important to remember that Beauchamp and Feuillet developed their works at different times. Pierre Beauchamp is credited with “laying the foundations of a technique which would later develop into the Romantic and Classical ballet of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”²³ While Beauchamp’s development of notation created a lasting effect, Feuillet’s publications made it possible for Beauchamp’s ideas to work their way into other countries in Europe. Specifically, two translations of Feuillet’s *Chorégraphie* (1700) were published in London in 1706. One of these was called *The Art of Dancing, Demonstrated by Characters and Figures* by P. Siris (an adaptation rather than a direct translation). The other, translated by John Weaver, was called *Orchesography, or, The Art of Dancing, by Characters and Demonstrative Figures*.²⁴ The Beauchamp-Feuillet style

²² Raoul-Auger Feuillet, *Orchesography, or The Art of Dancing by Characters and Demonstrative Figures*, 2nd ed., trans. John Weaver (London: Walsh, ca. 1720), 108, <http://lccn.loc.gov/22022367>.

²³ Goff, “The Art of Dancing,” 205.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

of notation was also spread by another French manual entitled *Le Maître à danser*. In it, Pierre Rameau explained and modified the notation in Feuillet's *Chorégraphie* and also included descriptions of proper ballroom etiquette and of the minuet.²⁵ In 1728, Rameau's manual was translated into English by John Essex, an English dancing master. Essex explained that dancing in England had greatly advanced in the early eighteenth century due to the translation of French dance notation; however, he admitted that the French still maintained the upper hand in dance.²⁶ These translations, expansions, and adaptations of French dance notation represent the particular influence of French dance on English culture. Ultimately, the view of French notation as high art in England represents the influence of Beauchamp-Feuillet notation throughout Europe.

Feuillet's involvement is a significant reason why dance notation became popular among dancing masters throughout Europe. Some reasons for his success are presented in Shirley Spackman Ritcheson's thesis on Feuillet's *Chorégraphie*. Ritcheson notes that "it was certainly a propitious time to undertake some formulation of the intricacies of the techniques of dancing."²⁷ This idea is credited to the fact that no dance notation system had been made available to the public for an entire century. Thus, in the late seventeenth century, there was a significant desire for the publication of reliable dance vocabulary and technique in France and England. The English were always eager to educate themselves on the latest dance styles from the "dance capitol" (France).²⁸ Feuillet's notation included extensive, clear detail on the particulars of dance technique and dealt with the latest ideals of French dance.

²⁵ Goff, "The Art of Dancing," 212.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

²⁷ Shirley Spackman Ritcheson, "Feuillet's *Chorégraphie* and its Implications in the Society of France and England, 1700," M.A. thesis, Ohio State University (1965): 51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Figure 2: Example of Lorin notation. Each rectangle of notation represents the stage and corresponds to a different section of the music.²⁹

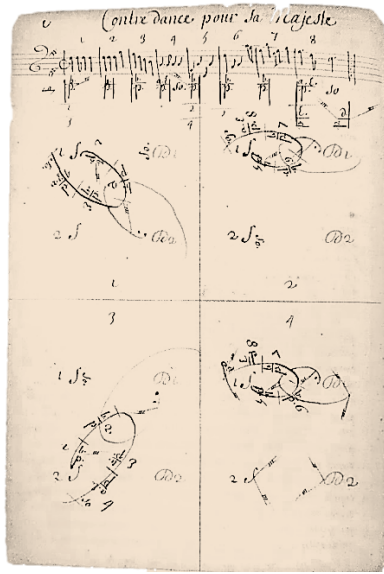


Figure 3: Example of Favier notation. Notice the rectangles which correspond to the portions of written music above.³⁰



²⁹ Julia Sutton and Rachelle Palnick Isachor, eds., *Dances for the Sun King: André Lorin's "Livre de Contredance"* (Annapolis, MD: The Colonial Music Institute, 2008), 162.

³⁰ Pierce, "Dance Notation Systems in Late 17th-Century France," 290.

Some other useful notation systems also emerged during the late seventeenth century. Two such systems are the Lorin and Favier systems. Lorin notation (Figure 2) is divided into smaller rectangles of notation that correspond with different sections of the music. The corresponding music is provided at the top of the page, and it includes bar numbers and symbols for various dance steps.³¹ In Favier notation (Figure 3), dance is communicated with rectangles resembling musical staff and bar lines. The rectangles, however, do not signify specific durations of time. Rather, the rectangles correspond with the music provided at the top of the page, and the symbols communicate both vertical and horizontal dance movement.³²

Though Lorin and Favier both developed useful systems that further improved and increased the availability of dance notation, none were quite as influential as the development of Beauchamp-Feuillet notation. Ken Pierce says, “In practice Beauchamp-Feuillet notation was widely used—there are extant dance notations from France, England, Germany, Spain, and Portugal—to record and transmit ballroom and theatre dances, in France and beyond, to dance professionals and their students both in and out of court.”³³ Consequently, Beauchamp and Feuillet were instrumental in the dissemination and influence of French dance, and their work was widely used by dancing masters and dance students throughout Europe.

While influence of French dance existed in the form of political influence and the development of dance notation, its influence also depended on the involvement of prominent European composers in French dance music. Many prominent composers throughout Europe were influenced by French dance music styles. George Frideric Handel is one composer who incorporated styles of French dance music into his compositions. Traces of the French style in Handel’s compositions were based on the traditional musical styles produced by Jean Baptiste Lully: a composer, instrumentalist, and dancer who spent the majority of his time working for King Louis XIV.³⁴ Since Handel was a diverse and efficacious composer, his compositions were likely heard and performed across Europe. Therefore, the inclusion of traditional French dance styles in his

³¹ Pierce, “Dance Notation Systems in Late Seventeenth-Century France,” 289.

³² *Ibid.*, 289–290.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Charles Cudworth, “Handel and the French Style,” *Music & Letters* 40, no. 2 (1959), 122, doi:[10.1093/ml/xl.4.122](https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/xl.4.122).

compositions would have greatly influenced the exposure of other countries to French dance music.

One example of Handel's integration of French dance into his compositions is heard in the overture to his Italian opera, *Rodrigo*. Handel included eight French dance themes in this overture: a gigue, a sarabande, a matelot, a menuet, two bourrées, another menuet, and a passacaille.³⁵ Although Handel was primarily Italianate in his opera style, he still included various French styles. Toward the beginning of his career, Handel spent some time in Hamburg, Germany where he wrote the Hamburg operas. These operas also included various French dance styles and melodies.³⁶ In 1710, Handel moved to London and began composing French ballet music. He was motivated to become more involved in this genre because of Marie Sallé, a well-known French dancer who visited London and captivated Handel's attention. Due to Sallé's influence, Handel wrote several ballet-operas, including *Arianna*, *Ariodante*, and *Alcina*. These ballet-operas each included significant elements of French dance music.³⁷ Overall, Handel's inclusion of various aspects of French dance in his compositions increased the prevalence and availability of French musical elements in other European countries.

Just as Handel largely contributed to the continued presence of French dance music, Bach also played his own role in its production and availability. When Bach was a student in Lüneburg, Germany from 1700 to 1702, he was exposed to many facets of French society, including dance. As Karl Geiringer states: "The Academy [in Lüneburg] was a center of French culture. French conversation, indispensable at that time to any high-born German, was obligatory between the students."³⁸ Evidently Bach received significant exposure to French culture although he did not travel to other European countries during his life. Furthermore, Bach's dance music often communicated a certain knowledge of French court dance and Lully's French music style. Bach wrote minuets, passepieds, courantes, sarabandes, giges, and loures—all French dance styles, which were performed in various cities throughout Germany.³⁹

³⁵ Cudworth, "Handel and the French Style," 123.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 126–128.

³⁸ Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

Bach spent a great deal of his career in courts throughout Germany. During this time, many German courts invited French dancing masters to deliver instruction regarding the elegant styles of French dance. As a result, Bach was exposed to some degree of training from French dancing masters, and he was additionally influenced by the ideals of high society in France.⁴⁰ Bach's exposure to French society was "an intrinsic, important, and graceful component of Bach's world, and...his titled dance music reflects the noble and subtle movements of early ballet."⁴¹ Ultimately, as Bach's music became increasingly popular throughout Germany and Europe, his French dance compositions likewise gained a stronger foothold. Specifically, Bach composed twenty-eight titled minuets (Figure 4), which reflected the noble, graceful, and political qualities of original French minuets.⁴² Bach also composed bourrées, which included rhythmic, melodic, and stylistic elements that were similar to those of original French bourrées.⁴³ These are just a few examples of Bach's prolific involvement in composing French dance music. J. S. Bach is yet another prime example of the influential composers who contributed to the composition, publication, and availability of French dance music throughout Europe.

Figure 4: Familiar minuet tune (mm. 1–19) by J. S. Bach. Simple yet stately.⁴⁴



⁴⁰ Little and Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach*, 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 44–46.

⁴⁴ J. S. Bach, "Menuet" in G major, from *Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach*, 44, http://ks.petruccimusiclibrary.org/files/imglnks/usimg/0/09/IMSLP475024-PMLP06107-Partitur_D-B_Mus.ms._Bach_P_225.pdf.

In addition to Bach's contribution, trends of French dance music continued to impact Europe even into the classical period. Although Mozart was born in 1756, these continued trends are seen in his compositions and publications of French dance music. Many of Mozart's compositions were minuets (Figure 5), which had originated in the court of Louis XIV. According to Eric McKee, "Mozart was a passionate and consummate dancer and...was especially skilled at dancing the minuet."⁴⁵ Moreover, Mozart composed 120 minuets.⁴⁶ Each of these reflected the exemplary grace and high society of the French court.⁴⁷ Mozart's experiences in the styles of French dance music also worked their way into other compositions such as the trio.⁴⁸

Figure 5: Mozart's Minuet No. 3, K. 599 (mm. 1–8); similar to original French style.⁴⁹

In light of Mozart's excessive production of the minuet, it is obvious that French dance styles maintained a lasting effect throughout Europe and were endorsed by none other than Mozart himself. The minuet had become an "ancient dance" by the late eighteenth century; however, it continued to thrive as European aristocracies sought to preserve their upper hand against republican ideals.⁵⁰ It is truly astonishing that the

⁴⁵ Eric McKee, "Mozart in the Ballroom: Minuet–Trio Contrast and the Aristocracy in Self-Portrait," *Music Analysis* 24, no. 3 (2005): 387, doi:[10.1111/j.1468-2249.2006.00226.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2249.2006.00226.x).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 388.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 389.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 398.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 390.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 420.

popularity of the minuet survived for such a sustained amount of time. Influential composers such as Mozart played a significant role in the continued presence of the minuet and the popularization of styles set forth by French dance. Overall, Mozart's exposure to ideals of French dance influenced a number of his compositions, which in turn contributed to the extended presence of French dance in Europe.

Without the reproduction and recognition of French dance music as high art, the availability of French dance education throughout Europe would have gradually disintegrated. Styles of French dance and dance music between 1600 and 1750 were influential throughout Europe due to King Louis XIV's use of dance styles as a political influence, the development of various dance and dance notation, and the involvement of prominent European composers with French dance music. Though the sources used in this paper differ in style and content, it is obvious that the development of French dance and dance music truly had a lasting effect on other European societies. First, Louis XIV's push for political power and recognition heavily influenced the production of French court and ballroom dance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The examples set forth by the French court eventually motivated other countries to strive for similar prestige. Second, due to Beauchamp and Feuillet, dance notation became readable, accessible, and prevalent not only in France, but in countries such as Spain and England. French dancing masters used these styles of notation to teach dance in royal and private courts throughout Europe. Finally, Handel, Bach, and Mozart were greatly influenced by French dance music, which ultimately resulted in the reproduction and the continued recognition of French dance music throughout Europe. Many of their compositions mirrored French dance structures such as the minuet, bourrée, and courante. These dances are still observed and studied today, especially the minuet. Overall, the success and popularization of French dance and dance music throughout Europe from 1600 to 1750 is largely indebted to the dedicated involvement of kings, writers, and composers.

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