

By Jordan Smith (MA 2007)

*La Danse Ancienne et Moderne*

Louis de Cahusac's *La danse ancienne et moderne ou Traité historique de la danse* was written in 1754. It consists of three volumes that Cahusac assembled in order to give the reader a practical guide to dance as it was in ancient times and in Cahusac's day.

Cahusac offers descriptions of the dance with a precision that no one had really achieved before him. He drew much of his information from Bonnet's *Histoire générale* but strove to be more detailed. In his preface, Cahusac describes how he sees his book: "The ideas presented here are not precepts. What I have written are merely reflections, views I recommend, methods I propose. If a conclusive word or a peremptory expression creeps into my style, know that it is only because I wish to be precise."<sup>1</sup>

The first volume discusses the dances of many ancient civilizations, including the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, Christians, and Turks. Cahusac compares the Romans favorably to Greeks and describes Roman pantomime in terms of the importance of its "imitation of nature."

In the second volume, he discusses dance in France and the modern political and religious judgment of dance as a sin. Volume three treats the story of ballet at Versailles and how Louis XIV influenced dance. Louis XIV was a dancer himself and his master of dance, Pierre Beauchamps, codified the five foot positions in ballet. Cahusac devotes a chapter to the principal actions of dance, one to ballet, and another to the creation of the French opera.

Following Cahusac's *La danse ancienne et moderne* came others who incorporated much of Cahusac's work into their own. One was Baron in 1824 with *Lettres et entretiens sur la danse ancienne, moderne, religieuse, civile, et theatrale*. Baron's text came 100 years after Bonnet and 70 after Cahusac. Many of Bonnet's citations came from Cahusac and Jean Georges Noverre's *Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* (1760). Cahusac also contributed several articles to Diderot's *Encyclopédie*.

Currently, there exist 28 copies of *La danse ancienne et moderne* in the United States. The edition of the book presented here consists of a box containing three volumes. These volumes are covered with very inexpensive paper wrappers and are, therefore, extremely fragile. There are tables of contents at the beginning as well as an index at the end. The volumes do not open easily and there are some uncut pages throughout.

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<sup>1</sup> "Ce ne sont de préceptes que je veux donner ici. Ce sont simplement des réflexions que j'écris, des vues que j'indique, des moyens que je propose, si quelque mot décisive m'échappe, il se glisse dans mon style quelque expression tranchante, j'en prévient mes lecteurs, je n'ai envie qu'être précis."