

TOO HOT TO HANDEL

/Jean-Paul Aubin-Parvu takes to the dancefloor with the elegant ladies and gentlemen of the Covent Garden Minuet Company

The Victorians brought the party to an end. From now on everything would be about morality, respectability and the covering up of bosoms. But what fun it had been. While the lower orders slept it off in the gutters on Gin Lane, the Georgian upper classes had pleased long and hard. They knew how to let their wigs down. Gentlemen of independent means and inherited fortunes slapped their breeched thighs and feasted on a diet of lust and depravity. To a man they idled, seduced, gambled, drank and generally raked about. A day that began with a duel at dawn might end with a fortune lost at cards. And as for the ladies well, let's not even go there.

But the Georgian age was a paradox. For while it could be both wild and wicked, it was also a golden age of elegant buildings and fine art, a period when ladies and gentlemen attended lavish balls and danced formal minuets, sarabands and bourrees to the beautiful strains of Handel, Lully, Mozart and Rameau. Young ladies were closely chaperoned, while men acted with honour. Even the most informal contradance was flirtatious rather than sexual. Every guest behaved impeccably for most of the night.

And for tonight only I'm an honorary member of the Covent Garden Minuet Company, which strives to recreate the atmosphere of the classic mid-Georgian period, circa 1760. The company performs at a host of wonderful venues spread far and wide and even rehearses in style, which is why my eyes are taking in the interior elegance of the Swiss Church on Endell Street. The church was built in 1762, which is very much in keeping with the period.

Five ladies and five gentlemen, including me, are to be put through our baroque paces by dancing mistress Sarah Cremer. Sarah introduces me to Charles Miller, the company's chairman and then to its secretary, Anna Nowakowska. The fact that everybody is so welcoming helps to calm my first night nerves.

The company don't actually rehearse in costume, which is heartening news, since my dance ensemble of t-shirt, tracksuit bottoms and trainers would cut little dash in the court of King George III.

We begin by warming up on the just re-laid wooden flooring. Charles switches on his iPod, mounted on a dock of fancy speakers, and the music begins. I am transported back

250 years within the first few bars.

Sarah lines us up at the far end of the church beneath the splendid pipe organ and soon has everyone practising basic movements in time with the music. First we step forward onto the right foot, which should land with the toes pointing off to the right at about 45 degrees, then onto the left, and so on down the room. Each step happens on the rising first beat of the bar at least when the others do it. Arms are held out gracefully to the side throughout, with hands slowly turning over, almost wafting, palm up, palm down. On reaching the altar steps we turn off to the side.

Sarah then asks the company to partner up, with the lovely Linda offering to stand on my right. The gentleman places his hand over the lady's and so do I. Each set of partners, with Linda and I the last in line, practise a processional minuet down the church.

I watch the next couple of dances from the sidelines. This gives me the perfect opportunity to ask our dancing mistress a little about baroque dance, which was at its height during the middle of the 18th century, a time when arts and culture were primarily led by France. Any new dance style or variation first seen at court would then spread across Europe as fast as a dance master's horse could gallop.

"Being able to dance well was as important as deportment, how you spoke, how you greeted people it was one of the social etiquettes," says Sarah. The lavish balls adhered to a strict hierarchy, *"The most important people would probably dance first and would have prime position on the dance floor, and there would be a very definite running order of the dances performed."*

But no matter how formal and elegant these events must have been with everyone bound by social etiquette underneath the Georgians were fairly rough and ready.

"It was, I think, a fascinating, complete juxtaposition," agrees Sarah. *"We see it as very formal, gentrified, held back, and yet at the same time the complete flipside. There are some wonderful writings of the time about how proper everybody looks, where they're all be-wigged, made up and dressed, but underneath the teeth are rotten, the women are wearing falsies and the men have got false calves everything is a façade."*

The announcement that the next dance will be the Flirtation has me rushing back

to the middle. We stand in a wide circle and then the men step towards our ladies. Taking our partner by the hands, with arms crossed over, we swing around smiling flirtatiously. We then skip a fast promenade in a big circle before coming to a halt. The ladies step into the middle, bid each other hello and step back again. The men take our turn in the middle, with my choice of greeting a loud hoorah, and back out we come, turning clockwise to face the next lady.

During the break, Araminta, the company's newest member, walks over carrying a pile of clothes. These are what a Georgian lady would have danced in. A lace chemise was worn next to the skin, followed by the stays, tied firmly to both pull in the stomach and accentuate the cleavage, or *"the positives"* as Charles puts it with a grin, having wandered over. The next item are the hoops, rather like American footballer's shoulder pads, only worn around the hips to puff out the skirt. The dressing up would continue with petticoat, stomacher, skirt and gown. And last of all, the wig, which, depending on the fashion of the day, could be a gigantic construction.

Georgian gentlemen wore a chemise with a ruffle at the top, a stock tie, waistcoat, breeches, stockings, buckled shoes, overcoat, powdered wig and hat.

I ask Araminta how easy she finds dancing in full costume. *"The only thing is that because the skirt puffs out at the sides, you have to bear in mind you're wider than usual,"* she says. *"So you can't get too close when passing someone."*

Anna Nowakowska nips off to put on a costume. Linda hands me a chemise, breeches and powdered wig. Minutes later I'm back wearing a chemise, powdered wig and tracksuit bottoms. The breeches weren't really my colour or size. Linda adjusts my wig, so I don't resemble a Georgian noble who's chosen to announce his arrival to the ball by falling down the stairs.

I stand beside Anna, who has stepped off the cover of Georgian Vogue, and we prepare to dance the Lully Processional, my hand resting upon hers. The company begins a procession that finishes with each set of partners turning out and away from each other, like two arcs fanning out. Anna very kindly mouths instructions to me through the next few sequences to help keep me on track. Towards the end, the ladies again step into the

middle, but this time they form a small circle, and with one arm stretched out, their hands touching, the ladies perform a revolution like pretty spokes of a wheel. Graceful doesn't do it justice this is something else.

The next dance involves only the ladies, who execute many a fine hop, skip and a spring between them. I sidle over to Charles Miller, who informs me that the Covent

Garden Minuet Company was founded in 1982 by the late Simon Caradoc Evans. They have since danced at such amazing venues as The Wallace Collection, Spencer House, Compton Verney, Harewood House, Shugborough Hall, Osterley Park, Barbican Hall and the Banqueting House, Whitehall. "We've also done several international tours," says Charles. "One of our greatest

successes was a performance at the Senate in Washington DC. A few years ago we opened the Handel Festival in Gottingen, Germany. It was on the front page of the local paper the next day and there was TV. We got a massive standing ovation and were quite gobsmacked. But it was huge fun."

Charles's enthusiasm for minuet dancing and the period is boundless. But why, I ask him. Partly it's because many of these dances hadn't been performed for centuries until the formation of the company. Partly it's the chance to interact and dance with such a lovely bunch of people. But most of all, I suspect, it's "a certain Hogarthian rumbustuousness, which is great fun and very appealing".

The final dance of the evening will be a Pistolet, a contradance that Charles insists I try. "It's a dance where you change partners very quickly," he says. "In the middle of the dance you both make the sign of a pistol. You're meant to shoot your partner through the heart, or someone else if you prefer, and then you turn round and meet the next girl. It's a very simple dance, just a bit of fun. Now would you like a pinch a snuff?"

I'm less than attentive to the opening movements of the Pistolet I'm just waiting for the shooting to start. There is some stepping towards my partner, followed by cross arm holding and possibly a bit of turning. And finally the moment I've been waiting for. We release our hold, step away, and after a loud clap of the hands we make a pistol with our fingers, take aim at one another and squeeze the trigger while stamping once on the floor. Not for the first time, my gun fails to fire.

After turning clockwise, I stand facing the next lady. Off we go again, and pretty soon I have shot at all five ladies, the last of whom chooses to point her pistol skywards rather than shoot me through the heart. More fool her, I think, as I take her out with a cracking shot. Still the music continues, which allows me the chance to finish off the wounded.

When the dance finishes I blow imaginary smoke from the end of my finger pistol. I'd lay money that back in Georgian times, before the advent of health and safety, this dance would be performed using real pistols. Doubtless one or two old scores would have been settled this way. That's possibly what caused so many wars something else those Georgians were very fond of.

