

A SUPPLEMENTAL POLONAISE SOURCE

THE POLONAISE

IN EARLY

19TH CENTURY

ENGLAND

**DANCE MATERIAL (EXCLUDING DANCE MANUALS) TO
BE CONSIDERED AS AN ADDENDUM TO PREVIOUSLY
PUBLISHED WORK (1984) OF
R. CWIĘKA - SKRZYNIARZ**

THE POLONAISE IN EARLY 19TH CENTURY ENGLAND

The following citation comes ultimately, we believe, from, *The London Court Journal* of the 1820s. Originally it appeared in, *The London Court Journal*, exact date unknown. *The London Court Journal* was much more than a record of the activities of Royalty and the Aristocracy. It really was a weekly newspaper which covered politics, fashions, culture, foreign news, stage, opera and book reviews. Our complete citation below is from a book published in Philadelphia in 1830. So, it is a re-print of the original.

THE POLONAISE

“The Polonaise was for the first time familiarly introduced into London society during the visit of the Allied Sovereigns; when every public ball was opened by this species of procession. It had been previously danced in many private mansions of the nobility; among others, at the Priory, the seat of Lord Abercorn, which was at that period particularly distinguished by its splendid hospitality. His late Majesty, then Regent, was frequently known to join in the Polonaise—a dance of such graceful eased, that persons of every age and figure may follow with perfect propriety in its train. Napoleon himself—albeit unused to the dancing mood—has repeatedly headed the brilliant throng, both in the private balls at Malmaison, and in honour of the festivities of foreign courts.

The national airs to which the Polonaise is danced, or rather walked, are of a very peculiar and pleasing description. The most celebrated one among them is one which bears the name of Count Oginski, and is said to have been composed by that nobleman for the lady of his love.—Chancing to enter a ball room where his fickle fair-one was leading the Polonaise with a successful rival, Count Oginski is related to have retired from the scene, and to have ended his woes with a pistol. A lithographic picture of this sentimental catastrophe, embellished the German editions of “Oginski’s Polonaise;” the music of which is characterized by the most melancholy tenderness. It was at one time so great a favorite with the late King, that he would order it to be performed by his private band at the Pavillion balls, again an again, in the course of the evening. Count Oginski, however, in defiance of the lithograph and the Polonaise, was still living, a few years ago, at St. Petersburg.

We may add, that the most singular specimen of the Polonaise ever exhibited in London was at a very crowded charity ball at Almacks, some ten years ago. Her Royal Highness the late Duchess of York, who was one of the patronesses on this occasion, having issued orders for a Polonaise, the consternation of Colinet and Co. may easily be conjectured when they beheld the stocks and stones to which their Orphean music was addressed commence a quadrille to the measure! Two of the more enlightened of the community were at length requested by her Royal Highness to head the procession; and

nothing could be more ludicrously diverting than the astonished stare and awkward gesture of the uninitiated, when they found themselves enveloped by the tortuous movements of the train, and finally compelled to follow in its wake. A far more picturesque display occurred a few years ago at a dejeuner on the banks of the Thames, where, upon a level lawn, interspersed with flowery parterres, the train of the Polonaise was led by a gentleman who had been some time resident in Russia: winding and doubling like the course of a hunted hare, among the numerous flower-plots of the garden. But the most brilliant exhibition of this national dance occurred at the celebrated costumed ball at Holderness House, where the procession was headed by Lady Londonderry, in the character of Queen Elizabeth, a character fully maintained by her Ladyship's magnificent costume, although rejected by her personal loveliness.

*The Polonaise is, perhaps, of all dances, the one most calculated to grace a court, from the dignity of its movements, as well as from the facility it affords to the exhibition of a long suite of state apartments. There are very few private mansions in London whose dimensions would not render its introduction ridiculous; and very few, among those whose limits will admit of such an exhibition, in which it has not been danced with the happiest effect during the last fifteen years. We may add, that with the noble proprietor of Devonshire House, in particular, the Polonaise is an especial favorite.”*¹

Let us see what we can glean from this.

The Allied Sovereigns refers to primarily the British Monarch, the Emperor of Russia, the King of Prussia and their numerous staffs. This visit took place from June 6-22, 1814. According to the above citation the Polonaise Dance open each ceremony. Certainly this was in honor of Alexander I of Russia as it, the dance, was associated with the Russian Court. However, according to this citation,... *“It had been previously danced in many private mansions of the nobility;”*So this means before 1814 in was done in England! How did this happen? We have no earlier sources than the above so we cannot prove how this might have happened. The late King, was George IV, who when he was the Regent (1811-1820) apparently danced it willingly, and many times. During this period he was in his 50s and over-weight. For such a person the Polonaise is a dance of choice. (As for Napoleon and the Polonaise there are no mentions of this occurring in Poland and Lithuania when he was there. Nor are there records, known to us, that the Polish Polonaise, and not a two quarter time, walking procession, was generally done at Napoleon's Court.)

Since we do not know the exact date of the original article we can only surmise the date of the charity Ball at Almacks. It had to be before 1820 since the said Duchess of York died in 1820. We note that ... *“ Her Royal Highness the late Duchess of York, who was one of the patronesses on this occasion, having issued orders for a Polonaise,...”*, knew of the Dance in some sense. This caused a great deal of consternation as people thought it was a Quadrille. But we see that there were two who did, apparently know the Dance and led it in procession. The two were probably a couple.

¹ “The Polonaise,” in *The Lady's Book*, Vol. I, (Philadelphia: 1830), p. 274-275, via Google digitized Books.

Then the account of the Polonaise danced out of doors reminds us of Poland itself since this was not unusual in the summer's of Poland and Russia.

And lastly the Polonaise was used at Costume Balls to dignify historical Pageants.

But it is the last paragraph which points out the inherent dignity and grace of the Polonaise when executed by persons you have these qualities. We have wondered why the Polonaise did not have a longer life in England. Basically this article suggests that the homes of the English were too small; that the long processional lines of the Polonaise cannot be nicely done in small rooms.

In the very last sentence we are informed that the Duke of Devonshire had the Polonaise as a favorite Dance of his. But nowhere else do we read of this being a favorite Dance of his. His relationship with the Mazurka overshadows that of the Polonaise.