

Sixdrilles 1825

Alena Shmakova, published in EDC Circular from January 2026

The Sixdrilles occupy a curious niche in the landscape of early nineteenth-century social dance. They first surfaced in 1825, when the Manchester dancing master Mr Paris advertised that he had devised and was teaching them — the earliest known reference to their instruction in Britain (Manchester Guardian, 25th Jun 1825, p.1). Soon afterwards, Mr John Lowe of Perth announced his own publication, issued by Patterson, Mortimer & Co. in Edinburgh (Caledonian Mercury, 10 December 1825, p.1). Yet another reference to published music comes from Aberdeen. There, the music seller and ball conductor J. Davie, a pupil of Francis Peacock, advertised a set of *Sixdrilles Charles X* by a certain 'Mr Prosper of Paris' (Aberdeen Journal, and General Advertiser for the North of Scotland, 7 Jun 1826, p.1). The identity of Mr Prosper remains unclear.

From their Manchester debut, the Sixdrilles spread with remarkable speed. Dancing masters across Britain seized on the new form: Mr Boulogne in Glasgow (1826), Miss E. Robertson in Leeds (1826), Mr Dewar in Carlisle (1826), Mr Ross in Aberdeen (1826), Madame Kennedy in Belfast (1827), Madame Ferzy in Birmingham (1827), and Mr Gunn in Tain (1827) all promoted or taught them within a few years. Interestingly, both Mr Paris and Mr Lowe published their versions as the Charles X Coronation Quadrille (Edinburgh), whereas others, such as Madame Ferzy and Monsieur Boulogne, advertised the dance as one imported from the French court.

The name Sixdrilles is itself a puzzle. Quadrilles, their obvious model, involve four couples arranged in a square; by analogy, Sixdrilles might be expected to involve six couples. Instead, surviving descriptions reveal something quite different: squares composed of triplets - two ladies and one gentleman. This was not an error but a strategic adaptation. The quadrille craze was at its height across the British Isles, but quadrilles had a structural drawback: they locked dancers into a fixed sequence of five or six short figures, followed by a couple dance such as a waltz or galop. Printed quadrille sets sometimes even included music for these concluding dances, implying that couples remained paired for extended periods. Georgian assemblies, like today's historical dance community, faced a familiar problem: there were more women than men willing to dance. Barclay Dun put it bluntly in his *Translation of Nine of the Most Fashionable Quadrilles* (Edinburgh, 1818): 'Extraordinary as it may seem, at a period when dancing is so entirely neglected by men in general, women appear to be taking the most pains to acquire the art.' By structuring the dance around trios, the *Sixdrilles* allowed assemblies to accommodate more female dancers without sacrificing the fashionable quadrille format. Mr Paris emphasised that his Sixdrilles were modelled on the well-known figures of the *First Set*, making them easy to learn for experienced quadrille dancers. Dancing masters soon reported 'Quadrilles & Sixdrilles parties' across the country.

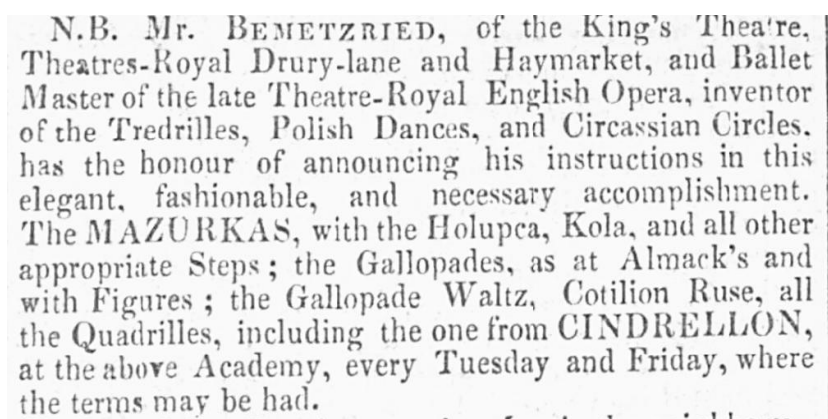
The name Sixdrilles also helped to distinguish this new dance from other contemporary experiments for twelve dancers. Trio-based quadrilles had existed on the Continent for at least a decade and were particularly common in German and Russian ballrooms. Ludovik Petrovsky, a dance teacher at the Slobodsko-Ukrainian Gymnasium, established in 1767 in

Kharkov and under the patronage of Kharkov University between 1805 and 1836, described trios as characteristic of ‘true Russian quadrilles,’ derived from traditional *pliaski* (folk dances) typically arranged as two ladies and one gentleman, a structure mirrored in the *Sixdrilles*.

There is, however, one more type, the True Russian Quadrille, in which dancers do not form pairs, but rather groups of two ladies and one gentleman, or twelve persons in total. It is composed of Russian folk dances, which is why it features distinctly Russian steps involving movements and heel strikes with the back foot. The figures themselves are similar to those in the preceding dances [i.e. French Quadrilles].” Людовик Матвеевич Петровский, Правила для благородных общественных танцов (Харьков, 1825), p. 81/ L. M. Petrovsky, Rules for Fashionable Social Dances (Kharkov, 1825), translated by AS.

Comparable trio formations, *Trojak* or *Troyans*, are also described in repertoire of traditional dances in Poland, Belorussia, Czechia, and Slovakia.

Britain had its own parallels as well: Chivers’ *Troidrilles* (c. 1825) and Wells’ *Tredrilles* (1832) explored similar trio-based structures (with thanks to Susan de Guardiola for these references). See also Fig. 1.



N.B. Mr. BEMETZRIED, of the King's Theatre, Theatres-Royal Drury-lane and Haymarket, and Ballet Master of the late Theatre-Royal English Opera, inventor of the Tredrilles, Polish Dances, and Circassian Circles, has the honour of announcing his instructions in this elegant, fashionable, and necessary accomplishment. The MAZURKAS, with the Holupca, Kola, and all other appropriate Steps; the Gallopades, as at Almack's and with Figures; the Gallopade Waltz, Cotillon Ruse, all the Quadrilles, including the one from CINDRELLON, at the above Academy, every Tuesday and Friday, where the terms may be had.

Figure 1 *Manchester Courier*, 25 Sep 1830, p.2

Surviving Choreographies

The structural logic of the *Sixdrilles* becomes clearer when the surviving choreographies are taken into account. Until recently, two sources were known, both of Scottish provenance:

- Mons. J. P. Boulogne, *The Ball-Room, or the Juvenile Pupil's Assistant* (Glasgow: Edward Khull & Sons, 1827), RSCDS-8-1-462
- Robert Lowe et al., *Lowes' Ball-Conductor and Assembly Guide* (Edinburgh, c.1831)

Both descriptions are strikingly similar, with only minor differences, suggesting a shared origin. Their internal coherence is notable: the phrasing aligns with standard quadrille musical structures, the figures clearly echo those of the *First Set*, and the formations exploit the trio arrangement to create additional visual and spatial interest.

Recent archival work has added an important new piece to this puzzle: a music sheet in the National Library of Scotland explicitly labelled for the *Sixdrilles* — *First Set of National Quadrilles, Selected from Favorite Operatic Airs and National Melodies, with the Figures of*

the Sixdrilles, as Danced at London and Paris, Arranged for the Piano Forte by John McFadyen Junr (Glasgow: J. McFadyen, n.d.). This source, previously unrecorded in the literature, provides the first securely identified musical setting for the dance.

The publication follows the conventions of early nineteenth-century quadrille printing and includes brief figure descriptions closely resembling those found in the Lowe and Boulogne sources, effectively linking all three pieces together. Unlike publications that foreground the Coronation of Charles X, McFadyen's selection has no thematic connection to the event. Instead, it draws on a mixture of operatic and 'national' material: *Preciosa* by C. M. von Weber; *Le Tonquin* by F. W. Mayseder; and three melodies derived from songs — *I canna like ye, Gentle Sir, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad* (based on Robert Burns' 1793 poem); *A Frog He Would a-Wooing Go* (a comic animal ballad belonging to the long 'Frog and Mouse' tradition, whose earliest known form is the sixteenth-century English broadside *The Frog Came to the Mylke-house Door*). John McFadyen Jr was the son of the Glasgow music publisher John McFadyen.

Theatrical Context and the Charles X Connection



Figure 2. Guerrier Gaulois (M.Mrs. Coulon &c.) (Danse): Dans Pharamond, Opéra (Académie Royale de Musique), 1825, The New York Public Library Digital Collections

Contemporary commentators consistently linked the *Sixdrilles* to the French court and the coronation festivities of Charles X. Whether this reflects genuine influence or a marketing strategy remains uncertain. The Aberdeen advertisement for the *Sixdrilles* by 'Mr Prosper of Paris' potentially strengthens the French connection, though the presence of many French émigrés in London complicates the picture and warrants further research into Prosper's identity.

Charles X was crowned on 29 May 1825 in Reims Cathedral, the first French coronation since 1775 and the last ever performed. He clearly sought to rival the splendour of George IV's coronation four years earlier. Scots may have taken particular interest in the event as Charles had spent time in exile at Holyrood Palace, attending assemblies and hosting soirées during his stay.

The coronation festivities in France were accompanied by two major theatrical productions, reflecting the rivalry between the Opéra Français and the Opéra Italien, both featuring choreographic works. The first, *Pharamond*, an opera-ballet, premiered on 10 June 1825 with music by

Berton, Boïeldieu, and Kreutzer, and choreography by Pierre Gardel. Poorly received, it was dropped after only sixteen performances. The second, Rossini's *Il Viaggio a Reims*, with choreography by Louis-Jacques-Jessé Milon (1766–1849), premiered at the Théâtre Italien on 19 June 1825 and fared considerably better. This appears to have been Milon's final choreographic work before his retirement in 1826.

London theatres soon followed with their own coronation spectacles. Covent Garden mounted *The Pageant of the Coronation of Charles X* with a prelude by Richard Peake, entitled *The Ramsbottoms at Rheims*, which premiered on 10 July 1825, while Drury Lane produced a hastier version a few days earlier. For the present question, the Covent Garden production is more relevant, as contemporary reviews noted that it featured the ‘admired Quadrilles *Cindrellon*.’ Newspapers named two possible choreographers for the dance: Pierre Gardel and Mr Albert. However, Albert was also reported to be engaged in Naples in 1825. I am indebted to Moira Goff and to the Garrick Club Library & Collections for clarifying the matter and providing the original playbill from their holdings. The playbill indicates that the choreography was by ‘Mr Albert of the Paris Opéra’ staged under the direction of Mr Austin. It also shows that Covent Garden did not use Rossini’s score; instead, the theatre performed an arrangement prepared under the direction of Watson and Goodwin. Together with Mr Plache’s recollection that he was sent to Paris to obtain scenic illustrations, this suggests that Covent Garden regarded the piece as a short-lived topical entertainment and invested its resources primarily in décor rather than in securing a professional dancing ensemble or a full musical score.



Figure 3. Queen Victoria, Mlle Taglioni as La Sylphide & M. Albert as James as they appeared in the ballet of *La Sylphide* at the King's Theatre this season dated 28 June 1833, RCIN 980015.dq. Albert was considered the most handsome dancer on the stage at the time.

François-Ferdinand Decombe (known professionally as Albert, see Fig.2) had created a highly successful *Cendrillon* ballet (1822), the great-grandparent of the modern *Cinderella*, in London to music by Fernando Sor (1776–1839). *Cendrillon* premiered at the King’s Theatre in March 1822 and soon after staged at the Paris Opéra, it enjoyed more than 100 performances and was chosen to open the new Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in 1825. A central feature of the ballet was the *Quadrille de Douze Dames*, which became its major attraction featuring the choreography for 12 dancers. In 2001, Elizabeth Aldrich and Sandra Noll Hammond, assisted by Goucher College dance students, reconstructed this choreography using surviving manuscripts — a *répétiteur* sent from Paris to Brussels, together with *Twelve Quadrille* from TB 1826 — confirming that the dance in the latter belonged firmly to the theatrical repertoire and linking stage practice with the work of dancing masters.

The *Quadrille des Douze Dames* proved influential, inspiring similar formations in Sor’s other ballets. A reference to Albert’s *Cendrillon* in 1825 would therefore have carried immediate theatrical resonance. Yet the Covent Garden version was mounted under the direction of the elusive Mr Austin, a figure who does not appear on other playbills and is absent from *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800*. This raises the possibility that Austin’s role was not to reproduce Albert’s choreography faithfully, but to adapt it,

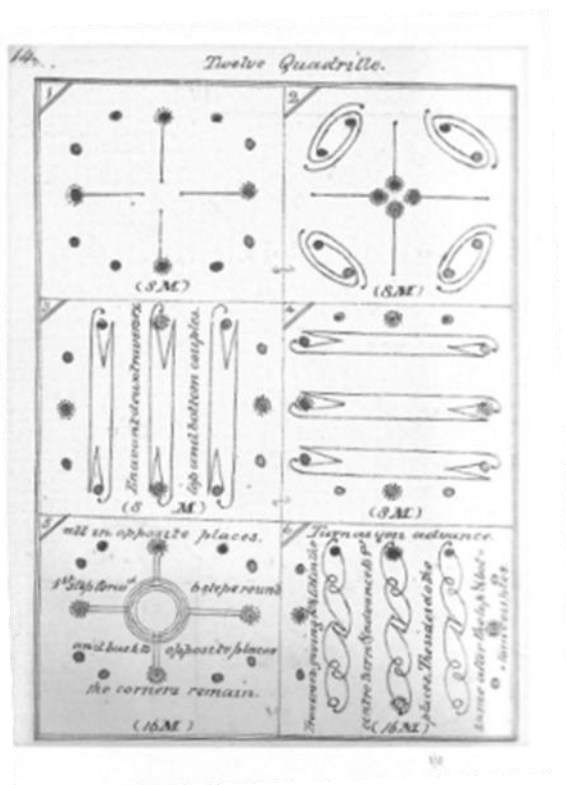


Figure 4. Twelve Quadrille in TB 1826

simplifying the celebrated quadrille into something manageable for a cast without professional dancers.

Unfortunately, neither the libretto nor the music for the London's *Coronation of Charles X* production has yet been located, leaving key details uncertain. Whether the dance drew on Albert's quadrille, reworked by Mr Austin into a more modest form, or whether it was imported from French celebrations and party culture, perhaps through publications such as those by Mr Prosper of Paris, still remains to be determined. What can be said with confidence is that the *Sixdrilles* emerged at a moment when theatrical spectacle, political celebration, and social dance were unusually intertwined.