

Hie Folget ein Welsche Tanz?

Hans Newsidler's "Ein Newgeordent Kunstlich Lautenbuch", published in 1536, includes a dance with the curious (undecipherable) title of 'Wascha Mesa'.

Popular among would be lutenists attending Summer Schools of the 1970's, it was usually performed at a 'breakneck speed' with metronomic precision and so earned the title "The Washing Machine" by the comedians among us. (It is interesting to note that – as a consequence – some now believe that 'wascha mesa' means 'the washer woman's dance'!). Another joker has even suggested that it is "what's the matter" uttered by a person under the heavy influence of alcoholic beverages!

However, a more serious consensus of opinion among scholars is that 'wascha mesa' is (somehow) a corruption of "passamezzo", the dance having the form of an Italian passamezzo and 'welsche' (i.e. foreign) in this context taken to mean 'from the South' i.e. Italy.

Unaware of this interpretation and suspecting that the dance may have originated in Eastern Europe I had the opportunity, many years ago, to ask a person from Poland if 'wascha mesa' (phonetic) meant anything to him. Without hesitation he replied that in Poland it meant 'My Place' (or my home or country?). He then wrote out the Polish spelling as "Wasze Miejsce".

Checking with 'on line' translation services confirms that "wasze miejsce" does indeed mean "my place" in modern day Polish. So is the 'foreign dance' Wascha Mesa a passamezzo from the courts of Poland or Italy?