

Understanding Tempo

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Together with Measure, tempo is one of the most important concepts in Italian rapier fencing. In this brief article, I will explain what tempo is in simple terms, using a blend of the Master's words and my own. If you have any questions about any part of this article, please go to our forum sections and I'll be glad to discuss tempo with you.

Tempo = Italian for time.

Simple definition: in Italian rapier fencing, tempo is that favorable time in which to strike the opponent or at least to gain an advantage over him.

In other words, look at tempo this way. You and your opponent have drawn swords, saluted and faced off. After acquiring an advantageous placement for your blade, you have stepped into measure. Tempo is like a green light telling you that *now* is a good time to launch your attack – whether it be a thrust or a cut. Or, if you don't feel quite confident to attack, tempo is a green light telling you that *now* is a good time to gain a further advantage over your adversary.

So, what is it that according to Italian rapier Masters makes any "time" a "tempo"?

In the Renaissance, the concept of time was related to that of motion: borrowing heavily from Aristotelian notions, time was actually seen as the yardstick with which to measure motion between two instances of stillness. Time could not exist without motion and vice versa. In martial terms, this translates into the following concept: most Italian rapier Masters state that favorable tempi can only occur during the opponent's motions.

For instance, Fabris' definition of tempo is as follows:

"We call tempo every motion made by the opponent while in measure. A motion he makes while out of measure is merely a motion or change of posture; because in this art, tempo must represent an opportunity to strike the opponent or at least to gain an advantage over him."

These words from Fabris provide a perfect illustration of what tempo is in 17th Century rapier fencing. Paraphrasing the Master from Padua, we can restate the definition of tempo this way: tempo is any motion made by the opponent while **in measure** (see Understanding Measure), which gives us an opportunity to strike him or gain an advantage over him.

Going back to our original example, here's tempo. You and your opponent have drawn swords, saluted and faced off. After acquiring an advantageous placement for your blade, you have stepped into measure. Now, you are looking for a **motion** from the opponent that becomes the **tempo** in which to strike him – or to gain a further advantage over him.

The expression **taking the tempo** means using a motion from the opponent to launch an attack.

Which Tempo Should a Rapier Fencer Take?

Italian rapier Masters spoke of tempo both practically and theoretically. Some Masters like Dall'Agocchie, Capoferro and others give a practical list of good tempi – or motions from the opponent – that are good to take while fencing:

- While he takes a step (as long as it is not to retreat out of measure)
- After you have parried his attack
- While he changes guards
- While he lifts his sword in preparation for delivering a cut
- After his cut misses the mark, but while his sword is still falling
- While he is attacking you

Other Masters, like Fabris, give instead a general theoretical rule to assess which motions from the opponent can be taken as a tempo to attack. In particular, Fabris states that you should take a tempo if the time required for your offense is less or equal that required for the opponent's defense. Or expressed mathematically, a tempo is good to take if:

$$T_O \leq T_D$$

Where T_O is the time required for your offense and T_D that required for his defense. The reason why Fabris says less or equal (instead of just less) is that you have the advantage of having moved first. Then Fabris goes on to state that while in misura larga (lunging measure), tempi involving the motion of the opponent's foot are in general longer and therefore easier to take than those merely involving a motion of the body or weapon(s).

Naturally, since time is dependent on motion and the speed of an attack is dependent on measure, it is easier to take smaller tempi while in misura stretta than in misura larga. For instance, Fabris advises that in misura stretta, it is often safe to take tempi even when they do not involve the motion of the foot. If, in any measure, you assess that a tempo the opponent gives you is not sufficiently long for you to carry out your attack, you may use it to gain an advantage against the opponent – for instance, by consolidating your advantage of the sword over him or to enter a narrower measure.

So why are motions, rather than openings, what the Masters focus on as an indication of a good moment to strike? Because the same part of the body that is moving one way cannot simultaneously make a contrary motion in the same space of time. For instance, if your opponent is taking a step forward and you attack him during the tempo of that motion, he cannot simultaneously retreat and void your attack: thus, if you take his tempo correctly, you will use the time of his forward motion as an infallible way to strike him before his motion is over.

Actions in Tempo, Contratempo, One Tempo, Two Tempi and Mezzo Tempo

While different Masters classify tempo in slightly different manners, I do not want to complicate matters too much. I will instead confine this discussion to the common terms adopted in the 17th Century about one Vs. two tempi, mezzo tempo and contratempo.

An **action in tempo** is an attack performed while taking a motion of the opponent as a cue in which to launch it. Consequently, an **action out of tempo** is an attack performed while the opponent is

still – either because his tempo is over or because he has not moved in the first place. Moving out of tempo in Italian rapier is extremely dangerous (as it is in most sword disciplines).

For most 17th Century rapier Masters, **Contratempo** was a sub-specie of action in tempo in which the tempo you take for your offensive action is the opponent's own attack. In the modern rapier revival, this action is also called "stesso tempo parry-riposte"; however, *contratempo* is the technically correct term for it, also because it does not necessarily include a parry--a void being also quite common. Most actions depicted in Fabris, Alfieri and Capoferro are actions in *contratempo*. In the 1800s, *contratempo* came to mean any counter to defeat an action in tempo from the opponent – even when it involves the two distinct motions of parrying and riposting.

Any one, continuous motion is **one tempo**. A step, a lunge, a change of guards, a *cavazione*. Since tempo is the measure of a motion between two instances of stillness – one before, one after it--any time you move and then you are still again you have "made" a tempo, and the opponent can therefore take it. Some, like Capoferro, classify tempo absolutely--stating that a lunge from the *misura larga* takes one-and-a-half tempi, that an extension from the *misura stretta* takes one tempo, and so on. However, for most Masters tempo could only be measured relatively--i.e. in relation to the length of the opponent's own motion.

Two tempi instead are created when two separate motions are made. For instance, if you parry a thrust from the opponent and *then* riposte, you will have performed an action in two tempi. Two tempi can also be created when you make two contrary motions, even though they seem one to the naked eye. For instance, most 17th Century rapier Masters would tell you that delivering a cut involves two tempi, because if you break down the mechanics involved, you first raise the sword in preparation for the cut, then lower it again for the delivery. Even though these two motions appear seamless, there is a small instance of stillness between the two, which – by definition – makes the cut a two-tempi action. Naturally, 17th Century Masters believed that a well-executed action in one tempo would defeat one in two.

The concept of **mezzo tempo** is linked to 16th Century swordsmanship, when the yardstick with which to measure a "full tempo" in absolute terms was the delivery of a full cut--a *colpo intero* or *colpo finito*. Thus, any half-cut would by definition take a half tempo, or *mezzo tempo*. In the 17th Century the notion of *mezzo tempo*--as well as that of measuring tempo in absolute terms--is not as used. But when it is, it can refer to both a half cut or to a quick half-thrust delivered in very close measure.

Provoking a Tempo From the Opponent

As we have seen, attacking the opponent out of tempo is not a good idea. So, if you are in or near measure and he does not give you a tempo by making a motion or performing an attack, you have to provoke him to move. The most common ways in which to do this in Italian rapier are the *feint* and the *invitation*.

A **feint** is a simulated attack designed to induce the opponent to move to parry. As he does so, he offers you two advantages: a) by attempting to parry on one line, he creates an opening on another and b) by moving, he makes a tempo. Also, since a *feint* is not a real attack (although it should be credible!), it normally does not involve the motion of the feet: therefore, the tempo you yourself make while performing it is not sufficiently long to place you in danger.

An **invitation** is a sub-specie of feint in which you create an opening in order to lure the opponent to attack you there so that you can defeat him with a well-planned contrary action in *contratempo* or *two-tempi* parry-riposte. Here too, your motion should be small enough that your tempo is not sufficiently large for the opponent to defeat your design.

Also, against a skillful opponent every motion you make in measure can be seen as a tempo — sometimes even a motion as tiny as a flinch or the blink of an eye. So, by performing any motion in measure, you can lure the opponent to attack you — which, as we have seen, is in turn an opportunity to strike him in *contratempo*.

Some Special Remarks on Tempo

Some authors like Capoferro explain tempo in a rather complex manner. In order to understand tempo according to Capoferro, you must consider that he uses the word both relatively and absolutely, and both in the commonsense meaning of “time” and in the specialized one of “tempo in Italian rapier.” Following is a brief synopsis of his thoughts relating to tempo.

Tempo:

1. The time required to achieve a certain result, regardless of speed or slowness. For instance, the time required for you to arrive into measure against the opponent.
2. The speed of a motion: brief motions require less time and are therefore shorter tempi, while longer motions require more time and are therefore longer tempi. In this case, it is not only important to achieve the result, but to do so in the right time. In this second instance, Capoferro’s definition of tempo is consistent with that of most his contemporaries. Also, it is here that he classifies tempi absolutely according to measure and of the size of the motion required.
3. Measure of the motion of one fencer relative to the stillness of the other. For Capoferro — and for others, to be sure — tempo is not only the measure of motion, but also that of motion Vs. stillness. In commonsense terms, if you are still for X time and I can hit you by making a motion X/2 long, I have an advantage.

My practical advice to Capoferro students is as follows. First, understand tempo in the general sense of 17th Century Italian rapier fencing. Once you do, you will notice that Capoferro’s theory on tempo, while fascinating, is not absolutely necessary in unlocking the dynamics of his action and the rest of his theory.

Origins of the 17th Century Notions of Tempo

As I have mentioned above, the 17th Century rapier Masters borrowed their understanding of tempo from Aristotle’s notions. Viggiani (1575) actually identifies Aristotle’s *Physics* specifically as the source of their understanding of time.

Following is an excerpt of the passage in *IV Physics* (Parts 11 and following) where the Stagiran philosopher defines time and discusses a few issues related to it. Please notice how his words apply to how tempo is understood martially — so much so that for Aristotle even a thought would have been a tempo. And notice how for Aristotle, time is continuous and it is not fast or slow, but always

proportional to the movement of which it is a measurement. This should give you a better idea of why the Masters defined tempo the way they did.

One last brief point. Before you launch in reading what comes next, please understand that I have only put it here for reference for those of you who may be curious. You do NOT need to grasp Aristotle in order to understand rapier any more than you need to be a mechanical engineer in order to drive a car. Enjoy.

From Aristotle's IV Physics:

Time does not exist without change; for when the state of our own minds does not change at all, or we have not noticed its changing, we do not realize that time has elapsed.

We must take this as our starting-point and try to discover-since we wish to know what time is-what exactly it has to do with movement.

We perceive movement and time together: for even when it is dark and nothing impresses us through the senses, if any movement takes place in the mind we at once suppose that some time has elapsed; also, when we think of time passing, we associate with it some movement (i.e. change). Hence time is either movement or something that belongs to movement. Since time is clearly not movement, it must be something that belongs to movement.

But what is moved is moved from something to something, and all magnitude is continuous. Therefore the movement goes with the magnitude. Because the magnitude is continuous, the movement too must be continuous, and if the movement, then the time; for the time that has passed is always thought to be in proportion to the movement.

We apprehend time only when we have marked motion, marking it by 'before' and 'after'; and it is only when we have perceived 'before' and 'after' in motion that we say that time has elapsed. Now we mark them by judging that A and B are different, and that some third thing is intermediate to them. When we think of the extremes as different from the middle and the mind pronounces that the 'nows' are two, one before and one after, it is then that we say that there is time, and this that we say is time. For what is bounded by the 'now' is thought to be time-we may assume this.

When, therefore, we perceive the 'now' one, and neither as before and after in a motion nor as an identity but in relation to a 'before' and an 'after', no time is thought to have elapsed, because there has been no motion either. On the other hand, when we do perceive a 'before' and an 'after', then we say that there is time. For time is just this-number of motion in respect of 'before' and 'after'.

Hence time is not movement, but only movement in so far as it admits of enumeration. **It is clear, then, that time is 'number of movement in respect of the before and after', and is continuous since it is an attribute of what is continuous.** (Emphasis mine.)

Time is not described as fast or slow, but as many or few and as long or short. For as continuous it is long or short and as a number many or few, but it is not fast or slow-any more than any number with which we number is fast or slow.

Time is a measure of motion and of being moved, and it measures the motion by determining a motion which will measure exactly the whole motion, as the cubit does the length by determining an amount which will measure out the whole. Further 'to be in time' means for movement, that both it and its essence are measured by time (for simultaneously it measures both the movement and its essence, and this is what being in time means for it, that its essence should be measured).

Hence what is moved will not be measurable by the time simply in so far as it has quantity, but in so far as its motion has quantity. Thus none of the things which are neither moved nor at rest are in time: for 'to be in time' is 'to be measured by time', while time is the measure of motion and rest.