

DANCE *Through the Ages*



A Visual History of Ballet

Study Guide

Presented by:

THE GEORGIA *ballet*
DANCE EDUCATION, PERFORMANCE, AND OUTREACH SINCE 1960

On a Historical Note:

When you think of Ballet what comes to your mind? Do you immediately picture dancers in tutus dancing on the very tips of their toes? Ballet is often associated with those elements, but did you ever stop to wonder what why ballerinas wear tutus and pointe shoes or if ballet looks any different now than it did years ago? The answers lie far back in history.

Court Dance: The origins of Ballet

People have been dancing and performing dances in front of an audience as far back as we can trace through history. However, the art of ballet dancing had its origins in the courts of European monarchs.

Though people have always danced as a form of entertainment, the idea of watching a dance performance as a spectacle is where we begin to

trace the history of ballet. As far back as the 1300s

it was common to find kings and queens celebrating events, such as the birth of an heir or the acquisition of new territory, by throwing lavish parties which

included a live spectacle

consisting of dancers in

ostentatious costumes moving in

choreographed ways. These balls

or masques were especially

common in what we now call Italy

and spread to the French courts

by the mid 1500's. The lavishness

of the costumes were especially

intriguing. They often consisted

of tight jackets, called doublets,

for the men, and long hooped

skirts for the women. Men and women danced in the

high heeled

shoes common

during that

period. Can you imagine moving at all in this kind of attire?

These spectacles often lasted for hours. One famous early ballet,

Ballet-Comique de la Reine,

lasted 6 hours! However during





this time that ballet was still performed by amateur dancers.

That began to change during the reign of the French monarch, Louis the XIV. He was very fond of ballet and it was his idea to establish a school specifically for the instruction of ballet. This is why all ballet terms have French names to this day. The focused study of ballet in this school quickly gave rise to more and more complicated movements and sophisticated dances. It also paved the way for professional dancers to take center stage.

The Romantic Period:

The Romantic Period was a time in history when people were captivated by the power of the imagination. It is generally thought to have lasted from the late 1700's to the mid 1800's. During this time, music, art and poetry focused on deeply felt emotion and people were fascinated by mystical beings and supernatural events. It was during this time that female dancers first began to rise up to dance on the tip of their toes, a phenomenon referred to as dancing *en pointe*. This ethereal kind of movement coincided perfectly with people's desire to see otherworldly beings. Dance began to feature themes of sprites, fairies, and other magical creatures.

A dancer named Marie Taglioni is credited as the first one to popularize dancing *en pointe*. Taglioni quickly rose to fame as a result of a role in which she portrayed a sylphide, or a spirit of the air. Because of her ethereal movements, skimming across the floor in the tips of the toes, audiences adored her and dancing *sur les pointes* was imitated by dancers everywhere. It soon became a common fixture of ballet. However, in those days pointe shoes were not made of reinforced glue and material to provide strong support to the





dancer's foot like they are today. Rather, they were simply slippers darned at the ends in order to reinforce the tips of the shoes.

Another major innovation that came about during the romantic period has to do with a dancer's costume. The steps dancers were required to do had

became more and more complex and intricate. Consequently, dancers began to discard their heavy lavish costumes in favor to ones that showed off their abilities. In particular, the skirts women wore became shorter so that audiences could see a dancers intricate footwork.



The Classical Period:

The classical period is most closely associated with the ballet in Imperial Russia. During the mid to late 1800's Russian ballet dominated the ballet scene. Most of the classical ballets were choreographed by a man named Marius Petipa. These are the ballets with which most people are familiar: The Sleeping Beauty, The Nutcracker, and Swan Lake to name a few. It was a time of prolific ballet activity.



In contrast to the other-worldly themes of the romantic period, the classical period was concerned with technically brilliant dancing and often featured stories about nobility or recounted beloved fairy tales. They were extensive productions featuring lavish sets and

costumes. It was during this time that tutus were shortened further to reveal the entire line of a ballerina's leg and allow for complex and intricate movement. In addition, much of the music for these ballets was composed by famous composers such as Peter Tchaikovsky, much of which is still played today.

The ballets of the classical period have had a lasting impact on the dance world. Many of these ballets continue to delight audiences as they are still being performed today by ballet companies. This period of ballet history is truly iconic and many of the images people know and love about ballet come from this time period.



The Contemporary or Modern Period:

The Contemporary or Modern period is characterized by pushing the bounds of dance. By the early 19th century, many felt that ballet had become too stagnant and predictable. They disliked the strict, prescribed rules that ballet dancers had to follow and instead attempted to do new things with the art form. They began to move in a more naturalistic fashion, turning their legs in at the hip and allowing for movement that was unusual, broken, or unattractive. The first to do that was a woman named Isadora Duncan. She was followed by a great many dancers who developed what we now know as Modern Dance.



The desire to push the boundaries of dance has had a major impact on ballet. Consequently ballet began to experiment with what could be done on pointe, pushing the limits further and further. For instance, contemporary choreographers often experiment with different kinds of music, abandon story-lines altogether and intertwine

naturalistic movements in with the codified ballet movements. In addition, many contemporary pieces do not feature a story-line and may have unconventional music choices.



Try it Out:

Monarchy Malarkey:

Monarchs often used lavish stage productions to send a message to their courtiers and to their kingdoms about their authority. What kind of message do you think these lavish productions sent? Do you think that was a good way to communicate to courtiers? Pretend you are a monarch of a small kingdom. Devise a play, ballet or theatrical production that would send a pointed message to your adversaries. What elements would you include?

Costume Construction:

You have had a chance to see how the costumes contribute to the ballet. Design a costume for a character in a story-ballet. What would the costume communicate to the audience about that character? Would the dancer's movements be hampered or enhanced by what he or she was wearing?

Heard that Before?

Listen to some music from some famous story ballets. Have you ever heard it before? If so, where? Now can you guess which ballet it is from?

Ballet Libretto

Write a story that you think would make a good ballet. What elements in the story would lend themselves to a theatrical production? Are there parts of your story that you think might be hard to portray in a dance? How would you intend to show them?

Time Line:

Make a time line of some of the world events and incorporate the information about dance that you learned above. What was going on in the world at the time of Louis XIV? What historical influences might have shaped the way Marie Taglioni saw the world?

Backstage:

Did you ever wonder what goes on backstage in order to make a production run smoothly? Here are some people involved with a dance performance:

Choreographer:	This person creates the steps of the dances.
Ballet Master/Mistress:	This person catalogues the steps and rehearses the dancers.
Dancer:	This person performs the choreography on stage.
Stagehand:	This person performs a variety of backstage work, including hanging drops, moving sets on and off the stage, monitoring props, etc.
Costume Mistress:	This person designs and assembles the costumes for the dancers.
Lighting Designer:	This person designs the lights that will set the mood of the ballet.
Sound Technician:	This person sets up and operates the equipment for the music.
Stage Manager:	This person directs everyone backstage to do his or her job at the correct time so that the production can run smoothly.

We hope you enjoy The Georgia Ballet's performance of "Dance through the Ages" If you have any questions after watching the performance that you would like answered please contact us at:

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