

The Highlight of the History of Classical Ballet

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Introduction

Classical ballet developed over several centuries through court entertainment, professional academies, theatrical reform, Romantic fantasy, Russian imperial production, modernist collaboration, and twentieth-century institutional growth. The original question-and-answer essay correctly identifies Italian Renaissance courts, Catherine de' Medici, Louis XIV, the Académie Royale de Danse, Jean-Georges Noverre, *La Sylphide*, *Giselle*, Marius Petipa, Sergei Diaghilev, and George Balanchine. It needs greater precision. Ballet did not emerge in one year, Louis XIV created an academy rather than the first dance school in every sense, pointe work developed gradually, and the Ballets Russes was a touring company rather than a school. The history of ballet is best understood as a changing relationship among technique, spectacle, narrative, music, gender, patronage, and institutions (Au; Homans; Guest).

Origins in Italian Renaissance Courts

Ballet's roots lie in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian court festivals that combined dance, music, poetry, costume, procession, and political display. Noble participants learned patterned steps and formations as part of courtly education (Au; Homans).

These entertainments were not stage ballets in the modern sense. Performers and spectators often belonged to the same elite social world, and dance demonstrated order, rank, wealth, and diplomatic power (Homans).

Catherine de' Medici

Catherine de' Medici was born into the Florentine Medici family and married the future Henry II of France in 1533. As queen and later queen mother, she supported elaborate court festivals that brought Italian and French artistic practices together (Homans; Au).

The *Ballet Comique de la Reine* of 1581, organized for the French court under her cultural influence, is often cited as an early court ballet because it integrated story, music, design, poetry, and dance on an exceptional scale (Homans; Guest).

The French Court

French court ballet developed as an instrument of royal image and aristocratic participation. Dance manuals and masters codified steps, etiquette, and posture. The vocabulary increasingly used French terms because France became the central institutional home of ballet (Guest; Homans).

Participation also reinforced hierarchy. Access to training and performance marked proximity to court power (Guest).

Louis XIV

Louis XIV danced in court ballets and famously appeared as the rising sun in *Ballet de la Nuit* in 1653. His image as the Sun King linked choreography with political authority (Homans; Guest).

In 1661 he founded the Académie Royale de Danse to improve and regulate dance teaching. The institution helped move ballet from aristocratic participation toward professional standards, although professionalization was gradual (Guest; Homans).

From Court to Public Theater

The Académie Royale de Musique, later associated with the Paris Opera, provided a public theatrical setting for opera and dance. Professional dancers increasingly replaced nobles onstage. Women became regular professional performers in the late seventeenth century (Guest; Au).

Proscenium stages changed choreography because audiences viewed action mainly from the front rather than from around a ballroom (Au).

Pierre Beauchamp and Technique

Pierre Beauchamp, dancer and choreographer at Louis XIV's court, is associated with codifying the five positions of the feet and developing French ballet technique. The positions did not create ballet alone, but they provided a systematic foundation for training and notation (Guest; Homans).

Turnout, placement, coordination, and courtly style became teachable conventions that later schools revised (Au).

Jean-Georges Noverre

Jean-Georges Noverre was an eighteenth-century dancer, choreographer, and theorist who argued that ballet should communicate through expressive movement rather than depend on decorative steps, masks, and complicated spectacle. His *Letters on Dancing and Ballets*, published in 1760, criticized artificial convention (Guest; Homans).

He wanted choreography, music, design, and gesture to support dramatic action and character (Guest).

Ballet d'Action

Ballet d'action is a form in which dance and mime carry a coherent dramatic narrative. Noverre believed performers should reveal emotion through the whole body and that scenes should follow understandable motivation (Guest).

His reforms did not eliminate virtuosity or spectacle. They changed the standard by which these elements were judged: technique should serve expression and dramatic unity (Guest; Au).

Technical Development

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, training, footwear, stage machinery, and theatrical taste supported more extended jumps, turns, balances, and leg lines. Costumes gradually allowed greater freedom of movement (Au; Homans).

Technique was shaped by individual performers and teachers rather than progressing automatically. What later appears “classical” was created through repeated experimentation (Homans).

The Romantic Ballet

The Romantic period in ballet flourished mainly in the 1830s and 1840s. It emphasized supernatural beings, unattainable love, dreams, nature, night, death, and conflict between ordinary and otherworldly realms (Au; Homans).

Women ballerinas became central figures, while male dancers often served supporting dramatic roles. Gas lighting, gauze, stage effects, and light costumes reinforced an atmosphere of mystery (Homans).

La Sylphide

La Sylphide, first choreographed by Filippo Taglioni for his daughter Marie in Paris in 1832, tells of a Scottish man drawn away from ordinary life by a supernatural sylph. August Bournonville created the enduring Danish version in 1836 (Au; Homans).

The ballet associates ethereal femininity with desire and loss, while its national setting and folk color ground the fantasy (Homans).

Giselle

Giselle, premiered in Paris in 1841, contrasts a village first act with the supernatural world of the Wilis in the second. Giselle's betrayal, death, and protection of Albrecht combine psychological drama with Romantic spectacle (Au; Homans).

Its survival depends on more than famous choreography. Performers must make the transition from living young woman to otherworldly spirit emotionally credible (Homans).

Pointe Work

Rising onto the tips of the toes developed gradually before and during the Romantic period. Marie Taglioni's performances helped make pointe work a central symbol of weightlessness, although early shoes offered far less structural support than modern pointe shoes (Au; Homans).

Pointe work should not be described as standing casually on toes. It requires progressive training, alignment, strength, appropriate anatomy, fitted shoes, and professional supervision. Starting before readiness can cause injury (Au).

The Tutu and Stage Image

The Romantic tutu, with a longer bell-shaped skirt, created an airy silhouette. Later classical tutus became shorter and stiffer, allowing audiences to see complex leg work (Au; Homans).

Costume changes reflect choreography, theatrical technology, modesty conventions, and the presentation of the ballerina. They also influence how gender and the body are perceived (Homans).

Marius Petipa

Marius Petipa was born in France and worked in St. Petersburg from 1847. He became a leading choreographer of the Russian Imperial Theatres and helped establish the large-scale classical ballet through works, revivals, and collaborations (Homans; Au).

His productions combined mime, national dances, corps-de-ballet geometry, character roles, and technically demanding variations. Attribution can be complicated because later generations revised choreography (Homans).

The Russian Imperial Ballet

Russian state patronage supported schools, theaters, composers, designers, and long rehearsal processes. French and Italian teachers influenced local training, while Russian institutions developed their own synthesis (Homans).

The late nineteenth-century repertory associated with Petipa includes *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Raymonda*, and influential versions of *Swan Lake* and *Giselle* (Au; Homans).

Tchaikovsky and Ballet Music

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky brought symphonic richness and thematic development to *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*. Ballet music had long existed, but his scores became unusually important as concert and dramatic works (Homans; Au).

Choreography and music interact through tempo, phrase, leitmotif, orchestration, and structure. The score is not simply background for steps (Au).

Sergei Diaghilev

Sergei Diaghilev was a Russian impresario who founded the Ballets Russes in Paris in 1909. It was a touring company, not a school. Diaghilev brought together choreographers, dancers, composers, painters, designers, and writers (Garafola; Homans).

He did not choreograph, but his commissioning and artistic judgment transformed ballet's relationship with modern music and visual art (Garafola).

The Ballets Russes

The company presented works by Michel Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska, Léonide Massine, and George Balanchine, with scores by Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel, Prokofiev, and others. Designs came from artists such as Bakst, Picasso, and Matisse (Garafola).

Productions including *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring* challenged nineteenth-century expectations of narrative, movement, rhythm, and design (Garafola; Homans).

George Balanchine

George Balanchine trained in St. Petersburg, worked with Diaghilev, and moved to the United States. With Lincoln Kirstein, he founded the School of American Ballet in 1934 and the company that became New York City Ballet in 1948 (New York City Ballet; Homans).

Balanchine developed a neoclassical style marked by speed, musical clarity, extended lines, reduced scenery, and choreography that often treated dance and music as the principal subject (New York City Ballet; Au).

Ballet in the United States

American ballet developed through touring companies, immigrant artists, schools, universities, regional organizations, and major institutions. Balanchine was central but not alone. Ballet Theatre, later American Ballet Theatre, cultivated dramatic repertory and international artists (Au; Homans).

Black dancers and other marginalized performers faced exclusion from schools and companies despite shaping American dance. Histories of ballet must include artists such as Janet Collins, Raven Wilkinson, Arthur Mitchell, and the Dance Theatre of Harlem (Au; Homans).

Classical Ballet Today

Contemporary ballet companies preserve historic works while commissioning new choreography. They debate authenticity, racial representation, gender roles, body standards, labor, injury, and how to restage works containing stereotypes (Au; Homans).

Classical technique remains a living practice rather than a museum object. Each performance transmits a tradition while adapting to present bodies, theaters, and audiences (Au).

Conclusion

Ballet began in Italian Renaissance court entertainment and became institutionalized in France through royal patronage, academies, professional theaters, and codified technique. Noverre's ballet d'action made dramatic expression a reform ideal. Romantic ballets such as *La Sylphide* and *Giselle* placed supernatural women and pointe work at the center of the stage. Petipa and the Russian Imperial system created enduring classical structures, while Diaghilev's Ballets Russes joined ballet with modern art and music. Balanchine helped establish a distinctive American neoclassical tradition. Ballet history is therefore not one uninterrupted line of improvement. It is a continuing process of institutional power, artistic invention, training, migration, and reinterpretation (Au; Homans; Guest; Garafola; New York City Ballet).

Works Cited

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