The Highlight of the History of Classical Ballet

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Classical ballet developed through several centuries of political patronage, professional training, theatrical innovation, musical collaboration, and migration (Au, 2012; Homans, 2010). Its history cannot be reduced to a simple sequence in which one country "invented" ballet and another perfected it. The form emerged from Italian Renaissance court entertainments, became institutionalized in France, developed new theatrical and narrative ideals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reached a major classical synthesis in imperial Russia, and was transformed again through modernist and neoclassical experiments in the twentieth century.

The most important historical developments were not only technical. Ballet changed whenever its institutions, audiences, stages, music, and social meanings changed. Court dance served aristocratic display; public theatre professionalized performers; Romantic ballet emphasized fantasy and supernatural femininity; Russian imperial ballet enlarged scale and virtuosity; the Ballets Russes connected dance with modern art; and George Balanchine helped establish a distinctly American neoclassical tradition. The history of ballet is therefore best understood as an evolving relationship among technique, dramatic expression, music, design, gender, and cultural power.

Court Origins

Ballet's roots lie in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian courts, where elite festivals combined dance, music, poetry, costume, architecture, procession, and political ceremony. These events were not ballets in the modern theatrical sense. Performers were often nobles, and dance functioned partly as a demonstration of discipline, hierarchy, education, and courtly identity.

Catherine de' Medici helped carry Italian court traditions into France after marrying the future Henry II in 1533. French court entertainments gradually incorporated increasingly elaborate combinations of music, design, poetry, and dance. The 1581 *Ballet Comique de la Reine* is often cited as an early landmark because it integrated spectacle and narrative on an unusually ambitious scale.

France became the central institutional home of ballet during the reign of Louis XIV. The king himself danced in court entertainments and famously appeared as the rising sun in the 1653 *Ballet de la Nuit*. His association with dance helped connect ballet with royal authority and social discipline.

Louis XIV founded the Académie Royale de Danse in 1661 and later supported the Académie Royale de Musique, which became closely associated with the Paris Opera. These institutions helped professionalize dance and standardize technique. The Metropolitan Museum of Art notes that the vocabulary of classical dance was consolidated through institutions attached to the French court and opera, and that professional dancers became increasingly important as ballet moved beyond aristocratic participation.

Pierre Beauchamp is traditionally associated with the codification of the five positions of the feet and with the development of French ballet technique. The French terminology still used today—such as *plié*, *tendu*, *arabesque*, and *pirouette*—reflects the importance of this period. Technique became increasingly teachable, repeatable, and professional rather than limited to courtly custom.

The transition from ballroom and court space to the proscenium stage also changed choreography. Audiences increasingly viewed dancers from the front, encouraging greater attention to line, symmetry, directional presentation, and stage picture. Professional women joined public theatrical performance in the late seventeenth century, though male dancers remained prominent for much of the period.

Drama and Romanticism

By the eighteenth century, ballet faced criticism for becoming overly decorative and disconnected from dramatic meaning. Jean-Georges Noverre argued in his 1760 *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* that movement, gesture, music, costume, and design should work together to communicate character and action. His concept of *ballet d'action* sought a more coherent dramatic form in which dance and mime could carry a story without depending heavily on spoken explanation.

Noverre did not reject virtuosity or spectacle. His argument was that technical display should serve expression. This reform ideal became important because it shifted attention from isolated steps toward dramatic motivation and emotional communication. The dancer was increasingly expected to portray a character rather than merely demonstrate courtly refinement.

Technical development accelerated during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as training, footwear, costume, stage machinery, and theatrical taste changed. Dancers developed more sustained turns, jumps, balances, and extended leg lines. These changes did not occur automatically; they emerged through individual performers, teachers, and institutions experimenting with what bodies could do safely and expressively.

The Romantic period of the 1830s and 1840s transformed ballet's stage image. Romantic ballets often contrasted ordinary human life with supernatural worlds populated by sylphs, spirits, ghosts, and other unattainable beings. Themes of forbidden love, death, nature, dreams, and longing became central. Lighting, gauze, scenic illusion, and flowing costumes helped create an atmosphere of mystery.

La Sylphide, first choreographed by Filippo Taglioni for his daughter Marie in Paris in 1832, became a defining work of Romantic ballet. The ballet presents a Scottish man drawn away from domestic life by a supernatural sylph. Marie Taglioni's performances helped popularize pointe work as a visual symbol of weightlessness and otherworldliness, although early pointe shoes were far less reinforced than modern shoes.

Giselle, premiered in Paris in 1841, remains another major Romantic work. Its first act is set in a village and its second in the supernatural world of the Wilis. The ballet's endurance comes from the interaction between technique and dramatic transformation: the performer must make Giselle believable both as a living young woman and as a spirit after death.

Pointe work should not be described as a single invention made at one moment. It developed gradually through technical experimentation and changing footwear. Modern pointe technique requires progressive strength, alignment, supervision, and properly fitted shoes. Its visual effect may suggest effortless weightlessness, but the physical demands are considerable.

Imperial Russia

During the nineteenth century, the center of classical ballet shifted increasingly toward Russia, where imperial patronage supported schools, theatres, composers, choreographers, designers, and long rehearsal processes. French and Italian teachers contributed heavily to training, but Russian institutions developed a distinctive synthesis of technical discipline, theatrical scale, and musical ambition.

Marius Petipa became central to this development after moving to St. Petersburg in 1847. Over decades at the Imperial Theatres, he choreographed and revised works that helped establish the large-scale classical ballet. His productions combined narrative mime, corps-de-ballet geometry, solo variations, character dances, and highly structured ensemble scenes.

Petipa's major repertory includes *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Raymonda*, as well as influential productions of *Swan Lake* and other works. Attribution is sometimes complicated because choreography was revised by later performers and ballet masters, but the Petipa tradition became foundational to twentieth-century classical training.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky transformed the relationship between ballet and music. His scores for *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker* gave ballet unusually rich orchestration, thematic development, and dramatic structure. The music was no longer merely accompaniment for dance sequences; it became a major source of emotional and formal organization.

The classical tutu and the visual emphasis on leg technique developed alongside this repertory. Shorter, more structured skirts allowed audiences to see increasingly complex footwork and leg positions. Costume therefore interacted directly with the evolution of technique and the visual

presentation of the ballerina.

At the same time, ballet's imperial institutions reproduced social hierarchies. Training was highly selective, state-supported, and disciplined. The prestige of the ballerina increased, but gender roles often remained strongly codified. Classical ballet's technical achievements should therefore be studied together with the institutional system that made them possible.

Modern Ballet

The twentieth century brought major change through Sergei Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes (Garafola, 1989). Diaghilev founded the touring company in Paris in 1909. It was not a school, and Diaghilev was not a choreographer. His importance lay in artistic direction, commissioning, collaboration, and his ability to bring together dancers, choreographers, composers, visual artists, and designers.

The Ballets Russes presented choreography by Michel Fokine, Vaslav Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska, Léonide Massine, and George Balanchine, with music by composers including Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel, and Prokofiev. Designs involved artists such as Léon Bakst, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse. The company challenged the assumption that ballet had to preserve late nineteenth-century classical conventions.

Productions such as *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The* Rite of Spring altered expectations about rhythm, movement, design, and subject matter. The 1913 premiere of *The Rite of Spring* became especially famous because Nijinsky's angular choreography and Stravinsky's complex score rejected the graceful symmetry audiences associated with conventional ballet.

George Balanchine later carried Russian training and modernist experimentation into 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. His neoclassical style retained the technical vocabulary of ballet but often removed elaborate narrative and scenery, emphasizing speed, musical structure, extended lines, and the movement itself.

American ballet developed through more than Balanchine. American Ballet Theatre cultivated a broad dramatic repertory and international roster, while regional companies and schools expanded ballet's reach. Black dancers and other marginalized artists also challenged exclusion within institutions. Janet Collins, Raven Wilkinson, Arthur Mitchell, and Dance Theatre of Harlem are important to understanding how American ballet developed beyond predominantly white elite traditions.

Contemporary ballet companies now preserve historical repertory while commissioning new choreography. They also debate questions of authenticity, racial representation, gender roles, body standards, labor conditions, injury, and how to restage works containing stereotypes. These debates show that classical ballet is not a fixed museum artifact.

The long history of ballet is therefore a history of continuity and transformation. Italian court culture supplied early social forms; France institutionalized technique and terminology; Noverre promoted dramatic expression; Romantic ballet reshaped theatrical fantasy and pointe work; Russian imperial institutions established the grand classical repertory; Diaghilev connected ballet with modern art; and Balanchine helped create a major American neoclassical tradition. Ballet survives because its technical vocabulary can be preserved while its artistic meaning continues to change.

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