

INFLUENCES ON BALLET:  
A STUDY ON HOW GEOGRAPHY AND  
CULTURE AFFECT BALLET TRAINING AND  
TECHNIQUE

by  
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## ABSTRACT

Two major ballet techniques are named after their founders and are practiced in the countries from which they originate—the Vaganova technique from Russia and the Balanchine Method from America. In my thesis, I will investigate what factors influenced these ballet techniques in addition to what similarities and differences they have. As I intend to become a professional ballerina, it is important to understand the influences of culture and geography on ballet training and technique. My research process is mixed method, meaning I conducted both traditional academic research in addition to embodied research. With this comparative analysis between two techniques, I wanted to seek out all possible historical, cultural, and embodied implications. Both techniques are a celebration of art and culture, and both are also reflections of their cultures' ideals. We can learn so much about a country's culture and past by delving into its art, so continuing dance research is both informative and influential.

## **Introduction**

At the peak of the Cold War, the communist United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and the capitalist United States of America were at odds ideologically and nationally. Both nations desired the spread of their regime at any cost, and both nations believed themselves to be irrefutably correct (Haslam). Throughout the Cold War Era, which occurred from the end of World War II in 1945 to the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union escalated dramatically. Though there was never direct combat, the war was sustained by the threat of nuclear warfare, the effort on behalf of the USSR to spread communism, the effort of the USA to both contain and end communism, and the spread of fear, skepticism, and pride (Britannica).

Just as there was a rift between the political ideologies of the USSR and the USA during the Cold War rivalry, there exists a rift between their respective ballet techniques. While Russia's Vaganova ballet technique and America's Balanchine ballet technique both stem from the same art form and may appear quite similar to an untrained eye, there are quite distinct differences between the technique, the rationale behind the technique, and the manner in which a dancer approaches performance, as there are with all different ballet techniques. Similar to a sense of nationalism, there is often pride associated with a nation's ballet training and technique. For Russians, then the USSR, the Vaganova ballet technique was the peak of nationalism—the uniformity and the historic and cultural traditionalism of the technique were ideals reflected in the spread of communism. For American audiences, the Balanchine method was a reflection of American ingenuity, freedom, and the pushing of boundaries.

Ballet, though universally utilizing the same steps, names for steps, and a basic structure and purpose, has many derivatives in terms of technique, of which the Balanchine and the Vaganova

technique are two. Often, these techniques are distinguished by the country in which they are being danced and taught. The Vaganova technique was founded by renowned ballet pedagogue Agrippina Vaganova, and The Balanchine Method was founded by pioneering choreographer George Balanchine. In this thesis, I investigated what factors—geography, culture, people, events—influenced these ballet techniques in addition to what similarities and differences they have. As ballet companies have preferences regarding which type of ballet technique their dancers should dance, it is worth investigating how history has brought technique to where it is today. The terms “technique”, “style”, and “method” are often used interchangeably, though some more closely define “technique” as a baseline for the dancing and “style” as the superfluous additions of a dancer. The techniques grow and develop depending on many factors, but namely culture, influential people, and historical events.

All of this information led me to ask the following research questions: In what ways are Balanchine technique and Vaganova technique similar or different? What factors influence nuances in technique? How do geography and culture affect ballet training and technique?

### **Background on Major Figures in this Research**

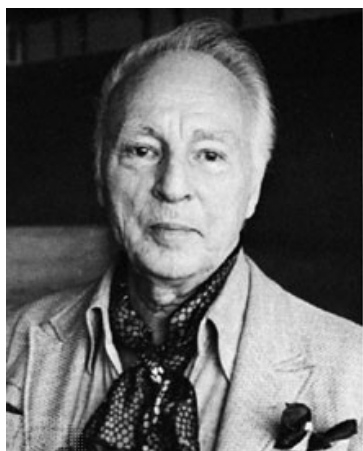
Agrippina Vaganova (1879-1951) trained at the Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg. She danced with the Mariinsky Theatre for many years and retired to teach in 1951. As a performer, she was known as the “Queen of Variations” (Vaganova Ballet Academy), though she didn’t gain the title status of Ballerina until the year before she



Agrippina Vaganova. *Vaganova Ballet Academy*, 2014.  
<https://vaganovaacademy.ru/academy-eng/vaganova-eng.html>.

retired from dancing. Though Vaganova was a talented dancer, her fellow company members, such as Anna Pavlova, often secured leading roles over Vaganova. Following her retirement from the stage, Vaganova taught at the Petrograd State Ballet School, which was formerly known as the Imperial Ballet School where she trained. While she was teaching, she codified the method she developed, and published a technique manual “Basic Principles of Classical Ballet”, which continues to be the standard for teaching the Vaganova technique. The manual describes everything from the way positions and steps are to be executed to the reasoning for and progression of a ballet class. Vaganova is more esteemed as a ballet pedagogue than she was a dancer.

In addition to teaching her ballet technique, Vaganova also choreographed, re-staged classical ballets, taught choreography, and was the artistic director of the Kirov Ballet (now the Mariinsky Ballet). She taught many prominent Russian dancers such as Marina Semeonova, Galina Ulanova, and Natalia Dudinskaya. In 1946 she was given the Stalin Prize of the USSR, and in 1957, the Leningrad Choreographic School (formerly the Petrograd State Ballet School/Imperial Ballet School) was renamed the Vaganova School.



*George Balanchine. The George Balanchine Trust, 2021.*  
<https://www.nycballet.com/discover/our-history/george-balanchine/>

George Balanchine (1904-1983), born as Georgy Balanchivadze, created the Balanchine Method and founded New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet. Just like Vaganova, Balanchine trained at the Imperial Ballet School at the Mariinsky Theater, but he was training during the period of revolution from Imperial Russia to the Soviet Union. As a young man, he defected from the Soviet Union and danced throughout Europe, later dancing and choreographing for the Ballet Russes led by Diaghilev, the Royal

Danish Ballet, Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, and Les Ballet 1933. After catching the eye of American dance enthusiast Lincoln Kirstein, Balanchine came to America and co-founded the School of American Ballet and the ballet company that would later become New York City Ballet (Britannica Academic). He became a world-renowned choreographer and his company and school still exist today, with his ballets being danced internationally. Though he was born in Imperial Russia, raised in the Soviet Union, and trained in the Russian style at the Imperial Ballet School, George Balanchine was “rabidly anti-Communist” (Lobenthal 228).

His ballet technique, though some call it a “style” rather than a technique, reflects this allegiance to Imperial Russia over his country’s current direction towards communism. His choreography is known to have revolutionized traditional ballet, and he had the credo: ““What I believe is what I learned myself, in St. Petersburg, in what was probably the most elaborate and refined school.”” (Schorer, Preface).

### **Research Methodology, Rationale, and Process**

My research process is mixed method, meaning I conducted both traditional academic research in addition to embodied research. It was important to do both because the topic I am undertaking needs to be looked at with multiple lenses. As a comparative analysis between two techniques, I wanted to seek out all possible historical, cultural, and embodied implications.

For the purpose of grounding, I started with historical research. I read multiple historical resources that gave insight to the cultural, political, and socioeconomic realities of both the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The history books detail the overall chronological progression of the period, but they also have specifics about each country

regarding daily life and culture. Additionally, I read the technique manuals for the Balanchine technique and the Vaganova technique.

The Vaganova manual was written by Vaganova herself. The language throughout the book is direct and to the point. She clearly articulates how the steps must be done and leaves little room for embellishments and elaborations. This technique manual goes through the fundamentals of a ballet class by explaining steps and the logical progression of the steps. It is purely for a classical ballet class, and each page describes in detail how to execute particular steps. Both techniques have similar frameworks for classwork, in that they start with barre exercises that prepare the dancers for the more physically demanding exercises for center work. While the book is primarily descriptive of the technique, there are also elements of artistry and performance sprinkled throughout.

The Balanchine manual was written by one of the dancers in his company, Suki Schorer, who later became a teacher in his school, and it includes many direct quotations from Balanchine. It is different from the Vaganova book in that Balanchine did not write it directly, though Schorer was a full-time teacher and Balanchine asked her to organize the school program in a way that prepared the students to dance for him in the company he established, New York City Ballet. From this conventional research method, I gleaned information about broad and miniscule details that differentiated the techniques which set the stage for the rest of this research.

I found that traditional academic research was not enough for me to fully understand the material, so I chose to explore embodied research as well. This means I physically learned specific ballet variations myself and analyzed differences between them from a more deeply artistic and personal way. By going beyond observation and actually inserting myself into the



work, I could more effectively dive into the material. Ballet can be best understood by being “in it” so by embodying the research, I gained further insight into the technique rather than solely relying on books and video. As a physical art form, it calls for physical research.

Rather than simply learning the techniques through classwork, I went further into learning specific ballet variations that were performed by dancers trained in both techniques around the same time period. Technique manifests itself in performance, and ballet has the end goal of being taken to the stage; I learned the techniques at their fullest expression to really get to the heart of each one. I chose one classical ballet variation to center my comparative analysis on based on multiple factors. Most importantly, I wanted to get as close as I possibly could to the root of the techniques. Both techniques had to have video evidence of the same variation online so that I could accurately juxtapose them as a representation of each of the techniques in performance. After searching for different variations to study, I selected the White Swan/Odette variation from *Swan Lake*.

The main character of the ballet is Odette, a princess who has been turned into a swan by an evil sorcerer. The only way to break the spell and return to human form is for a man to profess his love for her, which explains her desperation for Prince Siegfried and her overall feeling of being trapped. The White Swan variation is when the audience gets a glimpse of her true character and situation, and advanced technique in addition to impeccable artistry are required of the dancer. A variation clearly shows what is needed for this research, especially the White Swan variation from *Swan Lake* because of the structure. *Swan Lake* is one of the most widely known and recognizable ballets, and it has been performed in nearly every ballet style. As a staple of ballet repertoire and as what may be considered the height of the art form, it is a clear choice. By narrowing the techniques to a full-length ballet, and then to a variation, I am

able to make direct comparisons from a more condensed section. Both versions of the variation start similarly with slow, character emphasizing movements, and end in a flurry of turns. Certain aspects of the character of Odette are not to be confused with the pure technique—technique can be altered to fit the character, and in the case of Odette, there is much more freedom in the upper body and *port de bras* changes. I made sure to note this in order to make distinctions between the artistry of the dancer and the study of the technique. I wanted to isolate the technique from the ballerina's stylistic choices as much as possible.

*Swan Lake* was originally choreographed by Julius Reisinger in 1877, and the more popular version was revived by Lev Ivanov and Marius Petipa in 1895. Balanchine rechoreographed it in his own style in 1951. Much like Balanchine's method, his version of the ballet is rooted in a Russian style yet changed to suit his own stylistic values. I used the video of ballerina Maria Tallchief's 1954 New York City Ballet performance as my model of the Balanchine method in performance. I used the video of Maya Plisetskaya's 1957 Bolshoi Theatre performance as my model of Vaganova technique in performance.



Jack Mitchell, *Native American Prima Ballerina Maria Tallchief in "Swan Lake" 1960*

Maria Tallchief is the dancer I chose as a representative of the Balanchine method. The recording I am using as source material is from when New York City Ballet performed *Swan Lake* in 1954. Tallchief was born in 1925 in Fairfax, Oklahoma on a Native American Osage Nation reservation. After her early ballet teachers and parents recognized her immense potential, she trained under Bronislava Nijinska, Vaslav Nijinsky's sister, in Los Angeles. She landed a contract with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Her childhood instructor Nijinska often staged ballets on the Ballet

Russe de Monte Carlo, and she would cast Tallchief in premier roles (Tallchief, Kaplan, Chapter 2). George Balanchine was also hired to choreograph on the company, and he was immediately drawn to her as both a dancer and a person: Balanchine considered her as one of his first muses and they were soon married (Britannica). She trained in Balanchine's technique before it was codified and later performed with Paris Opera Ballet when Balanchine was choreographing there. Once Balanchine founded New York City Ballet in 1948, she joined as the first prima ballerina. Much like George Balanchine, she was trained in Vaganova then transitioned into the American style. Just like Plisetskaya, who I chose as the representative of the Vaganova technique in performance, Tallchief faced hardships in life—as a Native American woman, she fought discrimination and spoke out for both her and Indigenous peoples' rights. When prompted to change her name to sound more Russian, as was common for ballerinas in this era, she refused saying “Tallchief was my name, and I was proud of it.” (Tallchief, Kaplan, Chapter 2). She is hailed as a revolutionary in American ballet as well as a noteworthy spokeswoman for Native Americans.

Maya Plisetskaya is the dancer I chose to observe as an exemplar of the Vaganova technique. The recording I am using as source material is from when the Bolshoi Ballet performed *Swan Lake* in 1957. Plisetskaya was born in Moscow in 1925 and trained with the Bolshoi Ballet School. She later joined the Bolshoi Ballet and performed prima ballerina roles, and critics have said her portrayal of Odette-Odile in *Swan Lake* is her best work (Garafola). She



Sputnik/Alamy, *Maya Plisetskaya*, 1960.

faced numerous hardships in her life, but she was able to use dance as a channel for her to overcome these adversities. Her passion and expressiveness in her dancing may be a result of this: her father was executed under Joseph Stalin and her mother was put into a prison camp in Kazakhstan (Britannica). She herself was also displaced from Russia and was followed by the KGB under the suspicion she was a spy (Plisetskaya). These hardships in her life most certainly added to her artistic portrayal of these dramatic roles, particularly the character Odette-Odile's betrayal, agony, and passion. She is renowned as one of the foremost Vaganova dancers.

Once again, I am relying on two distinct performances to reflect technical influences, though these performances are also heavily influenced by each ballerina's interpretations and performance qualities. The choreography is quite different, as will be outlined later, yet it conveys the same meaning despite being presented in different ways.

Ballet variations are often built by combining multiple phrases which are each repeated a couple times. This particular recording of the Vaganova version is missing a phrase section. I learned this missing phrase from other videos of this same variation, though I noted in my embodied research that this section from the originally intended video was missing. The missing sequence in the Vaganova video consists of a series of *developpés* to the side at the beginning. The recording of the variation opens with a series of jumps and *relevés* along the diagonal, repeated twice. This is followed by a series of turns, also along the diagonal. The variation ends with a *tombé relevé arabesque* before Plisetskaya runs off the stage.

In the Balanchine version, the whole variation is shown in its entirety. This version begins with a mixture of *relevés* in *attitude* and *arabesque*, in addition to a few *pas de chats*, which are jumps. It is differentiated from the Vaganova version in the sense that it is not performed along the diagonal, and it is more circuitous and less linearly designed. The next

segment, where the Vaganova version has jumps, is a series of *bourrés* and *arabesques*. Finally, it also closes with a series of turns, though these turns are performed in a wide circle around the stage rather than along the diagonal and are subsequently called a *manège*. Both endings convey urgency and a deep sense of struggle from the character Odette, though this sense is accomplished in different ways via the choreography. The steps for the Vaganova variation were exclusively classical technique except for having a *bourré* turn in parallel at the end. The Balanchine variation also used classical technique with a few non-traditional additions, such as including *piqué* turns in *cou-de-pied* rather than *retiré* at the end.

Granted, though I have been instructed by teachers in both Vaganova and Balanchine techniques, there was not an expert of either techniques guiding me throughout this process; I was relying on my past experiences with both techniques and had no direct coaching due to the global pandemic. However, I watched these videos closely, noted similarities and differences, and analyzed possible implications.

I began this whole process by questioning what factors influenced the formation of Balanchine and Vaganova techniques and in what ways the techniques are similar or different. I conducted the conventional academic research first by reading the history books and technique manuals. I wrote my literature review and let the academic research influence and inform my embodied research. For the embodied research portion, I rehearsed for an hour and a half each week during the fall semester of 2020. When I learned each variation, I first focused on getting the choreography down to each miniscule movement—I paid special attention to the *épaulement*, which is the movement of the head, neck, and shoulders. While all ballet techniques share general ballet steps such as *pliés*, *tendus*, and *grande jetés*, they each have different ways of carrying the head, neck, and shoulders. These differences were key to understanding and

solidifying my perception of each technique. I also journaled specific adjectives about how it felt to dance each technique in addition to imagery I found it helped me to better execute each version of the variation. Even simple differences in musicality could inform major differences between the techniques.

I spent a couple of weeks learning the Balanchine version from the video and then dancing it myself and documenting all of the aforementioned elements. I spent the next couple weeks learning and dancing the Vaganova version and doing similar documentation. Then, I danced them back to back to immediately feel the differences and similarities between the two versions. I purposefully spent time delving into each individual technique followed by juxtaposing them closely—by doing it this way, I got a wide lens view of each one in addition to a closely comparative view. It also must be noted that this research took place in the fall of 2020, so I was wearing a face mask due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This certainly made it more difficult to dance each one because of stamina and breathing issues, but I hold that I had a solid understanding of each variation despite this restriction. After conducting the embodied research portion of this thesis, I went back to my conventional research to combine the findings of both the academic and the embodied research, as outlined below.

### **Era specifics**

Ballet has noticeably changed since the 1950s, so my experience of trying to learn the variations as shown is different from the specific period. For example, today we have different pointe shoes, flooring, training, rehabilitation and physical therapy, and understandings of the anatomy and health. Not only has the training and competition become more rigorous, but both techniques have become more refined and the talent more amplified. Simply put, some famous dancers during the 1950s would not be held in as high regard in today's ballet atmosphere.

Though I made an effort to closely copy the videos and techniques of that time, it isn't perfectly similar due to these time differences.

It also must be noted that all dancers have nuances that may not necessarily be representative of the technique or time period. Each dancer brings their own artistry and personality to a role. Each dancer also has a different body—a dancer's body determines a their flexibility, range of motion, the aesthetic of bone structure, and general physical idiosyncrasies that makes their dancing unique. Though I am studying one dancer per technique, that dancer may have distinctions that are not exclusive to the technique, but rather are habits or layered-on artistic choices.

## **Analysis**

### **Embodied Research Findings**

While conducting the embodied research portion, I kept track of both large and small differences and similarities, ranging from simple adjectives to describe how dancing either technique felt, to larger concepts such as differences in the structure of the choreography.

The variation, as is the case with most classical ballet variations, is split into sections, meaning there are repeated sequences going in a certain direction that are often separated by walking, changing direction, or posing.

I started by learning Balanchine's version with Maria Tallchief. Balanchine's version begins with a section of *attitudes* and *pas de chats*. This section repeats twice. The second section is a series of *bourrées* into *arabesques* along the diagonal, which repeats again with a change in direction. The third section is a *piqué turn* and *chaîné manège*, and the variation ends with a *tendu* back facing away from Prince Siegfried.

Next, I learned Vaganova's version with Maya Plisetskaya. This version was choreographed by Marius Petipa, but utilizes Vaganova's technique as Plisetskaya trained in Vaganova. The first section in this variation is a series of *sissonnes*, *relevé arabesques*, and *attitudes*. The second section was the one that was cut out, but through investigating other videos of the time period, it is a series of *developpés* to the side and more *attitudes*. The third section is a series of *tombé piqué tours en dehors* and *bourrés*, but it is along the diagonal. This version finishes with a *tombé relevé arabesque* and then she runs off the stage, away from Prince Siegfried.

I took note of all the descriptive words and phrases that came to mine as I observed each variation strictly through video. I found Balanchine's version to be athletic, dramatic, non-traditional, spinning, and expressive. On the other hand, I found Vaganova's version to be upwardly lifted, desperate, circular, agile, and with a whirlwind ending. When I personally danced the variations myself, I found a whole new set of ideas and descriptors that only became apparent when I was dancing rather than observing. While dancing Balanchine's version, I found it to be daring, held, and swift, with an undercurrent of resilience. While dancing Vaganova's version, I found it to be sustained, snaking, and liberated, with an undercurrent of despair.

Though I was dancing to the same music as the same character, due to the choreography and the differences in the techniques, the variation felt vastly different. One general difference in the techniques is the way the dancers hold their hands. I learned these differences throughout my training in both techniques rather than solely from the manuals. In Balanchine, they have a "claw-like" shape with the fingers being rounded and often broken at the wrists. This emphasis on the hand draws more attention to the end of the line and allows the dancer to be more



expressive by breaking or sustaining the line. It draws attention to the fingers and the tension held there, and it feels more energetically dynamic and held. Vaganova tends to be more straight-fingered with more mobile and flowing hands that continue the line of the arm. This emphasis on the elongating of the line of the body shows more of a focus on the entire body and the cohesion of the limbs rather than drawing attention to any one body part. It feels more expansive and poised.

Admittedly, Tallchief's hand position was not as pronounced in this video as many of the Balanchine dancers today, possibly due to hand positioning not being as emphasized in Balanchine's technique that early on. Plisetskaya's hands in this particular variation had more of a "flicking" quality, most likely due to an artistic choice to more clearly emulate a swan's wings rather than a reflection of the Vaganova technique.

Additionally, the Odette portrayal of Plisetskaya seemed more desperate and urgent than that of Tallchief because of her facial expressions, placement of her head, and the franticness of her arms—this artistic choice could be a reflection of the individual dancers', the choreographer or répétiteur's preference, or the choreography lending itself to the expression of the character's emotions. Balanchine's choreography came across as more cool and collected than the Petipa choreography that used Vaganova technique, almost as if Odette was deeply upset but had a fighting spirit throughout the hardships. She had clear muscular engagement and control throughout the whole variation, proving that she was ready to show some attack with a fighting spirit when the time came. On the other hand, Vaganova's version gave Odette more built up drama and a desperate spirit. Her upper body showed her desperation and emotion, while her lower body showed quiet strength on a firm foundation. Both dancers had a contrast between showing their strife as well as their strength. This could be a mirror of the dancers' experiences

with racism and politics in their respective countries—both were under deep-set oppression and their cultures and families taught them how to handle these situations. Their lived experiences were a product of their location (Plisetskaya). Even the smallest reflections of culture can be found in artistic performances. Though is it not conclusively linked to the techniques, the artistry was a performance quality worth noting.

Each section of both variations was choreographed differently, but both used the iconic arm movements and swan-like steps that are characteristic of *Swan Lake*. They were also both highly musical, with the Tchaikovsky score directing the character and intensity of each section. The musicality in the Vaganova variation was more accented, while the musicality in the Balanchine variation had clear segments, but the choreography moved through the music to give the dancer artistic freedom. If an audience member were to watch both variations, they would sense Odette's urgency and confinement and also would walk away with a similar understanding of the story and character. Only when one dives into the choreography and goes through the differences does one begin to recognize the distinctions as clearly—after all, they are both telling the same story.

Something that shocked me as I first started learning this variation was how fast it is. The music is deceptively calm and floating, but there is a fire and punctuality needed to successfully stay on the music. Both variations had this element of deceptive quickness. The Balanchine Method is typically known for fast and precise movements, and the Vaganova technique is typically known for drawn out and sustained movements (Vaganova). However, few things are truly binary, and this variation proved that dancers in both Balanchine and Vaganova techniques must be able to keep a circuitous, sustained quality despite the speed of the music and steps.

## Traditional Research Findings

Throughout my research, I found some key distinctions between the two techniques. Most of my traditional research was aided by my background knowledge of history, culture, and biographical and technical information, though I still gleaned valuable information for conclusive elements. While both Balanchine and Vaganova were heavily influenced by the choreography of Marius Petipa and came from Russian training at the Imperial Ballet School, the techniques were developed to serve different purposes. While both are clearly designed for ballet dancing, Balanchine's technique was designed to support his choreography, while Vaganova's technique was designed for the art form itself. Balanchine needed dancers who could dance in the particular style he wanted for his choreography, saying:

“We teach not for teaching's sake, but to prepare dancers to entertain the public, to appear onstage. That is the purpose...if you have that in mind, you use everything that looks very nice when you need it. Somebody can do better and faster, you allow for that. You become very personal. That's the beauty of it. We cannot stick to the rules. The rules are for us to break” (Schorer, preface).

Balanchine saw the technique as the means to perform, whereas Vaganova saw the technique was the end (Schorer). She believed conformity to pure technique would prepare the dancer for any choreography (Vaganova). If the base of strong technique was present, Vaganova held that the dancer would naturally take to the stage. Since Vaganova was primarily a teacher and a refiner of technique through ballet class, this makes sense. Balanchine was primarily a choreographer, so it also holds up that his priority was on the choreography and the movement: “Everything Mr. B taught in class had movement as the ultimate goal. Movement. Movement to music. Beautiful movement to music. Beautiful movement to music” (Schorer, 221). Both

approaches are valid and useful, and both have the result of skilled dancers performing on a stage.

It also must be noted that Balanchine never danced female roles while Vaganova did. Balanchine placed heavy prominence on the woman rather than the man in ballet and is even quoted as saying “Ballet is woman” (Schorer). For someone who appraised and showcased traditional femininity to such a degree that we continue performing his work and basing ballet standards on what he valued (Kourlas), he never experienced how it feels to be a woman dancing firsthand. This may have affected the distinctions between the style of the variations because gender can play a large role in one’s approach to dancing. As much as my experience dancing these roles shaped my understanding of them, Balanchine was not able to access that embodied perspective. Though both loved ballet, they understood and experienced it differently. Men and women have solos, but often in a pas de deux the emphasis is on the woman while the man supports the woman. I’ve personally heard in partnering classes that the work is split evenly, but that the man’s job is to “show off” the woman. This brings up a clear example that reveals gender values and historic perceptions in the dance world—women are put on stage to be seen, while men are in charge and running the show. However, compared to many of the performing arts and professions in general, the emphasis on women in dance has opened the door for women and traditional femininity to be seen in new ways. In a world that so heavily prioritizes male voices and traditional masculinity, dance contrastingly puts the spotlight on women in both Vaganova and Balanchine techniques.

Ballet technique is indeed influenced a great deal by geography and culture. Though it may be more attributed to the history and traditions of each country rather than slight differences in culture surfacing in the technique, a dancer’s training can be vastly different depending on

where they are born. There is a historically deep sense of nationalism tied to ballet. Stalin is quoted as saying “Our main enemy is America” (Haslam, 29). There was a direct rift between America and the Soviet Union, which explains a lot about why they were so different from each other and had open animosity towards the other’s way of life. Russians are generally proud of their art and their contributions to the ballet field, and the technique is quite literally meant to evoke nationalism: Vaganova was asked by the Soviets to develop something with Soviet spirit—this is why much of the technique is geared towards allegro. Vaganova wrote in her book “Allegro is the foundation of the science of the dance, its intricacy and the bond of future perfection. The dance as a whole is built on allegro” (12). She would plan her classes working backwards in order for the dancers to be prepared for the quick and travelling jumps. Ballet class has a classical structure by beginning with exercises at the barre that warm up the dancer for center work. Each exercise builds on itself to prepare the dancer for difficult physical steps by helping the muscles warm up, helping the dancer find balance, and generally increasing flexibility and strength. The Soviets chose the most powerful and climactic part of ballet, allegro, to focus on in order to show that their nation was mighty and forceful. In the words of Haslam, “Soviet foreign policy was tightly controlled at the center, initially by Lenin and subsequently by the senior Party secretary”(ix). Soviet culture emphasizes centralization and a controlled power—this way of thinking led to them having a specific codified technique/school. The Soviet government asked Vaganova to refine a ballet technique that celebrated and highlighted aspects of Soviet culture (Britannica). This comes across in the strength, solidarity, and diligence that are required of the technique. 1927, *The Red Poppy* debuted, which was a ballet about Soviet Russia that was the first to be developed to promote the State’s agenda (Chao). Additionally, *Swan Lake* was used as propaganda (Ross)—if something came on TV that

the state didn't want the people to see, the government would take over the network and put on Swan Lake. It began to become an indicator of political upheaval.

According to the Hofstede Insights Country Comparison on the United States and Russia, Russia is listed as having a 36 point value on Individualism while the United States is listed as having a 91 point value on Individualism. There is a time gap between this study and the material in this research (the study was conducted in 2020 while the research material is from the 1950s), but it shows that the United States culturally values individualism while Russia/the Soviet Union emphasizes the group. There is a disconnect between how each culture views the self, and this comes across in the techniques of Balanchine and Vaganova. Where Balanchine emphasizes individuals, Vaganova emphasizes the whole.

Political strategists knew that, in order to get the American people on board with the Cold War, they would have to influence their emotions and appeal to morality rather than try to explain military and economic tactics (Craig, 134). It could be argued that Balanchine used similar appeals to nationality and emotion by producing works like *Stars and Stripes* which premiered in 1958 and *Western Symphony* which premiered in 1954 (The Balanchine Trust) and evoked a sense of Western pride. These two Balanchine ballets are arguably the polar opposite of traditional ballet danced in the USSR at the time. As the dancers in the USSR continued performing traditional fairy tales and romantic ballets, American dancers began dancing about American themes that also incorporated American western dance styles, such as square dancing, to the classical technique, just as Eastern European folk dances were incorporated into the original classical ballets. There was a new element of nostalgia and tradition in American dance that stepped away from historical tradition.

Balanchine created his technique specifically for American ballet. He wanted something that had the freedom and independent nature of the United States. Some of Balanchine's movement, while also stemming from Imperial ballet traditions, was derived from the Africanist aesthetic (Gottschild). Most notably in the "cool," or the combination of composure, detachment, and attitude. Balanchine incorporated Africanist aesthetic movements into ballet such as displacement of the hips and the torso and angularity in the *ports de bras*, as Gottschild suggests: "Influences from past and present cultures are woven into, intermeshed with, and redistributed in any given cultural mode at any given moment in time. The Americanization of ballet by a Russian immigrant, George Balanchine, will show both African American and European American influences" (336). The Africanist tradition became melded into American dance, and Balanchine Americanized his ballet technique by combining his European influences with the Africanist tradition. Not only is America a melting pot, but American dance is also a melting pot of cultural dances and influences.

Americans identified with his understanding of breaking down past boundaries and pushing forward with ingenuity and creativity. When Balanchine's company, New York City Ballet, went to perform in Russia during in 1962, "It was the State Department that was most determined that NYCB would advance the cultural front of the Cold War into the home ground of the enemy" (Lobenthal 229). Not only were the United States and the USSR using ballet as a celebration of their respective cultural identities, but they were also using ballet as a political tool.

## Conclusion

As seen through the lens of the two versions of the variation I studied, Balanchine technique and Vaganova technique were both similar and different due to various factors such as culture, geography, influential figures, and varying priorities. Both are a celebration of art and culture, and both are also reflections of their cultures' ideals. Russian ballets are often traditional with an emphasis on conformity to rankings and lines, while Balanchine's American ballets tend to "break the rules" and mesh tradition with originality. They both come from the same Russian roots, and both have morphed to be more emblematic of their countries. They place emphasis on different key points, such as steps, musicality, body placement and *port de bras*, and the purpose of technique classwork.

I also found that multiple factors influence nuances in technique. It could range from the creator's preferences and artistic vision to the specific dancer's training, artistry, and life experiences. It is rarely possible for a dancer to be the perfect visualization of what the choreographer or teacher envisions, but seeing as the dancers I studied were internationally renowned ballerinas, it is safe to assume they were close to the ideal. Choreography is never exactly the same every time it is performed due to the idiosyncrasies of the dancers. There will never be two identical performances, which is one of the many beautiful things about dance. Nuances and slight changes happen regardless of training.

Today, there is much less exclusivity in training—with the spread of technology and communication, there are fewer dancers who only dance one specific style or technique. Companies from across the globe share repertoire and choreographers, and dancers must be versatile to keep up with the changing and evolving dance world. In 2017, New York City Ballet, the Bolshoi Ballet, and the Paris Opera Ballet came together in New York City to



collaboratively perform Balanchine's three-part ballet *Jewels*, which is said to represent the three countries most crucial to Balanchine's career: *Diamonds* for Russia, where he trained at the Imperial Ballet School, *Emeralds* for France where he honed his skills with Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, and *Rubies* for America where he established the School of American Ballet and New York City Ballet (Macaulay). Though dancers and dance lovers continue to have pride in their country's ballet style, training is not as limited to where one is born as it was in the 1950s.

It is vital to continue in this research of ballet forms in both traditional and embodied means. I learned a lot from embodied research that I would not have learned with just traditional research, and vice versa. This embodied element of analysis makes dance unique from other research topics because dance is meant to be experienced. We can learn so much about a country's culture and past by delving into its art, so continuing dance research is both informative and influential. Much can be understood about a country by seeing it adapt to changing situations, and dancers and choreographers from all over are applying their past experiences to pushing ballet technique forward into modernity while still holding fast to tradition and their history. How countries uphold the arts and continue valuing their histories while adapting alongside modernization is paramount to their culture.

American and Russian techniques are a celebration of art, humanity, and culture. Balanchine and Vaganova techniques mirror and are shaped by their creators and their continuers, and they both will continue changing with the times while holding fast to their roots. There is much to be learned through dissecting two versions of one variation, and this research brought so many new ideas and connections to light. Though geography and culture change the repertoire and the way in which ballet dancers train and perform, ballet continues to be a celebration of cultural identity and of both personal and collective expression.

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