# THE VAGANOVA BALLET TECHNIQUE IN THEORY AND PERFORMANCE

by

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# THE VAGANOVA BALLET TECHNIQUE IN THEORY AND PERFORMANCE

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The Vaganova ballet technique is one of many styles of ballet practiced in the world, and it is quite influential in today's ballet landscape. The traditions and features of the Vaganova technique, which was conceived during a tumultuous time in history, have remained the same in some respects and also evolved to reflect and embody today's global politics and changing aesthetics. This research consists of multiple methods, including practice of this and other ballet techniques, analysis of multiple videos of ballet classes and performances, and secondary sources, including books and other written sources. This research concludes that the development of the Vaganova ballet technique has implications for the practice of ballet, as training within a national syllabus is very different from training without a syllabus. Furthermore, changes in ballet training have implications for society because ballet training can increase inclusivity and opportunity when certain common practices are examined and updated.

#### Introduction

## Background

One of the many codified methods of studying and training in ballet is the Vaganova syllabus, which has come to define the aesthetic sensibility of Russian ballet. Conceived during the rise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the Vaganova method embodied the cultural and societal changes that occurred during the lifetime of Agrippina Vaganova, the creator of the technique, who lived during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite the hardships of the time, the art form grew, characterized by values of strength, artistry, and pride that shine through in the movement to this day.

The Vaganova Academy has a strict syllabus and training method that nurtures the values of movement that the technique strives to practice and promote. The values have changed and developed over time, since the technique has morphed to reflect today's global politics and changing aesthetics. Originally, the method drew from ideas of competence and passion in ballet, along with a shared national identity, and it is defined in its present form by its requirements for extreme flexibility, exaggerated upper body movement, or port de bras, an attitude of confidence and pride in the training program, and a culture of consistent striving for perfection.

In this project, I seek to draw a connection between the past and present values of the technique and training and how they have changed or endured over time. I emphasize the physicality, origins, and purpose of the Vaganova technique, with the end goal of assessing the impact of these changes on the wider practice of ballet.

### Rationale for Research

The Vaganova ballet technique has remained relevant to the field of ballet as it is one of the most practiced ballet techniques in the world. The technique has influenced the practice of ballet in Russia significantly since its inception, and furthermore, the study of this technique affects the entire world of ballet due to the popularity and influence of the style. The aforementioned Vaganova ideals of flexibility, grand movements of the upper body, strength in the legs, and emphasis on striving for perfection, have spilt over into other techniques, and changed the ballet world significantly in the last century. Previously a symbol of Russian pride exclusive to those training at the Vaganova Ballet Academy, the Vaganova technique is now practiced around the world, both as a pure training form, and blended with other techniques.

## **Methodology and Positionality**

As a researcher, I have a unique lens for this project because I have experience training in the Vaganova method. From 2012-2019, I took classes from Elizabeth Shipiatsky, who graduated from the Vaganova Ballet Academy, and then brought her expertise to the United States to a small studio in Denver, Colorado called Classical Ballet Academy. For seven years, I practiced yearly exams and learned combinations and steps in the suggested Vaganova order. Ballet technique is an oral and embodied tradition that is passed from person to person via the body, so both my teacher and training method were essential to shaping me as a dancer. I found training within a strict syllabus to be very helpful to me as a young dancer in creating a strong foundation of muscle memory, coordination, and technical prowess that I can always rely on. I have also practiced other techniques and methods during my ballet training, most notably during summer intensives and while earning my BFA in ballet; learning different styles enhanced my dancing by changing my perspective and broadening my knowledge so that I can draw on

different ideas and approaches if I ever find myself struggling with a certain technical requirement. In this project, I am using my embodied experience for background and drawing on the information garnered from my experience to support the traditional academic research. Specifically, I analyze multiple videos of ballet classes and performances, and my understanding of these sources is informed by my experience in and knowledge of ballet. Lastly, I read books and other written sources that inform the historical analysis element of the paper.

My inspiration for this project was driven by my curiosity about how my experience training in the Vaganova Ballet technique mirrors and differs from those who attend, or have attended, the Vaganova Ballet Academy in St. Petersburg Russia. My experience serves as an example of the greater implications of how ballet technique changes across time and space because the training that I, and others who study Russian ballet or its derivatives around the world, is directly related to the teachings of Agrippina Vaganova in Russia in the mid-1900s. The spread of the Vaganova tradition has implications for the evolving aesthetics and training methods practiced in ballet globally today due to the popularity of the training method.

#### Historical Context: The Origins of the Vaganova Ballet Technique

Early Dance and its Impact on Ballet in Russia (Pre-1738)

Early dance in Russia was diverse in style as it grew from a combination of folk culture and European court traditions (Souritz). Folk dances in Eastern Europe offered a way for individual ethnicities to form a collective identity and a space for celebration, and they often reflected values of Eastern European culture. In the early twentieth century, folk dance, and dance in general, in Russia would be considered a political issue of the revolution due to its ability "to valorize Russian ethnic identity through spectacularized dance" (Shay 18). Ballet is

also known to have grown from court art, where it was only accessible to nobility. Alexander Meinertz, who wrote a biography of Russian ballerina Vera Volkova, wrote of court dances and ballet that, "They shared many of the same steps, because classical ballet developed its language and aesthetics from the court dances of fifteenth-century Italy. Later ballet evolved in France at the Court of Catherine de Medici" (Meinertz 11). Eventually, the French and Italian traditions spread to Russia, where the Soviets made ballet more accessible to the public, even showing ballets that reflected court traditions for all to see, like *The Sleeping Beauty* (Homans 277).

## The Imperial Russian Ballet (1738-1917)

Prior to 1917 and Russia's transition into the Soviet regime, Russian ballet was a conglomerate of different styles, namely Italian, French, and Danish. Dancers studied at the Imperial School, where there was a strong emphasis on continuously improving and strengthening both the school and the dancers who studied within the school. This strength was found in the diversity of the different styles that the dancers trained in; for example, Italian ballet was known for its precision and athleticism, while French ballet was considered more refined. The teachers within the school were very competitive, and they each perpetuated their personal national and stylistic allegiances by punishing those students who trained with multiple different teachers, keeping the styles from merging into an identifiable curriculum. The way the school operated allowed for the body of each dancer to absorb the information presented to it and use that information to develop and create a unique form that synthesized multiple techniques:

"[T]he blending of French, Danish, and Italian national schools took place within individual Russian dancers' bodies during an era of heightened Russian nationalism, when the country was on the precipice of revolution" (Zeller 20). The Imperial Russian Ballet, the most historically

significant school in Russia during the nineteenth century, became known for its lyricism and impassioned movement style, and this combination of physicality and expressivity in ballet was gaining cultural ground throughout the world. The Imperial Russian Ballet began to change in the years leading up to the 1917 revolution due to national unrest affecting everybody, including the dancers. Despite the civil unrest, there remained a strong feeling of national identity amongst Russian people within and outside of the country (Zeller), which is one of the most important traditions of the Imperial Ballet School that has prevailed through the entire evolution of the technique and school. Dance scholar Dr. Jessica Zeller summarizes the manifestation of this idea during the Imperial era very succinctly in the following quote: "The technique was European, but the style and sensibility were uniquely Russian" (Zeller 20). That strong style and sensibility was born from Russian pride, which is still visible in many practitioners of the technique today.

In my experience, Vaganova teachers truly believe that the Russian method is the best, most correct, and most successful method for success in ballet; they are allied with the technique, and they teach as such, with finality and specificity in their instruction. While following the syllabus with its strict rights and wrongs encourages students to make sense of their instruments by creating cohesion and muscle memory, it can be hard for some students to meet certain expectations of the technique that require a specific bone structure or level of natural flexibility. One example of this is the requirement that outlines perfect turnout, which can be described as the feet forming a completely straight line while the legs are in an outwards orientation, so the heels are together, and the toes are apart; this requirement is not attainable for all individuals due to the nature of the shape of the hip sockets. In Russia, "the ballet [is] backed by [a] system of schools and selection" (Riasanovsky) that allows for the Vaganova Academy to select students who they believe can best meet the requirements, implying an exclusivity that comes with

attending the Vaganova Academy. On the other hand, in the rest of Russia and in the United States, the practice of this technique is available to all who seek it out, allowing the style to be more inclusive of different people, but the practice of the technique across the world is slightly different from the experience of the dancers at the Vaganova Academy.

The Soviet Commission of a New Russian Style of Ballet (1917-Present)

At the beginning of Soviet rule in the 1920s, the Leningrad State Choreographic Institute, previously known as the Imperial Ballet School and now known as the Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet, was established; there, Agrippina Vaganova was called upon to create a specifically Soviet ballet methodology (Zeller), and a "new sense of ballet as a Russian art began to emerge" (Riasanovsky 362). Historian Nicholas V. Riasanovsky describes the phenomenon, stating, "The high standards were continuous from tsarist days, aided by increased state subsidies and a very developed system of artistic training and education" (Riasanovsky 611). The concept of a state sponsored technique came with significant political implications and challenges, allowing the technique to embody the historical context of its conception. Happening at the time was the October Revolution, which was born out of political unrest in Russia that was caused by World War I; the economic impact of the war, combined with the declining monarchy, led the country to struggle to modernize. The revolution connected issues of economics, politics, and history to issues of art and culture. The arts, including ballet, were used to promote the revolution and the purported superiority of Russian society and flourishing of the human condition. However, this message could also be limiting; arts were critiqued as being "short on creativity and development, but long on execution and performance" (Riasanovsky 611). Either way, "the arts played an emblematic role in the October Revolution, seizing a vital moment

when political and aesthetic revolt seemed to fuse in an unprecedented surge forward" (Souritz 1). Additionally, dance, namely folk dance, was viewed as a way to integrate peasants into the revolution and gain their support, in order to make progress towards the socialist goal of creating a classless society (Olson), as well as to display to other countries an image of a peaceful, multicultural nation that supported the Soviet regime (Shay).

The Vaganova technique was inaugurated between 1917 and 1927, during the revolution and subsequent consolidation of the revolutionaries in power, meaning that the Vaganova method was influenced by the tumultuous politics of the newly forming Soviet federation. Marxist theory was prevalent, and it propagated the idea that art was morally significant, a necessity central to human society, and therefore, art became a socially conscious practice that informed tasks such as education, propaganda, and publicity (Souritz 3). Swan Lake is an example of a ballet that was highly politicized and propagandized in the USSR as it was rechoreographed across the Soviet era to embody different choreographic visions and political agendas. Elizabeth Souritz, ballet historian and author of Soviet Choreographers in the 1920s, describes how this ballet represents the phenomenon of propagandized messages embedded in narrative fairy tale and folk tale ballets with the quote, "the drama and realism of details reduced the abstract quality of the images" (Souritz 117). This statements implies that performances of the ballet had meaning beyond just a fictional storyline; instead, the ballet had implications for the lives of the residents of the USSR, even though it was veiled in a seemingly harmless story about swans. Accordingly, Souritz describes the rechoreographed ballet as "true to life and expressed in external action" (Souritz 117).

Furthermore, the early government of the USSR inspired and commissioned art, as "it was art's function to propagandize and to celebrate the revolution" (Souritz 6). Dancers were

sent abroad to show Soviet achievements and culture, but their expression and creativity were heavily controlled by the government, as we see in the politicized messages of *Swan Lake* and other ballets (Homans 344). Similarly, the ballet *Cipollino*, developed in the ideological space of the Soviet Union, was based on a children's fairy tale about vegetables, and was specifically designed to emphasize values that the federation prized and depicted the struggle between the poor and the rich and the oppressed and the oppressors (Marina).

The classics were also rechoreographed by the Soviets for posterity and to increase accessibility during this time period. This process became the key to making ballet a tool for revolutionaries to spread propaganda and ideas of the revolution. Marius Ivanovich Petipa (1818-1910) choreographed many classical ballets that have withstood the test of time, including *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, which are still performed today (About Petipa). His ballets reflect the Tsarist monarchy that existed during his lifetime by showing a hierarchy on the stage. The choreographers central to reconstructing the classics and classical repertory in the name of Socialist reform included Alexander Alexeyevich Gorsky (1871-1924), who rechoreographed many of Petipa's famous ballets, and Mikhail Mikhailovich Fokine (1880-1942), who created a large repertoire of classical choreography in the early twentieth century, and many of his ballets are still popular today (Fokine; Gorsky; Souritz).

Ballet in Russia was allowed to be reformed under Soviet socialist regime following the Russian Revolution, and Agrippina Vaganova, a dancer, choreographer, and teacher, was instrumental in creating and documenting a uniquely Russian ballet technique, an invented tradition that became synonymous with Russian culture (Kim). The Russian ballet technique is opulent, delicate, open, and powerful, all qualities that reflect the image of superiority and grandeur that the Soviet Union was keen to establish during the height of its power (Cappelle).

## Agrippina Vaganova's Life and Career (1879-1951)

The Vaganova technique would not be what it is today without its founder, who dedicated a significant portion of her life to creating a technique and a method of study that would still be influential almost 100 years later; V. Chistyakova, author of the introduction to Vaganova's manual, shares the importance of this contribution through the perspective of others, sharing that "during this period, within the walls of the Leningrad State Ballet School an instructional system rigorously tested in practice was being developed, a system later made known to the whole world as that of Agrippina Vaganova' (Vaganova ix).

Agrippina Vaganova was born in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1879, and she lived near the Mariinsky Theatre, where her father was an usher. She was admitted to the Imperial Ballet School at the age of ten, as the school took many students from "modest means" with connections to the theatre (Krasovskaia xvi). She later danced professionally for the Imperial Ballet, performing many corps de ballet roles and small solo roles. She was dubbed the "Queen of Variations," and she used her extensive knowledge of repertoire, especially the repertoire of Petipa, to her advantage as she shifted into the role of teacher and choreographer; she became "a fervent believer in the academic principles embodied in [Petipa's] work, in the technique that constituted its very foundation" (Krasovskaia xvii). Agrippina Vaganova was chosen to create the USSR's new standardized ballet technique due to her connections to fellow dancers, teachers, and choreographers in the Russian ballet landscape who all held her in very high esteem (Willis-Aarnio). Furthermore, she was chosen due to her prowess as a dancer and a choreographer, proven by her accolades and achievements, which included awards like the People's Artist of the

Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, and her position as a professor of choreography and instructor in the Leningrad State Ballet School, now the Vaganova Academy (Vaganova).

Vaganova became an accomplished ballerina during her years of performing, but despite her accomplishments, she was dissatisfied with her technique and training. She found none of the schools that were present as influences in the Imperial Ballet School to be sufficient. Vaganova critiqued the French school for not fully utilizing the energy of the arms and the body, thereby restricting virtuosity, and she critiqued the Cecchetti technique, which represents the Italian approach in the context of Russian training, for a lack of poetry and artistry. However, she also recognized the advantages of these styles, like the Italian technique's steadiness, dynamics, strength, and endurance, and the fixed study plan created by the founder of the technique, Enrico Cecchetti. Given her knowledge and beliefs formed at the Imperial school, she created a curriculum that merged what she viewed to be the benefits of the French and Italian styles, and the traditions of the Imperial Russian school. Vaganova systematized the new Russian style and school in the Soviet period by combining the trainings of countries known to be strong in ballet, and compounding these strengths by imbuing her dancers with pride in this training method and the USSR (Vaganova).

Clearly, Vaganova was an extremely influential figure in Russian ballet, and therefore Russian culture. She was beloved until the day she died, especially by many adoring students, who wrote her letters and carried on her technique. Her contribution to ballet is still valued, and she is honored in St. Petersburg by several plaques, and obviously, the school that carries her name (Krasovskaia 257). Dance scholar Peggy Willis-Aarnio wrote of her passing, "The same question, 'Where were you when?' that we ask with respect to J. F. Kennedy's death, was asked by dancers about Vaganova's death, in 1951" (Willis-Aarnio).

Vaganova's legacy lives on in her technique method. She documented her codified technique, methods, and thoughts in a handbook released in 1934 entitled *Basic Principles of Classical Ballet: Russian Ballet Technique*, which can also be referred to as a handbook or manual on the Vaganova technique. The introduction of the book, written by V. Chistyakova about Vaganova and her method, expresses, "The method expounded in it for teaching classical ballet represented a remarkable contribution to the theory and practice of the balletic art, a summation of the achievements of Soviet choreographic institution...It can be stated with certainty that the translations of this book have promoted the consolidation of the worldwide glory of Russian ballet" (Vaganova V). Several ideas are made clear within this quote: the Vaganova technique revolutionized the practice of ballet in the early twentieth century, Russian pride within the technique is still strong, and this manual is key in the spread of the Vaganova technique beyond Russian borders.

Towards the end of the Cold War, and moving into the present, the Vaganova Ballet technique started to become more accessible to the general public as ballet dancers and companies began to tour the country and later the world, and Russian choreographers started to work abroad as early as the 1970s (Belova 158). Furthermore, starting in the 1980s in Russia and continuing into the present worldwide, smaller dance studios formed that "developed entirely new dance languages composed by their art directors. As a result, the situation of Russian ballet today is complex and multidimensional" (Belova 158).

### **Evaluation of the Technique: Features, Values, and Strengths**

In *The Great History of the Russian Ballet*, authors Evdokia Belova and E Bocharnikova write that, "generational changes take place here much faster than in any other art" due to the

youth of the participants (Belova 197). As such, the Vaganova technique has changed significantly since its conception a century ago. I will examine some of the aesthetic features of the Vaganova technique as it has developed across time and space, and in doing so, emphasize certain focal points in the training method and aesthetics.

The Imperial Russian Ballet, operational from the late 1700s to the early 1900s, employed the idea of "plastique," an often-analyzed feature of ballet that was attributed to the influence of Isadora Duncan, a pioneer of American modern dance, in Russia. Plastique is defined by slow, graceful movements in dancing, and it was central to the choreography of Gorsky and Fokine at the Imperial Russian Ballet (Zeller). Plastique is noticeable in port de bras, or movement of the arms and upper body, and overall movement quality. Famous Imperial Russian ballerinas, including Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, and Olga Preobrajenskaya, all of whom studied with Agrippina Vaganova, were praised for their expressive nuance, or plastique, along with their strong national manner of dancing (Vaganova), which laid the foundation for the strong Soviet pride present in the Vaganova technique (Souritz).

As the twentieth century progressed, the divide between the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, Russia and the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia slowly and gradually became more pronounced; while the Bolshoi pursued an allegro driven approach, the Mariinsky focused on refining adagio, because according to Vaganova, "A complicated adagio develops agility and mobility of the body" so that "When, later in allegro, we face big jumps, we will not have to waste time on the mastery of the body" (Vaganova 12). This is evident in ballerinas from the Bolshoi Theatre like the late Maya Plisetskaya, who had lofty powerful jumps, and Natalia Osipova, who embodies this legacy with strong, soaring leaps. On the other hand Ulyana Lopatkina from the Mariinsky Theatre is an example of a dancer with measured, grand adagio

qualities, and Svetlana Zakharova is capable of the extreme flexibility that is championed in adagio nowadays. In accordance with this idea of building the technique towards a goal, Vaganova suggests structuring classes such that every combination in class builds to the last combination, which is a grand allegro, or big jump. She states, "Allegro is the foundation of the science of dance, its intricacy and the bond of future perfection. The dance as a whole is built on allegro" (Vaganova 11). Vaganova's ideas about the functions of allegro and adagio were taught and spread by her pupils, like Vera Volkova (Meinertz 17). Vaganova purports that allegro cannot be fully supported without placement of the legs and body, the straight line of turnout in the feet from outwardly rotated legs, and strength of the feet, all which are enforced throughout the progression of class, which shows the logic behind her training method.

## Exam Tradition and its Implications

The intention of the Vaganova ballet technique is for a dancer to graduate from the Academy with the capability to immediately enter a professional career. Therefore, the technique builds in structure from beginner lessons to complete mastery with eight levels and each level has benchmarks that are assessed yearly via exams (Warren 1).

An example of this specific progression of knowledge and practice can be seen in allegro. Three categories of allegro are practiced in ballet: small, medium, and large. Dance scholar Gretchen Warren describes the study of jumps in her book *Classical Ballet Technique* with the following quote:

First to be learned, and easiest, are those small jumps that take off from two feet and land on two feet, such as temps levés. Next are jumps from two feet onto one foot; these require considerable control upon landing and include such jumps as petits jetés and

sissonnes. At the same time, students learn jumps that take off from one foot and land on two, such as step-tombé assemblé. Finally, students are introduced to the most difficult allegro movements: those in which the dancer pushes off from one foot and lands on one foot. These include jumps such as temps levés on one foot and, later, ballottés and grands jetés, in which the dancer leaps from one foot to the other. (Warren 242)

This explanation of the progression of jumps by Warren is one example of how in each area of class, it is customary for dancers to learn easier steps in lower levels, and then learn more difficult steps as they get older. This is done very formulaically so that the new material always builds on the knowledge and muscle memory that already formed while students were learning the simpler steps.

The tradition of the yearly exams, which carries the tradition of the early Vaganova Academy and the Imperial school before that, is almost as important as the material within them. They are practiced every year with specific formalities that accompany them, such as colored uniforms to signify level and a révérence, or curtsy, to begin class. The exams have become an integral part of the training as they are an annual, ceremonial tradition. The Vaganova Academy showcases its training through the dancers' performance, and the dancers also have the opportunity to show their personal capability during the exams. The exams are a spectacle of choreography, and they are rechoreographed each year in a way that shows the technical trends of the time period as well as the abilities and new knowledge of each level. This is especially true in the present since the exams are filmed and shared digitally, and the footage is easily accessible on the internet for teachers and students around the world; now these teachers and students can see and practice the Vaganova technique by practicing the same combinations as the Vaganova Academy dancers.

I participated in yearly exams at the studio I trained at that were modeled after the Vaganova Academy exam structure. Some of the combinations I practiced in my yearly Vaganova exams were the same as those done in the Vaganova Academy exams, and those were mixed with combinations choreographed by my teacher. The experience of participating in yearly exams was significant for me because of the process of preparation that was put into it. While showing a year's worth of learning was an accomplishment in itself, it was also valuable to spend so much time rehearsing and correcting combinations that challenged me to do and show my best work. Furthermore, working with peers and my teachers to create a class that was like a performance in its specificity, intensity, and bravado was rewarding.

## Analysis of Exam Videos and Vaganova Technique Manual

I chose to analyze several recordings of the Vaganova Academy exams across multiple levels, using examples from the years 1995, 2015, and 2020, because the exams offer a clear example of the Vaganova technique, aesthetics, and values during specific years. Therefore, these classes offer a vehicle to see what the technique is doing at any given time, and what its practitioners are prioritizing.

The values of the technique are evident in the exam choreography, and the uniformity among the dancers and their strength and stability signals their training regimen and the detailed nature of the technique. This can be seen in the Level 8, or graduating level, exam from 2015. Starting at the barre, the dancers demonstrate the specificity of the port de bras through the bending of the upper back, the allongé height set at the shoulder, and the head direction that is denoted clearly in each position. The extensive port de bras and bending of the torso is very distinct from the legs, which is evident in both ronds de jambe en l'air and frappés. Furthermore,

there is a quality variation in the legs that is not always obvious in the upper body: sharp, speedy legs in tendus, luxurious brushes in ronds de jambe, and resistance and long, stretched legs in adagio. Also evident in the legs is the extreme flexibility that is encouraged as a necessity to the technique. This can be seen in the high arches of the feet, deep pliés, maximized turnout, high extensions in arabesque and à la seconde, and cambrés that reach very long and low. From ronds de jambe onward, exercises are conducted on relevé, which shows the importance of lower leg strength and coordination in the center and en pointe. Musicality is evident during each exercise, with an example being grand battement where a rhythmic consistent accent upwards is present (Classical Exam 2015 8th Grade).

Many of these features are evident in exams from previous years as well, some of which are available for viewing to anyone on platforms like YouTube. A Level 8 exam from 1995 shows similar extremity of turnout, specificity and depth of port de bras, and a mixture of sharp and indulgent movement that is both impressive and chorographically interesting. Uniformity is also noticeable among the dancers, even in this video of a class from almost three decades ago (1995 8th Year Exam).

All of these principles are outlined clearly in the Vaganova technique manual, *Basic Principles of Classical Ballet: Russian Ballet Technique*, where Vaganova's teachings are documented. For example, Agrippina Vaganova writes the following about turnout: "In the first position, the balls of both feet are completely turned out, the heels touch and the feet form a single straight line" (Vaganova 17). This is expected of all students regardless of whether or not it is physically possible. Vaganova also expresses her opinion on the importance of balance between specificity and freedom in port de bras, stating, "The arms, legs and body are developed separately through special exercises. But only the ability to find the proper position for her arms

lends a finesse to the artistic expression of the dancer, and renders full harmony to her dance" (Vaganova 44). This quote suggests that Vaganova valued the arms to be what renders ballet as expressive; while the legs are developed and important to technique, the port de bras is truly appreciated and viewed as important in mastering this technique.

The development of these noticeably Vaganova traits in dancers from the Vaganova Academy begins at a young age. A Level 4 exam, recorded in 2020, shows younger students; they too are in uniform, executing a révérence, just as their older peers do. The dancers are already practicing the perfect turnout described above; however, their port de bras is clearly still maturing as they have less expansiveness in their arms and head than the graduating level dancers. The emphasis on strength at this level is pronounced and visible via the length of the legs, the flexibility and extensions, and the explicit quality difference between slower and faster movements. The choreography of this exam is noticeably less complex, yet it remains detailed; the dancers execute it with precision, and uniformity is visible here as well. The musicality is also less nuanced, but still executed with clarity. (Classical Exam 4th Class).

The exam tradition, specifically in the present, is a way for the Vaganova Academy to show itself to the world by sharing its accomplishments in a perfectly curated ballet class. The success of the organization is seen through the intricate choreography by the teachers, the skill of the dancers, the intensity of the training regimen, and the impressive results of the eight level system, which is a monumental and spectacular feat that the whole ballet world looks upon.

Analyzing the traditions and technical development of the Vaganova ballet technique is important because the changes offer insight into the conception and growth of the technique.

When the technique was formed, Russia was trying to reshape its identity as it moved out of a monarchy, so it curated a form of ballet that was big, bold, and brave, showing what the people

of Russia represented at the time. The competitive nature of the Cold War made it so that the technique continued on the trajectory of intensity, because ballet was used to support the Soviet government by showing the superiority of Russian ballerinas. While now the technique is more widely available, it is still a major symbol of pride in Russia; Russian ballerinas continue to be widely recognized as the best at what they do, explaining the deep roots of the extremities of flexibility, harsh training, and performance that are staples of the technique.

Technique in Practice: Performances of "The Dying Swan" Variation

In order to analyze changes in Russian training over time, I have chosen to evaluate several dancers doing a performance of the same short variation. Performance is one of the best ways to analyze technique because the end goal and the application of ballet training is performance. I have chosen the variation "The Dying Swan," choreographed by Mikhail Fokine. This piece is unique because it has changed significantly over time in a way that can be easily analyzed since it has been performed by famous ballerinas from different time periods, and videos of these performances are now easily accessible via the internet. It is therefore easy to notice differences in the performances of the choreography, the intention of the dancers, and even the choreography itself, over time. I have chosen to analyze the technical and artistic elements that I see emphasized in the work of four Russian dancers from different eras: Anna Pavlova, Galina Ulanova, Maya Plisetskaya, and Ulyana Lopatkina.

"The Swan," or "The Dying Swan" is a short ballet choreographed by Mikhail Fokine on Anna Pavlova in 1905, before the conception of the Vaganova technique, and it soon became the great ballerina's signature piece. The concept behind the piece is a wounded swan fighting against death, and ultimately losing. The ballet is characterized by unique port de bras that is

crucial to the storytelling. Fokine's granddaughter Isabelle Fokine expressed that, "The Dying Swan does not make enormous technical demands, but rather enormous artistic ones because every movement and every gesture should signify a different experience, which is emerging from someone who is attempting to escape death (Anna Pavlova)." Fokine valued the interpretive and artistic element of dance very highly, believing dance was more than "mere gymnastics," and this was evident in his choreography and this piece specifically (Fokine).

Anna Pavlova conveyed the desperation of the dying swan through a clear distinction between her upper and lower body. Her upper body was expressive, with arm movements that reached and extended into and beyond her hands, and arms that never stopped moving, complimenting a mobile torso and a sternum that was lifted and showing emotion. Even when Pavlova's back was to the audience, her emotions were readable through the energy of her entire body. Conversely, her lower body was consumed with frantic bourrées, where the legs are extended and crossed and repeatedly alternating with tiny steps, and there are interesting level changes that conveyed the swan's vulnerability; other, more complex footwork was very minimal. Furthermore, Fokine's choreography and Pavlova's dancing completely embodied the heartfelt musical score that the ballet is set to (Anna Pavlova).

Galina Ulanova performed "The Dying Swan" in 1956, and already there were several notable changes in her performance. Ulanova's swan was still ugent and sharp, indicating her desperation, and she too was reaching beyond the physical scope of her arms, but in a very circular motion pattern. The ending of the variation, synonymous with her death, had a finality to it, flourishing suddenly one last time as her swan succumbed to death. Ulanova's performance differs subtly as her upper body bends further than Pavlova's, her head changes more often and

moves both with and without her arms, and most noticeably, she covers much more stage with her bourrées, and adds low arabesques as transition steps (Galina Ulanova).

In 1975, Maya Plisetskaya performed "The Dying Swan," with a marked shift between the choreographic and artistic intention of her performance and those that had come before. The entire piece was much more peaceful, and less frantic and emotional. Plisetskaya's bourrées were slower and fewer, and interspersed between bourrées were balances in higher attitudes and arabesques. Her upper body was more pronounced and specific, though still sweeping, and her arm movements and port de bras were smoother, more continuous, and yet very placed. She appeared to have more range of motion as her arms often floated as if independent of her body. Finally, she transitioned more often between standing, kneeling, and positions on the floor, and the positions she engaged in on the floor were more elaborate and require a higher range of flexibility (Plisetskaya). Plisetskaya's performance of "The Dying Swan" closely resembles "Odette" from the ballet *Swan Lake*, which is a departure from the original intention of the piece; Isabelle Fokine said of "The Dying Swan," "The ballet in essence is not about the beauty of a ballerina being able to transform herself into a figure of a swan. It is not about a swan; it is about death and the swan is simply a metaphor" (Anna Pavlova).

In 2010, over 100 years after Anna Pavlova performed the original choreography of the ballet, "The Dying Swan," Ulyana Lopatkina performed the ballet. Her version followed in the steps of Plisetskaya as she delivered a gentle portrayal of a wounded and helpless swan; her swan was not motivated by the same urgency as Pavlova's, but rather was more placed and still in both the lower and upper body. Lopatkina's bourrées were consistently quick and compact, rather than urgent and traveling, and again, she utilized attitudes and leg movements to break up the bourrées. Additionally, her version too had poses that required more flexibility, but she went to

the floor less often and instead remained very upright throughout. Her port de bras was longer and extended past the length of her arms in a more aesthetically pleasing manner. But despite 100 years of change in ballet training, there are several noticeable similarities between the original and modern versions. Lopatkina shows her emotion in her back, torso, and arms, just as Pavlova did, and both versions share a gorgeous, specific, and embodied musicality that enhances the ballet and its meaning (Ulyana Lopatkina).

"The Dying Swan" variation is an example of how much ballet has changed in the last century, and even more specifically, by analyzing Russian trained ballerinas, this variation shows very clearly how changes in the practice of the Vaganova technique have contributed to changes in performance quality over time. These performances emphasize many of the developments that have occurred in the Vaganova ballet technique in the last century, just as the exams do. The aesthetic features of the movement have become more extreme, which we can see in the more frequent presence of movements that require greater flexibility and range of motion, both in the legs and feet and in the increased ranges of port de bras and épaulement, also known as movements of the torso, head, neck, and shoulders. Sometimes nowadays, technique is put above artistry during performance, or used as a vehicle of artistry, whereas 100 years ago, the artistry of the dancer was the performance, and technique was a means of expressing emotions and stories. Dancers now have a more developed understanding of the poise and movement quality they bring to the stage as a result of the type of training they receive.

#### **Analysis and Conclusions**

Implications of Training With and Without a Syllabus

The Vaganova Ballet technique exemplifies a way of learning ballet and training the body that follows a predetermined order and a set of guidelines that are traditionally practiced as prescribed, with no outside influences or modifications. However, another approach to ballet training that is becoming more and more popular, is the idea of piecemealing different techniques and training methods together; the proposed advantages of this idea include a broadening and diversifying of knowledge and perspective, and it offers teachers the ability to choose alternative ideas or combinations that may suit their students better functionally or aesthetically. Many dancers, especially in the United States, study at institutions that only practice certain principles of the Vaganova technique by supplementing what they find helpful from the Russian instructional method with other pearls of wisdom from different instructional methods, like Cecchetti or Balanchine. For example, dancers may choose to practice the Vaganova port de bras due to its complementary structure, luxury, and length. On the other hand, those with less flexibility in their hip joints may choose to turn their feet out less by positioning their feet in accordance with their hip structure, contrary to the fully rotated position of the feet that the Vaganova method suggests, in order to prevent injury.

John White is a renowned dance teacher and author of *Advanced Principles in Teaching Classical Ballet*. His teaching philosophy and methodology are aligned with Vaganova's, which implies that he believes not only in her teachings and ideas, but also in the structure and success of syllabus training and the lessons of understanding of the body, musicality, artistry, and mental resiliency that are learned throughout a dancer's development. He writes derisively about what he calls the "mish-mash" method of teaching ballet, and does not endorse the idea that one can learn from a combination of syllabi (Freeman).

On the contrary, an example of a ballerina who embodied the successful sharing of technique was Vera Volkova (1905-1975), a Russian-born ballerina trained by Agrippina Vaganova; Vaganova even tested her now tried and true ballet method on Volkova, who became convinced of the soundness of Vaganova's teachings (Meinertz 16-17). Despite this foundation, Volkova decided, amongst alleged political persecution and difficult living conditions, to emigrate out of Russia in 1928 (Meinertz 40), a very difficult and weighty decision, and lived in several different countries before bringing her knowledge and Russian style to settle at the Royal Danish Ballet in Copenhagen in 1951 (Meinertz 96), where she shared both her teachings and her passionate, intense attitude towards ballet. Volkova's story is unique because she was able to spread Russian technique and Vaganova influence into the West at a time when this was really not possible otherwise. She is one of the first and most influential examples of the deliberate sharing of the technical elements of one style, in this case the port de bras of the Russian style, to enhance and augment a different style, the Bournonville style practiced in Denmark.

Several questions arise from this discussion, including the following: Is a piecemeal approach to technique likely to make an individual more successful, or is it important to keep training in a defined style? The blending of techniques is how Russian ballet originated, but does blending the Vaganova technique make it unrecognizable, or a new entity? What are the implications of using Vaganova's manual as a reference point or a supplemental resource, rather than a complete guide to ballet?

Many dancers who have chosen to train without a syllabus, or do not have access to a syllabus training, are successful, but whether or not they are more successful than dancers who train in a syllabus like the Vaganova technique is completely subjective. Already, the globalization and digitalization of information has increased access to the technique in an

instrumental way that even Vaganova herself could not have foreseen in her lifetime. The technique has already changed, and has the possibility to change even more as it continues to spread beyond the walls of the Vaganova Ballet Academy, where it has begun to look more and more different from what Agrippina Vaganova described in her manual. Even the Vaganova Academy has changed significantly since the death of Vaganova, meaning the Vaganova technique manual may not currently dictate a Vaganova Ballet Academy education.

Practitioners of ballet, both inside and outside of Russia, must evaluate which benchmarks will identify Vaganova technique going forward, and whether those include her manual, the academy, or an evolving version of ballet technique inspired by her wisdom and expertise. How much can the Vaganova technique adapt to keep up with global changes while still remaining true to its intention? Or is that balance even possible to achieve and uphold?

Implications for Ballet Technique and Greater Society

Almost none of the questions I have posed have clear or objective answers at this point in time, and going forward they will become even trickier to answer. There are many considerations that teachers, dance scholars and pedagogues, dancers, administrators, and other participants in the dance industry can research or implement in the field as ballet moves into the future.

The Vaganova Academy is in many ways a product of the culture within which it was created (Kim). The present situation of Russian ballet has been influenced by its complex history, both quite a long time ago and in the more recent past. The catalysts for change in ballet, including political, economic, cultural, and social factors, will continue to cause change, but due to globalization, it is possible that these forces will cause more radical and faster shifts in the practice of ballet. This forces questions of how the practice of ballet will progress in the future,

which for now we can only speculate about, as it will be impossible to analyze this progression until it happens.

Additionally, preexisting cultural and social issues are amplified in the environment of ballet, and these become increasingly evident as time passes and these issues become more prominent. The decision of whether or not to strictly preserve the manner in which things have always been done in the name of tradition, specifically in areas of political, economic, cultural, and social tension, is a very controversial space in dance conversations currently. There are many people questioning which traditions, if any, should be honored, and which are damaging to individual dancers, based on issues like the body, gender, race, media, neurodivergence, and body image. More specifically, certain groups of people have historically been excluded from ballet, or it has been made more difficult for them to participate, due to misconceptions about body type and race. Issues of this nature are not unique to ballet, while others are caused and perpetuated by ballet and its origins. (Angyal). But ballet does not have to be known for these problems, because movement offers freedom and opportunity to people, and ballet does not need to discriminate for it to be a successful and popular art form. Increasing inclusivity in ballet can offer insight on inclusivity in greater society, and for that reason, change in ballet is extremely important during this time and going forward. The wave of awareness and interest in bringing ballet forward may very well be a representation of what is to come in the field in the future. Ballet has a deep, rich history, and each and every one of us within the field of dance needs to consider if and how we can maintain this heritage and its rigor while also looking ahead and making necessary changes. While ballet is based in hundreds of years of tradition, I believe it is capable of adapting to the landscape of the world now just as it has changed over the last century, exemplified by the Vaganova ballet technique.

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