

About the Ballet Dictionary

Classical Ballet is a highly refined theatre art form that has evolved over several centuries, adapting to changing styles and varying geographic locales through the world. The form we know today stems from the social dance and court entertainment of Renaissance Europe, particularly Italy and France. Its language is based on French terminology first codified at the Academy of Music and Dance established by Louis XIV in the late 17th century.

Today French terms are still used, although in slightly different ways according to various “schools” of academic ballet. These branches of the *danse d'école* include the Danish School of August Bournonville (based on the 19th century French School of Auguste Vestris), the English School (as codified by the Royal Academy of Dance, RAD, throughout the 20th century), the Italian School (first codified by Carlo Blasis and refined in the method of Enrico Cecchetti), and the Russian School (including the teachings of Agrippina Vaganova). The late 20th century has seen the establishment of the American school, based on the choreography and teaching of George Balanchine.

Although each School has its distinctive style and repertoire of steps, all reflect the principles of an art form that has come to be universally recognized and appreciated. In ballet technique, the body and limbs are elongated and the legs turned outward to create harmonious, balanced forms in space. These forms change rhythmically with no trace of strain: the effort is in concealing effort. The laws of physics appear to be suspended for the ballet dancer: defying gravity is one of the primary illusions ballet creates. To these foundations, each School has added its distinctive mark. The French School is characterized by elegance of carriage and delicacy of movement, reflecting its aristocratic origins in the courts of French monarchs. The Danish School added great warmth and easy charm shown through lyrical port de bras. It also contributed wonderfully buoyant series of rebounding jumps (said to be developed by Bournonville himself to mask his shallow, brittle *demi-plié*). Technical virtuosity marks the Italian School, particularly seen in the solid mastery of jumps and turns. (It is from the Italian word *intrecciare* that we derive the term *entrechat* for rapid beatings of the feet during jumps. And it was an Italian ballerina who introduced the dazzling thirty-two *fouettés* to Russia in Petipa's *Swan Lake*.)

The Russian School assimilated the best of these elements in the late 19th century, and evolved a highly dramatic and poetic quality through greater use of the back and arms in *ports de bras*, expressed for example through Ivanov's choreography for the “white” acts of *Swan Lake*. The Russians are also known for their vibrancy, particularly in *grand allegro* – bounding leaps that appear suspended in mid-air. Ballet training in England was consolidated in the early 20th century with the establishment of the Cecchetti Society and the Royal Academy of Dance, giving rise to an English School characterized by gentle grace and precision. When Balanchine came to America, he expanded his solid Russian training to reflect modern values. Today Americans dance ballet with Olympic zeal – higher, faster, stronger – challenging the body to its physical limits.

While the French-based terminology is fundamentally the same across schools, there are subtle differences in usage and performance, e.g., different “dialects”. For example, the turn commonly known as a “lame duck” is formally called *posé turn en dehors* (Cecchetti), *posé pirouette en dehors* (RAD), and *turn from degage en dehors* (Vaganova). According to the Vaganova method, the dancer extends the leg diagonally forward to step onto the line of travel. In the RAD method, she turns to face the line of travel and steps forward into the turn.

Ballet Moves II contains a comprehensive dictionary of terminology used by the English School. Animations showing English steps are danced by Rose, with a turnout of 60° at the hip augmented by 20° at the ankle (in basic standing positions). Ballet Moves II also includes a Russian dictionary illustrating basic terms used by the Russian School (basically Vaganova). The Russian steps are performed by Raisa and Mikhail, whose turnout is slightly greater (30° at the ankle when standing). In keeping with Russian style, these dancers move with greater involvement of their back and arms. Ballet Moves II also contains a few palettes and animations illustrating the Italian School, danced by Rina. Future releases of DanceForms and Ballet Moves are projected to contain more comprehensive animations of other Schools.