

Ballet Dance Fact File

What is ballet?

Ballet is often referred to as classical ballet or classical technique. Ballet originated in the courts of France and Italy in the 16th century as an entertainment performed by aristocratic amateurs. Louis XIV was a ballet enthusiast and he founded the first ballet school in 1661. The principles of the form remain much the same as they were then: the turned-out shape of the legs, the five positions of the feet and arms, the elegance and upright posture. Key steps include the arabesque (where the dancer stands on one leg with the other extended straight behind them), jeté (a travelling jump) and the pirouette (a turn on one leg).



Key Facts

- The oldest surviving ballets are the Romantic ballets of the 1830s and 40s – Giselle, La Sylphide, Coppélia (1870) – which tend to be characterised by their supernatural themes and delicate, ethereal ballerinas, floating on air, or rather on pointe shoes.
- Next came the classical ballets of the late 1800s and early 1900s which heralded the golden age of Russian ballet – Sleeping Beauty, The Nutcracker, and the best-known ballet of all, Swan Lake, with its corps de ballet (the dancing chorus) of white, tutu-clad swans.
- During the 20th century, Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev started a revolution when he brought his Ballets Russes to Paris, unleashing the virtuosic talents of dancer Nijinsky, the radical choreography of Fokine and the riot-inducing music of Stravinsky.
- Ballet in London was firmly established when one of Diaghilev's dancers, Marie Rambert, founded Britain's first dance company Ballet Rambert in London in 1926.
- Another, Ninette de Valois, set up the Vic-Wells Ballet at the Old Vic and Sadler's Wells theatres in 1931, which went on to become the Royal Ballet.
- British choreographers Frederick Ashton and Kenneth MacMillan developed their own choreographic styles in the mid twentieth century during their tenures as artistic directors at The Royal Ballet. Ashton favoured soft movements and positions of the arms, intricate footwork and lots of épaulement (a slight twist of the torso). Ashton's successor Kenneth MacMillan preferred to delve into his characters' psyches and moved towards real-life subjects, although he also created a famous Romeo & Juliet for Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev.

- In 1950, dancers Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin together with Julian Braunschweig founded Festival Ballet, now known as English National Ballet. The company was formed to tour ballets to audiences that would otherwise be unable to experience ballet and toured extensively to venues both in the United Kingdom and internationally. It also established a number of educational programmes designed to make ballet accessible to new audiences being the first company to have an education team.

Where Do We See Ballet in the UK Today?

Ballet is immensely popular in London, which is home to English National Ballet, The Royal Ballet, Ballet Black and New English Ballet Theatre who perform full length ballets and mixed bill programmes in venues such as The London Coliseum, Royal Albert Hall, The Royal Opera House and Sadler's Wells. There are also ballet companies in many larger cities outside London and touring performances make ballet available to people across the UK. Ballet classes are popular with children and adults alike and established training academies the Central School of Ballet, English National Ballet School and the Royal Ballet School offer vocational training for aspiring young dancers.



Key Features of Ballet Dance

- A strong aesthetic feature is linear shapes, both through the body and within the space, in group formations and patterns.
- The use of turn out in the hip socket, with all steps staying in turn out.
- Training uses the 5 positions of the feet.
- Port de bras, a way of carrying the arms, that stems from set positions, e.g. 1st, 2nd, bra barre, arabesque.
- Grace in movements, a sense of musicality in the body, performed with posture and poise allows ballet to appear effortless and weightless.
- Classical ballets have a narrative, with the story often told through mime. Therefore, expression through the face and body is integral to this art form. Modern ballets however, often move away from narrative and are more abstract, with the focus on demonstrating technical skill and virtuosic movements, without a plot or story.

