

Victoria Ballet Theatre

Study Guide

Peter and the Wolf

Choreography by

Debbe Busby, Founding Artistic Director

Music by

Sergei Prokofiev

Pre-Performance Information: Dance History

What is Dance?

Dance is a language that communicates through movement of the human body. Just as there are many different spoken languages, there are many styles of dance.

In ancient times, dances were shared by all. People used dance, music and storytelling to express their relationships to their work, history and religion. Folk, or social, dancing continued in the countryside, while a new form of dance, *ballet*, began to appear in the palaces and cities of Europe. Sometimes, the people creating these new dances borrowed rhythms and steps from folk dances.

Soon schools were opened to train the dancers who performed and entertained in the courts. As dancers learned more difficult movements, only a few people danced while others watched. This began the separation between dancers and their audiences. This separation of people through dance is very evident in the United States today. Dance is not a part of our everyday living.

Immigrants to this country brought with them folk dances from their countries. Ballet was introduced in the U.S. by dance companies that came here from other countries to perform. By the late 1800s, modern dance was beginning its development. American dancers and choreographers began to explore new ways of moving that used the rhythms, styles and themes of the different cultures represented in America. Challenging tradition, these dancers developed a vocabulary of new dance styles and movements.

How Did Classical Ballet Develop?

Ballet did not just come into being. It evolved from other forms of dance entertainment. Although the ancient Romans and Greeks had stage performance with dancing and mimed plays, it was not until the 1500s that the style of dance called ballet appeared in Italy and France. Performed in ballrooms, the early ballets featured singing and dramatic speaking, in addition to dance. They lasted many hours and were performed by lords and ladies of the court, not by professionals.

One person, who took great interest in these spectacles, and introduced ballet to France, was King Henry II's wife, Catherine de Medici. She also produced *L'ye Ballet Comique de la Reine*, the first ballet to combine dance, drama, music and scenery into one unifying theme.

This new form of dance was most popular under King Louis XIV, an accomplished dancer, who in 1669 formed the first official ballet school, L'Academie Royale de Musique, known today as Paris Opera. With the arrival of professional dancing, ballet performances were moved from the palace ballrooms to a more structured theater setting.

The first professional women dancers appeared on stage in 1681. Prior to this, there were mostly male dancers. As more women danced, certain changes came that affected ballet technique. By the 1700s the first great ballerina, Marie Camargo, had shortened her floor-length skirts and petticoats. This made it easier to jump in the air and show her brilliant footwork. She also introduced shoes without heels to make moving easier. Another ballerina, Marie Salle, stopped wearing heavy hoop skirts and wigs so the characters she portrayed would look more believable.

Male dancers were featured more prominently until the 1800s when women began dancing *en pointe* or on their toes and in special shoes. The first major ballet to feature pointe dancing was *La Sylphide* in 1832. Its leading dancer, Marie Taglioni, became one of the greatest ballerinas of the

Romantic era. During her time, most ballets were about supernatural and imaginary creatures. Advances in theater technology-like gas lighting and more sophisticated sets-made these fantasy productions seem more real. Peter the Great introduced ballet to Russia. As in France the dances were social and soon developed into professional theatrical productions. The Russians took to dancing naturally and by 1850, St. Petersburg, Russia, had replaced Paris as the ballet center of the world. It was there that the master choreographer Marius Petipa produced some of the world's most famous ballets--*Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*-in collaboration with composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky. By 1900 the best dancers were trained at the Imperial Russian Ballet School in St. Petersburg.

What is Ballet?

Ballet provides exercise, discipline, and entertainment for those who study it. To become a professional dancer, however, one must have agility, strength, timing, a suitable physique, and extraordinary discipline.

As a profession, ballet attracts only those who are deeply committed to dancing. The work is very demanding, and the salaries are lower than in other entertainment professions. Like sports careers, careers in ballet are often short due to the athleticism required. To have a career in ballet, one should become a professional by age 18. This means a student usually decides by age 12 whether to become a professional dancer, and enters into a rigorous training program.

How Does Modern Dance Differ From Classical Ballet?

While classical ballet is formal and stylized, modern dance is more grounded, freer and more pedestrian. Modern dance features floor work, off-balance positions, complex partnering and closer contact between dancers. Though many modern dancers are classically trained, the dances they dance may not appear technically difficult. Classical ballet has to appear effortless and gravity-defying. It usually is pretty and is done in time to classical music. Modern dance often uses no music, can have spoken text or use *found sound* for its score. Costumes for classical ballet are usually elaborate and based on European court dress. Costumes for modern dance are designed to enhance and facilitate vigorous and complex movements. Simple unitards are often worn in contemporary or modern dance.

How Are Dancers Trained?

Ballet requires a very special technique that takes about ten years to perfect. The fundamentals of technique are turn-out (the outward rotation of the legs and feet which helps dancers move quickly and rhythmically in any direction), extreme flexibility of the legs and back, and strong feet and flexible ankles.

Dancers usually begin taking ballet class between the ages of eight and twelve. Many of them study two to four hours five days a week. Beginners must learn the five positions of the feet and arms. They practice traditional exercises which involve complex coordination and strength. In addition to developing their muscles, young dancers must learn to respond musically and understand the special movement style ballet requires.

Pointe work is essential to the development of female ballet dancers. Introduced in the 1800s, pointe shoes make it possible for a ballerina to dance on her toes, adding a light and a fleeting quality to her movement. Before they are ready to dance *en pointe*, female students must study for three or four years to strengthen their legs and feet and develop their balance.

Which Comes First--The Music Or The Movement?

That depends. If a choreographer has an idea in mind, he or she may select a piece of music to fit that idea. Often a choreographer will hear a piece of music and be inspired to create a ballet to it. Sometimes a choreographer will commission and work with a composer to realize an idea or concept. In modern dance, spoken text is sometimes used as a score. Choreographers are also not afraid to create work to be danced in silence.

Where Do Ballet Dancers Perform?

Compared to folk dancing, ballet is a theatrical art, performed on stage with music, sets, costumes, drama, and special lighting. Wherever ballet dancers perform, they require a special resilient, rubberized floor to reduce the risk of injury and lower the impact that jumping and leaping have on the body.

Why Do Dancers Wear Make-up?

Dancers wear make-up on stage so people in the audience can see their facial features. Bright stage lights make the dancers' eyes, noses and mouths hard to see. Make-up helps to emphasize their features. Dancers

performing character roles may use heavier and more dramatic make-up to create a different face.

How Are Sets and Costumes Designed?

Before they create costumes and scenery for a ballet, designers usually watch rehearsals to get a feel for the story, movement and mood of a ballet. For practical purposes, costumes must allow dancers to move freely and scenery must leave as much room for dancing as possible. Once they have a concept, costume designers draw the costumes and attach fabric swatches for the choreographer and/or artistic director to see. Fabrics are chosen for their color, texture and response to lighting. They must be durable to withstand the dancing, perspiration and washing they will go through. Generally, set designers draw and build miniature sets to scale so carpenters can recreate them for the stage. These model sets are exact replicas of what the audience will see.

Why Do We Use Stage Lighting?

Lighting is used to add drama, highlight scenery and costumes and to convey a mood. Lights are usually hung from horizontal poles hidden in the wings and are sometimes attached to the balcony and front of the stage. They can also be set on the ground just inside the wings to cast a different effect. Lights are given their color by placing tinted gels, made of thin glass or plastic, over them. Lighting designers often use yellow to convey sun/warmth; blue to suggest mood, romance and mystery; and red to convey tension or fear. After the colors are chosen for a scene, light cues are programmed into a computer. During a performance, the stage manager cues the technicians who change the lighting by computer.

Who Puts On A Ballet Performance?

It takes many different people to present a performance. The Artistic Director and artistic staff decide which ballets to present, and how they are to be performed. The dancers learn new works for each production. They are taught and rehearsed by a Ballet Master/Mistress; and sometimes they work directly with a choreographer. The administrative staff raises money to pay for the production; and promotes and advertises the performances. On the production end, experts design and build scenery; create and set lighting; design and make costumes; produce the music; and even pull the curtain. Theater staff sells tickets at the box office and work as ushers.

A Performance Happens Only Once

No matter how many times a ballet is presented, no two performances are ever alike. Various things may affect the way the ballet is presented.

Dancers may be overtired and not perform well or miss their cues. The tempo of the music may vary with each performance when live music is used. Props may be lost backstage and not be used. Scenery may not come out or disappear on time. The curtain may be early or late. Lighting may fail to come up or go down as expected or rehearsed. On the other hand, the performance may go perfectly, with each dancer's cue and scene change happening exactly as rehearsed. Each performance is unique, which adds to the excitement and magic of live theater and dance.