

technical manual and dictionary of classical ballet

technical manual and dictionary of classical ballet is an indispensable resource for dancers, instructors, choreographers, and enthusiasts seeking a profound understanding of this elegant art form. This comprehensive guide delves into the intricate terminology, precise execution of steps, and foundational principles that define classical ballet. We will explore the essential elements of ballet technique, from basic foot positions to complex allegro and adagio movements, all explained with clarity and accuracy. Furthermore, this article will serve as a robust dictionary, defining the French and Italian terms that are the universal language of ballet. Understanding these terms is not merely academic; it is crucial for effective communication in rehearsals, accurate instruction, and the nuanced interpretation of choreography. Prepare to embark on a journey through the structured beauty and demanding discipline of classical ballet.

- Introduction to Classical Ballet Terminology
- Understanding Ballet Positions and Postures
- The Language of Movement: Key Ballet Terms
- Adagio: The Art of Slow, Controlled Movement
- Allegro: The Joy and Precision of Jumps and Turns
- Arm and Hand Positions in Ballet
- The Importance of a Technical Ballet Manual
- Ballet Dictionary: A Glossary of Essential Terms

The Foundation: Understanding Ballet Positions and Postures

Classical ballet is built upon a bedrock of precise anatomical alignment and codified positions. These foundational elements are the building blocks for all subsequent movements, ensuring clarity, control, and aesthetic beauty. Mastering these positions is the first and most critical step for any aspiring ballet dancer. They are not merely static stances but represent a dynamic readiness for movement. Proper posture in ballet involves a lengthened spine, engaged core, lifted chest, and a relaxed yet attentive carriage. This posture allows for optimal balance and efficient transfer of energy throughout the body.

First Position: The Starting Point

The first position of the feet in classical ballet is characterized by the heels touching while the feet are turned outwards from the hips, forming a straight line. This outward rotation, known as external rotation or 'en dehors,' is fundamental to ballet technique and allows for greater mobility and range of motion. The knees should be aligned with the toes. This seemingly simple position requires significant flexibility and strength in the hips and ankles. It is often the starting and ending point for many steps and combinations.

Second Position: Expanding the Stance

Second position is an extension of first position, where the feet are turned out and separated by the length of one foot. The weight is evenly distributed between both feet, and maintaining the 'en dehors' rotation is crucial. This position provides a wider base of support, allowing for more dynamic movements and increased stability. It is frequently used as a preparation for lunges, pliés, and traveling steps. The dancer must ensure that the turnout originates from the hips, not by forcing the knees or ankles.

Third Position: A Transitional Step

In third position, one foot is placed directly in front of the other, with the heel of the front foot touching the instep of the back foot. Both feet remain turned out. This position is less commonly used in advanced repertoire but serves as a transitional step and a preparatory movement for fourth and fifth positions. It emphasizes the ability to maintain turnout while shifting weight and balance between the legs.

Fourth Position: The Introduction to Crossing

Fourth position is achieved by stepping one foot directly forward from third position, creating a space of approximately one foot's length between the front and back feet. The heel of the front foot is level with the toes of the back foot. Both feet maintain their outward rotation. This position requires significant balance and control, as the dancer is no longer supported by the feet being in line. It is a crucial precursor to many pirouettes and traveling steps. There are two variations: one where the front foot is to the right and the back to the left, and vice versa.

Fifth Position: The Pinnacle of Turnout and Alignment

Fifth position is the most advanced of the basic foot positions. One foot is placed directly in front of the other, with the heel of the front foot touching the toe of the back foot, and the toe of the front foot touching the heel of the back foot. This creates a tightly crossed position with maximal turnout. Fifth position demands exceptional flexibility, strength, and precise alignment. It is a fundamental position for many jumps, turns, and the conclusion of grand allegro steps. Maintaining the turnout and ensuring that the knees are not touching is paramount.

The Language of Movement: Key Ballet Terms Defined

The vocabulary of classical ballet is primarily French, with some Italian and Russian influences. These terms are not arbitrary; they describe precise actions, qualities of movement, and specific steps. A thorough understanding of this lexicon is essential for anyone involved in ballet, from the youngest student to the seasoned professional. This section will explore some of the most frequently encountered terms, providing clear definitions and contextual understanding. The accuracy of these terms ensures that choreography is transmitted faithfully and that instruction is precise and unambiguous.

Adage and Allegro: The Contrasting Dynamics

The terms 'adage' and 'allegro' represent two fundamental categories of ballet movement, differentiated by tempo and quality. Adage refers to slow, sustained, and controlled movements that emphasize balance, line, and expression. It is where dancers showcase their grace, strength, and fluidity. Allegro, conversely, encompasses quick, lively, and brisk movements, including jumps, hops, and turns. It highlights the dancer's agility, precision, and elevation. The interplay between adage and allegro forms the dramatic and technical core of most ballet performances.

Plié: The Essential Bend

A plié (pronounced plee-AY) is a fundamental bending of the knees. It is performed in all ballet positions and is crucial for absorbing shock, preparing for jumps, executing turns, and achieving fluidity of movement. There are two types: 'demi-plié,' a half bend where the heels remain on the floor, and 'grand plié,' a deep bend where the heels lift off the floor (except in second position). A well-executed plié requires the knees to track directly over the toes and the back to remain elongated.

Tendu: Stretching to the Limit

Tendu (pronounced tahn-DOO), meaning 'stretched,' is a basic ballet exercise where the foot extends from a closed position (like first or fifth) to a pointed toe on the floor. The leg remains straight and fully turned out, and the foot finishes with the toes touching the floor. A tendu strengthens the foot and ankle, improves turnout, and develops precision. It is often the preparatory movement for more complex steps and requires the dancer to maintain the energy of turnout through the entire foot.

Relevé: Rising on the Toes

Relevé (pronounced ruh-leh-VAY), meaning 'raised,' is the action of rising onto the balls of the feet (demi-pointe) or onto pointe. This movement requires strength in the ankles and calves and precise control to maintain balance. A good relevé should be smooth and controlled, not a forceful push. It is used to gain height for jumps, to hold balances, and to

execute turns. The transition from flat foot to demi-pointe or pointe should be seamless.

Sauté: The Simple Jump

Sauté (pronounced soh-TAY), meaning 'jumped,' is a basic jump performed from two feet and landing on two feet, typically originating from a demi-plié. The jump is usually performed in first, second, or fifth position. The focus is on achieving a clean, elevated jump with pointed feet and a controlled landing back into a demi-plié. It is one of the foundational elements of allegro work, teaching the dancer to initiate and control their upward trajectory.

Adagio: The Art of Slow, Controlled Movement

Adagio is where dancers often demonstrate their mastery of balance, line, and extension. These slow, sustained movements require immense muscular control, core strength, and the ability to hold positions with exquisite grace. It is in adagio that the dancer's artistry and musicality are most profoundly expressed. Each movement is carefully sculpted, with deliberate transitions that highlight the body's capabilities and the music's nuances. It is a test of physical stamina and mental focus, demanding unwavering precision.

Développé: Developing the Leg

Développé (pronounced dayv-loh-PAY), meaning 'developed,' is an exercise where the working leg is extended from a position of retiré (where the foot is held at the knee) to a fully extended straight leg, either to the front, side, or back. This movement emphasizes control and grace, requiring the dancer to maintain their balance and turnout throughout the extension. A well-executed développé shows a seamless unfolding of the leg, demonstrating muscular control and fluidity.

Grand Battement: The Large Sweep

Grand battement (pronounced grahn baht-MAHN) is a large, sweeping movement of the leg, extending it outward with force and precision. It can be performed to the front, side, or back. The goal is to achieve maximum height and control while maintaining turnout and stability. Grand battements are essential for developing the strength and flexibility needed for high extensions and powerful leaps. The movement should be initiated from the hip, not by the back.

Arabesque: The Elegant Pose

The arabesque is a signature pose in classical ballet, characterized by the dancer standing on one leg with the other leg extended straight behind them, lifted off the floor. The arms are typically held in a harmonious position that balances the extended leg. There are several variations of the arabesque, each with specific arm and leg placements. This pose

demands exquisite balance, a beautifully arched back, and a long, elegant line from the fingertips to the extended foot.

Allegro: The Joy and Precision of Jumps and Turns

Allegro is the exhilarating realm of ballet, characterized by quick, energetic movements that showcase the dancer's athleticism and technical prowess. Jumps, leaps, and turns are central to allegro, requiring immense coordination, strength, and control. The precision with which these movements are executed is as important as the height of the jump or the speed of the turn. Allegro is where the dancer truly appears to defy gravity, conveying a sense of lightness and joy.

Jeté: The Leap of Faith

Jeté (pronounced zhuh-TAY), meaning 'thrown,' is a type of leap where the dancer brushes one leg forward, springing off the supporting leg and landing on the brushing leg. There are many variations, including the petit jeté (small leap) and the grand jeté (large leap). A successful jeté requires a strong preparatory plié, a powerful push-off, and a clean landing. The aim is for height, distance, and a graceful execution.

Pirouette: The Art of the Turn

A pirouette is a turn performed on one leg, with the other leg typically in retiré position. Pirouettes can be performed en dehors (turning outward) or en dedans (turning inward). They require a strong preparation, a clean spotting technique (where the dancer quickly snaps their head around to find a fixed point), and a strong core to maintain balance. The ability to execute multiple clean pirouettes is a hallmark of advanced ballet technique.

Assemblé: Assembled Jump

Assemblé (pronounced ah-sahm-BLAY), meaning 'assembled,' is a jump where the dancer springs off one foot and brings both legs together in the air before landing on both feet simultaneously. The legs should meet cleanly in fifth position in the air. This jump requires coordination and precision to ensure both legs are brought together at the same time. It is a fundamental step in building up to more complex allegro sequences.

Arm and Hand Positions in Ballet

While the focus is often on the legs and feet, the arms and hands play a crucial role in classical ballet. They frame the body, express emotion, and contribute to the overall balance and aesthetic of a movement. The positions of the arms are as codified as the foot positions, providing a structured language for the upper body. The carriage of the arms should be fluid, graceful, and integrated with the rest of the dancer's movement.

First Position Arms: Rounded Embrace

In first position, the arms are rounded in front of the body, with the hands held at the height of the sternum, forming an oval shape. The elbows are softly bent, and the wrists are rounded, creating a sense of openness and grace. This position is often used as a starting point or for gentle, lyrical movements.

Second Position Arms: Open and Expansive

Second position sees the arms extended to the sides, slightly forward of the body, with the elbows softly bent. The hands are at the height of the shoulders, palms facing forward or slightly downward. This position conveys a sense of breadth, expansiveness, and outward expression. The dancer must maintain a feeling of reaching through their fingertips.

Fifth Position Arms: The Elevated Arch

Fifth position arms, often referred to as 'high fifth' or 'bras avant,' involve both arms rounded and lifted overhead, forming a symmetrical arch above the dancer's head. The hands are typically close together, and the overall shape is oval. This position is used for moments of grandeur, elevation, or to convey a sense of aspiration.

The Importance of a Technical Ballet Manual

A comprehensive technical ballet manual is more than just a book of steps; it is a vital guide for developing proper technique, understanding the nuances of ballet vocabulary, and fostering a lifelong appreciation for the art form. For instructors, it serves as a reference to ensure consistent and accurate teaching methods. For students, it provides the means to study and practice independently, reinforcing what is learned in class. The detailed explanations, anatomical considerations, and historical context found in a good manual contribute significantly to a dancer's development and the preservation of ballet's rich heritage.

Ballet Dictionary: A Glossary of Essential Terms

This section provides a concise glossary of frequently used ballet terms, offering quick reference for essential vocabulary. Understanding these terms is fundamental for anyone engaging with classical ballet. The terms are presented alphabetically for ease of access.

- **Allongé:** Elongated; the leg or arm is extended with a sense of lengthened line.
- **Ballon:** The elastic quality of a jump, giving the dancer the appearance of floating.
- **Chassé:** To chase; a gliding step where one foot "chases" the other.

- **Coda:** The concluding section of a ballet or variation, often featuring lively and virtuosic steps.
- **Corps de ballet:** The ensemble dancers of a ballet company.
- **Croisé:** Crossed; a position where the dancer is positioned so that one leg appears in front of the other, forming a cross.
- **En dehors:** Outward rotation of the legs from the hips.
- **En dedans:** Inward rotation of the legs from the hips.
- **En pointe:** On the tip of the toe.
- **Épaulement:** The carriage of the shoulders; a sideways placement of the shoulders and head to create a more angled and artistic presentation.
- **Frappé:** Struck; a sharp, accented movement where the working leg strikes the floor.
- **Glissade:** A gliding step, often used as a preparation for a jump.
- **Lacé:** Open; refers to a position where the legs are in a wide, open stance.
- **Pas de deux:** A dance for two performers, typically a male and female dancer.
- **Piqué:** Pricked; a sharp movement where the dancer steps onto the point or demi-pointe of one foot.
- **Port de bras:** The carriage of the arms; the graceful movement and positioning of the arms.
- **Quatrième:** Fourth; referring to fourth position.
- **Rond de jambe:** Round of the leg; a circular movement of the leg, either on the floor or in the air.
- **Soutenu:** Sustained; a turn or step in which the dancer sustains their balance.
- **Sur le cou-de-pied:** On the ankle; the foot is placed on the ankle of the supporting leg.
- **Temps:** A step or movement; often used in phrases like 'temps lié' (linked movement).
- **Tombé:** To fall; a step where the dancer "falls" into a plié or lunge.
- **Vaganova Method:** A highly influential and structured system of ballet training developed by Agrippina Vaganova.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary purpose of a technical manual for classical ballet?

The primary purpose of a technical manual for classical ballet is to provide a comprehensive and standardized guide to the execution, nomenclature, and pedagogical approach of ballet movements. It serves as a reference for teachers, students, and choreographers to ensure consistency in training and understanding.

How does a dictionary of classical ballet differ from a technical manual?

A dictionary of classical ballet focuses on defining and explaining the terminology, steps, positions, and historical context of ballet. A technical manual, while incorporating terminology, emphasizes the 'how-to' of executing movements, often including detailed instructions, anatomical considerations, and pedagogical exercises.

Why is it important for classical ballet to have standardized technical manuals and dictionaries?

Standardization ensures clarity and consistency across different schools and geographical regions, facilitating communication and understanding between dancers, teachers, and choreographers. It preserves the integrity of the art form and aids in the effective transmission of technique through generations.

What are some emerging trends in the development or use of technical manuals for classical ballet?

Emerging trends include the integration of digital platforms, video demonstrations, and interactive elements within manuals. There's also a growing emphasis on scientific research, kinesiology, and injury prevention integrated into technical descriptions, and a move towards more inclusive language and representation.

How are dictionaries of classical ballet being updated to remain relevant?

Dictionaries are being updated by incorporating new terminology that arises from contemporary choreographic innovations, exploring the evolution of specific steps, and sometimes including cross-references to different stylistic interpretations or historical periods of ballet.

What role do technical manuals play in the professional

development of ballet instructors?

Technical manuals are crucial for instructors to solidify their understanding of correct technique, explore different teaching methodologies, and stay abreast of current pedagogical best practices. They provide a framework for effective lesson planning and student assessment.

Are there debates or controversies surrounding the content of existing classical ballet technical manuals or dictionaries?

Yes, debates can arise regarding the precise definition of certain steps, the emphasis placed on specific anatomical alignments, or differing pedagogical approaches presented. Controversies might also surface concerning the historical accuracy of certain entries or the inclusion/exclusion of specific techniques from different ballet traditions.

How can a student effectively utilize both a technical manual and a dictionary of classical ballet for their training?

A student can use the technical manual to understand the proper execution of steps taught in class and to practice them independently. The dictionary can be used to clarify the meaning of unfamiliar terms, understand the historical origins of movements, and deepen their theoretical knowledge of ballet.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to technical manuals and dictionaries of classical ballet, with short descriptions:

1. The Classical Ballet Technique: An Illustrated Dictionary

This comprehensive volume serves as both a detailed technical manual and a definitive dictionary. It meticulously breaks down fundamental ballet positions, steps, and movements, offering clear explanations and precise anatomical cues. The accompanying illustrations are invaluable for visualizing correct execution and understanding the underlying principles of each technique.

2. Steps in Classical Ballet: A Complete Manual

This book provides a systematic approach to learning and mastering the core vocabulary of classical ballet. It progresses logically from basic exercises to more complex combinations, emphasizing proper alignment, muscle engagement, and musicality. Aspiring dancers and instructors will find its practical, step-by-step guidance exceptionally useful.

3. The Dictionary of Ballet Terms: Definitions and Applications

Going beyond mere definitions, this dictionary explores the practical application of ballet terminology in actual choreography and training. It clarifies the nuances between similar

terms and provides historical context where relevant. This resource is essential for understanding the language of ballet and its artistic implications.

4. Anatomy for Ballet Dancers: A Technical Guide

This manual bridges the gap between technical execution and anatomical understanding, crucial for injury prevention and optimal performance. It details the muscles, bones, and joint actions involved in every ballet movement. Dancers and teachers can use this to refine technique, understand limitations, and promote healthy training.

5. The Art of Classical Ballet: A Technical Compendium

This book offers an in-depth exploration of the artistic and technical elements that define classical ballet. It delves into the history, aesthetics, and rigorous training methods that have shaped the art form. The compendium provides a rich understanding of the discipline, from the foundational steps to advanced performance qualities.

6. Ballet Vocabulary: A Lexicon of Movement

This work functions as an exhaustive lexicon of ballet movements, encompassing both French terminology and its English equivalents. Each entry is accompanied by a clear description of the movement and often includes notes on its common usage in variations and repertoire. It's an indispensable tool for dancers, choreographers, and ballet historians.

7. The Pedagogy of Classical Ballet: A Teacher's Manual

Designed specifically for instructors, this manual outlines effective methods for teaching classical ballet technique. It addresses progression, common errors, and the importance of building a strong foundation. The book offers a wealth of pedagogical insights to help teachers guide students safely and effectively through the curriculum.

8. Ballet Technique: A Comprehensive Reference

This book stands as a comprehensive reference for all aspects of classical ballet technique. It covers everything from posture and carriage to port de bras and pointe work. The detailed explanations and clear instructions make it a reliable guide for dancers at all levels seeking to perfect their form.

9. Understanding Ballet: A Dictionary and Guide

This accessible yet informative book serves as both a dictionary of ballet terms and a guide to the world of classical ballet. It demystifies the often-intimidating language of ballet and provides insights into its historical development and cultural significance. It's ideal for students, enthusiasts, and anyone looking for a foundational understanding of the art form.

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