

DANCE RESOURCES BY GEORGINA BUTLER

RAD Grade 7 – THE ROMANTIC ERA

Ballet Insights



Grade 7: The Romantic Era and 'La Sylphide'

The music for the RAD Grade 7 ballet syllabus is taken from three ballets by the Danish choreographer August Bournonville (1805 – 1879).

Most of the pieces used come from the ballet '*La Sylphide*' (1836), a tragic tale of love, passion and revenge set in the Scottish Highlands.

'*La Sylphide*' means 'The Sylph' (a sylph is an otherworldly, ethereal winged creature; a fairy; a spirit).

The score for '*La Sylphide*' was written by composer Herman Severin Løvenskjold (1815-1870).

The following Grade 7 exercises are set to tracks which are extracts taken from '*La Sylphide*':

Pliés: [Act 1, Scene 1](#)

Battements tendus and battements glissés: [Act 1, Scene 3 \(Gurn's entrance\)](#)

Battements frappés: [Act 2 \(Sister sylphs dance around James\)](#)

Ronds de jambe en l'air: [Act 1, Scene 6 \(Sylph's solo\)](#)

Adage study: [Act 2, Scene 1 \(Pas de deux\)](#)

Grands battements and battements en cloche: [Act 1, Scene 7 \(James' solo\)](#)

Coupé fouetté raccourci: [Act 1, Scene 7 \(Springdans\)](#)

Port de Bras - Female: [Act 2 \(Sylph's dance\)](#)

Pirouette enchaînement: [Act 2 \(Sylph's solo\)](#)

Adage - Female: [Act 2 \(Sylphides enter\)](#)

Adage - Male: [Act 1, Scene 6 \(James alone\)](#)

Petit allegro: [Act 1, Scene 3](#)

Allegro: [Act 1, Scene 3](#)

Grand allegro: [Act 2, Scene 2 \(Sylph's solo\)](#)

Dance, classical - Female: [Act 1, Scene 1](#)

Dance, classical - Male: [Act 2 \(Pas de deux, James' solo\)](#)

Classical révérence - Female: [Act 1, Scene 1](#)

The Romantic Era

The Romantic Era was an artistic, literary and intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th Century. Partly a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, it was a period defined by a focus on humanity, emotion and individual expression - combined with a desire to improve social and political conditions.

Many Romantic thinkers were fuelled by an ambition to express a higher, truer reality than that which confronted people day to day. Consequently, they were inspired by nature, spirituality and the supernatural when formulating ideas and creating their works.

The most well-known and enduring Romantic ballets are: '*La Sylphide*' (1832; 1836), '*Giselle*' (1841), '*Napoli*' (1842), '*Pas de Quatre*' (1845) and '*Conservatoire*' (1849).

Ballet's Beginnings...

Ballet started in the courts of Renaissance Italy, as a form of both pleasant entertainment and a system of training that developed poise and elegance.

When an Italian noblewoman named Catherine de' Medici married Henri II of France in 1533, she introduced this form of entertainment to France. The court ballet flourished as successive generations of her family ended up being enthusiasts (including her grandson Louis XIII and great-grandson Louis XIV).

Eventually, the focus shifted from the royal court to the theatre and dramatic works began featuring ballet alongside opera. This meant that there was a need for professional dancers. These dancers were directed by the court ballet master Pierre Beauchamp (who is credited with the invention of ballet's five positions of the feet).

By 1760, ballet masters were lobbying for dance to be seen as an art in itself and dancers were making breakthroughs in technique, performance and popularity. Of note is Jean-Georges Noverre, a French ballet master and dancer who wrote *Lettres sur la danse et les ballets* – an impassioned plea for dance to be used to tell emotive, narrative stories through movement alone, thereby elevating dance to an equal status to that of the other dramatic arts.

As you can see, the beginnings of ballet were very much informed by the nobility, grace and dignity of the royal courts.

The Romantic Ballet...

Ballet evolved significantly during the Romantic Era and the earliest ballets that are still danced today in anything like their original form are those of the 1830s and 1840s.

This was the era when the ballerina took centre stage and pointe work became established. The lead female dancer would defy the laws of gravity as she portrayed a fairy, a sylph or a spirit.

Three 19th Century innovations aided the ethereality of the ballerina: gas lighting; the tutu and the pointe shoe.

Gas lighting atmospherically set the scene to suggest moonlight and the supernatural. The long, gauzy, tulle skirt worn by ballerinas gave them a fragile, airy and unearthly quality. These elements combined to facilitate the *ballet blanc* – the famous ‘white ballet’ passages which occur at dusk or night-time (as found in ballets including ‘*Giselle*’ and ‘*Swan Lake*’).

The pointe shoe gave us ballet as we know it today. In the early court ballets the pointed foot was demonstrated in order to show off the ribbons and buckles on the shoe. In the pointe shoe, the foot itself becomes the object of admiration – the high arch (developed by dancing *en pointe*) is a desirable feature of ballet line.

Marie Taglioni (daughter of choreographer Filippo Taglioni) became a much-admired dancer as her use of pointe work was elegant, subtle and integral to her dancing (rather than used as a mere acrobatic feat). She was exquisitely graceful and is regarded as being the first dancer to establish “toe-dancing” akin to the pointe work we recognise today.

Marie Taglioni was one of the five most important ballerinas of the Romantic era. The other four were: Fanny Elssler, Fanny Cerrito, Carlotta Grisi and Lucile Grahn.

The Romantic ballet was characterized by an expressive, modest dance quality and capitalised on female dancers’ allure. Romanticism in ballet demands gracefulness, softness and an otherworldly weightlessness from female dancers and an easy, moderated poise from male dancers.

‘*La Sylphide*’ is the archetypal Romantic ballet.

'La Sylphide'

A poignant story of impossible love.

Woken on his wedding morning by a beautiful, winged sylph, the Scotsman James is utterly bewitched...



(Picture credit: Queensland Ballet dancers Shane Wuerthner and Meng Ningning in Peter Schaufuss' 'La Sylphide'. Photo by Georges Antoni.)

The Story...

'*La Sylphide*' is a compelling tale of unattainable love which sees the human realm and the supernatural realm collide with tragic consequences.

On the morning of his wedding, a young Scottish farmer called James wakes up very early and discovers that the beautiful winged sylph from his dreams is sat at his feet. She flies around his farmhouse but remains just out of his reach. Fascinated, he chases after her but she vanishes up the chimney.

James wakes his companions but none of them have seen her. Gurn, who is in love with James' bride-to-be Effie, realises that James has become infatuated with someone else.

As the wedding preparations begin, an old woman slips in to warm herself by the fire. James tries to throw her out but Effie begs him to let her stay and tell their fortunes. The old woman, Madge, declares that Effie will marry Gurn. A furious James threatens Madge, who curses him.

Torn between the Sylphide and Effie, James soon finds himself ditching his fiancée to pursue the captivating Sylphide. He follows her into the moonlit forest where she and her sister Sylphs dance for him. However, the Sylphide continues to evade his embrace and flies away from him.

Madge's quest for revenge sees her produce an enchanted scarf. She convinces James that if it is placed around the Sylphide's shoulders, the magical creature's wings will fall off and she will be his forever.

The Sylphide reappears and James applies the scarf. However, this proves to be fatal: the Sylphide's wings drop off, she loses her sight and she dies an agonising death in front of him.

As he kneels, heartbroken, the wedding procession of Effie and James' love rival, Gurn, passes. James is left with nothing and Madge triumphs over him.



(Picture credit: Queensland Ballet dancers in Peter Schaufuss' '*La Sylphide*'. Photo by David Kelly.)

The Background...

'*La Sylphide*' was originally choreographed by Filippo Taglioni to music by Jean Schneitzhoeffter and based on a libretto by Adophe Nourrit. It premiered in 1832 in Paris and starred Marie Taglioni as The Sylph and Joseph Mazilier as James.

Marie Taglioni's apparently effortless dancing was the result of hours of gruelling practice. She had rounded shoulders and unusually long arms so she and her father worked to find poses that would flatter them. These poses are the Sylphide positions we are familiar with today – with the torso softly tilted and the arms gently bent.

Tailor-made for Marie Taglioni, Filippo Taglioni's original '*La Sylphide*' made the most of her modest dance quality, expressive arms and soft, weightless elevation (or "*ballon*").

In his 1836 version of '*La Sylphide*', Danish choreographer August Bournonville took the ballet - a tale of an unfortunate man's infatuation with an unattainable creature for whom he abandons everything – and made more of the male dancer's role. He reworked the ballet, creating choreography for his star pupil, Lucile Grahn, as The Sylph and himself in the role of James.

Filippo Taglioni's original 1832 staging has not survived. It is August Bournonville's 1836 production, set to music by the Norwegian composer Herman Severin Løvenskjold, which has endured.

This version remains in the repertoire of the Royal Danish Ballet to this day and has achieved international acclaim since the second half of the 20th Century, influencing subsequent restagings.



(Picture credit: Queensland Ballet dancers in Peter Schaufuss' '*La Sylphide*'. Photo by David Kelly.)

Further Reading...

These two articles offer further insight into '*La Sylphide*' and demonstrate the continued relevance of Romantic ballets to today's ballet repertory.

- Queensland Ballet brings '*La Sylphide*' to London – A preview of Australia's Queensland Ballet's London debut (written for culturewhisper.com by Georgina Butler): <https://georginabutler.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Dance-Resources-by-Georgina-Butler-Ballet-Insights-Romantic-Era-La-Sylphide.pdf>
- A review of Queensland Ballet's '*La Sylphide*' at London Coliseum, August 2015 (written by Georgina Butler): <https://georginabutler.co.uk/2015/08/05/review-queensland-ballets-la-sylphide-london-coliseum-august-2015/>

Something To Watch...

This [video](#) shows the '*La Sylphide*' Act 2 *Pas de Deux* (with Tamara Rojo as The Sylph and Steven McRae as James).



A Final Musical Note...

The remaining tracks used in Grade 7 are taken from the Bournonville ballets '*The Legend of Thrym*' (1868) with music by J.P.E Hartmann, and '*Napoli*' (1842) with music by Edvard Helsted (1806 – 1900).

The following Grade 7 exercises are set to music from '*The Legend of Thrym*':

Ports de bras - Male exercise: Act 4, No. 19: Gimle 21

Classical révérence: Male: Act 4, No. 19: Gimle 24

Study with use of cloak – Male: Act 4, No. 18: Lokes Staff

The following Grade 7 exercises are set to music from '*Napoli*':

Study in stillness and gravity: Act 1 No.6. Marionetspilleren høres komme 23

Study for upper back: Act 1, No. 3 25

Dance Free Movement: Act 3, No. 1

All of the music for the Grade 7 Character is from '*Napoli*'