

# GEORGINA BUTLER

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Dance Resources BY GEORGINA BUTLER

## 'POINTE SHOES'





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## Ballet's beginnings

Ballet today is readily associated with athletic yet elegant ballerinas gracefully balancing on the tips of their toes. However, the practice of dancing *en pointe* only came about as the art form evolved and individual dancers pushed the discipline in new directions.

The art of ballet was established a good 200 years before dancers began to don reinforced slippers and showcase toe-dancing.

The beginnings of ballet can be traced back to when King of France Henri II married Italian noblewoman Catherine de Medici in 1533. Catherine was a great patron of the arts and their marriage united French and Italian culture, helping to cement ballet as an essential courtly entertainment.

Just over a century later, King of France Louis XIV founded the former dance institution The Académie Royale de Danse in France in 1661. His passionate commitment helped to drive ballet's transition from a pleasant social or courtly event to a distinct theatrical performance art, complete with codified rules, etiquette and conventions. No longer simply a pastime for amateurs, ballet was elevated to the position of an endeavour requiring professional training.

## Early ballet history

Throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries, ballets were largely performed as part of a celebration for the royal court and known as *ballets de cour*.

In the mid-17<sup>th</sup> Century, French ballet master Jean Georges Noverre rebelled against the pretentiousness of these productions, believing that ballet alone could tell a story and reveal relationships between characters.

Noverre's efforts introduced the *ballet d'action*, a dramatic, expressive style of ballet that conveyed a narrative and was a precursor to the narrative ballets of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.



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## The first ballet shoes

The first ballet shoes, as worn by King Louis XIV's (initially all male) dancers, were heeled slippers. Elaborately decorated with buckles, these shoes were not the easiest to wear and prohibited jumps and a lot of technical movements.

As the focus shifted towards codified ballet technique, softer silks and leathers were used to construct these shoes, making it easier to point the toes and execute more intricate footwork.

It is believed that revolutionary French/Belgian dancer Marie Camargo, of the Paris Opera Ballet, may have been the first dancer to remove the heels from her ballet slippers.

Certainly, by the time of the French Revolution (towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century) and once the *ballet d'action* was accepted, the heeled slipper had been replaced by a new flat-bottomed design, which liberated dancers.

Secured to the feet with ribbons wrapped around the ankle and pleated under the toes for a better fit, these shoes enabled the dancer to articulate the whole foot and achieve a full extension more befitting of ballet as an art form beyond the royal court.

## Romantic Era

The earliest narrative ballets were created during the Romantic Era in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Romantic ballets reflected the themes of the period. These include a fascination with the supernatural world of spirits, magic and a fondness for depicting women as passive and fragile.

Romantic ballets tend to be widely regarded as representative of the time in ballet history when pointe work became the norm for the ballerina.



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## Acrobatics and illusions

Although the ethereal, otherworldly nature of the Romantic Era was undeniably bolstered by having gentle ballerinas perched delicately on the tips of their toes, the origins of pointe work reside in the showy stunts of a few acrobatic Italian performers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Inspired by French dancer and choreographer Charles Didelot's 'flying machine' - a contraption he invented in 1796 which allowed dancers, suspended on wires, to stand on tip-toe before leaving the ground - choreographers became eager to experiment with ways of recreating the illusion. It was this aspiration to make the impossible possible which drove the eventual evolution of pointe shoes.

Notably, Italian *grotteschi* (pantomime) dancer Amalia Brugnoli was among the first to haul herself up onto the tips of her toes - without the use of wires - to give audiences something spectacular to wonder at.

This toe-dancing trick was then refined by the Romantic Era ballerina Marie Taglioni into something much more elegant, effortless and elevated.

Marie Taglioni worked tirelessly to make dancing *en pointe* look easy - a quality we still associate with pointe work today. She rose to fame as a *danseuse* at the Paris Opera when her father, Filippo Taglioni, created the ballet *La Sylphide* (1832) for her.

## La Sylphide

*La Sylphide* was designed to showcase Marie Taglioni's talent. It capitalised on her expressive arms, incredible strength and soft, billowy leap - while simultaneously disguising her rounded back and awkward proportions.

As a result, *La Sylphide* was the first ballet where dancing *en pointe* had an aesthetic rationale and was not merely an acrobatic stunt (as had been the style of dancers in the late 1820s).

Thanks to her endurance and ease *en pointe*, Marie Taglioni managed to combine a desire for simplicity and modesty with the virtuosity demonstrated by the showy Italian performers of the past.



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## The transition

The shoes Marie Taglioni danced in were no more than soft satin slippers, with leather soles, which had been heavily darned at the tip for support underneath the metatarsals and toes. They were not hard or boxed like today's pointe shoes are. Dancers relied exclusively on the strength of their feet and ankles.

The soles of Marie Taglioni's shoes have been studied and are revealingly scuffed and worn at the metatarsal. This indicates that she stood on a very high demi-pointe and danced on what today's dancers would consider a transitional part of the foot: more than demi-pointe but less than full pointe - the three-quarter pointe.

This is an extremely awkward position to stand in and 19<sup>th</sup> Century dancers often bound their toes tightly into shoes that were too small in order to squeeze the metatarsal, making it easier to stand on. However, in doing so, they also made it easier to dislocate bones. Unsurprisingly, the shoes would not last very long as they had considerable weight to support and lacked durability.

## En pointe

The next generation of pointe shoes appeared in Italy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Star Italian dancers including Pierina Legnani wore shoes with a sturdy, flat platform at the front end.

These modified slippers also boasted a box – made of layers of fabric – to encompass, support and protect the toes and a stronger sole that was carefully stiffened (but only at the toes to make sure that the shoes were as close to silent as possible for dancing in).

Advances in training and pointe shoe design meant that dancers were now able to hold sustained balances and execute more demanding and virtuoso movements fully *en pointe*, while still retaining the natural ease the Romantic Era ballerinas radiated as they skimmed and flitted in their reinforced slippers.

This is the epoch during which Marius Petipa added thirty-two fouettés to the 'Black Swan' *pas de deux* in *Swan Lake* and had Aurora hold drawn-out balances *en pointe* in the 'Rose Adagio' of *The Sleeping Beauty*.



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## Pointe shoes today

Today, pointe shoes offer much more support which allows more freedom in terms of the choreography that can be performed *en pointe*.

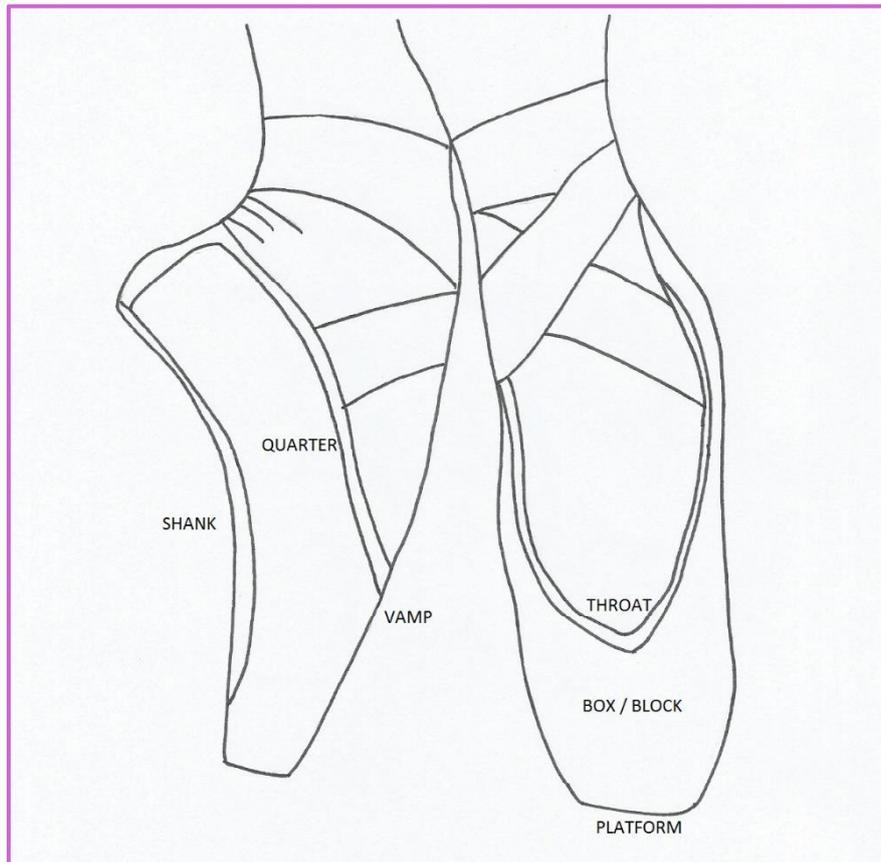
The design of the modern pointe shoe is often attributed to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russian prima ballerina Anna Pavlova.

She had high, arched insteps, which left her vulnerable to injury when dancing *en pointe*, and slender, tapered feet, which resulted in excessive pressure being applied to her big toes. To compensate for this, she would insert toughened leather soles into her shoes for extra support and flatten, curve and harden the toe area to form a box. This made it easier for her to dance *en pointe*.

Although making these alterations to the shoe was regarded by her peers to be "cheating", the irony is that Anna Pavlova's modified design became the predecessor of the modern pointe shoe we are familiar with today.



## Parts of a pointe shoe



### **BOX / BLOCK**

The front of the shoe; it encases and supports the dancer's toes

### **PLATFORM**

Allows the dancer to stand flat on the floor for balancing, turning and appearing to be weightless

### **VAMP**

Supports the dancer's toes and metatarsals

### **SHANK**

Reinforces the sole of the shoe to support the arch of the foot *en pointe*

### **QUARTER**

The part covering the sides and heel of the foot

### **THROAT**

The opening of the box (can be V-shaped or rounded)



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## Wearing pointe shoes

Pointe shoes work by providing support to a ballet dancer's feet in two critical places – under the arch and around the toes. By allowing a dancer to transfer some of her weight to the shoe in these two areas, pointe shoes facilitate the execution of steps, turns, hops and sustained balances on the tips of the toes.

The shank is a stiff midsole which presses snugly against the bottom of the foot, supporting the arch.

The shank may run the entire length of the shoe or just some of the way. Shank flexibility varies, as does the shape and length of the vamp. Dancers must find the options that best support their feet.

The toe box or block tightly encases the toes, providing them with support so that the dancer stands on an oval-shaped platform at the very end of the shoe. Toe boxes are made of canvas, linen and glue and the stiffness of the box may vary in different shoes. Some toe boxes have extended sides (known as wings) to provide extra support along the sides of the foot.

## Pointe work requires strength and technique

Of course, pointe shoes alone are not enough to dance en pointe.

Although the shoe helps the dancer to remain on the tips of her toes, it is her strength and technique that gets her rising from a normal standing position, through the demi-pointe and the three-quarter pointe, all the way to the full-pointe position.

Once *en pointe*, the hard work continues as the dancer must engage the muscles of the feet, ankles, legs and torso to pull herself up out of the shoe.



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## When is a dancer ready to start pointe?

Starting pointe work is a real milestone achievement as a ballet student. It is not just about reaching a certain age or extent of physical maturity (although age does have a bearing on bone development). Significantly, a dancer's readiness to begin pointe work depends on her strength, technique, attitude and commitment.

Generally, students will likely be ready to begin pointe work once they have been taking ballet classes for two to four years and can demonstrate appropriate strength, sound technique and a focused approach to learning the art of ballet.

Often, this may be between the ages of ten and twelve.

Earlier than ten is very unusual indeed and not recommended. Beginning pointe work too soon may pose risk of injury as inadequate motion, strength and stability could place undue stress on the legs, pelvic girdle and trunk – and leave the joints and the (still developing) bones vulnerable to damage.

Before beginning pointe work, a dancer must have good core stability (strong trunk and pelvic muscles), alignment through the legs (hip-knee-ankle-foot) and strong and flexible feet and ankles.

She must be able to maintain her turnout when dancing, possess a strong relevé, understand postural control and use and articulate her feet properly.



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## Pointe shoe fitting

Pointe shoes need to be professionally fitted. There are so many options available to make sure that a dancer gets the shoe that will best support their feet that, until students are very experienced and have understood what works for their feet, they must rely on the advice of fitters (and their teacher).

Fitters will check the shoe's sizing by inspecting both length and width fit, check that the vamp depth or shape does not inhibit a dancer's ability to get fully *en pointe*, consider how strong the shank needs to be to provide adequate support to the arch and advise on ways to affix ribbons and elastics to the pointe shoes.

## Preparing pointe shoes

The purpose of pointe shoe ribbons is to give additional ankle support. The ribbons should be attached to the lining, not the satin, and placed at the point of the shoe where the heel meets the sides of the shoe when it is folded forward. Sewing the ribbon angled slightly forward may result in the most secure and aesthetically pleasing placement but each individual dancer must find what works best for them.

Elastics are an optional extra – again, it is up to each dancer to go through a process of trial and error to discover what gives them optimal support.

## Tying pointe shoe ribbons

Put on the pointe shoes and take the inside ribbon (the ribbon sewn on the same side of the shoe as the big toe). Cross the ribbon over the ankle bone until it meets the inside of the ankle. From there, wrap it around the ankle once. Hold the ribbon taut.

Next, take hold of the outside ribbon and cross it over the inside of the ankle so that it crosses the other in an 'X'. From there, wrap it around the ankle once and then around half the ankle so that it meets the other end of the ribbon on the inside of the ankle.

Tie the ribbon ends in a secure double knot and tuck the ends of the ribbons tidily away.



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## “Breaking in pointe shoes”

Many dancers find that the simplest and safest way to break in new pointe shoes is to carefully massage them, wear them around the house and then take great care to use correct ballet technique when dancing in them in class.

Once a dancer has prepared a new pair of pointe shoes by sewing on the ribbons (and elastics if she chooses to use them), she may place the shoes somewhere warm and dry and leave them overnight (the airing cupboard is ideal).

The next day, just before putting them on, the dancer will gently massage the box and wings to soften the shoe, focusing on the part of the shoe that will bend when rising onto demi-pointe.

When the dancer first wears the shoes, gently rolling up through the demi-pointe to full pointe on one shoe (while standing flat on the other foot) will apply pressure to - and encourage a slight softening of - the shoe in the correct place. Transitioning through the demi-pointe in this manner will force the shoes to conform to the shape of the dancer’s arches. Walking around on demi-pointe is another useful method.



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## Starting pointe work – the very first steps

The introduction to pointe work must be gradual so to begin with only a few minutes of each class will be devoted to special pointe exercises.

Beginner pointe students will need to focus on finding the correct placement *en pointe*, with careful attention to posture and alignment. All the basic ballet technique that has already been acquired will be challenged once a dance student starts to wear pointe shoes, so it is more important than ever to implement all of the technical corrections that a teacher offers.

Students must get used to their feet feeling confined in pointe shoes. Some discomfort is to be expected at first, but students may choose to experiment with using lamb's wool in their shoes, taping their toes or wearing specially designed fabric pouches to protect the skin on their toes from blisters.

Pointe work will begin at the barre, with rises and *relevés*. As students develop strength, skill and confidence *en pointe* they will try simple exercises in the centre without the assistance of the barre.

Eventually, students progress to wearing pointe shoes for their whole class. By this time, they will be aiming to perform all the steps that they are accustomed to executing in soft ballet slippers while wearing their pointe shoes.



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## *The Red Shoes*

If you think your pointe shoes are tormenting you, spare a thought for Vicky!

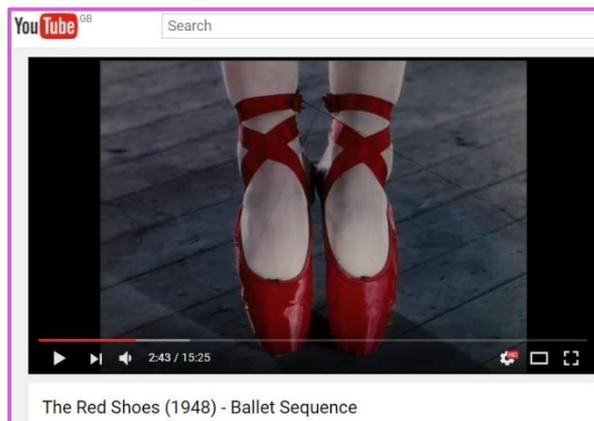
*The Red Shoes* (1948) is cinema's quintessential backstage drama, a glorious technicolour blockbuster full of drama, dance and danger.

It tells the tale of Victoria "Vicky" Page, a young ballerina torn between her career with a ruthless impresario and her romance with a young composer.

The film enlists the 'story within a story' narrative device with a hallucinatory central dance sequence in which Vicky dances the lead role in a new ballet entitled 'The Red Shoes'.

In this ballet, a girl wears a pair of cursed red pointe shoes. The shoes refuse to stop dancing and, exhausted, she ends up dancing herself to death.

In the film, life imitates art as Vicky eventually falls to her death while wearing the iconic red shoes.





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## *Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo ("the Trocks")*

This all-male company has been hurtling through the classical ballet repertoire in size 12 pointe shoes since 1974.

Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo (affectionately nicknamed "the Trocks") brings pointe work to a whole new category of dancers – men! The company was founded in 1974 for the purpose of presenting a playful, entertaining view of traditional classical ballet in high-quality parody form.





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