Chapter 6

Romantic to Classical Ballet: The 19th Century

# Overview

While the Industrial Revolution escalated, the ballroom and the theater provided escape, but not without a price. In the ballroom the novice had to know the rules of society and practice impeccable etiquette and demonstrate graceful and appropriate dance ability in order to navigate the intricacies of climbing the social ladder to attain the right husband or wife.

Romantic ballet was an escape from the drudgery of the rising Industrial Revolution. Romantic ballerinas were the center of attention, and their lives followed in a fashion similar to the superstars of today. The ballerinas inspired coiffures, clothing, and moods. Male dancers, who had dominated the 18th-century stage, took on supporting roles to female dancers. The two-act ballets told stories of love triangles and unrequited love, taking audiences to faraway, exotic places and mystical places such as forests at midnight, under the sea, and other places populated with wilis, naiads, or spirits of the air.

Romanticism was a short-lived phenomenon in ballet. But the ideas of romanticism were to continue throughout the century. In its stead was the development of fantasy, which later 19th-century ballets became associated with. During the 19th century, ballet technique became codified with the development of classical ballet. The ideas expressed in romantic ballet were enhanced and became more sophisticated in classical ballet.

In the first half of the 19th century, romantic ballet blossomed and faded in Europe. In the last quarter of the 19th century, classical ballet, supported by the wealth and power of the czars, was able to reach new heights as an art through the choreography of Petipa and his artistic associates. In classical ballet, the ballerina became a technical giant on stage with her accomplishment of pointe work. The male dancer continued to support her central role onstage and in ballets. The four-act performances using ballet, character dances, and mime told stories presented in a context of extravagant sets, costuming, and musical accompaniment to create a unified theatrical production.

# Activities and Assignments

The activities and assignments for this chapter are divided into three parts: the ballroom, the romantic ballet, and the classical ballet. During the 19th century the separation between dance in society and on the stage that began in the 18th century continued. The ballroom dances from the 18th century, such as the minuet, became a dance for children. Country dances continued to be popular in England until the waltz and the quadrille were introduced. In the early 19th-century ballroom, the cotillion and the quadrille took over as group dances, while the risqué waltz gained popularity and new national dances surfaced, such as the polka, mazurka, and others that crossed over from the ballroom to the theatrical stage.

## Part I: The 19th-Century Ballroom

Have you seen or participated in a reenactment? It can be a reconstruction of a battle or a re-creation of an event. For example, Renaissance fairs have reenactments of jousting, museums present 18th- and 19th-century balls, groups execute battles from various wars.

Today, it is popular to present events such as a re-creation and reenactment of a 19th-century ball, sometimes as a fund-raiser. People who plan to attend the ball come for several weeks before the event to learn the dances that will be performed at the actual ball. On the evening of the ball, the people dress in costumes of the period. They dance the dances from the period and the refreshments are also from the period and the region.

Balls were an important social function in the 19th century. The following activity explores some of the dances and their relationship to the society—the roles of men and women and the expected manners for the ballroom.

Many dance etiquette books were written during the 19th century to instruct the males and females attending the ball on what to wear and how to act. Manners were an important aspect of acceptance by society and the ability to function successfully in society. How well a person danced was considered a necessary social grace and accomplishment that helped define the person socially. At the ball the dances were performed in a specific order. The major dances from this era are the waltz, the quadrille, and the polka.

### Activity 1. 19th-Century Social Dances

Choose your partner and decide which dance that you want to learn (the waltz or the polka). You will need four couples to perform the quadrille. Using a website from chapter 6 or conducting your own search on the Internet, read about the dance you select. From instructions written in the 19th century, learn the dance and rehearse it to music. Prepare to execute the dance for the class.

The partners or groups performing each of the dances meet as a group and share their research, learn the dance, and practice it to the period music selected. When the groups perform the dance in class, one person from the group will present the research about the dance before the group performs it. Then two people from the group will teach the class how to perform the dance.

Put the waltz, the polka, and the quadrille into the context of the ballroom and society and relate it to 19th-century history. For the next activity, divide into new groups to accomplish the following tasks.

### Activity 2. Ballroom Etiquette

Group 1: Read about the etiquette and conduct in the ballroom, what is required of a dancer, and how the ballroom etiquette related to society and the specific country.

Group 2: Research the political and historical aspects of the 19th century within your geographical region and country. (These provide topics for polite conversation at the ball. Remember the scene of Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler at the Confederate Ball?)

Group 3: Examine the culture—literature, arts, gender roles—and how they were reflected in the society of the times. (Again, these provide topics for polite conversation at the ball.)

Group 4: Search the Internet for information about the dances that were performed and their order at a typical ball.

A reporter from each group will share with the class the group’s research that can be used in creating a reenactment of a 19th-century ball. In many situations, these balls are presented by an organization and committees are created to accomplish the work.

### Activity 3. Planning Your Ball

Plan a 19th-century ball. Each student joins a committee for the ball. Each committee will make the necessary arrangements for the event: order of the dances, music, refreshments, design of the invitations and dance cards for the events, compiling the invitation list, and so on. Select a chairperson for each committee.

* What committees would you need for an event such as a ball?
* Why are you having this ball?
* Who will attend the ball?
* Where (city or town and building) will the ball be held?
* Who are you as an attendee to the ball?
* Who will be the master of ceremonies for the ball?
* Who (organization or person) is giving the ball?

**Attending the Ball**

Each student will assume an identity of a person attending the ball. In your journal, write a brief biography of who you are, describe your attire for the ball, what you have done to prepare for the ball, why you are attending the ball, and your expectations for the evening. You may include a drawing of yourself in your ball gown or evening attire. After the ball, write your impressions of the event, whom you met, and whom you danced with. Compare and contrast your expectations with your impressions.

**After the Ball**

Select a master of ceremonies for the ball who debriefs the participants on their character roles. Or they can introduce themselves in couples or small groups, demonstrating the deportment expected in the ballroom.

After the debriefing, ask committee chairpersons to respond to these questions regarding their selections for the ball:

* What committees were selected for your ball?
* Who attended the ball?
* Where (city or town and building) was the ball held?
* Who are you as an attendee to the ball?
* Who was the master of ceremonies for the ball?
* Who (organization or person) gave the ball?
* Why did they (organization or person) have a ball?
* Do you think the ball was a success? (How many people attended? Was it a pleasant and stimulating social event?)

## Part II: Romantic Period

Discuss these questions in class:

* Do you watch soap operas or prime-time television dramas?
* What kind of dramas do you see in these shows?
* Do you think the dramas are romantic?
* What elements make them romantic?
* What does this idea have to do with the arts? (romantic music, romance novels)
* What makes music romantic?
* What is the difference between a romance novel and a mystery novel?
* Do you know any romantic ballets?

At the beginning of the 19th century, the ideas of humanism that surfaced during the late 18th century expanded. These ideas can be seen in the 18th-century ballet *La Fille Mal Gardée* (1789). During the early 19th century, the arts abounded with emotion, and by the 1820s, ballet became the perfect vehicle for expressing these emotions using movement, or “poetry in motion.” As the 19th century progressed, the division that had developed in the previous century between the social dances in the ballroom and the ballet steps on the stage was even more apparent. In a previous class you explored the social dances of the 19th century and how they related to the society of the times. Here are some questions:

* What new mechanical devices and machines were invented?
* How did these new inventions affect manufacturing?
* How did this type of manufacturing change people’s work habits?
* Do you know what this time period has been called by historians?

In the 19th century, more and more people became employed in factories and the Industrial Age expanded. Seeking escape from their mundane lives, they went to the theater and attended ballets to be entertained and swept away to fantastic places. These ideas were the basis for romantic ballets and romanticism in the arts.

Romanticism began as a literary movement in the second half of 18th-century Germany and blossomed in France in the 1820s and for the next 15 years. In its brief existence, the ballets created were completely different from those of the 18th century.

Watch the romantic ballet *Giselle,* which is considered a prototype of a romantic ballet and is still performed today.

### Activity 1. *Giselle*

View the video production of the ballet *Giselle*.

After watching the ballet, do a reflective writing assignment.

Do some reflective writing on the question *What did you see?* Then share what you saw in the video. Using the following questions, first review act 1. Then repeat the process for act 2. Next, compare and contrast the answers you identified for act 1 and act 2 of the ballet *Giselle*.

* What was the story line in act 1, then act 2?
* Who were the major dance characters in the ballet? List by what act they appeared in.
* What characters appeared in the corps de ballet, and how were they part of the story line? Answer for act 1, then act 2.
* How did the characters use pantomime in the story? Provide examples from major characters in act 1, then act 2.
* Where did the ballet take place? Provide setting for act 1, then act 2.
* Describe the music selections for act 1, then act 2.
* Compare the costumes for characters in act 1, then act 2.

Your instructor may ask you to further research the story line of *Giselle* and learn more about the historical background of the ballet and its production.

Summarize what makes the ballet *Giselle* a prototype of a romantic ballet.

**Extended Learning Activity**

Write how you would revise the ballet. (For example, you might choose a different ending, a different role for the characters, or a different setting for the ballet.)

### Activity 2. Romantic Ballet and Ballerinas

In small groups, choose one of the following activities, then share your research with the class.

* Choice 1: What are the characteristics of romanticism in the arts? How did the characteristics of romanticism appear in romantic ballets (story line, setting, costumes, music, other arts)?
* Choice 2: Compare a romantic ballet to an opera-ballet from the 18th century. For a romantic ballet, view a video production of *Giselle* or *La Sylphide* on the Internet. Select a video performance that is a reconstruction of the original ballet. For an opera-ballet, find a video such as the following example: Rameau’s *Hippolyte & Aricie* ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OksrK1ulHg&index=21&list=RDU3OdDDEs3lg](http://walternelson.com/dr/polka?v=-OksrK1ulHg&index=21&list=RDU3OdDDEs3lg)).
* Choice 3: Research how the development of pointe shoes and how dancing on pointe affected the ballets, ballerinas’ roles, and male roles. Write a one-page report on the history of pointe shoes and include pictures from Internet resources of early pointe shoes to today’s pointe shoes in the report. The following website is a good place to start: [https://brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky\_Institute//courses/13things/7615.html](http://walternelson.com/dr/grand-march).
* Choice 4: What were the various roles that women had in the ballets of the romantic period? Describe the role of men in romantic ballets. How did women’s and men’s roles differ from their roles in both the early and later 18th-century ballets? Include pictures of men and women dancers from each period.

### Activity 3. Female Dancers in Romantic Ballets

View the pictures of women as sylphs, en travesti, and Amazons. Research the role of women in the early part of 19th-century society. Create a concept map that connects the roles women played on the stage to the roles they had or wished to attain in society. How and why did women’s roles change during this period? How and why did women’s roles remain unchanged during this period?

### Activity 4. *Pas de Quatre*

This activity is for ballet students in groups of four. View the video of *Pas de Quatre.* Choose a role and learn the dance. Perform the dance with the group. Use the information you have learned about romanticism, romantic ballet, and the dancer you are representing to support your dance performance. Perform the ballet for the class or for another class or create a video of your performance. The presentation could include an introduction of each of the ballerinas. Before the performance, an interviewer could interview each of the ballerinas separately about the importance of this performance to their careers.

## Part III: Classical Period

Discuss these questions:

* Have you listened to classical music? How would you describe the music? Who were some of the classical composers, and what were some classical works of the 19th century?
* Have you seen a classical ballet? *The Nutcracker* is similar to a romantic ballet in form (2 acts: first act realistic, second act fantasy), but how is it different?
* How do you determine if a ballet is classical? (Hint: What do you know about the ballet *Swan Lake?*)

In a previous class, you studied the characteristics of romantic ballet. Think of these things while you watch the video production of the classical ballet *Swan Lake* today. There are similarities and differences between these two ballets from these different eras. List three similarities and three differences for the romantic ballet and then the classical ballet you selected.

### Activity 1. View *Swan Lake*

Watch a videorecorded performance of *Swan Lake.* After viewing the video, discuss the following questions:

* What was the story line? Who were the main characters? Can you identify the characteristics that make this ballet classical? Look specifically at form (number of acts), costumes, and story. What other elements are necessary? What other elements extended the story line?
* What are the roles of the male and female dancers in this ballet? Who are the corps de ballet (act 1 and act 2)? What is their role? How did the characters use pantomime in the story?
* Did you understand their pantomime? What kinds of dances were performed during the ballet? How would you describe the dances performed by the corps de ballet in the first act? Were they ballet? Were they folk dances? Can you identify some of the countries from which the dancers presented these character dances? What were the characteristics of the Italian dance? The Hungarian dance?

### Activity 2. Understanding *Swan Lake*

Choose one of the activities; then each group will share their findings with the class.

Group 1: Choose a pantomime scene from the ballet video. Learn the pantomime of the characters. (Benois and Siegfried going to hunt swans; the Prince and the Swan Queen proclaiming their love for one another; the Queen Mother telling Siegfried he must find a wife) Perform the pantomime scene for the class; then perform it for the class again and add dialogue to the scene.

Romantic dance pantomime: Watch and reconstruct a dance pantomime scene as it would have been performed in the romantic era. Then transpose the scene into contemporary dance. For example, watch a ballet of *Giselle.* Reconstruct the flower scene from act 1 or the scene between Giselle and Bathilde near the end of the first act.

Group 2: As a group, view two character dances from act 1 and/or act 3. Compare and contrast the steps, figures, costumes, style of the dance, and music for the dances. Create a Venn diagram and present or demonstrate the stylistic elements for the class.

### Activity 3. Reporting From Russia

Review the section on classical ballet in chapter 6.

Imagine you are a visiting European or American reporter in Russia in the late 19th century and the czar invited you to the ballet. Write an article about your observations of the ballet performance. Answer these questions in your article:

* Where did classical ballet develop? Why?
* How did Russian history support the development of classical ballet?
* Who danced in the Russian ballets?
* Who choreographed the ballets?
* Who trained the dancers?
* Who were some of the most prominent classical ballerinas and male dancers?
* What were some of the most significant classical ballets?
* What was the purpose of these ballets?
* Are these ballets still performed today?

### Activity 4. Comparing Romantic and Classical Ballets

In this activity you will compare what you have learned about classical ballet to what you have learned about dance forms in other historical time periods. Your comparison can be a written report or infographic presentation.

**Group 1: Comparing *Giselle* to *Swan Lake***

How are these two ballets the same? How are they different? (characters, male and female roles, groups; form [number of acts and scenes], settings [locations of scenes], dances [solos, pas de deux in terms of amount of supported work and lifts], styles of dancing, types of dancing [pointe work, ballet, folk dance, character dance], amount and use of pantomime to convey the story)

Research and report on the following:

* What was the significance of pointe shoes in each of these periods?
* What were the roles of the men and women in the ballets of these periods?
* Compare and contrast the pas de deux from *Giselle* with a grand pas de deux from *Swan Lake* or *Sleeping Beauty*.

**Group 2: Comparing Court Ballets**

Compare ballet in the 19th-century Russian court with that of Louis XIV’s French court. Start with the historical and social background of each court and then focus on the role of ballet in each court and how the king or czar supported the arts.

### Activity 5. Learning Dance Literature

This activity is for ballet students.

Females: Learn Giselle’s solo in act I (advanced level) and either the Swan Queen’s solo (advanced level) or the Dance of the Four Swans (intermediate level).

Males: Learn Albrecht’s solo in *Giselle* (advanced level) and Siegfried’s solo (advanced level) in *Swan Lake*.

For males and females: Learn the pas de deux from act II of *Giselle* (advanced level) and either the White Swan pas de deux for the Swan Queen and Siegfried in act II (advanced level) or the Black Swan pas de deux (advanced level) from act III in *Swan Lake.*

Perfect each dance and then perform and video your performance. During the process keep a learning log on the insights you gather about each of the dance roles.

View the video performance and then write a short essay comparing and contrasting the role in each ballet, the movements, the quality of the movement, and the style of each ballet. Support each of your claims with information observable in the ballet. Include your preference for a specific dance.

### Activity 6. Comparing Historical Notation Forms

Find examples of 19th-century notation by Frederick Vorn, and compare Vorn’s notation to Feuillet’s or Arbeau’s or Labanotation (if the student knows Labanotation). What are the similarities and differences? Copy examples for each. If possible, find examples of the same or similar step or dance to use for comparison.

# Web Links

An American Ballroom Companion: dance instruction manuals  
[https://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920/?q=&fa=Subject%3ADance+Instruction+and+Technical+Manuals](http://walternelson.com/dr/victorian-dance?q=&fa=Subject%3ADance+Instruction+and+Technical+Manuals)

Etiquette for the ballroom  
[https://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920/?q=&fa=Subject%3AEtiquette](http://walternelson.com/dr/victorian-quadrille?q=&fa=Subject%3AEtiquette)

Proper behavior and attire for the 19th-century American man  
[http://walternelson.com/dr/?q=node/18](http://walternelson.com/dr/victorian-waltz?q=node/18)

Regency dance: styling, carriage, and deportment  
[http://walternelson.com/dr/node/678](https://www.youtube.com/watch)

Regency waltzes  
[http://walternelson.com/dr/regency-waltz](https://brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute//courses/13things/7615.html)

*The Scholar’s Companion—Cotillions and Country Dances* (1796)  
[http://walternelson.com/dr/scholars-companion](https://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920/)

*The Complete System of English Country Dancing* (1815)  
[http://walternelson.com/dr/wilson-system](http://www.geographia.com/russia/rushis01.htm)

*Elements of the Art of Dancing* (1822)  
[http://walternelson.com/dr/strathy](http://www.bolshoirussia.com/theatre/bolshoi/history)

Quadrille: naming and numbering of couples  
[https://www.loc.gov/item/42048497/](http://walternelson.com/dr/node/678)

Quadrille video clip  
[https://www.loc.gov/item/musdivid.002/](http://walternelson.com/dr/regency-waltz)

Victorian dance  
[http://walternelson.com/dr/victorian-dance](https://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920/)

The Victorian waltz  
[http://walternelson.com/dr/victorian-waltz](http://walternelson.com/dr/strathy)

The Victorian polka  
[http://walternelson.com/dr/polka](http://www.mariinsky.ru/en/about/history/mariinsky_theatre)

The grand march  
[http://walternelson.com/dr/grand-march](http://walternelson.com/dr/scholars-companion)

The quadrille  
[http://walternelson.com/dr/victorian-quadrille](http://walternelson.com/dr/wilson-system)

History of ancient Russia  
[www.geographia.com/russia/rushis01.htm](http://walternelson.com/dr/)

Bolshoi Theatre history  
[www.bolshoirussia.com/theatre/bolshoi/history](https://www.loc.gov/item/42048497/)

Mariinsky Theatre history  
[www.mariinsky.ru/en/about/history/mariinsky\_theatre](https://www.loc.gov/item/musdivid.002/)

# Review Questions

1. What was society like during the romantic and classical periods?
2. Who were the dancers and other contributors to dance during this period?
3. What were the dances, music, and other arts that supported dance during these periods?
4. What were the significant dances, ballets, and literature of each period?

# Vocabulary

## Romantic Ballet

Blasis, Carlo

Bournonville, August

cachucha

Cerrito, Fanny

*Code of Terpsichore, The*

Coralli, Jean

cotillion

*Elementary Treatise Upon the Theory and Practice of the Art of Dancing, The*

Elssler, Fanny

Gautier, Théophile

*Giselle*

Grahn, Lucile

Grisi, Carlotta

lancers

*Pas de Quatre*

Perrot, Jules

polka

polonaise

quadrille

romantic ballet

romanticism

*Sylphide, La*

Taglioni, Filippo

Taglioni, Marie

Viganò, Salvatore

waltz

## Classical Ballet

Bolshoi Theatre

Cecchetti, Enrico

*Coppélia*, or *The Girl With Enamel Eyes*

galop

Ivanov, Lev

Legnani, Pierina

Maryinsky Theatre

*Nutcracker, The*

Petipa, Marius

Saint-Léon, Arthur

*Sleeping Beauty, The*

*Swan Lake* (*Lac des cygnes)*

Zucchi, Virginia