

DEMYSTIFYING POINTE WORK: BEAUTIFUL ART FORM, OR TREACHEROUS PHYSICAL ENDANGERMENT?

In the 1830's, famous ballerina Marie Taglioni began dancing en pointe, showcased in ballets choreographed for her by her father Filippo Taglioni. These include "La Sylphide", which was the first ballet for a ballerina en pointe with an artistic aesthetic, a big difference from the acrobatic stunts that dancing en pointes began as. Images of Taglioni were synonymous with grace and delicacy.

A lot has changed since 1830. We now know that dancing en pointe takes a serious commitment to training, great physical strength and mental fortitude. Pointe shoes give the female dancer an edge: ballerinas can be quicker, lighter, more aerodynamic and in some ways even stronger en pointe. However, to achieve this takes a remarkable amount of work on the part of both dancer and teacher.

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Marie Taglioni pictured in an 1831 lithograph. She is quite famously pictured dancing on her toes, showcasing her extreme femininity and lightness. Pointe shoes were devised to make the ballerinas of the early 1800's appear to be as light as air. Their counterpart male dancers were, in contrast, less agile and more muscular. Pointe shoes exaggerated the difference between male and female techniques and appearances in those early days.

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In the mid-20th century, there was a big backlash against the art form, propelled by dancers who had been harmed or disfigured by toe shoes. They had been put en pointe before they were ready and/or were not properly trained from the beginning stages. Many may have had feet which were pre-disposed to injury, and most of them (if not all) had teachers who were not expert enough in their field to properly teach pointework. Gruesome photos of feet which had been permanently damaged were circulated, and thus a big change was made in most ballet schools, especially in America. This change had students waiting until they were 12 years of age or older to get their pointe shoes; after the bones in their feet had completely ossified, thinking injuries would be prevented.

Surely fewer students were harmed with the new approach. Unfortunately it's probable that most of the dancers were also unable to achieve their full potential by going en pointe so late in their training. It's best that pointework be started before the bones of the feet are completely formed. Under an experienced instructor's tutelage, the ankle and foot can be shaped to better suit pointework, and with more longevity. Both can be coaxing into more flexibility, which minimizes injury in the long run. Very few people have feet perfectly suited for pointe shoes, but feet can be improved with diligence, and just about every well-trained dancer can achieve beauty en pointe.

Both the famous Vaganova Institute in St. Petersburg, Russia and the most prestigious training school in the United States, Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet, have continued to put their female students in pointe shoes at early ages and have achieved great success. Both schools boast some of the most qualified and experienced instructors that exist today, which is key to the success of the training offered by these institutions. The other major factor to the success of putting younger dancers en pointe is the number of hours they spend in the studio. At the Vaganova and CPYB schools, the dancers either live there (in the case of the Russians) or take a minimum of 18 weekly classes before they are put en pointe (CPYB requirements). At 7-8 years of age. Amazing. The success of schools such as these has helped the pendulum swing back the other way in regard to accepted ages that dancers begin dancing en pointe. Most informed parents realize now that there are differences between schools and the level of expertise offered by the instructors.

Here in Santa Cruz, we realize it is not realistic to expect children between 7 and 8 to spend their whole formative lives in the ballet studio, nor can we provide boarding services. We also recognize the effects of burn-out at young ages if students are pushed too hard too early. Our syllabus implements the discipline of classical ballet training starting in Level Ia and builds from there on solid growth, both mentally and physically. Dancers entering Level II recognize the rewards of attaining long-term goals. Ballet is a slow process. It takes the discipline of years of hard work before it blossoms into the beautiful art form realized in professional dancers.

Our instructors are experienced in all aspects of training, and we pride ourselves in the success of our students. A dedicated student with almost any body type can be trained to become a good dancer. Success in this field relies even more on desire and hard work than it does on natural ability. We currently have a class of Level IIb girls who will begin preparatory pointe training this winter, next spring or in the summer. Each student is different. Some come equipped with a body pre-disposed to the rigors of ballet. Some demonstrate mental maturity, so necessary for the challenges of pointe. The girls will each mature and develop in their own time. Reaching this milestone takes care and precision and we are here to help each student achieve success.

I recently read an article on the website of another school which had me completely dumbfounded. It explained how the student will know when they are ready to buy pointe shoes. What to look for in yourself so you know you are ready to go to the store. At The Studio, we would never put this responsibility in the hands of the student dancer. We will let you know clearly when it's time to buy your first pair of shoes. In fact, we will even direct you to the store to go to and equip you with a fact sheet to take to your first fitting. Pointe shoes are not for recreation. They are a reward of hard work and determination. Once your shoes are purchased, the fit will be checked to be absolutely sure they are the right shoes for each student. Then the dancers will be taught how to sew the ribbons and elastic onto the shoes. Correct: this responsibility is not that of parents. It is our goal to prepare each student as completely as possible for this milestone and for the subsequent training en pointe.

The nitty-gritty of what to expect includes physical aptitude and preparedness. We will not put a student in pointe shoes who is not ready. Heredity may include predisposition to bunions, low arches or instep, or tight achilles tendons. If severe, these genetic problems may make it more difficult for the student to enjoy pointework, but it is doubtful they will keep a dancer from going en pointe safely. Tendons and feet can be stretched. Toe

spacers can be worn and shoes properly fitted to alleviate the possibility of bunions. Your instructor will explain how to cut your toenails straight across to prevent ingrown toenails. The toes will build calluses, which will protect the skin from blisters. There is probably no classical ballet dancer who was also a foot model — so if you've got two dreams: ballerina and foot model, you should probably make the choice before you start pointework.

Parents who have medical questions or concerns are encouraged to visit a Dance Medicine professional:

- Dr. S. Chris Horine, Podiatrist, foot and ankle specialist
- Dr. Peter Gerbino, Orthopedist, knee and hip specialist

Both of these professionals are very knowledgeable about classical ballet training and have many years of experience treating dancers. We have the utmost respect for each doctor and will be happy to provide you with a business card for either of them.

Ballet dancers are high-level athletes as well as artists. Successful dancers push their bodies to the ultimate limits, and along the way job-related hazards can result. Just like a world-class tennis player or football quarterback can develop tendonitis in the elbow, ballet dancers can have bouts of tendonitis or muscle pain. It is our opinion that the benefits of ballet training outweigh the detriments about 100 to 1.

Dancing en pointe requires determination and focus. Once a certain level of proficiency is reached, it can be amazingly fun. Ultimately, it is as exhilarating to achieve as it is to observe. Starting pointework is probably the greatest milestone on the road to achieving this beauty. It is not an easy journey, but well worth the time and effort. We are here to help our young charges achieve success.

Article by Diane Cypher



There is no substitute for an experienced instructor's watchful eye to ensure foot and ankle alignment is correct throughout the formative years of training, here demonstrated by Linda Lock.

See next page for an up-close study of this alignment.

ANATOMY OF PROPER FOOT AND ANKLE ALIGNMENT FOR POINTE WORK

Figure 1

Student Hayley Blackman executes an arabesque en pointe, demonstrating excellent alignment of the whole body, especially of the supporting leg. See how straight the leg is, how lifted the supporting instep, the full use of the calf muscle to support the foot in the pointe shoe, and the strong use of rotation, from the top of the leg all the way down to the tip of the pointe shoe.



Figure 2 shows all of the above-mentioned musculature and alignment up close. Notice the back of the leg well over the foot. This not only helps with balance, but makes it possible to retain a high instep in the pointe shoe, facilitating the weight of the entire body well up over the box of the shoe.

Figure 3
In this closeup of the foot en pointe, we see the high instep, foot over the box of the shoe and the calf muscle fully utilized to support the foot and ankle. Notice also, that the dancer is wearing Freed classic shoes, which require a great amount of strength, but give the accomplished dancer an excellent amount of control.

