

THE PURPOSE OF BARRE WORK

In recent years *barre* work seems to have become very elaborate. It is now quite the fashion when observing ballet classes at a vocational level to see long and complex exercises being given, many of which contain *pirouettes* and *allegro* steps. This phenomenon brings into question the purpose of *barre* work.

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insists that *barre* exercises ‘are to the dancer what scales and arpeggios are to the musician’ cautioning dancers to ‘remember always that it is of far greater importance to execute ten movements correctly than execute a hundred in a careless or slovenly manner’. (1977, 58) These words of advice suggest exercises should be relatively simple and repetitive in order to perfect detail, seemingly a direct contradiction to modern practice. However, as Cecchetti did not, in the main, work with students in training, but with fully fledged professional dancers it could be argued that to compare his method to current vocational trends is not appropriate. For this reason the views of other eminent international teachers will be taken into consideration.

Barre work, sometimes described as ‘side practice’, should assist in the development and maintenance of technique. Ballet requires that the placing of the dancer’s weight should be poised over the balls of the feet so as to ensure rotation of the legs. The training of ‘turn out’ as this rotation is referred to, must begin at the *barre*. Only by fully rotating the legs from the top may aplomb, balance and aesthetically pleasing line be attained. This placing is particularly challenging when standing on one leg. Common faults are to ‘sit back’ on the supporting heel in extensions front and back, and ‘swing’ away from the supporting leg during extensions to the side. Both these habits limit leg rotation.

George Balanchine was most particular. Suki Schorer, a student of his, remembers ‘Mr B wanted each dancer standing square to the barre. Sometimes he divided the class into two groups so we could be properly placed at the barre’. (Schorer, 1999, 46). As well as requiring the dancers to stand sideways ‘square to the barre’ when working in second, they often stood facing the *barre* when working *derrière*, and back to the barre when working *devant*. Balanchine maintained that by twisting and turning diagonally, correct placing and alignment would be compromised. By deliberately omitting the *écarté*, *croisé* and *ouverte* directions at the *barre* he aimed to avoid misplacement.

Working evenly is an important aspect. At the *barre*, the legs and feet are able to work together and equally, but the arms and upper body, cannot move so freely. The hand at the *barre*, unable to participate in arm lines must be placed correctly so as not to destabilise posture. It should be placed, rather than ‘gripped’, slightly in front of the body with the elbow relaxed. The common fault is to put the hand too far back and/or stand too close to the *barre* which results in faulty stance. The use of diagonal lines at the barre means the dancer is having to think of this hand placement at an odd angle, something that is not required later in the centre and therefore adds unnecessary complications.

Indeed how the dancer thinks is important. When a *pirouette* or *fouetté en tournant* is required at the *barre*, concentration on placing can be interrupted as the dancer negotiates the removal and replacing of their hand. Eye focus is then affected, thus disturbing the equilibrium required for a *pirouette*. Here, the use of the barre has positively hindered the movement rather than awakening the virtuoso quality so necessary for *pirouettes*.

Quality and dynamics are a very important aspect of *barre* work. If the dancer is to develop quick foot work, a complex sequence will not be beneficial.

Agrippina Vaganova advocates repetition explaining ‘there is nothing bad about the exercises being tedious in their monotony’ and goes on to advise that ‘this monotony can be broken by doing the movements in different time, four-four and two-four’(1969, 15). This illustrates not only that she valued the principle of repetition but sought to change the dynamics of the exercises through the use of music, a principle Richard Glasstone endorses when he says, ‘Each action at the barre needs to be performed with a specific dynamic. Precise rhythmic action and musical phrasing are of paramount importance’ (1997, 82). The fact that Vaganova refers to the training of children, while Glasstone’s comments apply more generally, serves to confirm that both the training of children and the maintaining of strong technique of professional dancers are similar in principle. One wonders why the training should be different for vocational students. Obviously the brain must be trained to ‘pick up’ and retain unfamiliar sequences. However, it would surely be more beneficial to do this later in the centre once the body has been prepared at the *barre*.

The ‘importance’ to which Glasstone refers is that of the exercises directly relating to the steps that are to be performed in the centre. Steps, like words, have different emphases, giving *enchainments* light and shade. Some steps are regarded as ‘highlights’ while others, less obvious, link one step to another. An example of the latter is the *glissade*. The perfection of this movement benefits from work at the *barre*. The speed with which the second foot closes is vital. If a *glissade* is executed by closing the second foot into fifth position quickly, the link into the step it precedes will be strong because the foot will almost close and ‘push off’ simultaneously. If, conversely, the second foot closes slowly the ‘take off’ is impaired, losing the attack required to highlight the step that follows it. It stands to reason then that a series of quick *degagés* at the *barre* will develop the required speed in the step. When a complete *glissade* is executed at the *barre*, the quality of ‘link’ is lost and the step is merely decorative.

Grand jetés en tournant are another case in point. To execute this step at the *barre*, which is sometimes seen, is to defeat its quality. It is an exciting movement which consists of a *grand battement sauté devant*, a *fouetté* and a *jeté*. All these movements require clear spacial orientation as the dancer changes direction in the air. The step is usually preceded by a *pas de bourrée*, of a running quality which covers ground before the actual *jeté* soars into the air.

None of this is possible at the *barre*. Indeed the *barre* may only assist in the placing of the initial *grand battements* and *fouetté* actions taken much earlier in the class and ‘square to the *barre*’ as Balanchine advocates.

It is worth considering too that whenever a dancer is injured or a student confused over the execution of a step, they are taken ‘back to the *barre*’. This very expression implies that one is going back to the beginning or back to basics to remedy or improve something. The structure of a ballet class develops. Exercises at the *barre* are followed by the same exercises in the centre in order to strengthen equilibrium. It is in this section of the class, centre practice, that the diagonal lines of *écarté*, *croisé* and *overté* can be explored to the full. Both arms are free to move and may flow from one line to the next with ease.

Traditionally the centre practice is followed by *adage*, *pirouettes* and *allegro* all of which require an adequate and balanced amount of time. Current trends seem to favour a less balanced structure. The *barre* work is no longer used as a mere preparation for work in the centre but now takes up a large percentage of time at the expense of real dancing in the centre. One hopes this trend is just that, and that soon the pendulum will swing back to the beliefs of the illustrious teachers quoted here. Simplicity and common sense cannot damage a dancer but bad habits developed through careless placement at the beginning of class may.

Bibliography

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