

Introduction

For admirers of the famously refined Mariinsky Ballet—home to many of the world’s most famous dancers and the repository of what many consider to be the pinnacle of Russian achievement in dance—it may come not as just a surprise but a genuine shock to hear one of the great teachers of our time:

Unfortunately I must declare that very little has remained of Vaganova’s method. The patience of pedagogues to teach children and adults, and the attention of the dancers to learn the coordination, I think it is all a bit broken, and now our famous Leningrad Ballet School is being combined with other schools that suddenly come from the periphery. The actual initial students of Vaganova, they are, you can say, better than today’s children because . . . because they relate to it with responsibility. But for this generation of dancers today, for some reason it seems to me that they somehow decided it’s not required of them, it’s not necessary. And I am very upset about this.

One might expect a product of the Soviet system like Ninella Kurgapkina—the famous spitfire ballerina—to perhaps blindly support the system she herself has helped to preserve, but Kurgapkina’s opinions are surprisingly candid. With a diploma in choreography and considerable teaching credits, she remains one of the preeminent names in Russian ballet circles, a ballerina who danced with Rudolf Nureyev before his defection, and one graced with the titles Honored Artist of the RSFSR

(1957), People's Artist of the RSFSR (1966), and People's Artist of the USSR (1974).

A small woman with straight, often uncombed gray hair, void of makeup and jewelry, and more reminiscent of a country peasant than a decorated former ballerina, Kurgapkina is unhesitating in her frankness. She spoke at length about Agrippina Vaganova's role in the traditions of the Mariinsky Theatre and Academy of Russian Ballet—now known as the Vaganova Academy—at our meeting just two weeks before her death in May 2009. Her staunch, unyielding opinions about the great pedagogue are quite unguarded, but as I discovered, she is not alone in her criticisms of the recent evolution of the great Vaganova school and the pedagogues who guard Vaganova's legacy.

Still, others take a longer view. Tatiana Terekhova—a famous ballerina and pedagogue in her own right—declares that while some elements may have been lost over time, the core values of Vaganova training still continue to produce superior dancers with honed artistry and crisp technique.

Who was this woman, Agrippina Vaganova, and how did she manage to leave such an indelible imprint on Russian classical ballet? How has her name influenced so many people and been linked with such a deep cultural tradition? And why is the continuation of the traditions she instilled such a hotbed of debate, even today?



Born in 1879, when the tsars still ruled in Russia, Agrippina Yakovlevna Vaganova was a modern woman for her generation. Unlike other dancers from her era, Vaganova's country, culture, and the time when she came into her art all conspired to create a legendary figure who would leave an indelible mark on Russian ballet and become a name known worldwide. Her long life spanned several periods in Russia, and the legacy she left behind as the codifier of the Vaganova method of ballet training is now recognized internationally for its contributions to the art of ballet. With her death in 1951, well after her country had adopted and instilled the Communist Party as its dominant political system, an epoch in Russian ballet ended. Since then, many of Vaganova's own pupils have completed successful stage careers and are now coaching today's leading ballerinas. Several individuals who were trained directly by Agrippina Yakovlevna

herself to become pedagogues are now in their eighties, still teaching at the Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet in Saint Petersburg.

Some of the best names in ballet have trained under Vaganova's methodology: Rudolf Nureyev, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Yuri Soloviev, Irina Kolpakova, and Natalia Makarova among them. Each dancer studied at the famed Academy on Rossi Street in Petersburg—or Petrograd, or Leningrad, depending on its name in a given year—and each went on to become a legend of sorts in his or her own right.

“Vaganova training” carries with it great prestige. Graduates of the Academy are offered employment contracts with the best international ballet companies. Not infrequently, a member of the Mariinsky corps de ballet will be given a soloist or principal contract elsewhere in the world, pointing to the high standards of training, the clean technique that dancers acquire from the Academy. And yet, when we refer to “Vaganova training” today, it is with the understanding that we credit those many important pedagogues who continued the work of Vaganova after her death, for they are not only part of her legacy but are now the proverbial carriers of her torch for future generations of ballet artists.

Before Vaganova, what system of training existed in Russia? In the 1800s, teachers from Italy and France brought their own traditions and teachings to the Russian stage. With them, both French and Italian ballerinas performed in Russia, gaining enormous popularity in Petersburg. Names such as Pierina Legnani, Virginia Zucchi, and Carlotta Brianza were well known to the theatergoing public of the 1880s and 1890s, but they were not Russian dancers. The French school at the end of the nineteenth century was characterized by overly decorative movements described by Vaganova as “saccharine sweetness” with flaccid poses and limited virtuosity.¹ The Italian school, on the other hand, according to Vaganova, focused on virtuosity at the expense of poetry and substance.² The main guides to classical ballet included the four-volume issue of *The Letters about Dance* by Noverre, published upon the order of Tsar Alexander I in 1803–1804, and Carlo Blasis's *The Code of Terpsichore*, published in 1828, which codified existing French technique and laid the foundation for the Italian school. Russia had nothing systematized or codified of its own.

The result was a mix of styles, but an uncategorized and unstandardized one. The idea of focusing on the process of teaching ballet was

unique at the turn of the nineteenth century and had not been done in Russia before. Vaganova's efforts to take the best from the existing knowledge, improve upon it, systemize it, and further develop virtuosic technique was unprecedented in Russia. She worked to teach dancers a conscious approach to each movement. Her students not only learned steps, but the reason for them and how they should be executed. Vaganova's work gradually set in place an ideal standard for what became known as the distinctly "Russian" school. Through trial and error, and research, Vaganova prompted her pupils to find the reasons behind unsuccessful execution of steps, thereby instilling a standard execution and a new, more conscious approach to ballet movements that would become the backbone of the strongest ballet tradition in the world.

In the end, the Vaganova system taught dancers to dance with the entire body to acquire harmony of movement and to expand their range of expression.³ This ideal harmony, characterized by a pliant, flexible back, well-articulated *port de bras*, emotionally vibrant expression, and strong, clean footwork is now recognized the world over as a sign of Vaganova training.