

BALLET IDAHO STUDY GUIDE
Ballet with King Louis XIV
A brief history of ballet from 1643-1903

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Performance by Ballet Idaho Youth Ensemble

Magnificence, extravagance, artificiality, a tiny society in which everyone knew every detail of everyone else's life; that was the court of King Louis XIV, the Sun King of France from 1643-1715. It was into this world that the professional ballet was born, for Louis was an accomplished dancer and appeared in many court "ballets" beginning at age 12. At age 32, affairs of state and his royal dignity (he had grown rather fat) caused him to give them up. He did, however, continue to perform his favorite ballroom dances.



Imagine what life was like 350 years ago, in the pre-electric world, when young people did not have Game Boys, iPods and television for entertainment. Palaces and homes were lit with candles as this was before electricity had been discovered. People traveled on foot, by horseback or by horse and carriage. Children did not attend school!

King Louis brought honor, grace, victory and fame to France. France was at peace during most of his reign and he was able to spend lavishly on beautiful buildings; notably the Palace of Versailles where he performed in the Hall of Mirrors. He loved beautiful gardens and enjoyed firework displays. Louisiana was colonized by France and is named

after him. He was a truly remarkable man. Tall and vigorous, he outlived his son and grandson (perhaps because he danced so much!). His favorite role was in the 13-hour performance of *La Ballet de la Nuit* (Ballet of the Night) where he appeared as the Rising Sun. This is how he got his nickname Le Roi de le Soleil, or the Sun King.

In 1661, Louis established an Academy of Ballet at the Paris Opera which still exists today. At this academy, the principles of ballet technique as an art form were laid out and established. Only men attended this academy and danced in the ballets - mainly due to the fact that women were encumbered with elaborate heavy dresses made of brocade. While the fashion for men and boys allowed them to participate in horse riding, lawn bowls, fencing, rowing, and climbing trees with ease, the females were so restricted by their dress that the only ballet they could master was the required curtsey. Curtseys were given to the king, to parents, servants had to curtsey to masters, and young girls had to curtsey to their elders. The curtsey is still part of ballet etiquette today and is practiced by dancers from their first day of ballet class. It is performed at the end of every class as a reverence or “thank you.”

About 70 years later, in 1726, the ballet was revolutionized by the French/Belgian dancer, Marie Camargo, who was the first ballet dancer to appear on stage in a dress with a shortened skirt. She was also one of the few female dancers who dared to dance on stage with the men. La Camargo started a new fashion for women as she adapted her hairstyle to be less cumbersome and her dress was made of lighter fabric. She also invented a new ballet step called an “entrechat quatre” which is a light jump in the air during which the feet beat against each other. From then on, women were accepted as ballet dancers but because men performed more exciting jumps and turns, women were still considered to be not as good as men until the Romantic Period.

In the 1830s, the Industrial Revolution had people working in dreary factories with the smell of smoke, steam and coal. The relentless noise and oppressive atmosphere placed a great deal of stress on the lives of the workers. In order to escape from the grey, dull factory work, they read romantic poetry, listened to romantic music composed by Beethoven, Chopin, and Schubert, went to see operas by Verdi and went to the ballet to see sylph-like creatures in ethereal white costumes gliding through forests. The beautiful images in the ballet of supernatural, magical creatures lifted the imaginations of the audience to new levels. In the same way, today the magical supernatural characters in the Harry Potter, Aragon or Inkheart novels lift readers to a new level of perception of possibilities.

The ballerina who drew the largest audiences for her ethereal grace and beauty was Marie Taglioni (pronounced Tal-ee-on-ee). Taglioni was trained by her father, Filippo. He was a famous dancer and determined that his daughter would become a major star. He pushed her to practice more and more every day. As a result, she became extremely strong and was the first dancer to dance on her toes. She did this to give the appearance that she had taken off in flight. The costumes worn by ballerinas at this time were calf-length, light and easy to move in. They became known as romantic tutus.



Other dancers copied Taglioni. In particular, Fanny Elssler who introduced a fiery dance influenced by Spanish folk dance called *La Cachucha*. Taglioni and Elssler became great rivals. Taglioni was soft and ethereal and Elssler was vibrant and dynamic. They were both stars at the box office of the Paris Opera and commanded excellent salaries.

Whereas, Taglioni started performing in Russia, Elssler traveled to America in 1840 and performed for two years. She was such a success that Congress adjourned whenever she appeared in Washington. While on a boat to Cuba, a thief stole into her stateroom to steal her jewels and she knocked him out with a kick!

In 1845, Queen Victoria of England commissioned the choreographer Jules Perrot to choreograph a ballet starring four ballerinas of the Romantic period. The ballerinas were: Marie Taglioni, Fanny Cerrito, and Carlotta Grisi from Italy, and Lucille Grahn from Denmark. This famous ballet is titled *Pas de Quatre* or “dance for four.” It is famous for the fact that it is unusual to see four famous ballerinas all appearing in the same ballet, especially as the ballerinas did not like each other very much and were extremely jealous of one another.

After the Romantic period, the choreographers and teachers moved to Russia and there was a decline in the quality of ballet in both Paris and London. However, from 1871 to 1903, the famous choreographer, Marius Petipa, created over 50 ballets. Most of his ballets are still performed today, including *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake* and *Don Quixote*. Tchaikovsky and Minkus were two composers that Petipa collaborated with during this time.

Today, ballet is taught and performed throughout the world and retains the French terminology for the vocabulary of steps.



Discussion Questions and Activities

- 1) Find a picture of King Louis XIV and color it in. Compare men's fashion of the 16th century with the fashion today.
- 2) Make a list of activities that children could possibly do in the 16th and 17th centuries and compare them with what children do today.
- 3) What new invention changed activities during the Industrial Revolution?
- 4) Name three romantic composers, three romantic writers and three romantic painters.
- 5) The ballet uses a combination of ballet steps and movements to interpret the story. What other ballets do you know? Make a list or research the names of other ballets.
- 6) Verbs will be danced by the dancers in the performance. After the performance, make a list of all the verbs you observed.

Idaho Humanities Standards Dance addressed

Standard 1: Historical and Cultural Contexts

K-3 D.1.1.2, K-3 D1.1.1. K-8D 1.1.2

Standard 2: Critical thinking

K-3 D 2.1.1., K-3D 2.1.2 K-D 2.1.2 K-8D2.2.1. K-8D 2.2.3

Standard 3: Performance

K-3D 1.1.1, K-D3.1.2, K-3D3.3.4