A Vaganova Examination

by Michael Popkin

At the time of her death in 1951 Agrippina Yakovlevna Vaganova was the foremost teacher of the Imperial Russian ballet tradition. Born in 1879, she’d danced for Petipa in Imperial Russia and survived the revolution. An advocate of strict classicism, in 1934 she was appointed director of the ballet academy at the Maryinsky theater in St. Petersburg (before the revolution, the Imperial Ballet School where she herself had studied) and at that school rigorously preserved a ballet curriculum throughout the Soviet era that was based on the classical values she had imbibed under the ancien regime. Today the school at the Maryinsky theater bears her name and the syllabus she taught there is considered the purest form of Russian classicism at its fountainhead; meanwhile here in America, the Kirov Academy of Ballet in Washington D.C. — a ballet school founded a couple of decades ago as a boarding academy for promising dancers — maintains Vaganova’s teaching syllabus in the purest and most traditional form that is to be found in the United States, or perhaps anywhere else outside of Russia. All teaching curriculums include both substantive elements (content) and teaching methods; and a key part of the Vaganova curriculum is a yearly examination of dancers, grouped by level, each spring. Modeled on the structure and content of a standard ballet class under her syllabus, but without instruction (the exam is danced from memory) or corrections, a Vaganova examination has the attributes of a public performance. There’s piano accompaniment; and the teacher of each group, having rehearsed matters carefully, puts each class through its evolutions in a carefully choreographed sequence of exercises on which the students receive grades and written corrections from the academy’s artistic staff.

These yearly exams are preserved at the Kirov Academy along with the teaching, and on March 15 and 16 of this year I got to attend them at the Academy’s studios in Northeast Washington. The students were divided into five levels. On the first day, Level 1, girls ages 15 to 22 (the most advanced class, including several “Advanced Studies” students who have completed high school) danced first, to be followed later in the morning by Level 2, with boys of the same age. In the afternoon it was the turn of the Level 3 girls, aged roughly 15 to 17; while the next day came the youngest girls in two groups: Level 4 first, ages 13 to 16, followed by Level 5, with girls and one boy ages 10 to 12. Each group’s examination lasted between an hour and an hour and a half; and as each class followed the other, the aesthetics and rationale of the training was laid bare. (This year the normal order of the examinations, from youngest to oldest, was reversed; we were told this was to accommodate some older students’ trip to the Youth America Grand Prix in New York). And in a year when I had by March already seen more than twenty-five ballet performances on stage (both at New York City Ballet and, in Washington, during ABT’s brief season at the Kennedy Center), the exams were, surprisingly, one of the most uplifting artistic experiences I have had from the points of view of both the aesthetic pleasure of watching ballet; and the related intellectual satisfaction of consciously appreciating the harmonious ideals at the root of this art form that I love.
* * *

Although I’ve never been a dancer myself, over about the past twenty years I’ve been generally observing a couple of ballet classes a year, at School of American Ballet in New York and elsewhere, as a means of educating myself about classical dance, and a counterpoint to attending performances. These were thus very far from the first ballet classes I’d seen; but watching these exams, major differences from other classes I’ve seen immediately became evident. The first and most basic thing one noticed was the infinite attention paid to how the dancers presented themselves in this as opposed to other pedagogic systems. Not only was there a marked beauty of carriage and alignment in how the dancers’ carried themselves — the elegant pull up and alignment of the back, neck and head; the rounding of the chest outward with the shoulders down that one associates with the Russian school — but something more than this, a self presentation that involved how the dancers walked and ran, their facial expressions, and the very way they had been taught to breathe. You saw it, paradoxically, as much during the transitional moments between exercises on display than during the demonstrations themselves, and perhaps even more strikingly then because it was unexpected.

In principle, there are a good many transitional moments during a ballet class. As each begins with basic elements (such as tendus of the foot and back bends at the barre) before proceeding to more complicated evolutions or moving on to other exercises, such as jumps and turns in the middle of the floor, there are first of all the moments when one element ends and the other begins. Then also, in the center of the floor generally two or more groups of students work in succession even during the same class and here the groups have to change places:

![Students of Level 1. Photo by Paolo Galli.](image-url)
those on floor have to run off while those standing at the side then take their places. Generally these are the down moments, the time when even professional dancers mill about, but as it’s precisely at such times that you see someone’s posture, carriage and affect without the restriction of formal dance, it’s revealing. And what you saw here immediately could not have contrasted more than what was usual in other schools/Schools: the transitions were beautifully accomplished; they were part of the class. The girls would end each combination with a moment of quiet introspection, lowering their arms to the front and quietly breathing for a few seconds, while consciously accomplishing a subtle final change of position with their wrists and hands, their faces demurely turned to the side (in effacé) and their facial expressions beautifully neutral — modest, composed, aware of the audience, yet self collected and intelligent, with their eyes lowered just so. A highly lyrical atmosphere was created; with the girls moving in unison, and perhaps a quiet Chopin waltz concluding on the piano, and with the early spring sunlight filtering in the window, you felt that you’d stepped into the perfumed atmosphere of Les Sylphides. Also with respect to expression, it was striking (and again in contrast to the usual experience) that not only did the studio have no visible mirrors (in fact the mirrors were fully curtained); but also that, with near uniformity, the students displayed none of the self consciousness and sense of looking at themselves instead of experiencing the music and the meaning of their steps that so often mars ballet class.

As indicated, the girls in particular ran and walked most beautifully, moving with their arms held parallel to the floor and elegant ports de bras, and likewise with a lovely spring to their steps on half pointe. During classes given elsewhere I’ve often heard the teachers say things like: “Girls, present yourselves;” or, “Girls, make the run beautiful now. They’re watching your backs so make it a beautiful back.” In a training regime, all the same, that does little or nothing to teach the students how to run, and to walk, and to drill that knowledge into them; where there is neither time nor systematic inclination to inculcate this, such refinements remain...
mere admonitions. On the contrary, the carriage of the arms, the runs across the floor, the modest finishes in effacé that I have mentioned, the quiet breathing, and the demurely intelligent expression of the eyes — all these things are treated as the very foundation blocks of the Vaganova training and not as things to be added at the end merely as grace notes; and what was obvious from the first instant was that they had been assimilated and internalized by these students accordingly. I’ve never seen such elements more beautifully presented. The pianists’ musical choices by the way — especially the simple and traditional ballet music chosen by Regina Martin, who accompanied all but one of the girls’ classes — including airs from *La Bohème*, waltzes from *Coppélia* and *Swan Lake*, and snatches from the grand pas de deux from *Don Quixote* and *La Bayadère* were also particularly effective in fostering the sense of calm artistic elevation that I’m trying to describe. As dependent as dance is on music for both its rhythm and mood, this is not in itself surprising; but the degree to which the dancers expressed the music emotionally while doing nothing more than demonstrating basic step combinations was very unusual and artistic and set this examination and curriculum apart from any other I’d seen. They were training artists and not just dancers.

* * *

As group followed group, it became clear that the syllabus aimed at building the students’ strength and control (particularly in the torso or core of the body) with the intermediate goal being to coordinate and position the legs from the hips and arms from the shoulders harmoniously with each other, all the while keeping a plumb and solid foundation in the supporting leg and back, to the end of presenting beautiful and simple visual lines from and through the limbs and body. That building the dancers’ strength (in an intelligent way of teaching) was a goal appeared from the fact that the same elemental steps and poses were repeated by each age group during the examinations, but made progressively more

*Students of Level 4. Photo by Paolo Galli.*
complex and difficult as the exams proceeded from younger to older students. A simple example was how a series of seven jumps from second position that was given to the youngest dancers — straight up into the air, pointing the foot at the apex, before returning to second position on the ground (the music here by the way was a czardas from Coppélia) — added entrechat deux for the 14-year-olds and finally entrechat quatre for the oldest level. Similarly, the girls aged 15 to 17 ended with a display of fouettés; but those a year or two older did both these and then some so-called Italian fouettés to the rear. For every element of the examination, from the simplest tendus to the most complicated turns and jumps, this gradual progression from simpler to more complex and embellished combinations seemed to hold true.

I was also particularly struck by the way Vaganova put the girls in slippers instead of pointe shoes for fully one half each class. This portion of the syllabus placed great emphasis on the students’ demonstrating balance, strength and control in keeping their hips and shoulders level while they extended a working leg and/or arm to either side in elevated positions, to hold them there just so in finished poses. In these développés of the leg to the side, front and rear, the values sought were balance, beautiful line, and the impression of being absolutely strong, secure and at ease, often with the supporting foot on high demi-pointe. With the working leg so extended, and the supporting leg secure, the arms could then be posed in one of three ways — either both arms held horizontally to the sides; or in one direction or the other with one arm raised overhead and the other extended horizontally. There were thus a limited number of variations to the shape of the physical lines that could be produced; you could also, finally, twist the torso or the hips (while still holding both level) and achieve a more flowing and eloquent line from the leg through the body and into the arms. Arabesques simply added the further complication of inclining the torso. Altogether, one had the impression that what Vaganova wanted here was a series of basic positions (to be completely internalized by the dancer) that represented the varying possibilities of visual harmonies between a few basic physical elements of the human body — but with the body’s line, always that resulting visual line, never to be forgotten. The arms and legs were thus treated as intelligible visual units controlled from the shoulders and hips respectively. Varying a leg position from développé to, say, attitude to the front or rear by bending rather than extending a leg.
was simply a slight sub-variation to an otherwise standard set of physical evolutions. Really, it’s quite a simple system for arriving at quite a number of variations of position, a speech built up out of phonetic units. Consistent with Vaganova’s focus on line, however, at all times when the leg was extended and developed the emphasis was on stretch, articulation and presentation instead of the height of the leg. The pointe of the foot was thus always crucial in finishing that line.

The artistic impression made by the half of the class where the girls were in slippers instead of toe shoes was so very lyrical that, when they finally did strap on their pointe shoes halfway through, I felt that to a degree the advent of the toe shoe had been a devils’ bargain for classical dance; meaning by this that in exchange for the aesthetic elements gained by putting women on pointe, ballet has sacrificed other very important values. Classical dance is in its most fundamental sense based on the basic proportions of the human body; the measure of the body you see in a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo, or in renaissance art generally, is the basis for the aesthetic harmonies of ballet and, when a woman puts on toe shoes she alters those measures. Strap on a shoe with a blocky pointe and add even an inch to the foot and you not only crucially vary the proportions of the leg and foot vis-à-vis the body but introduce difficulties of balance that also alter the viewer’s sense of the body’s plumb foundation on the floor; not to mention problems of the loss of suppleness and articulation for the foot in the shoe. On the other hand, toe work gives ethereal effects; the illusion that a dancer is floating above the floor; a sense of weightlessness; and a dramatically improved facility in a number of other ways as well, particularly in turns on pointe. But to see this examination was to appreciate the amount of lyricism that was sacrificed. By this I don’t mean to be reactionary after nearly two centuries of toe work. But if you do take a glance rearward to appreciate the values that have been sacrificed, you can at least compensate for them in contemporary training and from this viewpoint the things probably most to be desired in pointe training

Students of Level 2, the advanced boys class. Photo by Paolo Galli.
besides inculcating basic facility are that the dancer continue to cultivate as strong a sense of balance as possible and to treat the foot in the pointe shoe in as supple a way as possible so as not to be limited by the shoe’s stiff shank. You want a dancer in toe shoes to be as natural and facile on demi pointe as they possibly can continue to be. It’s an attempt to dance in toe shoes as nearly as possible as if you weren’t wearing them, and in that case you might have the best of both worlds.

From this point of view, however, the toe work on display at the Kirov Academy appeared to be the most anachronistic part of the Vaganova training on display, the element of the training least responsive to contemporary needs. The traditional Vaganova spring onto pointe, so sharp and discordant at times, was incongruous with the aesthetic values that had earlier been on display; the dancers’ shoes seemed also to be long and overly stiff; and a loss of strength in their balance was also perceptible. (That the sharp relevé is part of the basic St. Petersburg training appears from the fact that you can see the same spring up to pointe in the professional dancers of the Maryinsky troop today; what was on view in Washington was not an artifact of that particular school but rather of the syllabus). Another needlessly old fashioned element involved a lack of speed among the girls: once the girls got onto pointe, the tempi utilized for their combinations was generally very slow and during a particular series of step over chainée turns (given to a waltz from a Donizetti opera) I had the impression that the pianist was holding the young girls back and that they themselves would have preferred to move faster to this music; that they would have gained élan and interpretive feeling and looked better too if allowed to dance at a faster pace.

As a result of this (and perhaps it’s the flip side of the very simplicity of the combinations I had admired previously) I had the impression at the end of the two days that, while the boys could come out of this Kirov training and go straight to a professional level (with the caveat, however, that I had not seen them partner), the girls would
need a finishing class (particularly with respect to their toe work) before dancing at that level. Since nearly all professional companies today have an apprentice body (an ABT II for example) to finish dancers, this should not in principle be an insuperable obstacle, but it would clearly be desirable to have a perfection class within the academy to accomplish this. Of course, pointe work is not an issue for the boys, for whom Vaganova training consists of two preliminary stages, aimed for them as for the girls at building strength and mastering basic elements, before an advanced class — like the one I saw performed — sets them free to apply what they have learned. Most interestingly, while the boys’ style and presentation were wholly masculine, their training was not in principle very different from that of the girls: the same steps, elements and combinations had been mastered, only with more emphasis on jumps, elevation and a confident display of strength. Their exam concluded with several of the boys performing set pieces from the classical repertory (such as the male variation from the Don Quixote pas de deux) where they displayed an admirable mastery of the classical vocabulary as well as what I’d call the standard performance conventions of Russian male dancing in the classical tradition — the slow walk to the center rear of the stage and taking of one’s place before launching into the start of a variation on the one hand; or the turn to the knee with extended arms at the end — that mark the professional dancer when done with assurance, ease and command and in the doing of which the boys appeared to be fully prepared, without further polishing, for professional employment.

***

Of course what has been labeled “Vaganova training” in the West is simply a pedagogic method for inculcating the values of classical Russian ballet in the St. Petersburg tradition. And as to this, coming originally from a Balanchine-centered point of view as I do, perhaps the most interesting thing I learned from two days of near total immersion in this syllabus was that its values were not contrary to those of Balanchine; were not just consistent with his, but
were in fact the point of departure and foundation for his development, the very root of his art. Coming from the Russian Imperial Theater as Balanchine did, this was the training he received and the tradition in which he had worked; perhaps it would be truer to say the ballet language he had originally spoken with his very personal voice, afterwards with his increasingly international accent. He added the speed I spoke of above and intuited the need for having the dancers roll up and down through their feet instead of spring onto pointe; his taste in incorporating popular and foreign cultural elements was also more catholic and imaginative than that of the theater he had left. But the values that lie at the root of the Vaganova training are in fact his values: strength; line; eloquence; lyricism; harmony; the classical lexicon. It’s good to remember that Balanchine always had the most classical teachers he could find — Danilova and Doubrovska from the Russian Imperial School at first, followed by Stanley Williams, a pupil of Vera Volkova (herself a pupil of Vaganova, although she had modified Vaganova’s teaching). As such we would also do well to appreciate that Balanchine’s particular elaboration of this rootstock was not the only possible way to make this tradition contemporary while still being true to it. Pruned back many times to its trunk, the tree can grow in many healthy shapes. That’s the genius of classical dance.

Underlying what you see that’s best in classical dance today is still the harmonious presentation of the human body and coordination of the limbs in relation to the torso. Before jumps and turns and all of the athletic and circus-like elements so popular today come basic positioning and line. The cornerstone of classical dance is still the lyricism of the body etched in space. To give an example applying these principles with respect to a of a contemporary dancer, core strength and lines are what continue to make a woman like Sara Mearns compelling on the stage today. These were the same things that were necessary to make Farrell, Ulanova, Kirkland or Makarova great, with each elaborating her greatness in a particular way.

In fact it’s universal, and watching the back bends of the young girls at the Kirov Academy at the barre this March you could connect the dots intellectually. The essential building blocks on display were the very things that are too often missing in ballet today. These young dancers will leave the academy and have to cope with more complex combinations and speed; after the calm of the temple, they’ll have to learn to exist in the near chaos of modern performing companies, in many (if not most) of which they’ll go from the highly determined aesthetic hothouse of this syllabus to a nearly complete lack of aesthetic guidance, systematic rehearsal, emotional support and even basic taste on the part of the artistic direction. In some companies an attempt will be made to train the values and style they’ve worked so hard to acquire out of them. In most places they’ll be asked to roll on the floor and dance Twyla Tharp and Jiri Kylian one night and Petipa and Balanchine the next. But at least they’ve gotten those crucial basic elements here: taste, technique, aesthetic guidance and systematic assimilation of the basic elements; at least the great tradition is still alive; and if you care about classical dance, those are very good things indeed.