

Ballet Positions Explained

The history of ballet has been enriched by the contributions of many important artists and instructors. Among the most noted was Beauchamps.

Pierre Beauchamps was a ballet instructor from the 1600s who was credited for standardizing the initial five ballet positions. These five positions are considered to be fundamentals of ballet. Other standard ballet positions include the various poses of the body, first implemented by Thoinot Arbeau in 1588, and supported by Pierre Rameau in "The Dancing Master" in 1725.

These basic ballet positions provide the starting and ending points for many of today's most familiar and intricate movements of the dance. In each of the five basic ballet positions, both legs are turned sideways from the hip. The toes are then extended out to each side, with the feet forming straight or parallel lines on the floor. Body weight should be evenly distributed over both feet, which can remain flat on the floor, resting "demi-pointe" on the balls of the feet, or for women, may rest "pointe" or entirely on the toes. The corresponding positions of the arms and hands, or "port de bras", complete the perfect balance of figure.

First Ballet Position

With heels together, the toes are turned outward until the feet make a straight line. The arms are lowered with the hands slightly away and in front of the thighs. This position is a ballet dancer's equivalent to "stand at ease." Arms are forward, held curved and apart as though the dancer is embracing a large object. The first ballet position is also known as the "gateway", as it is the mid point of transition to other positions.

Second Ballet Position

The feet are in a parallel line, separated by a distance of approximately 12 inches, or 30 centimeters. Both feet are turned outward with the body weight divided between them. While one foot supports the weight, the other is raised at the side. Arms are curved slightly forward and held out to the sides.

Third Ballet Position

In this position, the heel of one foot rests against the instep of the other. Both feet are firmly turned outward, with the weight divided between them. Arms are held aloft like a crown, or "en couronne". Used extensively in popular 18th century social dances such as the gavotte and minuet, this position has all but disappeared from theatrical usage.

Fourth Ballet Position

One foot rests about 12 inches in front of the other, both are turned outward and the weight is divided between them. One arm extended to the side, while the other is held curved in front. As in the second position, the fourth has an equivalent performed "en l'air", or in the air.

Fifth Ballet Position

The fifth and final position requires the feet to be turned out and pressed closely together, with the heel of one foot against the toe of the other. With one arm raised overhead, the other is held curved in front. There is also a change in the position of the head, from being held straight to having a slight tilt.

Traditionally, these five basic ballet positions have provided the basis for training and performances. Classical ballet also supports two other important positions: the arabesque, and the attitude. In both of these ballet positions, the weight of the body is supported on one leg. The arabesque requires the dancer to hold the raised leg backward, with the knee straight. In the attitude the other leg is also extended, however is in a bent position. The raised leg is held at a 90° angle to the body either in front or back, and the knee may be well bent, or held "attitude allongee", nearly straight.

It's hard to imagine that so many beautiful movements and forms are created from five basic ballet positions. Over the centuries, ballet as a dance form has been altered in many ways, but the fundamental ballet positions will always provide the foundation for breathtaking performances.