

Stretch Yourself

Want to try a new ballet technique this summer? Find the style that will help you improve the most.

BY CANDICE THOMPSON



Bolshoi Ballet Academy students get a crash course in Vaganova upper-body carriage.

From left: Gene Schiavone, Courtesy Bolshoi Ballet Academy; Rosalie O'Connor, Courtesy SAB

Before spending a summer at Los Angeles Ballet School, Lillian Glasscock had never learned a Balanchine variation. "The stylistic differences, like preparing for a pirouette with a straight back leg, were at first very challenging," says Glasscock, 17. "But it soon got easier." Los Angeles Ballet company members were in class daily, motivating and inspiring her. Trying out a new style and expanding her repertoire gave Glasscock more strength, and a better understanding of the varied demands of ballet companies today. Months later, the Balanchine variations she learned are now personal favorites.

While the early years of training are typically spent diligently working through the syllabus of a single ballet technique, when you start to prepare for a professional career, versatility is key. There isn't just one correct version of each step. And as ballet companies continue to diversify their repertoires, directors need dancers who can move fluidly between an array of styles.

"Choreographers will challenge you to step out of your comfort zone," says Colleen Neary, co-director of Los Angeles Ballet School.

"Don't be afraid of taking the steps you already know further, or learning something entirely new."

Trying another technique also can help you address your weak areas. Are you naturally a quick mover? You may want to try a Vaganova-based program that builds adagio control. Do you tend to prepare for each step? You may want to push yourself to bolder, faster movement with a Balanchine-based intensive. While a summer program may not be long enough to master a new style, it is the perfect way to start exploring.

GOOD-BYE, FEAR. HELLO, OPPORTUNITY

To improve, you need to stay open-minded and allow yourself to be vulnerable. If you are worried about not being as advanced as other students who train in a style year-round or if you fear you won't get enough attention, you won't allow yourself to take the risks needed to learn something new. Remember, a summer program is an educational opportunity, not a competition.

Vaganova: Strong and Controlled

As a testament to the value of learning multiple techniques, New York City Ballet soloist Indiana Woodward recently told *The New York Times* that training with the Bolshoi Ballet Academy was one of her life-changing moments.

Perhaps this is because of the leg strength and upper-body coordination that the Russian style demands. "Vaganova technique is the foundation of practically all recognized ballet training," says Marina Leonova, dean of the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow and artistic director of the summer programs in New York and Connecticut.

Spending four to six weeks in this tradition will have you paying particular attention to epaulement—the placement of the head in relation to body direction and in coordination with the arms and legs. Students may be challenged by getting explicit directions about where to direct their gaze. Longer adagio and slower jumping tempos can also be grueling for newbies. But working on these elements will give you the power in your legs and the finesse in your upper body needed to conquer classical variations and corps de ballet work.