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ПРОБЛЕМА ПОДГОТОВКИ ПИАНИСТОВ БАЛЕТА:
КАФЕДРА МУЗЫКИ АКАДЕМИИ РУССКОГО БАЛЕТА
ИМЕНИ А. Я. ВАГАНОВОЙ КАК МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ РЕФЕРЕНТ

*Сабатер П.*¹

¹ Профессиональная консерватория танца королевы Софии, Торре Мачука, 18007, Гранада, Испания.

Статья посвящена подготовке балетных пианистов в мире и в Академии Русского балета имени А. Я. Вагановой — единственном учебным заведением, занимающем в указанной области позицию международного эталона. Решение проблемы осуществляется на кафедре музыкального искусства, где реализуются бакалаврские и магистерские программы подготовки балетных пианистов. С учетом международного опыта подготовки таких профессионалов анализируются условия, способствующие или препятствующие реализации образовательной программы для пианистов, специализирующихся на балетном исполнительстве вне России, в частности в Испании.

Автор подчеркивает необходимость контекстуализации проблемы, ориентируясь в качестве образца на такое авторитетное международное учреждение, как Академия Русского балета имени А. Я. Вагановой.

Ключевые слова: балетный пианист, балетная музыка, обучение, музыкальное образование, аккомпаниатор, Академия Русского балета имени А. Я. Вагановой.

PROBLEM OF TRAINING FOR BALLET PIANISTS: THE CHAIR
OF MUSIC AT VAGANOVA BALLET ACADEMY IN ST. PETERSBURG
AS AN INTERNATIONAL REFERENT

*Sabater P.*¹

¹ Conservatorio Profesional de Danza Reina Sofía, Torre Machuca s/n 18007, Granada, Spain.

This article focuses on the problem of training for ballet pianists around the world and how *Vaganova Ballet Academy* is an international reference in this area, being the only educational institution that, from its Chair of Music, solves this problem by offering a bachelor's and a master's degree for ballet pianists. Through a brief approach to the international context of the training of these professionals, we will analyze the current situation and some of the parameters

that condition or prevent the regulation of an adequate educational program for those interested in the art of playing for ballet in some countries, such as Spain.

The author emphasizes the need to contextualize the problem taking as a reference an institution of international prestige such as *Vaganova Ballet Academy*, analyzing some of the most outstanding features of the particularities of this reference, in order to establish some conclusions that can serve as a guide for future educational proposals for these professionals in other parts of the world.

Keywords: ballet pianist, ballet music, training, education, music education, accompanist, *Vaganova ballet Academy*.

Introduction

In Spain the figure of the accompanying pianist is a fundamental requirement to ensure a quality teaching-learning process of classical dancers. The fact that no training is offered for pianists in the discipline of musical accompaniment of dance classes, is an incongruity that shows the great neglect that exists by the public administrations of education in the country in this area. That is why it is difficult to find any pianist in the Conservatories of dance in the country who prior to the exercise of their profession received any training on this subject. This means that basically, any qualified pianist who accesses a position of ballet accompanist, with few exceptions, will have no prior knowledge of what it means to accompany a class and will face his work from the most absolute ignorance.

This reality is extrapolated to many countries, with few exceptions where pianists who want to devote themselves or have an interest in this specialty can be trained in an institution, thus avoiding a learning model clearly based on professional practice. Therefore, the training of pianists who wish to be ballet accompanists at the international level is scarce, but their contribution is vital and very relevant.

Let us get acquainted with a bachelor's and a master's degree program¹, implemented at the Vaganova Academy in St. Petersburg which in total adds up to six years of training for pianists who complete both degrees, the Academy is by far the most complete and elaborate reference in the training of these professionals that we can find today.

¹ We would like to clarify that the degrees offered by the Chair of Music at Vaganova Ballet Academy are three: the Bachelor's degree for ballet pianists, the Master's degree in Music for the Art of Ballet and the Master's degree in Ethnochoreography and Ethnomusicology, to which we do not refer because our article is focused on musical training for ballet pianists.

Contextualization

To make the comparison possible, we will give examples of the approach to solving the problem of training accompanist pianists in different countries.

In an international contextualized framework, we see that the situation in which the training of ballet pianists is found is disparate and if we compare, in some cases it is extreme. An institution such as the *École Supérieure de Ballet de Québec* [1] in Canada, for example, would be at the opposite extreme, offering training for pianists of forty-five hours of class and fifteen hours of practice, with the possibility of working at the school once this period is over. One of the requirements for access to this training is previous experience, which leads us to intuit that it is more of a selective process of pianists through a short course, than a training per se. Between the two extremes we find a great diversity of possibilities, where the most outstanding are the Master's degrees offered at institutions such as the *Royal Conservatoire of Scotland* [2], the *Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris* [3], or the *University of Arizona* [4] in the United States, among others. Therefore, in a first approximation, we can speak of a very unbalanced and disparate training, which in its extremes can give rise to a contradictory vision as far as the training needs of these professionals are concerned: we are facing a profession that in most places is learned through practice, but which has been shown to require prior training to be carried out satisfactorily, training that is only given in a small number of countries and in a very heterogeneous way.

So, the obvious conclusion to this is that the majority of pianists accompanying ballet will not have access to any training, while some who are lucky enough to have a training program close to their residence will have access to it and others who don't and have the interest, will travel directly to obtain it. That for example is the case of Ho Wen Yang, pianist of the Dance Teq in Toronto, who responds in an interview for the website of the *Royal Academy of Dance* [5] to the question of how he came to train at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland for its Master's degree:

«Where I come from in Singapore, most of the aspects are concentrated on playing for classes in the studio, and I'm interested in learning more about playing for rehearsals, being a répétiteur and all the other different things, you don't get in a vocational school. Also, to see how dance accompaniment is taught, because, to me, that's always a mystery. I think that up till now, most of us dance accompanists have figured out how to do the job through trial and error...».

«How to do the job through trial and error». Learning through trial and error is the most common system of learning for most ballet pianists. And this is the generalized starting point: an incongruous reality that must change in response to the demand that exists for professionals of this profile.

Recent articles, publications and research on this subject in Spain are categorical in this regard, a curriculum is needed to put an end to this situation, as described

by Luis Vallés: «...there is a curricular void in the present curriculum in the aspect of the piano as an accompanying instrument, which justifies the need for a new curriculum. There has always been a minimum content necessary to equip the pianist who chooses to work as an accompanist for a later performance. But the growing social demand, both in number and quality, makes it essential to create a specialty for pianists who want to become piano accompanists... The musical society demands piano accompanists, both in public and private institutions, but nevertheless they are not given the distinction of a specific qualification, nor directionality, nor training. It will be the pianist with a higher degree who will have to make his own curriculum, extracting later what he has learned to direct it to his later work and end up training himself through experience. From subjects such as transposition, improvisation, sight-reading and score reduction, the accompanying pianist is nourished, but in no case does he have any knowledge of what he is going to accompany...» [6, p. 5].

Pianists who want to devote themselves to the art of accompanying ballet deserve a training that will ensure them a satisfactory exercise in their practice and a knowledge of all the main aspects that occur in this profession: technical class accompaniment, *pas de deux* class, male class, pointe class or repetition in rehearsals, in order to be able to perform them with sufficient security and fluency, thus avoiding experiences as beginners that can be traumatic or tedious and that sometimes trigger the abandonment of many pianists who thus lose interest in the profession at the first attempt. It seems that the system has assumed that by the fact that this professional profile exists, that they are hired and have been performing their work for so many years (the first time that the figure of the piano accompanist appears regulated by decree in Spain is in 2000) [7], the training offer given to piano students in higher education centers in this country, as in others, is more than enough and there is no need to design and create a specific training program for these professionals as Luis Vallés points out: «To date the knowledge that has been imparted has not prevented the normal performance of accompaniment by the professionals dedicated to it, but we believe that a specialization referring to the figure of the piano accompanist that in turn dignifies it is opportune» [8, p. 13].

Every professional has the right to feel dignified when performing his or her work, and can aspire to a recognition that reinforces his self-esteem and strengthens his bond with the work he or she performs, and to achieve this it is essential to have a quality training that guarantees it. This is a fact that we consider indisputable.

This brief contextualization of the ballet pianist profession at an international level is necessary to understand and value the relevance of the training model that has been developed for more than thirty years by the Chair of Music of Vaganova Ballet Academy in St. Petersburg.

The Chair of Music at Vaganova Ballet Academy: Excellent training for excellent education

The volume of work and the technical needs of accompaniment to cover the number of hours taught at *Vaganova Ballet Academy* in St. Petersburg are one of the main challenges for the Academy's Music Chair, from where Prof. Galina Bezuglaia, as Head of the Chair, manages a massive workload to meet the Academy's pianistic needs and to organize the entire content of the two training programs for pianists interested in accompanying ballet: a four-year Bachelor's degree and a two-year Master's degree in Music for Ballet Art. Both programs are taught within the *Academy* itself and on many occasions give rise to situations of duplication, in which some of the students are hired to work at the Academy. This is a fact that seems remarkable to us, given the relevance of learning a profession such as that of ballet piano accompanist within an institution, in this case also so prestigious, guaranteeing these future professionals a direct contact with the practice of teaching the art of ballet from the beginning of their training. We believe that this particularity is something to be taken into account whenever the possibility of designing a training program for ballet pianists arises anywhere in the world: **immersion in the daily practice of ballet in all its aspects, both educational and professional, is essential for quality learning of pianists, so that those centers interested in offering an education to these professionals, should consider as a priority the collaboration with educational institutions of dance, where they are guaranteed an immersion in a contextualized educational process, thus following the training model that is taught within *Vaganova Ballet Academy*.**

Six years of exclusive training for ballet pianists form a solid foundation on which to build a successful professional career. We believe we can thus state that Russia is officially the only country in the international framework where a four-year degree is offered, with a course of subjects ranging from the study of Ballet Theatre Repertoire or Musical Accompaniment of the Dance Lesson, to the study of subjects such as Ballet Terminology, History of Dramatic Theatre or subjects such as Pedagogy or Psychology, as well as more specific subjects of the musical branch such as Musical Forms, Instrumentation, Sight Reading, Fundamentals of Composition and Improvisation [9]. What led the *Vaganova Ballet Academy* to create such a complete training program? Prof. Galina Bezuglaia corroborates the two reasons mentioned above in her book *New Ballet Accompanist*: «The shortage of specialists in ballet theaters and choreographic educational institutions is often compensated by hiring people who do not have a good piano training that meets the high level of modern requirements. Some of the graduates of music schools, who do not have sufficient competence in the profession, try to compensate for their pianistic deficiencies with a good knowledge of the specifics of the art of ballet.

And so, they are in demand as accompanists. However, the results of their activities, which are insufficiently professional in musical terms, sometimes discredit the very idea of choreographic accompaniment, aggravating the problem of involving good musicians in ballet pedagogy and performance. Problems of personnel shortages in turn cannot but affect the quality of musical education for ballet dancers. After all, ballet class students learn to listen, perceive music, dance to music, every day, six times a week. Therefore, the quality of their performance must be impeccable» [10, p. 6].

The shortage of efficient professionals and the lack of training to ensure their existence. These are sufficient reasons that will lead to the creation of a higher education with two degrees for ballet pianists as complete as those offered at the *Academy*. Orienting all its efforts in this direction, the Chair of Music in the early 1990s was guided by the requirements of the State Standards for Higher Professional Education for the training of pianists [10, p. 7] when creating these programs.

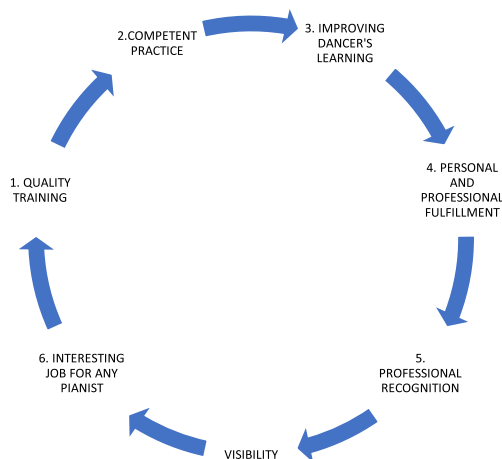
The musical quality on the part of these professionals, as Prof. Galina Bezuglaia emphasizes, had to be impeccable if the standards of excellence in the training of dancers at the *Academy* was to be achieved. The role of music is thus fundamental. Elizabeth Sawyer [11] is also categorical in this respect. For her, the weight of the musical quality of the pianist in the studio is almost directly proportional to the level of musicality of the dancers who have worked with that pianist. Poor musical quality jeopardizes the efficient training of dancers anywhere in the world. It is what we might define as the “loop of mediocrity”, thus using a term Sawyer herself [11] employs to refer to the problem of the lack of musicality in so many dancers because of poor accompaniment in classes and how those dancers, eventually becoming teachers, allow a pattern of poor quality musical accompaniment to repeat itself, thus unconsciously perpetuating cyclically this endless loop of mediocrity: «It is very likely, however, that the average dancer’s lack of a musical sense is partly defense gradually developed against years of musical mediocrity to which they have been exposed. The teachers compound the problem by tolerating this mediocrity which has, in turn, dulled their own response. A vicious cycle is thus established; many dance students will eventually become teachers and perpetuate it unintentionally» [11, p. 84].

To the reader unfamiliar with the discipline of ballet accompaniment this may seem a very extreme statement, but the truth is that, going a little further, even the best of pianists, the most experienced and technically trained, when starting to work accompanying ballet, feel lost, insecure and disoriented, not knowing what to do. At the beginning of her profession, Katherine Teck for example describes how she had many doubts that were difficult to answer: who decides what music is played, how is technology being used in the field of sound applied to dance,

or what is musicality in a dancer? The author describes how from the moment she started working she felt very disappointed at not being able to give an answer to these and other questions and especially at discovering the scarce information that existed in relation to these issues: «When I first started working as a musician for ballet and modern dance, I was disappointed to find relatively little information in print concerning these and other questions» [15, p. 1].

This lack of knowledge jeopardizes the quality of the educational process in which the dancers are immersed and sometimes fosters disinterest in the ballet musical accompaniment itself on the part of the pianists, who feel that they do not know what they have to do and consequently become demotivated or lose interest, seeking another profession more in line with their knowledge and previous training.

Going even further in this approach, sometimes the musical accompaniment that does not reach the desired levels and is not professional enough, discredits the very idea of choreographic accompaniment as explained by Prof. Galina Bezuglaia, [10, p. 6]. This makes good pianists not interested in this profession, thus enlarging the endless loop in which the discipline is immersed, adding to the difficulty of achieving a relationship that we consider indispensable for this loop to be one of quality and not mediocrity, as we pointed out above:



And there are many authors who refer to the direct influence of the quality of music as an indispensable tool that affects the quality of dance teaching. Harriet Cavalli emphasizes the tremendous responsibility we ballet pianists have when it comes to providing quality music to students. In most cases, she stresses, «what you play will be the only music education they receive» [13, p. 88]. «It is our responsibility to produce quality work befitting the 21st century musician» stresses Karen MacIver [14, p. 2]. In the end, as Katherine Teck says «music is the constant companion of the dancer», hence its importance [15, p. 1]. If we take into account

statements like these, which come from great professionals in the discipline of piano for dance, we can only reaffirm the need for good training to fulfill such an important task.

That said, and being recognized worldwide for its excellence in the training of dancers, it was expected that the pianists who work daily in the classes and rehearsals that take place inside the mythical building at 2 Rossi Street, where the *Vaganova Ballet Academy* is located, successfully meet the standards of rigor and resolution in the work that an institution of such a high level needs. With an international prestige and a history whose legacy places it among the elite of the ballet world, the Academy necessarily relies on the best professionals, and that means not only the dance teachers, but also the pianists. Such an institution cannot afford in its routine to deal with pianists who do not work, who do not know how to improvise or who do not master the ballet repertoire and the technical and artistic pianistic skills of the highest classical repertoire as unfortunately happens so often in other parts of the world. The only way to ensure that this does not happen, is to give these pianists the necessary training to work satisfactorily fulfilling the objectives expected of them every day.

One of the hallmarks of the musical accompaniment at the *Vaganova Ballet Academy* is the preference for the classical repertoire in the daily work as an enhancer of excellence and standards of classical dance. It should also be noted that improvisation is a resource constantly used to accompany the technique classes, always being an improvisation with a marked classical style, closely linked to the training of the pianists and the Academy's musical canons. As Prof. Bezuglaia points out, the classical dance class – both today and a hundred years ago – was embodied in an endless variety of daily variations of the many dance steps that make up the training combinations. Classical written music or published compilations of music for the accompaniment of ballet classes can hardly solve by themselves the needs this fact produces, especially the problem of the musical illustration of a dance class, because the sole use of pre-selected music causes the free, spontaneous and improvisatory character of the class to be lost. [11, p. 4]. This is why improvisation becomes an indispensable tool in the daily practice of these professionals, and is also present in the training they receive in the bachelor's and master's degree programs.

Situations such as those analyzed by Ana López in a Professional Dance Conservatory such as the Mariemma in Madrid, where the students suffer on a daily basis from the lack of specialization of many of the pianists who work there due to the lack of training in improvisation that exists today in the training curriculum for pianists in Spain [16, p. 173], is totally alien to the *Academy*, where this type of problem is now a thing of the past. Like Juan Mata points out, the specialization of the dance pianist must include a great capacity for adaptability and flexibility. To

this end, he must develop multiple skills in repertoire and above all in improvisation... Versatility and conviction are the key [17, p. 512] and this is something that the Chair of Music of the *Vaganova Ballet Academy* is very much aware of.

Finally, it should be noted that the *Academy* has 33 professionals dedicated to accompanying the entire volume of classes and rehearsals that take place over six days of intense work and that include everything from technical classes to acting classes (pantomime), character dance classes, rehearsals... the need for pianists is constant. Our final hypothesis is that in the end, demand is what regulates the training market and in countries where the figure of the ballet pianist is scarce, we will hardly find training that goes beyond the occasional advanced course or specific training.

Conclusions

A profession for which there is no training is either because it is very easy to perform and therefore training is unnecessary, or its presence in the labor market is so scarce that its needs go practically unnoticed. In the case of accompanying pianists for ballet, the remarkable thing is that this situation is managed differently in each country, the most widespread being that of hiring professionals with no previous experience who end up learning the trade through practice.

While this need is not covered and the problems associated with this profession are not solved, the system of musical artistic education in these countries that have the profession of ballet accompanist regulated within their labor system but do not have their own qualifications to train these professionals, will suffer from a training gap that will lead to the efficiency of their work being a matter based entirely on practice and the chance to possess certain skills of great value to the profession such as improvisation or sight-reading.

We consider that the model of training given to ballet piano students at *Vaganova Ballet Academy* in St. Petersburg is a model that can be extrapolated to most countries in which, in general, professionals who enter to work in public or private dance institutions usually have a classical training as instrumentalists. The model implemented at *Vaganova Ballet Academy* is clearly adjusted to the parameters of the musical accompaniment of the classical repertoire, being these the context from which one of the most used tools to accompany the technique class, improvisation, is worked. Considering the difficulties faced by so many classically trained pianists around the world when entering the language of improvisation applied to the art of ballet, we believe that the training system taught at *Vaganova Ballet Academy* is an indisputable reference and of great value for this discipline. If we add the fact that the content of the bachelor and master programs offered to these future professionals, prepare them not only in improvisation but in multiple musical educational aspects such as the study of sight reading, the study of ballet

repertoire, psychology, pedagogy, musical forms or harmony, piano soloist repertoire or ensemble, etc. to complete a range of subjects that make up a total of six years of training, we can affirm that this is the most complete educational program that exists for these professionals nowadays.

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СВЕДЕНИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ

Сабатер Пас — PhD, пианистка, педагог; p.sabater@cpdanzagranada.com

INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sabater Paz — PhD, pianist, teacher; p.sabater@cpdanzagranada.com