World Dances

Lesson – *The Evolution of Ballet*

Companion Video – "Festival of the Clocks and Dance of the Hours" from *Coppélia*

Suggested Grade Level

Grades 5-8

Objective

Students will become familiar with the origins of ballet and the evolution of the art form shaped by French culture. They will identify ballet characteristics and movements representative of varying artistic periods in European history.

Suggested Materials

- BPO video of Léo Delibes' "Festival of the Clocks and Dance of the Hours" from *Coppélia*
- YouTube video of *Coppélia*: Waltz of the Hours- https://tinyurl.com/bdekz9ay
- Evolution of Ballet timeline (provided)
- Composer Fact Sheet (provided)

New York State Arts Standards

MU:Re9.1.5a-8a DA:Re7.1.5a-8a
DA:Re8.1.5a-8a
DA:Re9.1.5a-8a

New York State English Language Arts & Literacy Standards

Reading, Standard 1, 2, & 7
Speaking & Listening, Standard 1, 2, 3 & 6
Language, Standard 1, 2, 4 & 6

New York State Social Studies Learning Standards

Standard 2: World History

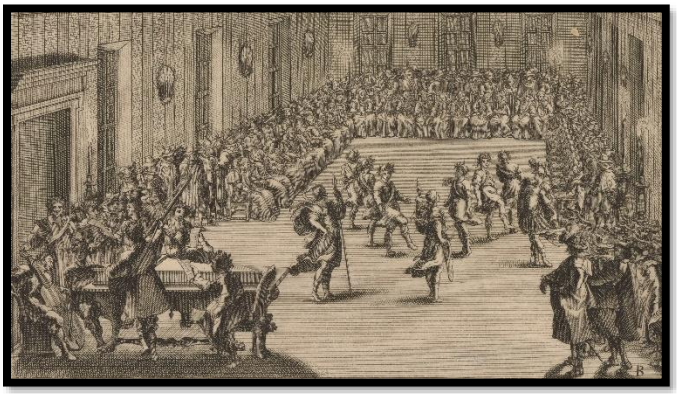
Procedure

1) Ballet is a theatrical dance in which formal dance technique is combined with artistic elements such as music, costume and stage scenery. It is a common assumption that ballet originated in France, when in fact, it began as a form of entertainment in the Italian Renaissance courts. During the 15th and 16th centuries, the dance technique became formalized. The headquarters of the art moved to France following the marriage of the Italian-born aristocrat Catherine de' Medici to Henry II of France.

2) Have students read through the Composer Fact Sheet and information on *Coppélia*. Questions for discussion:
    a) What is automata?
    b) Why do you think ballet was chosen as the medium to portray the story of *Coppélia*, as opposed to opera?
    c) What sort of dance movements do you expect to see to represent the character of Coppélia?
3) Share the video of the BPO's performance of "Festival of the Clocks and Dance of the Hours" from *Coppélia*.
4) Have students read through the Evolution of Ballet timeline. Questions for discussion:
    a) Based on the ballet timeline and knowing that *Coppélia* premiered in 1870, what stylistic characteristics may we expect to see in the ballet?
    b) What artistic periods do the stylistic elements of *Coppélia* draw from?
    c) What historical events may have influenced composer Léo Delibes in his creation of *Coppélia*?
5) Share the YouTube video of *Coppélia*: Waltz of the Hours with students. Questions for discussion:
    a) What stylistic ballet characteristics are featured in the video?
    b) How do musical elements contribute to the movements of the dancers?

EVOLUTION OF BALLET

1300s & 1400s The Renaissance Period in Italy



Ballet began as a form of entertainment in Italian Renaissance courts. The upper classes took part in ballet in the lavish courts of royal palaces to celebrate the birth or marriage of powerful people. The dance was performed on ballroom floors in lines and circles by lots of people. The technique at the time involved moving from elegant pose to elegant pose using a flat foot.

1500s The Renaissance Period in France

Catherine de' Medici, as Queen of consort of France, 1550s.

Ballet spread from Italy to France when Catherine de' Medici, an Italian noblewoman, married King Henry II of France and arranged for ballet to be performed in the French court. She would host popular festivals called *ballet de cour*, a theatrical form of dance which incorporated costumes, music, and even poetry.

1600s The Baroque Period in France

Ballet remained an important part of royal entertaining and grew in popularity under King Louis XIV, nicknamed the "Sun King," from his role as Apollo in a ballet performance. Under the Sun King's rule, ballet became a more formal art form, trickling out to the courts in Germany, Spain, Portugal, Poland, and many other countries. The Sun King's personal ballet teacher, Pierre Beauchamp, choreographed many of the dances performed at the Palace of Versailles and is credited with classifying ballet as a system of movement, categorizing five positions of the feet and arms (https://ballethub.com/ballet-lesson/five-basic-positions-ballet/). The Royal Academy of Dance, the world's first ballet school, was founded in 1661, thus paving the way for ballet as a profession. Ballet began to move from palace ballrooms to stages, where it became more of a performance than a leisure activity.

Louis IV as Apollo the Sun King in "Ballet de la Nuit," by Henry de Gissey, 1653.

1700s The French Revolution

The 1700s gave rise to female ballet stars. In 1789, the French Revolution led to the overthrowing of the monarchy and many royal institutions, including the Royal Academy of Dance. The academy lived on underground and reformed in 1929 as the Paris Opera Ballet

Early 1800s The Romantic Period

The 19th century marked the Romantic period in the arts, in which ballet shifted from a spectacle for the royals, to a narrative art form for the masses. Romantic ballets often blended realism and fantasy, including elements of beauty, passion, emotion, imagination, nature and the supernatural. The use of steps and body language to express emotion and interaction became crucial. Costumed skirts shortened and soft dance slippers were introduced, allowing for greater range of motion. Dancing *en pointe* was developed by female dancers, thus leading to the dominance of the ballerina. The soft pointe shoe would soon become an icon of both graceful movement and technical skill. Choreography became free, light, and airy, where ballerinas appeared as fragile beings who could be effortlessly lifted, creating the feeling of floating in the air. Soft movements, folk characters, folk-style dancing, and countryside settings were characteristic of the new genre.

Italian ballerina Marie Taglioni in "Zephire et Flore," c. 1831.

Late 1800s The Classical Period

The height of the Classical Period was during the late 1800s, in particular, the 1890s in Russia. Classical ballets still conveyed a story and emotion, but with more emphasis placed on the movement and dancing itself. The short ballet tutu was created which allowed dancers to execute higher leg extensions. Key characteristics of Classical ballets included geometric and symmetrical formations, highlighting balance and harmony. Pointe shoes evolved to allow dancers to rise on pointe for longer periods of time, and eventually led to the requirement for all ballerinas to dance on pointe. The ballets themselves became longer and included opulent set and costume designs, appealing to the Russian government officials who were the major patrons at the time.

Léo Delibes

Clément Philibert Léo Delibes was a French Romantic composer best known for his ballets and operas. Born in St. Germain-du-Val, France to a musical family, he enrolled in the Paris Conservatoire at the age of 12, studying under the famous opera composer, Adolphe Adam. He began taking voice lessons, while also serving as a church organist.

In 1856, Delibes' first stage work, *Deux sous de charbon* ("Two sous-worth of coal"), a one-act comic piece was premiered. Over the next fourteen years, he produced an average of one comic opera a year. He became accompanist at the Paris Opéra, in addition to professor of composition at the Conservatoire.

In 1870, Delibes gained notoriety with the success of his ballet, *Coppélia*, which tells the story of a mechanical dancing doll that distracts a young boy from his beloved and appears to come to life. The ballet was an immediate success and has remained among the most popular works in the classical ballet repertoire.

In his later years, Delibes made several attempts at writing more serious operas, and achieved considerable commercial success in 1883 with *Lakmé*, best known for its "Flower Duet", a traditional folk song that was later used in British Airways commercials. Delibes died at his home in Paris after a sudden collapse, shortly before his 55th birthday.

Coppélia

The comic ballet, *Coppélia*, was first presented at the Theatre Imperial de l'Opera of Paris in 1870. It was originally based on a story by German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann, the same author famous for *The Nutcracker*. It tells the story of a girl named Coppélia who sits on her balcony all day reading and never speaking to anyone. A boy named Franz falls deeply in love with her, forgetting all about his fiancé, Swanhilda. Swanhilda soon learns that Coppélia is actually a mechanical doll that belongs to Doctor Coppélius, a mad toymaker. Doctor Coppélius hopes to sacrifice Franz's life in order to bring Coppélia to life. Swanhilda decides to impersonate the doll, pretending to make it come to life, in order to win back Franz's love, and ultimately save him from an untimely end at the hands of the crazed toymaker. Swanhilda and Franz eventually reconcile and get married. The marriage is celebrated by the entire town with several festive dances.

Giuseppina Bozzacchi as Swanhilda in the Saint-Léon/Delibes Coppélia. Paris, 1870.

The ballet enjoyed immediate success and continued in the Paris repertoire. It was the first ballet to incorporate traditional dances and music, including national dances like the Hungarian *Czárdás* and the Polish *Mazurka.* It was also the first (and only) ballet to be danced by Giuseppina Bozzacchi, the 16-year-old ballerina who originated the lead role of Swanhilda, a role that propelled her into the position of prima ballerina at a remarkably early age. In fact, *Coppélia* was the first time Giuseppina Bozzacchi ever danced ballet on stage.

Coppélia was the first ballet to use "automata"- marionettes or automatized dolls. The Industrial Revolution in France paved the way for the trend of automata as parlor entertainment for adults, beginning in the mid-19th century. Until then, only the wealthy and royalty could afford larger automata. The rise of the middle class meant more Europeans were wealthy enough to purchase automata devices to entertain guests at their homes, and advances in manufacturing meant parts for these clockwork robots could be produced and assembled like never before, particularly in Paris, where material resources, technology and skilled craftsmen came together to make these moving works of art.

Pierrot Ecrivain Automaton by G. Vichy, Paris, France, c1885. (Via the Murtogh D. Guinness Collection at the Morris Museum)