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Ballet technique

by Gavin Roebuck

Brisé

Brisé means to break or shatter. It is a brisk, travelling and beaten step in ballet. There are about twenty different types of brisé. Swanilda in Act 1 of *Coppélia* traverses the stage diagonally doing a series of eight brisés dessus (over). For the male dancer, the most celebrated feat with this step is the 24 brisés volés (flying) (in the Russian school called brisé dessus dessous) at the end of the coda as the Bluebird in the Bluebird and Princess Florine pas de deux from the *Sleeping Beauty*. The creator of this role in the Petipa / Tchaikovsky ballet was Enrico Cecchetti in 1890.

The brisé is perhaps the most complicated step in all batterie beaten jumps. They can be from two feet to two feet, two feet to one foot, one foot to one foot, and one foot to two feet. They can go in any direction, and there are also compound steps such as Brisé Telemaque, which dates back to Paris in the 1810s.



Vyacheslav Lopatin as the Bluebird with Anastasiya Stashkevich

Some teachers see a brisé over as being the same as a beaten assemblé, but I don't agree. In short, while both are beaten jumps, assemblé battu is

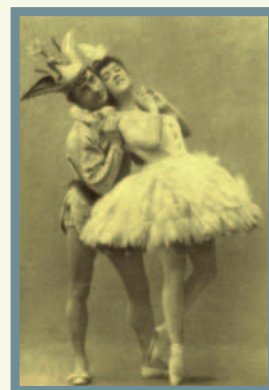


*Dancers Taryn Mejia and Dillon Malinski Kansas City Ballet
Photography: Brett Pruitt*

more vertical and lands on two feet, whereas brisé travels and lands with a asymmetrical finish and usually has a greater use of the upper body bending over the line of travel. Mastery of the brisé requires strong footwork, coordination, and precise timing, requiring agility and control, making it a hallmark of a technically advanced ballet dancer.

One might start teaching it at the intermediate level, so at the age of about 13, in the simpler form, focusing on co-ordination and correct placement. A barre exercise of a demi plié and dégagé to the side with the back foot moving front back, as you straighten the legs, is a good preparatory exercise. A simple exercise of a brisé dessus sideways, two feet to two feet, is probably the first exercise to attempt,

and you might try it facing the barre before moving into the centre. Demi plié in 5th, brisé over, straighten the knees, then bend, is the simple exercise which could be done before attempting it in the centre.



Varava Nikitina as Princess Florine and Enrico Cecchetti as the Bluebird in Act III of The Sleeping Beauty, 1890.

Pas De Bourrée

The bourrée is a dance of French origin, not unlike the gavotte in that it is, in double time, and often has a dactylic (long, short, short) rhythm. However, it is somewhat quicker, and it starts with a quarter-bar anacrusis or “pick-up”.

After the Académie de Danse was established, by the Sun King Louis XIV, of France, in 1661, the French court adapted the bourrée, like many such dances, for the purposes of theatre dance.

In this way, it gave its name to the ballet step, a rapid movement of the feet, and so the sequence of steps called pas de bourrée developed. The bourrée also became an optional movement in classical music, though not necessarily intended to be danced; examples are by J.S. Bach, Handel, and later by Chopin.

There are usually three transferences of weight—two stepping actions and a closing one. In some methods, each pas de bourrée has a set arm movement to accompany it. A pas de bourrée, therefore, has many different variations and can be performed in all possible directions.

In ballet, pas de bourrées are a series of linking steps consisting of three small steps. They may be executed starting with either foot in any direction, often from fifth position to 2nd position to 5th and change feet or not. So, from a closed (5th) to open (2nd), to closed (5th) position. They can also travel to an open position, for example, from 2nd to 5th to 2nd. On the flat, they start from bent supporting



Louis XIV in as Apollo the Sun King in 1653

knees, move to a rise and end on bent knees, so: down, up, up, down.

If you can do one pas de bourrée correctly, you have the technique to do them all.

The pas de bourrée steps are performed as a continuous movement; they can also be performed

en pointe and pique - picked up as high as retire to the knee or by the ankle. Pas de Bourrée Couru is a running step girls perform en pointe.

Pupils today often just learn one pas de bourrée at a time from a fairly young age, but it can be a useful test for pupils to simply ask them to reverse it to see who can quickly work it out. Which pupils give up, and which watch someone else do it, then copy them, and which don't try. A pupil that will try to find variations on the step you have taught them may have the innate sort of curiosity, creativity, and spirit that could lead them to take an interest in choreography.

Teachers don't have to spoon-feed pupils, and doing so can stifle inquiring minds and creativity. If you can perform one pas de bourrée, there is no reason physically why you can't perform others; it is after all three little steps, yet often they are not studied all together.

Here is a well-established study or étude dance of pas de bourées:

En Avant (starting with the back foot (left) and moving forwards), En Arrière (starting with the front foot moving back), Devant (starting with the back foot moving to the side Front Side Front), Derrière (start with the back foot going to the side Behind Side Behind), Dessous (with the front foot travelling to the side Behind Side Front), Dessus (with the back foot travelling to the side Front Side Behind), En Tournant Dehors (turning outwards starting with the front foot Behind Side Front) and Dedans (with the back foot turning inwards Front Side Behind). You are now ready to start the whole sequence on the other side.

Three little steps and so many choreographic possibilities!

Gavin Roebuck

