

# Pointe Shoes

Pointe shoes have often been the goal to little girls and boys when they would start ballet. But why do ballerinas and ballerinos go on pointe shoes? When to start pointe shoes? What are they made of? How to choose your perfect pair of pointe shoes? Everything you have ever wanted to know about pointe shoes is right here!



*Jurgita Dronina and Harrison James in La Sylphide // © Aleksandar Antonijevic*

## **Why do we go on pointe shoes?**

The first ballerina to go « en pointe » was Maria Taglioni in 1832 for the premiere of *La Sylphide* at the Paris Opera. She wanted to appear ethereal, weightless, and as she was floating above the stage, in accordance with the representation of women in the romantic classical ballets of the nineteenth century.

Pointe shoes enable the dancer to balance, spin, hop, leap, slide, and linger on the tips of her or his toes to create even longer and more beautiful lines and shapes with the dancer's body. Their primary goal was aesthetic rather than acrobatic.

Before the advancement of the modern reinforced pointe shoe, around 1900, ballerinas wore soft cotton and satin ballet slippers and could only perform quick and light movements on pointe. The technological advancement in the design and conception of pointe shoes made it possible for ballerinas and ballerinos to perform harder steps, turns, and sustain balances on pointe. All the beautiful and theatrical movements that we admire in ballets today.

So what are pointe shoes made of to make us go on our toes and enable us to achieve performances?



*Maria Taglioni // © Unknown*



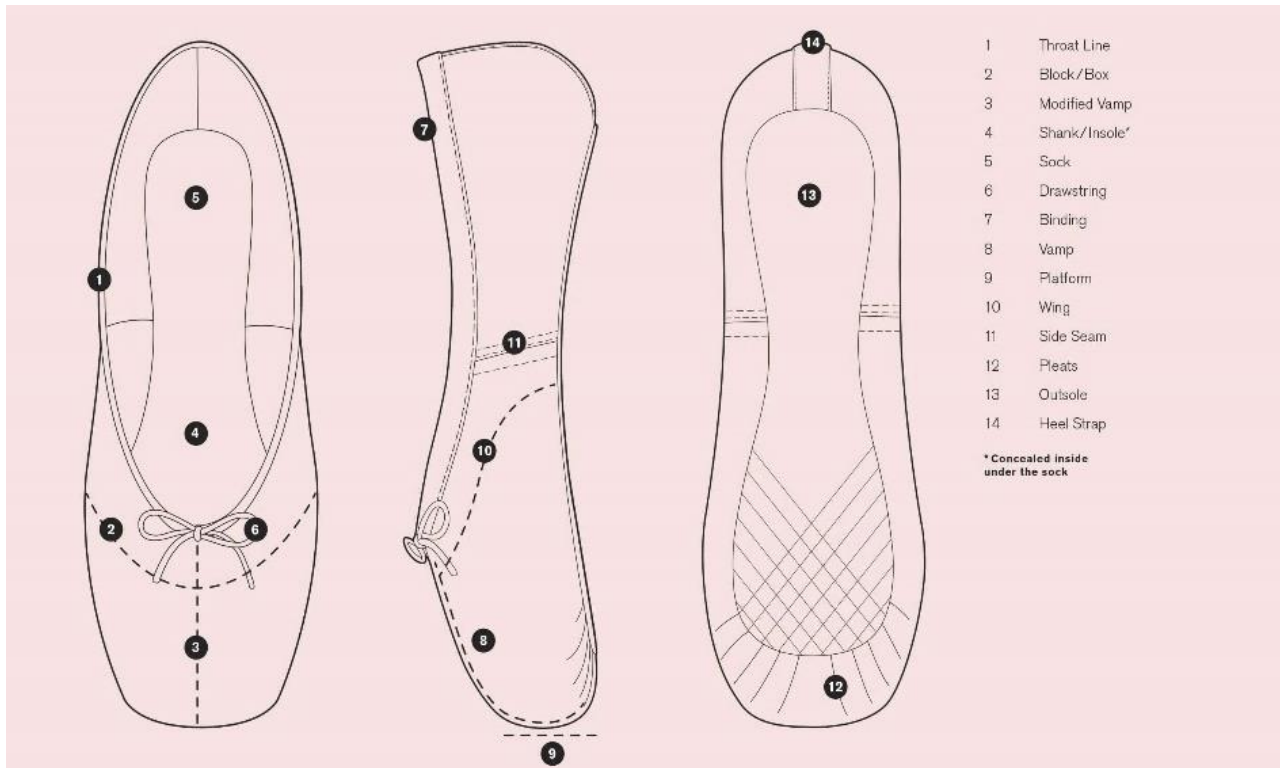
*Sylvie Guillem in Tchaikovski Grand Pas Classique  
// © Unknown*

## **What are pointe shoes made of?**

In order for dancers to go on the tip of their toes to perform on pointe shoes, these specific ballet shoes have to be made with perfect technological skills. Usually handmade, pointe shoes must be strong enough to enable the dancer to go on his or her toes with correct feet position while also complimenting the leg line. Pointe shoe makers for any brands are always trying to innovate and optimise as much as possible this tool which is so important for professional ballet dancers in companies and makes so many young dancers dream to get their first pair of pointe shoes.

Pointe shoes are made of different layers. What you will admire first in a pointe shoe is the beautiful and shiny satin « robe » covering the outside of the ballet shoes. But what is the most impressive is actually well hidden behind this shiny fabric. Let's learn about the structure and design of a pointe shoe!

Pointe shoe makers use a foot shaped mold on which the pointe shoe is manufactured around. The main elements are leather, rubber, glue type paste, fabrics like hessians (or « toile de jute ») and satin. The paste will be a specifically formulated substance which will be used in both the process of hardening the toe box and platform and attaching the fabric to the inside of the pointe shoe. The leather will mostly be used for the inside and outside soles which are the two main elements holding together the body of the pointe shoe.



© Bloch pointe shoe guide

### Pointe Shoe Elements Glossary:

#### **1. Vamp Shape / Throat Line**

The shape of the entrance area for the front of the foot. In Bloch pointe shoes the Vamp shape is either 'U' shaped or 'V' shaped.

#### **2. Block/Box**

The hardened surface area of a pointe shoe which includes the vamp, wings and platform, surrounds the front section of the foot. The Block/Box is made from the application of numerous layers of special fabrics, all with different shapes, bound together by the paste in between each layer. This process is very similar to the process of papier maché.

#### **3. Vamp (Modified)**

The measurement from the centre middle of the drawstring to the edge of the Platform.

#### **4. Shank / Insole**

A combination of layers of special materials into a unique profile which forms the structural anchor similar to the way a spine supports the human body. Shanks/insoles are developed in different profiles creating various levels of flexibility.

#### **5. Sock**

A thin suede or cotton fabric covering the inner shank.

#### **6. Drawstring**

A length of either cotton cord or elastic cord encased within the binding that allows the upper to form a snug fit around the foot.

#### **7. Binding**

The tape that finishes the top edge of the upper which also encases the drawstring.

#### **8. Vamp**

The lower forward part of the shoe's upper, covering the forepart of the foot and includes the Block/Box and Platform.

## 9. Platform

The flattened surface at the toe end of the pointe shoe which allows the dancer to balance on pointe.

## 10. Wing

Each of the two symmetrical sides of the vamp directed toward the heel. The outer edge of the hardened toe Block/Box that contain a lesser amount of material and paste. The Wings can vary in shape and hardness depending on the style of pointe shoe or the dancer's preference.

Explain the different layers

## 11. Side Seam

The stitching on the side seam is a double French stitch which ensures strength and sews front Upper to the back Upper.

## 12. Pleats

The measured pleating which draws the satin over the Box which meets the Outsole.

## 13. Outsole

The outer most sole of pointe shoes is made from leather.

## 14. Heel Strap

A satin tab which is sewn over the joining seams of the back uppers.

Wanna see exactly how it's done? Watch Freed of London and Merlet make their pointe shoes!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zExmSmO35Q>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-SrzMY0xDs>

## When to start pointe shoes?



*Dorothee Gilbert from the Paris Opera // © Repetto*

Little girls and boys usually dream very young of getting their first pair of pointe shoes. But going up on your toes is not natural and will damage the dancer's feet and ankles if not strong enough. The first person to ask to for advice on when to get your first pointe shoes is your teacher. By watching you dance, she or he will know your abilities and if your ankles and legs muscles are strong enough to support the hard exercises on pointe shoes.

The second person is the pointe shoe fitter at your favourite ballet shop whose job is dedicated to knowing the characteristic of every feet and pointe shoes she or he sees in a day. I have rarely seen a pointe shoe fitter trying to push the sell to a dancer who is not ready yet. They know it is also their responsibility to serve you as best as they can, sometimes by telling you that you will have to be patient and not get your pair of pointe shoe straight away...

For young ballet dancers, usually the age to start pointe shoes is around 10 12 years old. It can be a little bit before or sometimes after. For adults, it really depends on your strength, previous possible injuries, fitness, years of learning ballet with flat ballet shoes, etc. Again, your ballet teacher will be your best guidance to know when to start pointe shoes.



*Duane Gosa as the Dying Swan -.Les Ballets du Trockadero // © John Ross 2018*

If pointe shoes are usually the dream for every little ballerina, ballerinos are now known more and more to go on their toes too. Pointe shoes are a great exercise in balance and strength for ballet boys. They can also be fun and there is no reason for boys or men to not have the pleasure of dancing on pointe shoes.

Les Ballet du Trockadero de Monte Carlo is a ballet company based in New York and is entirely composed of male ballet dancers dancing « en pointe » with beautiful costumes and often with a hint of humour and sarcasm.

Watch the Dying Swan staged by this company and acclaimed around the world:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcHxW82Eeik>

## How to choose your pointe shoes?

So you made it. It is time to get your first pair of pointe shoes. But with so many options, how do you choose? Soft or hard sole, large or narrow shank, high or low box, satin or stretch ribbons, there are a variety of structures for different pointe shoes. Ballet brands offer a combination of shank flexibilities, platforms, vamps and pastes, to suit all dancers' feet.

When I started working at the Stanlowa shop in Paris I had to forget everything I knew about pointe shoes, my own feelings and experiences on stage with pointe shoes, and try to put myself in the other person's « ballet » shoes.



*Alycia Hiddinga from the Paris Opera Ballet // © Adèle Cuel Wood for Stanlowa*

- *Before the fitting*

First advice, I do not recommend buying random pointe shoes on the internet. I know that you will find cheap pointe shoes on Shein, Amazon or AliExpress. But they will either break very easily and you will have to buy new ones every 2 to 3 months which will in the end be more expensive than buying a good quality pair of pointe shoes. Or they will injure your feet because of the bad design and cheap elements. Your pointe shoes, especially the first pair, will have a major impact on you as a dancer, and choosing the right shoe takes careful consideration.

Second advice, I can give you is to take your time: take your time in choosing your ballet shop and most of all take your time during the pointe shoe fitting. During my years as a Stanlowa team member it could sometimes take us more than one hour to find the perfect pointe shoe depending on the feet of the dancer. Even longer if it was the first pair of pointe shoes for a young or an older dancer.

Below you will find a guide for choosing the right pointe shoe, but always make sure to go to a specialty ballet shop to do a proper fitting and also do not hesitate to ask your teacher's recommendations. They have been through this process and can be of very good advice.

- *During the fitting*

The simplest place to start for your pointe shoe fitting is understanding your foot type and how that will translate to your pointe shoes. Depending on your foot strength and shape and also on the thinness of your heel, you may be better suited to certain models of pointe shoes. For example, dancers with a Greek or Egyptian foot shape can opt for thinner platform and tapered box, whereas larger box and platform might be better suited for Giselle foot shape.

If you are not sure what your foot shape is, find out from this illustration:



Note the overall shape of toe tips as well as the width at point A and point B.  
Both Greek and Egyptian shapes have a narrow tip and wide tip types.

*Get Ballet Box // © Audrey Collins*

### Pointe Shoe Fitting Glossary:

#### **Narrow, Medium or Wide Box**

Depending on the width of your knuckles (feet articulations or joints) you might need a box that is either narrow, medium or wide. A too narrow or too large box will either compress your feet or not support your weight enough and might cause bruising, ingrown toenail and bunions and will definitely cause joint pain.

When you try a new pair of pointe shoes, make sure first that all your toes are aligned in the box and that you do not feel the ground or your foot sliding towards the floor when going up on your toes.

#### **Hard, Soft or Pre-arched Shank (or Sole)**

Finding the right shank strength for your pointe shoe is determined by several different factors such as your arch, foot strength, height/weight, level in ballet and preferences. You might also change your preference in shanks other the years depending on your practice and on your strength.

A pre-arched shank is perfect for either young dancers who need support but do not have the strength to go perfectly on their toes yet, or for dancers with flat feet or low arch. Pre-arched pointe shoes are usually a special feature offered by many ballet brands. A hard shank will contrarily fit better and bring more support for intermediate to advanced dancers or beginners with a very strong arch (or « cou de pied »).

The perfect test to know which shank is the best one for you is to go up on your toes and make sure that the entire platform is on the floor: if you are a little bit backwards and you can slide a finger underneath the front of the platform then the shank is too hard, if you are going over the platform and bending to much forwards (what we call « going over the box ») then the shank is too soft. Be very careful on choosing the right shank, tendons and nerve damage can come from having the wrong hardness of shank.

#### **Low, Medium or High Vamp**

The vamp refers to the upper part of the pointe shoe, beginning at the drawstrings and covering the top of the toes. The length of the vamp is determined by toe length, foot width as well as arch and ankle flexibility.

A lower vamp can help dancers who have trouble reaching full pointe as it will enable the dancer's feet to go a little bit more over the pointe shoe. Dancers with stronger or more flexible feet might want a higher vamp. For professional dancers for example, who can sometimes go through several pairs of pointe shoes throughout the day, a higher vamp will give them more support especially if they start getting tired at the end of a long day of rehearsals. When the vamp shape and length are chosen correctly, the vamp supports the foot without restraining movement while still complimenting the line of the leg.

The length of the vamp is important for toes, metatarsals and ankles stability. A vamp that is too low for the dancer's feet and strength can be dangerous as the dancer might roll forwards on pointe and go over his or her pointe shoes. If the vamp is too high, it can hurt the feet joints and knuckles and be very painful.

The test for me to know which height you need personally for your vamp is that when you start going up on your toes, stay a moment in half pointe and see if you can really bend your feet as you usually do with soft ballet shoes. Of course, the sole will still be hard and new and you will not be used to the box shape... But if right away you feel a sharp pain on the top or around your knuckles then the vamp is too high! If you were able to go easily through half pointe before going on your toes but then you feel like you are falling forwards with your ankles bending too much in the front then the vamp is too low.

### **U cut or V cut**

So no, we are not speaking about hair style... A U cut or a V cut is the shape at the entrance area for the front of the foot and around vamp. Usually, U cut have drawstrings while V cut have an elastic around the throat line of the pointe shoe. But it can differ from one brand to another.

Honestly, never really saw the difference for me. I had pointe shoes with U cut and pointe shoes with V cut without even knowing which one it was. But some of my students and dancers from the shop told me that they could really feel the difference.

### **Toe Pads or Feet protection**

The little tricky one as I like to say... Lots of pointe shoes sold on the internet will not be coming with feet protections and as soon as you add them and put them on, the pointe shoes are too small or too narrow. Again, a professional pointe shoe fitter in a ballet shop will know how to help you find the best protection for your feet so that your pointe shoes are as comfortable as possible. The padding you pair with your pointe shoes plays a big role in your ability to stay on your toes pain-free, or as close as possible, through classes and rehearsals.

There are different possibilities of protections. The ones you choose comes down only to individual preference. Some dancers can prefer pointe shoe cushion or toe pad made of thick fabric or silicone. Others will go for lamb's wool (« coton cardé »), second skin squares in hydrogel or a simple piece of absorbing paper with blisters.

It could even happen for some really soft feet that I would put a little bit of wool at the bottom of the box of the pointe shoe in addition of the dancer's favourite toe pads. In that case I would sometimes go half a size up in pointe shoes so the dancer would not be too squeezed in her shoe. That would also enable a young dancer to keep her pointe shoes a little bit longer by removing the wool a few weeks or months later when she or he would finally be used to going on their toes.

Your pointe shoes will be your own so listen to your teacher's recommendations and to the pointe shoe fitter at the ballet shop but always go with your own preferences.



- After the fitting

After leaving the ballet shop, try your pointe shoes again at home the next day for example. Do not forget to wear clean tights and your protection. Take the time to feel again the hardness of the shank and box, to go “en pointe” with them, etc. If anything feels different or even hurts, do not hesitate to go back to the shop. This can happen if during your fitting you had swollen feet because of a long day or because the shop was too warm or the other way around if you were not warmed up enough before the fitting.

Once you have tried them one last time at home and checked that everything is still okay for you, it is now time to sew ribbons and elastics...

*[Find a video on how to sew pointe shoes on Ballet in Yorkshire IG account soon!](#)*



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