

Finding the Right Pointe Shoe

It all depends on the right relationship—the one dancers should have with an experienced pointe shoe fitter!

by Stacie Overmyer

For a ballet student, the much-anticipated day of her first pointe shoe fitting is full of excitement and passionate hope for what her future as a ballerina may hold. On this day a dancer's dedication has paid off, and she is now ready to graduate to the next level of dancing, *en pointe*. A dancer's ballet teacher must first grant permission to begin this journey and may make recommendations regarding what brand and style of shoe would be best to try at a first fitting. As a skilled ballet dancer who has worked alongside two highly respected fitters in Southern California, I have learned that it is most critical that each student be fitted for her shoes by an experienced and knowledgeable professional. This is true not only for her first fitting, but for all of her consecutive fittings as well. Yes! It is that important!

When fitted by a professional, both parents and dancers should walk out of the store confidently, knowing that you are leaving with shoes that are the best fit. Based on my dancing and pointe shoe fitting experience, I will provide some guidelines about how to find a highly skilled, "fairytale" fitter. This is someone who will help dancers find the perfect fit, or as many dancers call it, "*the shoe*." Understanding the importance of finding the best pointe shoe fitter will benefit a dancer beginning with her very first pair of shoes and throughout her many years as a ballerina.

Finding "Your" Fitter: What to Look For

Researching some general information about pointe shoes should be on the top of your list before venturing out to purchase your first pair of shoes. Although there is much to learn about the construction and different brands, it's advisable to learn just the basics and leave the specifics to the fitter. Educate yourself on the different brands of pointe shoes that are most common for students. Your research will undoubtedly reveal brands such as Bloch, Grishko, Russian Pointe, Suffolk, and Freed. Of course there are other brands, but these are a good start! Familiarizing yourself with these names will help you when exploring the different fitters in your area.

It is important to choose a fitter that not only maintains an abundant inventory of pointe shoes, including sizes, brands, and models, but who is also well versed in fitting each style. (This is when your prior research will come in handy!) Choosing a retailer with a small inventory or only a few brands can be disadvantageous. Although the fitter may be skilled in fitting the brands they have, there is a risk of being sold what's available in their inventory instead of what's best for you. On the other hand, stores with vast inventories and more employees may have fitters that are only generally educated on how a pointe shoe should fit, but not all of them may be experienced professionals.

Knowledgeable fitters look beyond the basic foot shape, length, and width. Their fittings involve a deeper understanding of the foot and should include discussing toe shape, width, and

length, how compressive the foot is, foot profile, arch type/flexibility, and the shape of the heel. A professional fitter will encourage asking any questions you may have.

Finally, when searching for a fitter, it is very important to find an individual that is passionate about their job and is excited to see a dancer grow. A reliable pointe shoe fitter will inquire about training, including location and how long they have been dancing. Most importantly, they will ensure that a young dancer has received teacher approval to further her ballet training *en pointe*. If a retailer is willing to sell a beginning ballerina her first pair of pointe shoes without asking these questions, this may be a sign that they do not have her best interests in mind. If this is the case, now is the time to start asking questions or find a new fitter!

Along with these guidelines, one of the best ways to find the right fitter is to ask your teachers or more experienced dancers. Finding the right shoe is a personal experience that is different for each individual and word of mouth is extremely valuable in this field. Names of fitters with a strong reputation in the dance community will be repeated often. Also of value is reading online reviews of a retailer's store fittings where people relate and rate their experiences. Never hesitate to actually visit the store to ask questions and get a feel of the store and personnel before you choose a fitter.

Grace Lee, owner of Dancer's Choice in Aliso Viejo, CA and an excellent example of what to look for in a fitter, has mastered the art of pointe shoe fittings while establishing interpersonal relationships with each one of her recurring customers. In a discussion quoted on the Russian Pointe website, it's noted that, "When you call Dancer's Choice, owner Grace Lee will know you by the sound of your voice!" While working at Grace's store and living in the area, I regularly heard girls in conversation speaking highly of "their fitter," referring to Lee. The relationship with their own fitter is something that dancers take seriously and are very proud of. Dancers always look excited to visit Grace for another fitting, because they know that she will treat them well and fit them with expertise each and every time.

How your fitter can help you through the years

The moment when pointe work is allowed is not necessarily dependent upon a dancer's age, but rather on her stage of physical development and the amount of training and strength she has. For students who begin ballet at a young age, the go-ahead to advance to pointe work is generally granted between the ages of 11 and 14. While some studios may start girls at a slightly younger age due to meticulous training, I advise that you read up on the importance of "bone ossification" and the associated risks of beginning pointe work prior to 75 percent ossification in the feet (Lugo). Most dancers' beginning years on pointe will coincide with their adolescent growth spurt. For girls, this means that they will grow fastest, beginning with their feet, around the ages of 12 and 13 (*Science: Human Body and Mind*). This of course is problematic when the precise fit of a pointe shoe is so imperative! It is not realistic for an aspiring ballerina to have her first pointe shoe fitting and then simply continue ordering the same brand and style of shoe as time goes on.

Based on my own experience as a dancer and a pointe shoe fitter, the awkward teenage years are a time in which a dancer often circulates through different types of shoes as her feet grow and change shape. A shoe that fits in November for *The Nutcracker* may no longer feel or look correct the following June for summer intensive programs. Working with professional fitters, I quickly recognized the benefits of documenting the different styles of shoes each dancer wears and on what date they purchase or switch to a new shoe. This helps the fitter remember what has worked in the past and what is currently working for her. Ultimately, because you will

not be required to start from scratch with a new fitter, this saves time and frustrations while providing a more accurate assessment of what you need each time you have a fitting. I highly recommend visiting a fitter every few months to be sure that a growing dancer's shoes are still a suitable fit for her.

A good fitter will work with a dancer as her body and skills develop over the years of dancing on pointe. Increases in flexibility and strength will be observed. According to Josephine Lee, daughter of Grace Lee and also a respected pointe shoe fitter, "As you increase your skills and hours *en pointe*, your feet might get stronger and need a different shank, or you get an injury and need more support. Maybe you had a growth spurt and your ankles are weaker." It is inevitable that a dancer will experience these types of things, which can affect motivation and performance abilities. Visiting the same retailer throughout the years creates a relationship between fitter and dancer, leading to advice tailored to personal circumstances and experiences.

A professional fitter is committed to helping each dancer they work with to achieve their full potential. During my time learning from professionals, I saw many young dancers come into the store with a preconceived idea of what they wanted their feet to look like on pointe, usually based on what shoes looked good on their friends. It is most important for a dancer to understand that everyone's feet are different! Today, pointe shoe companies have created a style of shoe for nearly every type of foot imaginable. It is no longer justifiable for a pointe shoe fitter to place a girl in a shoe that just "fits alright." The wrong shoe can make pointe work seem impossible. Unfortunately, many young dancers have endured this, but they can get a great boost in confidence after visiting an experienced fitter that helps them find the "perfect fit." Finding "the" shoe is every ballerina's dream! Although pointe work is rigorous and can be painful at times, there is no reason for any dancer to experience the pain of ill-fitting shoes. A reliable, trained fitter will ensure the right pointe shoe for each dancer's specific skills and needs.

The positive bond that can develop between a ballerina and her pointe shoe fitter is an underestimated relationship in the dance world, one that not all students have had the good fortune to experience. This relationship is much more involved and complex than a typical encounter between a retailer and a customer. A dedicated fitter will become a dancer's supporter, cheerleader, faithful advisor, and a trusted friend throughout their dancing years.

Works Cited

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