



# See you at the BARRE

Helen Carpenter-Waters explores barre fitness, from its origins to the present day.

**W**hen I joined the industry over 40 years ago, 'keep fit' offerings (led by organisations such as the Ladies League of Health and Beauty, Medau and the Keep Fit Association) were joined by the worldwide 'Jane Fonda Aerobics' phenomenon. There were far fewer gyms, which were often of the 'spit and sawdust' variety where bodybuilders or boxers hung out. Council-run swimming baths and leisure centres had small gyms where fixed weights were the trend. Men and women rarely mingled – the dance studio was where the women hung out and the weights area was for the men!

There were also dance and ballet schools, yoga, Pilates and martial arts classes, which either had their own venues or used the local school/church hall but, at that time, everyone was very much in their 'own lane'.

Today there are so many gyms and studios with a broad variety of offerings, along with a great deal of cross-fertilisation across disciplines. While this amount of choice is wonderful for the public and for we fit pros, it provides a challenge when seeking recognised and credible initial and ongoing training. I fear there may be excessive hybridisation resulting in a loss of clear identity, direction and purpose in some group exercise offerings.

Barre fitness has a genuine heritage and is far from being a fad. Lotte Berk is credited as the creator of barre fitness classes and she, like Joseph Pilates, was a German refugee escaping the Nazis and living in the UK

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during WW2. Lotte used her background in ballet to create a workout she asserted everyone could do.

She was a beautiful woman with poise and a slender figure (very popular at that time), so news of her and her classes quickly spread across London in the 1960s. She had many famous clients, including Joan Collins, Britt Ekland, Barbra Streisand and Yasmin Le Bon, which promoted her reputation further. Lotte didn't brand or copyright her work but, despite her passing aged 90 over 20 years ago, her legend and work lives on in her daughter, Esther, who is herself in her late 80s. Esther has given her blessing to another generation of barre teachers, and you can still train in her mother's method today with Esther and the next generation of Lotte Berk Method teachers.

The ballet barre around which barre fitness classes are focused (although not entirely) is a training tool for ballet dancers and, consequently, there is a strong influence of ballet in barre fitness. Classical, contemporary and jazz ballet are predominantly the styles used and there are many sub-styles under these headings which, when blended with the principles taught in ETM and fitness plus the strong influences of Pilates and Yoga, prevented Lotte or anyone else from claiming ownership of barre fitness.

## Do I need a barre?

Much of the class can be done in a smallish space, so it's ideal for Zoom as well as the studio. My clients use kitchen counters, dining chairs, the windowsill and mantelpiece! When we started the class, we didn't have enough barres so we used broom handles (and often still do) for support and incorporated them to help with other exercises too.

## Training

There are various accredited barre fitness providers and organisations that offer certifications and most require pre-learning, including those recognised by CIMSPA and EMDUK, including qualifications in group X

and PT. Some will take dance teaching qualifications; others accept Pilates and yoga qualifications; some will consider experience as a dancer.

Jayne Nicholls, via her company GXT, offers an online certification that takes between one day and one week to complete, with no ongoing costs. Jayne believes a qualified fit pro or dance teacher already possesses necessary foundations to instruct fitness and her course provides you with the barre-specific knowledge you need to create your own barre fitness class. If you feel you need more input, a course such as Barre Concept, which includes a theory quiz and one-hour video assessment plus the optional life-time membership, might meet your needs.

The Royal Ballet offers a licensed Silver Swans training for qualified ballet teachers, which is promoted as a ballet class for seniors (\$5 plus) so as such it's not a fitness class, but of course fitness is improved by attendance.

My own background of ballet (Elmhurst Ballet School), plus various other styles of dance, gymnastics, sport and a huge variety of fitness disciplines and influences, informs my instruction and class content. I believe it's important to honour the heritage and disciplines of classical, contemporary and jazz ballet and blend them with my knowledge/experience as a dancer, choreographer, fitness and health practitioner.

## What's the difference between barre fitness and a ballet barre class?

The barre is used in ballet classes as support for work on ballet-specific strength, stability, mobility, flexibility, co-ordination and fitness exercises. These exercises prepare dancers' bodies for the demanding techniques and exercises which, when perfected, are taken away from the barre and, ultimately, used in performances on stage or exams. The purpose is to prepare the body for ballet-specific work, with the goal being ballet excellence when performing. At the barre, ballet dancers gain support to slow the movement down, allowing them to work



on details, layer elements of technique, maintain balance and perform more repetitions, building skill and dance-specific fitness.

In barre fitness, the goal is to improve all aspects of fitness for life (mobility, flexibility, co-ordination, cardiovascular fitness and strength too). It offers an alternative and effective way of getting and staying fit and is great for everyone of all fitness levels and ages. My classes have ballet pros and former pros sharing the barre with absolute beginners – the age range is from the young to the old and everyone can be challenged at their level. The movements are adapted from ballet to assist a ‘regular person’ – rather than a ballet dancer – to exercise safely and effectively, although my ballet pros do find our classes assist them to meet the demands of ballet.

The barre fitness class plan can have one or several objectives depending on time, preference and clientele (e.g., you can have a class that focuses on muscular strength, endurance and functional movement; another that includes or focuses on cardio

[steady state and intervals]; another that focuses on flexibility, co-ordination and balance, etc.). I include all elements in my class, but the emphasis can change from week to week. This flexibility of content allows instructors to teach ‘express’ classes in addition to longer classes.

The benefits of a barre class are those outlined above and, with Pilates, yoga and fitness influences added to the session at the barre, it really is a full-body, effective workout. It’s also a class that gets harder rather than easier as you progress!

In barre fitness, like in ballet class, we work on ‘pulling up’ (lengthening the spine, lifting out of hips, knees, ankles, etc.) the alignment of our posture when stationary and when moving through positions and, of course, on using our centre – the spinal, pelvic and shoulder stabilisers – plus knee, ankle, elbow and wrist dynamic and static stability.

With improved fitness, strength, posture and mobility, clients often feel better (i.e., more energetic, mobile, positive, etc.) and they often comment that they look better (improved muscle tone, standing taller,

moving more freely and possibly some fat loss). Two of my clients in their 60s noted they had regained some height (over an inch!) when measured at their last physical and they both attributed it to the posture work in our barre class.

#### Barre fitness language

The French terminology used in ballet crosses over into my barre fitness class; however, it comes with a translation that fitness participants are more familiar with, so a ‘plié’ is a ‘squat’, or a ‘battement’ is a ‘kick’. I use both (e.g., “We will take our legs shoulder-width apart, toes pointing outwards and bend our knees into a wide squat, or plié”).

#### BASIC TERMS TO GET YOU STARTED

##### Plié – to bend the knees (i.e., squat)

There are five positions, although check out the two positions for 4th. In all positions, the bodyweight should be evenly placed between both feet, with knees tracking in line with the toes.

■ **1st** – heels together (narrow squat).

■ **2nd** – legs apart, sideways (wide squat).

■ **3rd** – heel of one foot sits in line with the arch of the other (closed split stance squat).

■ **4th ‘open’** – heels of feet are aligned with one foot placed approximately 12 inches in front of the other, depending upon leg length of dancer (wide split stance squat).

■ **4th ‘crossed’** – as with 4th open but the heel of the front foot aligns with the toes of the rear foot and the toes of the forward foot align with the heel of the back foot (crossed wide split squat).

■ **5th** – like 4th, crossed but the feet are together, rather like a more crossed 3rd position (crossed narrow squat).

Pliés can be performed in the following ways:

■ **With a ‘turn out’** – toes pointing outwards, leg externally rotated at the hip joint, not the knees and ankles, and no strain should be felt at the knees or ankles.

■ **In parallel** – toes pointing forward. Feels natural to the fitness participant and is a counter position for the external rotators of the pelvis, which will fatigue with constant work in turn out.

■ **As a demi plié, which is a halfway squat, or a full plié, which is full range of motion squat** – tough on the knees in 1st, and not recommended in either of the 4th positions. Incredibly tough in 3rd and 5th and often not a great choice for the non-dancer or deconditioned participant. Indeed, the ballet community has debated for many years as to the value of full plié in any position other than second.

■ **On a flat foot or on demi pointe** (i.e., heels raised from the floor, ankles fully extended, balancing on the balls and toes of the feet).

■ **En pointe** (standing on top of the toes) – this is for ballet class, not barre fitness, and requires specialist ‘point’ shoes and many years of training and skill.

■ **One-leg plié** – ‘Fondu’, the other ‘free’ leg is usually moving outwards from the supporting leg forwards, sideways, backwards, out and round, or held close to the supporting leg (coupé or retiré) or held out to the front, back or side. See video 1.

##### Other basic movements at the barre

■ **Tendu** – moving one straight leg, usually with pointed toes and stretched ankles away from the supporting leg (e.g., front, side, back).

■ **Battement** – ‘kick’ (forward, sideways,

backwards, around from front to back or back to front).

■ **Retiré** – ‘knee lift’ with toes of lifted leg close the knee/thigh of the other leg.

■ **Développé** – slowly drawing one foot up via the retiré (knee lift) and slowly stretching it out forwards, sideways or backwards.

■ **Relevé** – lifting from a plié up on to demi pointe (balls of feet).

■ **Élevé** – lifting from straight legs up on the demi or full pointe. See video 2.

##### Jumps

■ **Sauté** – jumping from two feet to two feet.

■ **Jeté** – jumping from one foot to the other foot (grande or petite – big or small).

■ **Temps levé** – hopping, taking off one foot and landing on the same foot.

■ **Assemblé** – jump from one foot landing simultaneously on two feet.

■ **Sissone** – jump from two feet to one foot. See video 3.

##### Port de bras

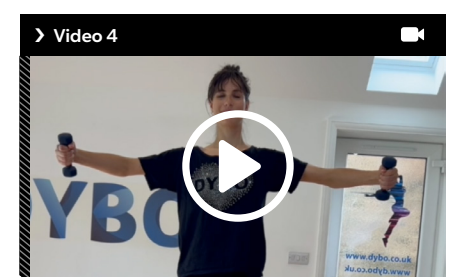
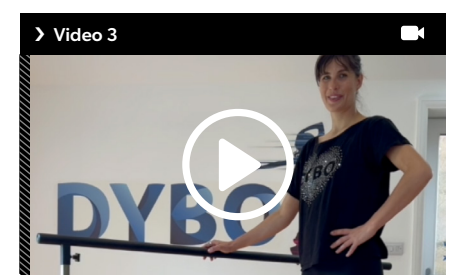
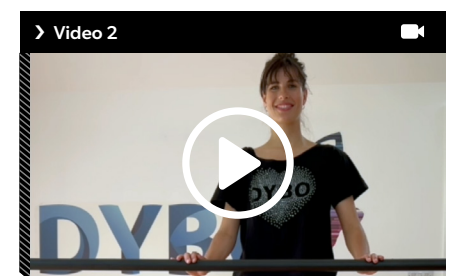
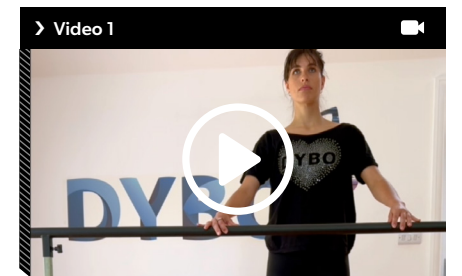
There are five basic arm positions. In training, dancers learn to perform the positions of the feet and matching arm positions together.

Port de bras is great for improving posture, special awareness and endurance of the postural/stabilising muscles of the shoulders and upper back. I add resistance bands or light hand weights to our port de bras sequences, which really is demanding – not just for the arms and shoulders but also the stabilisers of the trunk and, when combined with leg action and balances, core stability is certainly challenged. See video 4.

There are many more movements in ballet that we can carry across to barre fitness but, armed with just these basics, a barre fitness instructor has almost limitless combinations to keep their classes progressive and interesting! When including exercises from the fitness/Pilates/yoga world, I recommend blending a balletic style and flow to maintain a sense of authenticity.

I suggest you attend a variety of barre fitness (and ballet if that’s what you enjoy) classes to experience the many ways a class can be put together and delivered. With barre fitness training, the combination of ballet movements, other trainings you have from the fitness industry plus your personal style and the type of clients you have will influence the content and style of class and will help you attract your barre fitness crew.

You are certainly welcome to join my classes via Zoom or in person if you are passing and I’m happy to respond to any questions you might have relating to this article or any other area of my professional expertise. 



Thank you to my dear friend and colleague Daisy West for her beautiful demonstrations.

Daisy trained at Ballet Rambert (BA 1st Class Honours), holds a Level 4 Diploma in Yoga, is Barre Fitness trained and is a busy professional dancer with many stage and TV credits.  
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