

IMPERIAL BALLET

WHEN MARIUS PETIPA arrived in Russia in 1847, he joined a long line of imported dance professionals. By the time of his death in 1910, the situation had reversed: it was the dancers and choreographers of Russia who would revive ballet in Europe and beyond.

Ballet in Russia began as a court art form, as it had in Italy and France. The first recorded Russian ballet performance took place in 1673 when Tsar Alexei, who had heard of the danced entertainments of European courts, ordered something similar for his summer seat in Preobrazhenskoye village, near Moscow. He was delighted with the results, but it was not until the eighteenth century that ballet training became established in Russia. Peter the Great brought French and Italian dancing masters to Russia as part of his westernising programme, but not to prepare stage dance: they were to train the children of Peter's aristocracy in ballroom dancing and etiquette. The first Russian ballet school had its roots in this courtly training. In 1736, during the reign of the Empress Anna, more than a hundred pupils from the Cadet Corps appeared in the finale of Francesco Araja's opera-ballet *La Forza dell'amore e dell'odio*, dancing 'a most pleasant ballet'.¹ Their teacher, the French ballet master Jean-Baptiste Landé, started a ballet school in St Petersburg two years later. His twenty-four students were the children of palace servants. From the beginning, until the revolution of 1917, Russian ballet was dependent upon the Tsar.

When Catherine the Great came to the throne in 1762, she turned St Petersburg into an important theatrical centre, establishing state theatres for French drama, Russian drama and French and Italian ballet and opera. Italian and French teachers and choreographers came to work in St Petersburg, including Charles-Louis Didelot, Jules Perrot, Arthur Saint-Léon, Bournonville's student Per Christian Johansson and Marius Petipa.