

THE NUTCRACKER SUITE



Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), an extremely gifted child, could read three languages by the age of seven. His parents began him on the piano when he was eight. He was met with several personal tragedies throughout his life, the first of which was the death of his treasured mother in 1854. Instead of joining his father in the Mining Corps, he completed his work in the St. Petersburg School of Jurisprudence (a hotbed of homosexual practices) in 1859 while composing some of his first works, such as the *Anastasya Waltz*. In 1862 he enrolled in the St. Petersburg Conservatory, graduating in 1865. Eventually he was appointed to the faculty there, but only after a disastrous marriage of only a few months to a woman he didn't love.



Swan Lake was his first ballet, in 1876. In 1877 he received a sizeable annual stipend from Nadezhda von Meck, a wealthy widow, allowing him to leave his teaching position and compose full-time. This epistolary, platonic friendship with Meck (he never met her), was crucial to his mental health. In 1888 he finished *The Sleeping Beauty*. In 1890 the stipend was abruptly terminated (von Meck went bankrupt), the same year the Imperial Theatre commissioned *The Nutcracker* (Shchelkunchik). While working on it, Tchaikovsky was invited to tour America for 25 days to conduct the inaugural concert opening Carnegie Hall in New York City. Just before he sailed in 1891 his much-loved sister Alexandra died. His brother Modeste kept this news from Pyotr, afraid that knowing of Sasha's passing would cause him to abort the tour. Tchaikovsky however purchased a local newspaper, read every word as he would usually, and discovered the tragic news. Close friends persuaded him to continue the tour. Nevertheless, he completed *The Nutcracker* in 1892, one of his most beloved and memorable works.



A ten-chapter story by E.T.A. Hoffman, "The Nutcracker and the Mouse-King," was severely condensed by Marius Petipato into two acts for *The Nutcracker*. The ballet was not originally a success, though the suite Tchaikovsky derived from it was. Currently the entire production is a December favorite. Tchaikovsky's manipulation of orchestral sounds is highly Romantic and excessively masterful.

"Young Clara [Stahlbaum] becomes infatuated with a toy nutcracker, a present from her godfather Drosselmeyer [a local magician]. She comes down at midnight to visit the nutcracker, and experiences a fantasy in which all the toys come to life in response to an attack by an army of

mice. The Nutcracker defeats the Mouse-King with Clara's deft assistance, whereupon they visit his realm, Confiturembourg."

There are several musical versions of *Nutcracker* which deserve mention elsewhere. Today in our unique rendering we strive to remind you of the lovely melodies and sublime textures characteristic of this masterpiece – the pictures the music paints. And we plan to impress upon you the flexible talent of these advanced ringer-musicians, manipulating their bells and chimes in astounding competence without distracting you from the genius of Tchaikovsky's composition. Possibly these few remarks will help.

1. **Miniature Overture.** Written in an extremely high register, this piece features dotted-note figures and pervasive staccato. The opening motif is heard several times throughout, along with its accompanying counter-melody of a descending scale. It is a perfect introduction – playful, light-hearted, spirited, and bouncy. The center section is more *legato* – flowing, melodic, which makes the closing all the more dramatic.

2. **Marche.** As the excited children line up to receive their gifts, this well-known march highlights their eagerness. In fact, you will actually hear the peals of delight from the youngsters interrupting the distribution of the presents. Their joy is incredibly infectious as the music flies through upward and downward scales.

3. **Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy.** One of the most characteristic sounds of the entire ballet is the *celesta*, featured in this dance. The *celesta* is a struck idiophone operated by a keyboard. The keys connect to hammers that strike a graduated set of metal (usually steel) plates or bars suspended over wooden resonators. It sounds much like a *glockenspiel* – tinny, fragile, delicate, transparent.

4. **Trepak (Candy canes).** In the story, Clara enjoys international sweet treats. This dance features great contrasts, constant movement, and drama. It should be performed as fast as possible without sounding too frantic.

5. **Danse Arabe (Coffee).** Referred to as “cloying and bewitching music,” this dance hosts a melody contained within a very small interval. There is a pervasive “carpet of sound” throughout, punctuated now and then by a tune. There are hardly any accents in this haunting piece, no edges, only a slight “murmur” sounded by tuquets.

6. **Chinese Dance (Tea).** Extremely high sounds over thumping pedal tones, this piece is furious, captivatingly short.

7. **Dance of the Reed Flutes.** One cannot help but recall the breathy sound of the wooden flutes in the original orchestral version. In our arrangement you'll be pleased with harmonies and rhythms you may have never enjoyed before. Grace notes punctuate tempi. The lower “flutes” enjoy a quick melody, and the piece comes almost to a standstill before launching into a reprise of the opening theme.

8. **Spanish Dance (Chocolate).** This delightful *divertissement* is hardly ever heard. It too is a waltz, with a few “bent sounds” and a very subtle Latino flavor. Castanets add to the mix.

9. **Waltz of the Flowers.** This is both the longest and the most developed member in the suite. It deserves its place as the grand climax. Throughout we struggle to hold back the speed, keeping it relaxed and flexible. To wit. The lengthy introduction establishes the tonal center as D-major (incidentally, a very friendly key for strings). Arching chords and *arpeggia* engrave on the ear the main motif. Then the waltz begins on tone bars, embellished with contrasting bells. This *dolce cantabile* repeats often throughout, topped by the choral waltz theme. The middle section is much quieter, introduced almost apologetically with tones hesitant and somewhat incomplete and highlighted by vaulting scales on the *pianoforte* and punctuated by the deft triangle. A harsh, lower melody twice interrupts these heavenly thoughts before the more pleasing natures return. Rushing to the extended coda, the principle theme recaps, frosted above with *obligati* as though driven mercilessly to the climactic chord.

Tchaikovsky's principal medium was opera. However, only *Eugene Onegin* (his greatest opera and probably biographical) and *The Queen of Spades* are regularly produced. The force of his three ballets (don't forget *Swan Lake*) resound throughout his symphonies, chamber works, serenades, and suites. David Brown in *Grove* remarked, “His natural gifts, especially his genius for what he called the ‘lyrical idea,’ the beautiful, self-contained melody, give his music a permanent appeal; it was his hard-won but secure and professional technique, and his ability to use it for the expression of his emotional life, which enabled him to realize his potential more fully than any of his major Russian contemporaries.”

--Paul W. Allen