

Lethbridge Symphony Programme Notes
The Nutcracker
December 15, 16, 17, 2017

Tchaikovsky's ***Nutcracker*** ballet was premiered on December 18, 1892 in St. Petersburg, Russia. It was not well received. In fact, it was actually a failure. Over time, however, the ballet became enormously popular and is now a staple of the holiday season – music that is as important to Christmas as carols.

Today, Tchaikovsky is praised for his mastery of writing music for classical dance with ***The Nutcracker*** singled out for its “beguiling melody, balletic rhythm, and vivid atmosphere”, and its sensitive invocation of a child’s journey into a fantastical land of imagination. Indeed, the way Tchaikovsky presents all the elements of Clara’s creativity, the wonder of the Land of Sweets, displays Tchaikovsky’s ear for orchestral colours and musical substance. His innovative instrumentation elevates the work as well, such as the use of the celesta in the Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy. This instrument had only been invented five years previously in 1886, and this was one of the first times it was used for such a work.

Born in 1840 in Vyatka, Russia, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was destined for a career in civil service. His father was a mine inspector and expected that his oldest surviving son would follow in his footsteps. That was not to be, however, when at age five Tchaikovsky began taking piano lessons and displayed a rapidly blooming passion for music. He attended boarding school in St. Petersburg until the age of nineteen, when he took up a bureau clerk position with the Ministry of Justice, honouring the wishes of his father and late mother. He only held this position for four years, choosing instead to pursue his much stronger passion for music.

Tchaikovsky began taking music lessons at the Russian Musical Society, and shortly after that he enrolled as one of the first composition students at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He began giving private composition lessons to other students there, and in 1863 he moved to Moscow to become a professor of harmony at the Moscow Conservatory. Eventually he began to receive acclaim for his compositions, which became increasingly popular throughout Russia. Once he had established himself as a composer in Russia, he began to receive much more support for his work, both in the form of patronage and through commissions from the Imperial Theatre of Russia.

Opened in 1860, the Imperial Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg was the main theatre for opera and ballet in Russia, particularly in the late nineteenth century. This theatre was the place for many premieres of Tchaikovsky's music, as well as other important Russian composers such as Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. The Imperial Theatre saw the creation of many other ballets before ***The Nutcracker***, such as Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*.

In 1891, the director of the Maryinsky Theatre, Ivan Vsevolozhsky, commissioned Tchaikovsky to write ***The Nutcracker*** ballet, to be choreographed by Marius Petipa, who is considered to be the most influential ballet master in history. The ballet was commissioned for the 1892-1893 season of the Maryinsky Theatre, when Tchaikovsky was already earning international renown for his compositional output. His works were so well known at this time that from March to May of 1891 he broke from working solely on ***The Nutcracker*** and instead toured the United States, both as composer and conductor.

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During this tour he was only able to compose small parts at a time, often expressing his distress in letters over finding himself “unable to compose a single note.” Because of this, in his two months away he managed only to complete the opening scenes of the first act, but upon his return to Europe, after extending his deadline once, he threw himself back into the ballet and managed to complete it nearly a year later, in March of 1892. His finished score stayed true the plot outline provided to him by choreographer Petipa, and they began working together on the production of the ballet immediately.

Marius Petipa himself created over fifty ballets, many of which are still performed today faithful to his original choreography. Although his choreography for ***The Nutcracker*** ballet was met by a generally unenthusiastic audience who felt that this ballet centered more around the spectacle than the actual dance, his other works were earning him great recognition at the time, and allowed ***The Nutcracker*** enough momentum to become one of the best-known ballets in history despite its initial disappointment. As the First Ballet Master at the Maryinsky Theatre, he choreographed many of its most important ballets, including Tchaikovsky’s *Sleeping Beauty*.

Tchaikovsky was beginning to write ballet music just as ballet was “coming of age” as an independent art form, and his writing was incredibly important during what some have called the “Golden Age” of ballet in the late nineteenth century. At this time, classical dance had begun to break away from the entrapments of opera, where dance troupes served only to break up several acts of singing.

The Nutcracker, based on two short stories by German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann, later reworked by Alexandra Dumas, a French novelist, tells the story of a young girl’s journey into the most fantastic parts of her imagination and all of the whimsical characters that live there. Though the plot is greatly simplified for the ballet, providing music for this story would have been an incredible compositional undertaking. Still, Tchaikovsky manages to create a vivid and magical atmospheric experience when Clara enters the Land of Sweets, and throughout the rest of the ballet.

Ballet companies all over the world perform ***The Nutcracker*** at Christmas, and the marvellous score that Tchaikovsky composed remains one of the most important in the entire ballet repertoire.

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