

Musical Treasure Chest #34

I have always loved dance. Some of our earliest family movies are of me dancing around the living room while my mother played the piano. More formal training occurred later with ballet classes and summer camps devoted to dance. I even considered pursuing dance as a career, but realized in high school that what was the real drive behind the dance passion was the music. When I took class (at a time when studios still used live accompanists!), I was always so aware of what was played, and I would frequently talk with the pianist about which pieces they selected and why. To this day I have associations with certain repertory that cannot be disentangled from dance. And some pieces that combine both music and dance remain extremely special to me: one of those is the *Nutcracker Ballet of Tchaikovsky*.

When I was in high school I had a chance to dance in a *Nutcracker* at the Albany Palace and the performances were accompanied by a live orchestra. This experience was exhilarating; the three-dimensional sound of a live orchestra is so different from a recording. I have never forgotten the excitement of standing backstage waiting to go on (as a snowflake) and hearing the orchestra. As a professional musician I have had a chance several times to be down in the "pit," and it is just as thrilling from the other side. To see the dancers responding to what we are creating musically is fascinating, it's like a musical carpet they ride on.

One of my Christmas morning traditions is to put on the *Nutcracker Ballet* music, either just audio or the Balanchine version on TV (although McCauley Culkin can be a little much to stomach sometimes!). But hearing the music, and watching the guests arrive in the first act somehow makes me feel as though Christmas has begun. Tchaikovsky's score is brilliant. Of course, it's enduring popularity is proof of that. And, along with Handel's *Messiah* is one of the two musical works performed all over the world every Christmas. But I think the music has become so familiar that we forget in its own time the composer had embarked on new compositional territory.

The Nutcracker is the last of Tchaikovsky's three ballet scores (*Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty* are the other two). Commissioned in 1892 by the Imperial Theaters in St Petersburg and meant to be part of a double bill that featured also a new opera by the composer titled *Iolantha*, Tchaikovsky was to work once again with the great choreographer Marius Petipa, who selected the ETA Hoffmann story *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* as the basis for the ballet. Petipa gave Tchaikovsky a very detailed list of what he wanted for dance numbers in the ballet, including tempi and number of measures. But within this rather strict framework, what a masterpiece Tchaikovsky created. His music so perfectly marries with the drama of the story that to hear anything else would be inconceivable.

The premiere was not successful. The ballet concluded the evening (the opera preceding it was full-length), and with the first act set to be more of a pageant than dance, the audience did not even get to watch the real ballet material until well after midnight. Tchaikovsky's music fared better, with critics generally praising the score. The ballet languished forgotten after the 1892 production until 1919, when it was re-worked and restaged by Alexander Gorsky. Gradually the reimagined version caught on, with performances outside of Russia starting in the 1930s. Balanchine catapulted *The Nutcracker* into an annual Christmas event with his 1954 version for New York City Ballet. (There are actually a few more steps between 1919 and 1954, but the history is too long to detail for this writing).

And how lucky we are that *The Nutcracker* is so much a part of the Christmas tradition. Even people who are not familiar with classical music tend to know the melodies from the ballet. And children still vie to be accepted to dance in the first act of the piece in all types of productions. There are many great orchestral recordings, but I thought you might enjoy instead watching the ballet, where the music is played to match the needs of the dancers. This is the famous 1977 version with Gelsey Kirkland and Mikhail Baryshnikov.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YL1m6WatMRY>