

The Nutcracker

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After the success of *The Sleeping Beauty* in 1890, Ivan Vsevolozhsky, the Director of the Imperial Theatres in St. Petersburg, proposed uniting Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (the composer) and Marius Petipa (the choreographer) to work together on a new fairy-tale ballet.

Vsevolozhsky devised a scenario based upon E.T.A. Hoffmann's 1816 story: *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*. However, it was a French adaption of this German children's story by Alexandre Dumas (père) called *The Nutcracker of Nuremberg* that Vsevolozhsky knew. The basic plot is the same between both versions although minor details differ. For instance, Hoffmann says Drosselmeyer is short; Dumas says he is tall. Hoffmann's original story had a tale within a tale, many digressions and was too long and unwieldy. Vsevolozhsky therefore simplified the scenario and softened the story which contained grotesque and sinister elements. He also changed the name of the little girl from Marie in the story to Clara in the ballet, Clara being the name of one of Marie's dolls.

Both Tchaikovsky and Petipa considered the scenario provided by Vsevolozhsky to be inferior to *The Sleeping Beauty* and were unenthusiastic. Tchaikovsky at first refused the commission, angry with Vsevolozhsky for removing his opera *The Queen of Spades* from the Imperial Theatre repertoire, but eventually agreed to write music for *The Nutcracker* after Vsevolozhsky explained this had been done for scheduling and casting reasons and commissioned a one-act opera, *Iolanthe* (Iolanta) based on the Danish play *King René's Daughter* by Henrik Hertz, to be presented in the same performance before the two-act ballet. Vsevolozhsky wrote to Tchaikovsky "*I have experienced agonies of remorse for asking you to do this ballet. I know that it is unappealing to you. You are an exceptionally kind soul for not refusing me*".

Petipa drew up the ballet's libretto and stage direction and gave Tchaikovsky a list of instructions for the music. But the creation work did not proceed smoothly. Tchaikovsky's interpretation often clashed with Petipa's, both the libretto and choreographic structure had to be revisited several times.

Tchaikovsky began work on the opera and ballet simultaneously and had completed the music for half of the ballet's Act I and the Snowflake Waltz by March 1891 when he travelled to America to conduct the opening ceremonies for a new concert auditorium in New York City built by industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. It was in Paris enroute to America that Tchaikovsky discovered the celesta (a keyboard instrument which produces an ethereal tinkling sound) which he thought to be "*divinely beautiful*" and on his return to St. Petersburg ordered one to be bought and shipped back to Russia under conditions of utmost secrecy, using it for the dance of the Sugarplum Fairy.

On his return to Russia, he completed the first draft of *The Nutcracker* in July 1891 and the orchestration in April 1892. He was not happy and considered it infinitely worse than his other ballets. Yet when composed for the opera *Iolanthe* he wrote to his brother that while composing the ballet he kept thinking it was not very good but now it was the ballet that seemed good and the opera not so good. Before the ballet's premiere, Tchaikovsky selected eight numbers (*Nutcracker Suite, Op. 71a*) for a concert performance in April 1892 which

was a huge success. This was an idea he copied from Léo Delibes. Ballets had short lives and divorcing the music from the ballet ensured the music would continue to survive the ballet's inevitable demise. (For instance, records for Paris Opera Ballet show 40 new ballets created in the period 1820 to 1846. If we set aside *Giselle* which lasts to this day, the average life of a ballet in the repertory was 7 years and medium life only 5 years).

In August 1892, before the ballet was finished, Petipa became seriously ill with a nervous disorder and was prescribed bedrest following the tragic death of his 15-year-old daughter Evgenia after her leg was amputated. The task of choreographing the ballet was entrusted therefore to his assistant Lev Ivanov who followed the Ballet Master Plan and stage directions drawn up by Petipa. According to Modest Tchaikovsky, Ivanov fulfilled his task magnificently when it was only a matter of dancing, but his action scenes were a total flop, especially the war between the mice and the toys. Ivanov was unfocussed and indolent in nature, and while he showed flashes of genius and originality when it came to choreographing individual scenes, he could not sustain the focus required to put together a complete ballet. He too often allowed individual dancers to change elements to suit themselves.

At the premiere in December 1892, the opening party scene was deemed pleasant but not very interesting, the dancing dolls childish, and the fight with the mice which involved *"disorderly pushing about from corner to corner and running backwards and forwards"* quite amateurish. The Peterburgskaya Gazeta reviewer declared *"... it is a pity that so much fine music is expended on nonsense unworthy of attention ..."*. The scenery for the Kingdom of the Sweets was criticized as being overdone, the profusion of colours and sweets being a cloying experience. Even Tchaikovsky thought the designs were wearying on the eye. (If you ever watch George Balanchine's version of *The Nutcracker* ballet performed annually by the New York City Ballet you will likely experience this for yourself). Never-the-less, Ivanov's *Waltz of the Snowflakes* (using a *corps de ballet* of more than 50 dancers) was praised at the premiere as were a few of the Act II *divertissements* and the *grand pas de deux*. Unfortunately, most of Ivanov's choreography has been lost. The *grand pas de deux* of Act II is one of the few bits of Ivanov's choreography that has survived intact, passed down from dancer to dancer through the generations.

The structure of the original ballet is arguably not very satisfactory. The ballet's leading role, the part of Clara, is a child's role while the ballerina roles, that of the Sugarplum Fairy is very small. She dances one *pas de deux* at the end of Act II and the rest of the time she merely acts as Clara's host in the Land of Sweets. Clara herself becomes a passive spectator in Act II.

Consequently, people have been tinkering with the choreography ever since hoping to make it better. Indeed, even before the ballet premiered, Vsevolozhsky was tinkering with Petipa's Master Plan writing to Tchaikovsky that he *"wanted to pass on to you some ideas for the ballet, which do not fit in with Petipa's scheme. He is what the French call 'vieu jeu' (played out). All the solos and variations he devised for the first act would be of little interest to the public."* As a result, the Spanish, Arabian, Chinese and Russian dances originally written to appear after the March in Act I were transferred by Tchaikovsky to the *divertissement* of Act II. The English dance was dropped from the ballet (it survives in the form of a piano sketch),

and the Italian dance (tarantella) was moved to become the first variation (male solo) in the concluding *grand pas de deux* of Act II. It is no wonder the ballet structure became so lopsided with the first act all narrative and the second act all *divertissements*.

Over the years choreographers have tackled the structural problems of the ballet in various ways:

- by completely modifying the plot. A good example, because it worked brilliantly, is Graeme Murphy's 1992 *Nutcracker (The Story of Clara)*.
- by making Clara an adolescent and casting a senior but small ballerina in this role and having Clara dance the *grand pas de deux* with the Nutcracker Prince.
- By making Clara an adolescent but keeping the roles of the Snow Queen and Sugarplum Fairy separate. This treatment allows for significant, even if small, roles for the other soloists and principals. In addition, the Sugarplum Fairy can be a taller girl and having her dance only this one role makes it more magical and special.
- by combining the roles of the Snow Queen and Sugarplum Fairy.
- by introducing a new *pas de deux* for the Snow Queen to enhance her role.

The choice basically comes down to whether the choreographer wants to show off a star ballerina, wants to provide roles for children from the company's ballet school, or wants to provide small but significant roles for as many of the company's dancers as possible.

The second act *divertissement* was a popular feature of Russian ballet at the time. Bearing no relationship to the story line, this was a suite of dances inserted into a ballet, usually near the end, to show off the company's dancers. Ivanov's *divertissements* included the popular Waltz of the Flowers, a dance for reed flutes (the *Mirlitons*) and dances suggesting things to eat and drink from foreign countries. These include hot chocolate from Spain, coffee from Arabia, tea from China and candy canes from Russia. Chocolate is represented by Spanish dancers as it was introduced to Europe by Spaniards from the New World. In many productions the mirlitons (flutes) are said to be made of marzipan and the Sugarplum¹ (Fairy) is also a sweet, made of boiled barley sugar, variously coloured and flavoured.

The climax of the ballet is the *grand pas de deux* which followed a prescribed formula. Slow sustained movements for both dancers together, then solo variations for each, the male preceding that of the ballerina, and finally a quick bright coda for the two stars dancing together. While this is the highlight of the ballet for balletomanes, it is the most boring part of the ballet for children. The ballet concludes with all the soloists returning to dance together with the ensemble.

In addition to structural defects, the ballet suffers from the weakness of the libretto. The story has no moral and there is no character development of the story protagonist, Clara, who, against all established rules of storytelling, is sidelined in Act II. This has led to various attempts to find some meaning for the ballet in even the smallest piece of evidence.

¹ Plum refers to the shape and size rather than taste.

In Act I, the adults dance to Tchaikovsky's version of a well-known 18th century humorous French song (*Bon voyage, M. Dumolet*) and Petipa originally had listed a dance to a popular song from the French revolution to be included but removed it. This has led to speculation by Fedor Lopukhov, a Soviet and Russian dancer and choreographer, that for Petipa the battle of the mice and soldiers was intended to be an allegory for the French Revolution. Notwithstanding that the soldiers ultimately won the battle this was not something the Russian authorities would have appreciated on the Imperial stage.

At this time, Tchaikovsky was very enthusiastic about Léo Delibé's ballet *Coppélia* and the popular Viennese ballet *Die Puppenfee* (The Fairy Doll) and clearly could not resist adding his own dancing dolls to Act 1. Drosselmeyer was a toy maker who brings a traditional nutcracker doll to the party but his bringing of other dancing doll automata to entertain the party guests was not in the original Hoffmann story². Tchaikovsky's friend and music critic Nikolai Kashkin wrote regarding this: "*The latter shows how Pyotr Ilyich had moved on from the magic fairy-tale genre, as in 'The Sleeping Beauty', to that of the puppet-theatre story*".

While Tchaikovsky had completed much of the first act before heading to America in April 1891, he could not write a single note during his three-week stay in Paris prior to his departure. He moved, therefore, to Rouen "*for few days rest and solitude from Parisian life*" and a week later wrote to Vsevolozhsky that he "*was working all hours*". But the next day he was so despondent after the death of his beloved sister Aleksandra (Sasha) he wrote: "*Today, even more than yesterday, I feel the absolute impossibility of depicting in music the Sugarplum Fairy*". On his return to St. Petersburg at the end of May 1891, he finally started working again intensively and finished the ballet "*with a feverish haste*". This has led to speculation that for Tchaikovsky the ballet gained a deeper meaning after his sister's death and the Sugarplum Fairy *grand pas de deux* could well be a tribute to his sister. Roland John Wiley, an American musicologist and writer who has closely studied Tchaikovsky's ballets, postulated in 1984 that perhaps he identified Aleksandra as the Sugarplum Fairy and himself as Drosselmeyer³.

But, instead of speculating about intended meanings for the ballet I believe it is far more profitable to derive meaning from what we actually see. In essence the ballet comprises two parties: the first (Act I) is a perfectly ordinary 19th Century Christmas party, enlivened by the arrival of Clara's godfather Drosselmeyer. Normally a mysterious and sometimes sinister figure, elderly, wrinkled and wearing an eye patch, in WAB's version he is cast more as a middle-aged party entertainer complete with magical tricks and animated dancing clockwork

² In Hoffmann's tale, Drosselmeyer and his nephew found a cure for a curse of ugliness on Princess Pirlipat cast by the Mouse Queen in revenge for the death of her children. Princess Pirlipat needed to eat the Crackatook, the world's hardest nut, and it was only Drosselmeyer's nephew who succeeded in cracking it open. Princess Pirlipat ate it and became beautiful again. However, after the nephew accidentally stood on the Mouse Queen and was transformed into the nutcracker doll, he was rejected by Princess Pirlipat as a suitor and exiled. Only after the Nutcracker took Marie to the doll kingdom and she swore that she would never behave like Princess Pirlipat and would love him no matter what he looked like is the curse broken making him human again.

³ English National Ballet in its 1986 staging using David Walker's designs under then Artistic Director Peter Schaufuss adopted this idea, setting the Act I party at the home in Russia of Tchaikovsky's sister, Sasha, and with the composer appearing as the Drosselmeyer figure.

dolls. The party ends with the traditional grandfather dance after which the guests depart. Clara falls asleep and has a vivid dream of a battle between rats and toy soldiers led by the Nutcracker doll (Drosselmeyer's present to Clara) who magically comes to life.

The second party (Act II) is held in the Land of the Sweets and hosted by the Sugarplum Fairy. Here Drosselmeyer acts as Clara's guide. While the party at Clara's home is down-to-earth, with a mixture of joys and disappointments, good and bad behaviour (exemplified by Fritz and his friends twice noisily interrupting the proceedings with drums and pipes and Fritz breaking Clara's Nutcracker doll)⁴, the party at the Sugarplum Fairy's home is one of heavenly manners, gracefulness and in all ways is how a child imagines a party should be conducted. The Sugarplum Fairy is Clara's idealized vision of the beautiful adult woman she would like to grow up to be.

The two parties, one in the ordinary everyday world, the other in a magical world of the imagination, are connected by Ivanov's *Waltz of the Snowflakes*. Many Australians will not have experienced how falling snow not only blankets roads and houses turning a dull grey landscape clean, white and bright but, as falling snow absorbs sound, it brings a seemingly magical silence to the world. For Russians, the transformation of the mundane, everyday world to a mystical world through the fall of snow was something they had all experienced. For them, Ivanov's Snowflakes Waltz as a bridge between the two worlds was a perfect transformation piece. Father Joseph Mohr had already recognized the transformative power of snow when he wrote the world's most popular Christmas carol in 1816 and which, set to music by Franz Xaver Gruber, was first performed in 1818 - "*Silent night! Holy night! All is calm! All is bright!*"

Snowflake dances were not novel. Petipa himself had previously choreographed a three-act ballet *Daughter of the Snows* based on a polar expedition where the ship is stranded in snow. The vogue for snow scenes had been launched by the 1875 opera *The Voyage to the Moon* (inspired by Jules Verne's story *From the Earth to the Moon*), which included a dance sequence called *The Grand Ballet of Snowflakes*.

The Nutcracker was notated in the Stepanov notation method in 1909. One of the earliest full-length productions based on this notation and brought to the West by Nikolai Sergeyev (Petipa's former assistant), the ballet premiered for the Sadler's Wells Ballet in 1934. However, it was George Balanchine's version for the New York City Ballet premiering in February 1954, and which has been performed every year since, that popularized the ballet in the West. Balanchine had danced the role of the Nutcracker Prince when he was a 15-year-old student at the Imperial Ballet School in Moscow and so was familiar with Alexander Gorsky's May 1919 revival of the ballet in Moscow. Gorsky's version remained faithful to Petipa's scenario but replaced the numerous mime scenes in the first act with fully choreographed numbers. Gorsky also made the roles of Clara and the Nutcracker ones for adults rather than children, gave the dances between the Sugarplum Fairy and her cavalier to Clara and the Nutcracker Prince and even introduced a romantic relationship between

⁴ In Patrice Bart's 1999 production for Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin even the elderly grandfather exhibited lecherous bad behaviour.

them. These changes were retained in Russia and eventually made their way into western productions. Today, Balanchine's version, although based on Gorsky, is probably the most authentic to the original with its extensive use of children.

WAB commissioned its own Nutcracker in 2016 for its November/December Christmas season ballet, the ballet subsequently performed biennially during Aurélien Scannella's tenure as Artistic Director, but this practice has now been abandoned, apparently for a three-year rotation. The choreography by Jayne Smeulders, Aurélien Scannella and Sandy Delasalle followed the traditional story and order of dances and of course used Tchaikovsky's music but set the story in 1839 London. WAB opted to provide small but significant roles for as many of the company's dancers as possible. While children from local ballet schools were incorporated into the Act I party scene, members of the ballet company took on the roles of Clara, Fritz and the Nutcracker Prince. After the party has ended and King Rat and his army have been defeated in battle, Clara and the Nutcracker, turned into a prince by Drosselmeyer, dance together as the room transforms into a winter scene. The Nutcracker Prince then dances a *pas de deux* with the Snow Queen, beneath fluttering snowflakes. At the ballet's conclusion the Nutcracker Prince dances the *grand pas de deux* with the Sugarplum Fairy, the same ballerina cast in both these roles.

The sets and costumes by Phil R Daniels and Charles Cusick Smith were a standout feature of WAB's production – over 30 km of silver thread was used in the Snowflake skirts; and for the Flower costumes, 2,270 flower petals were hand cut from specially produced material with 50,000 individual glitter dots placed on these costumes by hand.

The Nutcracker is the most popular ballet in the world because in America the ballet has become a symbol for the miracle of Christmas, and it is thus staged every year by ballet companies large and small (in truth, because they rely on box office receipts rather than the state for funding, American companies will repeat ad nauseum anything the public will pay to see). In Australia, only Queensland Ballet under Li Cunxin has adopted this annual Christmas tradition – a tradition not likely to be followed under QB's new Artistic Director. This is understandable for Australian audiences but unfortunate, as although *The Nutcracker* is a childish ballet with an unsatisfactory story and structure, that has survived only through the brilliance of Tchaikovsky's music, it is one of the most important ballets in a company's repertoire. Because it is widely recognized by parents as an acceptable spectacle for the entertainment of their children, and for a lucky few may even feature their children on stage. It is no exaggeration therefore to state that *The Nutcracker* ballet's prime role today is as an incubator of future dancers and future audiences.

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https://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/The_Nutcracker

<https://petipasociety.com/the-nutcracker/>