# Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker

As we celebrate the traditional Holidays of December it would be wise to note the relatively new "tradition" of the *Nutcracker* ballet. In truth, the *Nutcracker* has only enjoyed annual revival since the mid-1950's, when George Balanchine's version created a vogue for a celebratory Christmas ballet. While the nostalgic sentiments surrounding *Nutcracker* are hundreds of years old, its actual performance tradition is a scant 25 years. Although the ballet was written nearly a century ago, it has taken the better part of that period for *Nutcracker* to establish itself as a popular tradition.

In 1891, Peter Tchaikovsky was commissioned by the Directorate of the Imperial Theatre, St. Petersburg, to compose a double bill for the following season, a one-act opera and a ballet. Tchaikovsky began his opera *Yolanta* with great excitement but expressed a certain reluctance about adopting E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Nutcracker and the King of Mice,* believing it unsuitable material for a ballet. "I feel a complete impossibility to reproduce musically the Kingdom of Sweets," he wrote, "but the principal thing is to get the ballet out of the way." The scenario and choreography were worked out by the great genius of the Russian Ballet, Marius Petipa, who had recently created his own masterpiece to the music of Tchaikovsky, *The Sleeping Beauty.* Unfortunately, Petipa fell ill and entrusted the actual choreography to his assistant, Lev Ivanov, but retained his own plot outline. In retrospect it would have been interesting to see how Ivanov would have treated the music himself. An eloquent and refined choreographer, he suffered the hapless fate of a second-in-command and is barely remembered today. The only evidence left to us of his great talent is the second act of *Swan Lake.*

Uninspired by the *Nutcracker* subject, Tchaikovsky meanwhile welcomed an interruption in his work to accept an invitation to the United States to conduct at opening ceremonies for the newly-built Carnegie Hall. Returning to Russia he was plunged into despair by news of the death of his beloved sister, Alexandra Davidova and complained bitterly about having to compose music for a Sugarplum Fairy! But by the spring of 1892, he was sufficiently recovered to finish much of the second act. While working on the Sugarplum variation, he sent to Paris for a celesta, a recently invented instrument then unknown to Russia. But he cautioned his publisher, "I don't want you to show it to anybody, for I'm afraid Rimsky-Korsakov or Glazounov will smell it out and take advantage of its unusual effects before me." A Preview concert of the suite from the *Nutcracker* was given by the Russian Musical Society in March. In December the dress rehearsal for both *Yolanta* and *Nutcracker* were given at the Maryinsky Theatre in the presence of Tsar Alexandar III and the Empress Marie Feodorovna, who heaped the composer with compliments. A triumph seemed assured, but Tchaikovsky remained skeptical about the ballet – "It's definitely inferior to the Sleeping Beauty, of that I'm positive. We'll see what happens with the opera."

At the premiere on December 17, 1892 the opera was greeted with only lukewarm applause but *Nutcracker* was cruelly reviled on all sides. To the sophisticated St. Petersburg balletomanes and critics it was a complete disaster – the domestic bliss of Act I seemed boring, the plot was poor and poorly realized, the ballerina appeared only once and then at the end of a long series of divertissements, and most appalling, the heroine of the piece was a mere child! Not even the participation of three of the company's brightest stars – Olga Preobrajenska as the Doll, Antoinetta Dell'Era as the Sugarplum and Paul Gerdt as the Cavalier – could save the evening.

Though the *Nutcracker* ballet failed, the music of Tchaikovsky lingered in the air. By the turn of the century the suite had become a popular item on concert programs. In 1908 in London, Olga Preobrajenska toured a reduced version of *Swan Lake* in which she inserted the Sugarplum Fairy variation for Odette's solo in Act II(!). Dighilev, a passionate devotee of Tchaikovsky's music, inserted both the Arabian and Chinese variations into his memorable production of *Sleeping Beauty* in London in 1921. Anna Pavlova later had a star vehicle created for her to the music of the Snowflakes scene which she toured until her death in 1931.

The first complete staging of the *Nutcracker* outside Russia was done by Nicholas Sergeyev for England's Royal Ballet in 1934. This production also suffered from public apathy and was withdrawn after several seasons. The *Nutcracker* was first seen in the United States in 1940 in a very abbreviated version by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo but audiences remained unimpressed. The first completely American production was choreographed by William Christensen for the San Francisco Ballet in 1944 where it went in and out of style for many years, later completely revised by his brother, Lew. Balanchine's *Nutcracker,* perhaps the most famous in the world and certainly closest to the original conception, was premiered in New York in 1954 but it was not until ten years later that the production was completed as we know it today.

During the late 1960s and early '70s, hundreds of versions of *Nutcracker* appeared all over the world, notably productions by Rudolf Nureyev in 1967 and Mikhail Baryshnikov in 1976. Like all great theatrical monuments, the *Nutcracker* is interpreted differently according to changing tastes and social attitudes. Some view its characters as representatives of complex psychological meaning, some as indications of deeper emotional conviction, both theories doubtless unknown to the original creators. In the end, it is the music of Tchaikovsky that attracts us and draws us deep into the magical world of childhood in a more innocent time. And it is the sweet nostalgia that brings us back year after year to the *Nutcracker.*

- Peter Anastos