

***Waltz of the Flowers* from The Nutcracker Suite**

By Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Suggested decent costume: Exercise clothes

Play “Waltz of the Flowers” on CD, Track 18

What kind of music do you think this is? I have something to show you that might help you guess. (*Hold up ballet toe shoes and tutu*) This is one of several dances from a very famous ballet that you might especially see at Christmas time. I’ll give you a hint. (*Hold up the nutcracker*) Can you guess what it is? How many of you have seen “The Nutcracker Suite” ballet? This piece of music is called “Waltz of the Flowers” and comes towards the end of the ballet.

During our last FAME lesson, we talked about the melody of a song. *Waltz of the Flowers* has a beautiful melody, but it also has a special kind of rhythm. When you go to the Doctor to get a checkup, what is one of the first thing he checks? (*Mime doctor listening to the heart*) That is because the beating of your heart gives the doctor a lot of information about your body. The same is true of musicians. When they know the beat of a piece of music, it helps them play the piece just right.

This piece is called a waltz because it is in waltz time. Most people couldn’t really waltz to it, though, because it’s too fast. The rhythm has counts of three that make up its waltz rhythm. (*Demonstrate by clapping: ONE-two-three, ONE-two-three, with ONE being clapped in the air, and the two-three being clapped on the thighs. Can you do it with me?*)

Play “Waltz of the Flowers” (Track 18) again and have them clap with you.

There are many dances and music with many different rhythms in *The Nutcracker Suite*. We listened to a waltz rhythm with three counts, now let’s listen to a different song and see how many counts you think this one has.

Play “Russian Dance” (“Trepak”) on CD, Track 16

How many counts was this? It was a very fast four count.

Music Description –

Based on an old fairy tale, the magical ballet called *The Nutcracker Suite* has become a holiday tradition for millions of people. It was one of the works that caused Moscow and

St. Petersburg to be called the dance centers of the world. It was first performed in St. Petersburg in 1892.

Our composer, Peter Tchaikovsky (chi-COWV-ski), considered *The Nutcracker Suite* inferior to his *Sleeping Beauty* ballet score, and one modern critic compared it to a “wedding cake with icing made from saccharine with the cake itself from imitation ingredients.” But this amazing fantasy has captured adults and children alike with its charm for more than 100 years.

Tchaikovsky originally wrote fifteen dances, but later chose seven of them to make up the ballet. The lilting waltz, haunting melodies, and subtle, colorful orchestration that characterize *The Nutcracker Suite*, keep a listener waiting for the next exciting sound treat. Tchaikovsky’s orchestral innovations were shocking for the time. He created some musical effects with toy instruments: a rattle (for the sound of the Nutcracker cracking nuts), a toy trumpet, and cuckoo and nightingale whistles. The bell-like instrument, the celesta (a percussion instrument resembling a toy upright piano), was smuggled in from abroad. It had never been seen in Russia and Tchaikovsky wanted to use it before Rimsky-Korsakov or Glazunov did. The existence of the celesta was kept secret until the performance where Tchaikovsky used it to characterize the delicacy of the Sugar Plum Fairy.

This clever instrumentation emphasized the mood or quality of each of the dances, and almost every instrument gets a chance to solo. The sweet tones of three flutes swirl about for the *Dance of the Reed Flute*, and the strange mix of piccolo, flute, and bassoon set the tone for the *Chinese Dance*. The lilting *Waltz of the Flowers* is the finale to this suite composed a year before Tchaikovsky’s death.

The Nutcracker Suite Story Synopsis

It is the most merry of times, Christmas, at the home of Clara and Franz, with an ornament-festooned tree and a party for the youngsters. In the midst of the festivities arrives the old and eccentric, but beloved, Dr. Dosselmeyer who, as always, brings with him wondrous toys. The most unusual toy is for Clara, a soldier shaped nutcrackers that is said to be magic.

Franz is jealous of the special gift and in attempting to wrest it from Clara’s hands, damages it. The children go off to bed, but Clara cannot sleep for worrying about her nutcracker and creeps downstairs to find it. When she arrives at the bottom of the stairs, she can’t believe her eyes!

Life-size toy soldiers, led by the Nutcracker, are battling an army of mice. When it seems the mice are winning, Clara hurls her shoe at the Mouse King, strikes him down, and saves her precious nutcracker. He is immediately transformed into a Prince, who in gratitude for his life, offers to transport Clara to the lovely Kingdom of Sweets.

They travel through snow where they watch delicate snowflakes dancing and are welcomed by the Snow King and Queen. When they reach their destination the Sugarplum Fairy greets them with her solo dance and the festival begins. The Prince and Clara are ushered to twin thrones in the Crystal Palace to watch enthralled while live dancing toys celebrate their presence.

A parade of lavishly costumed dancers begins. Strong Russian dancers leap in abandon to wild music, Chinese dancers trip lightly and delicately, and the finale is a profusion of flowers joining in the grand dizziness of *Waltz of the Flowers*.

Clara is dazzled by the color, the music, and the unheard of delights. The sights are so wondrous that we think she must be dreaming. At the end of the story, we find that she is!

Biography

The composer of today's music, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, was born in Russia in 1840 to a family that encouraged his musical gifts. He received piano lessons as a young child, but soon was better than his teacher. He was greatly affected by music, often waking at night complaining to his nanny that the music in his head would not let him sleep.

Sent away to school in St. Petersburg at age eight, Tchaikovsky eventually studied law, but turned away from it finally to pursue a career in music. Living in St. Petersburg was lonely for the young and homesick Tchaikovsky, but it provided him the opportunity to see operas and learn more about music.

He began to give music lessons to support himself while attend the St. Petersburg Conservatory and upon completing his studies, Tchaikovsky became Professor of Harmony at the Moscow Conservatory. He taught there for twelve years, always composing in his spare time.

Dance and the theater had always fascinated Tchaikovsky, and he began to compose for them. Ballet music at that time had become mediocre, and composing such music was considered an inferior occupation. He revitalized ballet music and restored its stature. The music for *Swan Lake* was written for his sister Sasha's children whom he loved to visit. Although his compositions such as the *Romeo and Juliet Overture* were popular, they were often unkindly received by the critics when first performed, and Tchaikovsky suffered severe attacks of nerves while conducting.

Tchaikovsky composed, taught, and worked as a music critic until the strain of overwork, added to financial problems and emotional insecurity, almost overcame him. Financial assistance came from a mysterious wealthy benefactor. An eccentric widow and recluse, Mrs. von Meck, offered Tchaikovsky a yearly subsidy with the provision that she and the composer never meet. They corresponded frequently for fourteen years, revealing very personal feelings and thoughts. Three years before his death however, for unknown reasons, she cut off Tchaikovsky's pension without explanation.

Although Tchaikovsky was a compulsive composer, writing each day the music that allowed him to express his emotions, he was not a happy man. He wanted more: a home and family. He entered into a disastrous marriage that endured only nine weeks and unsuccessfully tried to kill himself by throwing himself into a river. He thought he would contract the then fatal disease of pneumonia. He succeeded only in catching a cold.

Though Tchaikovsky had a largely unsuccessful and unhappy life, during his last year he enjoyed popularity and respect to a degree unusual for any composer. When he died in 1893 of cholera (the result of drinking unfiltered water), he also left an impressive legacy of joyous, beautifully orchestrated music that came directly from his heart.

(If time allows, show “Waltz of the Flowers” clip from the Nutcracker movie or can pass around magazine pictures from the movie)