
ID: 17793

'The Nutcracker', 1978

Ballet in 2 Acts

Music by: P. I. Tchaikovsky based on E. T. A. Hoffmann's fairy-tale "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King"

Libretto: Marius Petipa

Choreography: Marius Petipa

Director: Yuri Grigorovich

Production designer: Simon Virsaladze

Conductor: Alexander Kopylov

Performers: Ekaterina Maximova Masha
Vladimir Vasilev Nutcracker Prince
Victor Levashev?? Drosselmeyer (uncle)
Sergei Radchenko?? The Mouse King
Elena Vatulya?? Nutcracker doll

Running time: 1:41:33

History of the ballet:

P. I. Tchaikovsky's ballet, The Nutcracker has been a long-standing classic. The libretto to this famous ballet was created by maestro Marius Petipa, adapted from the fairytale by E. T. A. Hoffmann, 'The Nutcracker and the Mouse King'. There has always been a lot of interest surrounding the history of the ballet's creation.

At the end of the 19th Century in the 1890s, the Director of the Imperial Theatres in Russia, Ivan Vsevolozhsky, had planned to stage a grand performance, which would combine the ballet of The Nutcracker and Tchaikovsky's opera 'Iolanta' (a lyric opera in one act). It was assumed that such a magnificent spectacle, with its ornate decorations, would be the 'acme' of the theatrical season. However, work on the ballet by Tchaikovsky, who was even at the time was named one of the great reformers of ballet music, was progressing slowly and it was Petipa's scenario which was laid down as the basis for The Nutcracker. The completed ballet instigated a strongly enthusiastic response from critics however; many doubted that the ballet is even possible. The music for this ballet was much richer and more complex than any of the other works by Tchaikovsky.

The complete Nutcracker has enjoyed enormous popularity since the late 1960s and is now a favourite particularly during the Christmas season. Tchaikovsky's score has become one of his most famous compositions, in particular pieces featured in the suite; it is also noted for its use of the celesta (a struck idiophone operated by a keyboard) instrument.

The Nutcracker is one of the composer's most popular compositions. The music belongs to the Romantic Period and contains some of his most outstanding melodies, several of which are frequently used in television and film to this day. The Trepak, or Russian dance, is one of the most distinguished pieces in the ballet, along with the famous Waltz of the Flowers and March, as well as the pervasive Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy. The ballet contains astoundingly progressive harmonies and a wealth of melodic invention that is deemed unsurpassed in ballet music. Nonetheless, the composer's admiration for Rococo (an 18th century artistic movement and style) and late 18th century music can be detected in passages such as the Overture, the "Entrée des parents", and "Tempo di Grossvater" in Act I.

A clear novelty in Tchaikovsky's original score, was the use of the celesta, a new instrument Tchaikovsky had discovered in Paris. He genuinely wanted it for the character of the Sugar Plum Fairy, to symbolise her because of its 'heavenly sweet sound'. It appears not only in her 'Dance', but also in other passages in Act II. Tchaikovsky also uses toy instruments during the Christmas party scene. Tchaikovsky was evidently proud of the celesta's effect and had wanted its music performed for the public.

Plot summary:

The plot of Hoffmann's story was greatly simplified for the two act ballet version. Hoffmann's tale contains a lengthy flashback story within its main plot entitled 'The Tale of the Hard Nut', which goes on to explain how the Prince was turned into the Nutcracker – this section was eliminated from the ballet.

This synopsis is based on the original 1892 libretto by Marius Petipa. Act I begins with a scene at the Silberhaus home at Christmas Eve. Family and friends have gathered to decorate the beautiful Christmas tree in preparation for the night's festivities. The merriments begin, a march is played and presents are given to the children. Suddenly as the clock strikes eight, two mysterious figures enter the room, Herr Drosselmeyer, a local councilman, magician and Clara and Fritz's godfather. He is a talented toymaker and has brought lifelike dolls as gifts for the children, who dance to the delight of all. The precious dolls are then put away and kept safe, both Clara and Fritz are sad to see the dolls taken away but Drosselmeyer has another toy for them; a wooden nutcracker, carved in the shape of a little man. Clara instantly takes a liking to the toy, while other children ignore it but Fritz purposely breaks the toy, which leaves Clara heartbroken.

During the night, after everyone else has gone to bed, Clara returns to the parlour to check on her cherished nutcracker. As she reaches the little bed, the clock strikes midnight and she looks up to see Drosselmeyer perched atop the clock. Suddenly, mice begin to fill the room and the Christmas tree begins to grow to dizzying heights. The Nutcracker also grows to life-size. Clara finds herself in the midst of a battle between an army of Gingerbread man soldiers and the mice, led by the Mouse King. The Nutcracker appears to lead the gingerbread soldiers, who are joined by tin soldiers and dolls who serve as doctors to carry away the wounded. As the Mouse King advances on the still-wounded Nutcracker, Clara throws her slipper at him, distracting him long enough for the Nutcracker to stab him.

The mice retreat and the Nutcracker is transformed into a handsome Prince. He leads Clara through the moonlit night to a pine forest in which the snowflakes dance around them.

Act two is set in the land of sweets Clara and the Prince travel in a nutshell boat to the beautiful Land of Sweets, ruled by the Sugar Plum Fairy in the Prince's place until his return. The Prince recounts for the Sugar Plum Fairy how he had been saved by Clara from the Mouse King and had been transformed back into a Prince.

In honour of the young heroine, a celebration of sweets from around the world is produced: chocolate from Spain, coffee from Arabia and tea from China all dance for their amusement; candy canes from Russia; Danish shepherdesses perform on their flutes; Mother Gigogne has her children emerge to dance; a string of beautiful flowers perform a waltz. To conclude the night, the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier perform a dance.

A final waltz is performed by all the sweets, after which Clara and the Prince are crowned rulers of The Land of Sweets forever and are shown the riches of their kingdom domed with an enormous beehive.

In 1966, Yuri Grigorovich created his own version of The Nutcracker for the Bolshoi Ballet, utilising many of the changes made by Vasily Vainonen for his 1934 production; including the casting of adult dancers in the roles of the heroine (called Masha rather than Clara in this version) and the Nutcracker Prince, as well as the omission of the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier. In this version, all of the toys take part in the 'Journey through the Snow' sequence, rather than being offstage while Masha and the Prince perform the dance. Moreover, as in the Vainonen version, much of the company also dances along with Masha and the Prince as they perform the Adagio in the Act II Pas de Deux; in fact, Masha and the Prince never have the stage to themselves. As a departure from the original 1892 production, Grigorovich omits the pantomime that the Prince performs 'describing' his defeat of the Mouse King at the beginning of Act II. The music for the pantomime is used for the defeat of the Mouse King, who is not killed in the first act as in the original version but at the beginning of the second act.

In this production, although Masha is outfitted with a bridal veil in the 'Final Waltz' in anticipation to her impending wedding to the Nutcracker Prince, she then awakens to find that the fantasy sequences were a dream.

Performance history:

The premiere of The Nutcracker was staged at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg on December 18th, 1892 and was held as a double premiere with Tchaikovsky's opera 'Iolanta'. Since that time, the ballet has become a well-known classic, having experienced a record number of classical and innovative performances. During the premiere, the roles of Fritz and Clara were performed by students from the Imperial Theatre School in St. Petersburg. Other participants included; the conductor Riccardo Drigo, choreographer Lev Ivanov, costumes Ponomariov and Ivan Vsevolozhsky and artists Lev Ivanov and Bocharov.

The first performance of the Nutcracker was not considered a success. The reaction to the dancers was ambivalent and critic's reviews were ambiguous; some with praise and others with reproach. Nonetheless, the reception was certainly better for Tchaikovsky's score.

There exist several versions of The Nutcracker ballet. In one of these versions, the main heroine's name is Clara and in the other it is Maria. In the fairy-tale by Hoffmann, the girl's name is Mary and one of her doll's names is Clara. During the Soviet era the ballet was russified as a result of the ideology present in the Soviet Union and the heroin transformed from a bourgeoisie Clara, to a Russian Masha.

Tchaikovsky became for many decades one of the biggest obstacles to all choreographers. His music was simply too grand and lacked room within the constraints of an ordinary fairy-tale for schoolchildren. His music's anxiety and poignancy for many years eluded choreographic realisation, it was Yuri Grigorovich who managed to embody the choreography with the help of others – artist Simon Virsaladze, first performer for Masha Ekaterina Maximova and the Nutcracker Vladimir Vasiliev.

On March 12, 1966, at the Bolshoi Theatre, a new spectacle was born. Hoffmann's naïve fairy-tale was touched by Grigorovich and filled with an essence of mysticism and mystery. His unique version of The Nutcracker is certainly not a ballet about the blessed kingdom of Confitureburg, wherein branches are hung with candy, nuts and marzipan but about the fantastical realm of Drosselmeyer; where handsome princes always reign and good prevails but the immortal and the Mouse King have their own army. Masha, who says goodbye to childhood in a dream, wakes up in her room among her usual toys. Happiness, even in the fight against the dark forces, is fleeting. But even then it seems to be held, the motive formidable and an imminent disaster invades a solemn ritual wedding.

Yuri Grigorovich and the team at the Bolshoi Theatre, who have managed to turn The Nutcracker into a philosophical reflection of the ever unattainable ideal of happiness, have filled it with romantic feelings. It is down to their creativity and ingenuity that a simple children's fairy-tale has become a classic in the twentieth century.

Roles:

The following extrapolation of the characters (in order of appearance) is drawn from an examination of the stage directions in the score (Soviet ed., where they are printed in the original French with added Russian translation in editorial footnotes):

Act I	Act II
☛ President	☛ Angels
☛ His wife	☛ Sugar Plum Fairy
☛ Guests	☛ Clara
☛ Children, including	☛ Nutcracker Prince
☛ Clara (sometimes known as Marie) and	☛ 12 Pages
Fritz [children of the President]	☛ Eminent members of the court
☛ Parents dressed as " incroyables "	☛ Spanish Hot Chocolate Performers
☛ Councilor Drosselmeyer	☛ Arabian Coffee Performers
☛ Dolls [spring-activated]:	☛ Chinese Tea Performers
☛ Harlequin and Columbine, appearing out of	☛ Russian Candy Cane Performers
a cabbage [1st gift]	☛ Danish Marzipan Shepherdesses Performers
☛ Vivandière and a Soldier [2nd gift]	☛ Mother Gigogne
☛ Nutcracker [3rd gift, at first a normal-sized toy, then	☛ Polichinelles
full-sized and "speaking", then a Prince]	☛ Dewdrop
☛ Owl [on clock, changing into Drosselmeyer]	☛ Flowers
☛ Mice	☛ Sugar Plum Fairy's Cavalier
☛ Sentinel [speaking role]	
☛ Hare-Drummers	
☛ Soldiers [of the Nutcracker]	
☛ Mouse King	

• Snowflakes

• Angels

Some versions also give a nephew to Drosselmeyer who resembles the Nutcracker Prince and is played by the same dancer.