

# Ballet

N E B R A S K A

Presents a Study Guide to

## The Nutcracker

Did you know that no two versions of the ballet *The Nutcracker* are exactly alike? Through its history, it has changed so many times that there's no single "original" version. Every ballet company that performs it – including Ballet Nebraska – has its own *Nutcracker* with its own special touches. But behind them all is the same story...

### The Story Behind the Story

*The Nutcracker* is one of the most-loved ballets of all time. It's become a Christmas tradition throughout much of the world. Many people grow up seeing it every year, and many young dance students dream of being part of a *Nutcracker* production.

It's no wonder the ballet is so popular — it's got fun music, beautiful costumes, wonderful dancing, and a story that combines fantasy, sweets, a magical land, princes, fairies, and Christmas. But did you know — it wasn't always so popular? It actually started out looking much, much different.

*The Nutcracker* was created nearly two hundred years ago as a story called *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, written in 1816 by a German author named E.T.A. Hoffman. His *Nutcracker* story was darker and sadder than our current version.

In his story, there is a young girl named Clara who was a kind of "Cinderella" character—a neglected, unloved orphan who was forced to labor for her relatives. But just like Cinderella, Clara kept a cheerful attitude, and she was helped and watched over by her mysterious godfather, Dr. Drosselmeier, who sent her gifts and warm clothing to brighten her life.

One Christmas, he gives Clara a Nutcracker doll. This Nutcracker is really his beloved nephew, who is under an evil spell that only true love can break. Clara's love for her Nutcracker breaks the spell and turns him back into a young man, and the two marry.

In 1847, the French writer Alexandre Dumas, father of the more famous writer of the same name, retold Hoffman's story, removing some of its darker elements. He renamed his heroine "Marie." Marie's love for her Nutcracker frees him from the evil spell and they marry to live happily ever after. This version of



the story is the one on which *The Nutcracker* is based. In fact, Dumas' version of *The Nutcracker* is why many *Nutcracker* storybooks call the main character "Marie" instead of "Clara." But in most versions of the ballet, she is still known as Clara.

In the 1890s, the director of the Russian Imperial Ballet decided to stage a ballet based on Dumas' telling of the *Nutcracker* story. His chief choreographer, Marius Petipa, asked the famous composer Peter Tchaikovsky to write music for the scenes that he developed. Petipa became ill, so his assistant, Lev Ivanov, developed the choreography for that first ballet version of *The Nutcracker*. The ballet, with the heroine named "Clara" again, premiered at St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theater in 1892.

When the ballet premiered, some people considered it a failure! They thought the action was flimsy and that it didn't give the ballerina enough opportunity to show off her skills. However, the choreography for the Snow Scene and the Grand Pas de Deux (dance for two people) of the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier was considered magnificent.

For the next several decades, the ballet was performed in different versions and even under different titles, but it was never very popular. It wasn't until 1944 that the first production of *The Nutcracker* in the United States was staged by Willam Christensen for the San Francisco Ballet.

This time, the ballet was a huge success, and became so popular that audiences demanded the performance every year since. This is how the *Nutcracker* tradition began. Through the years, ballet companies worldwide have adopted *The Nutcracker* as a permanent feature in their repertory.

People love Tchaikovsky's music, and it is a perfect Christmas story. Because it has become so special to audiences, many choreographers and ballet companies now stage their own versions of the ballet.

## The Music: Fun-To-Know Facts

Many of the melodies in *The Nutcracker* were drawn from existing music that people of the composer's time would have recognized:

- The *Grossvateranz* (Grandfathers' Dance) that ends the party scene is a traditional tune that was played at parties to hint to people that the party was over and it was time for them to go home!
- The final children's dance earlier in the party is a French nursery song, *Bon Voyage, Cher Dumollet*.
- The Arabian dance is based on a lullaby from the Asian country of Georgia.
- The *Trepak* (Russian Dance) borrows from several well-known Russian folk dances.
- Mother Ginger is a reworking of a French folk song, *Girofle, Girofla*, which is about a little boy with three birdhouses for swallows.

Peter Tchaikovsky, the composer, also used several unusual "instruments" in the music of *The Nutcracker* – children's noisemakers such as a rattle, bird calls, toy trumpet and miniature drum. He had purchased many of these instruments in Paris, the city where he also discovered the *celesta* – a keyboard instrument that produces a soft, bell-like sound. Auguste Mustel, a French instrument maker, had invented it just a few years earlier.

Tchaikovsky found out about Mustel's new instrument almost by accident. He had received an invitation to conduct at the opening of the Andrew Carnegie Music Hall in New York. To get to New York, he traveled from Russia by way of Paris, and it was there that he heard the celesta. "I expect that this new instrument will produce a colossal sensation," he wrote to his music publisher.

News in the 1890s did not travel as fast as it does today, and Tchaikovsky knew that almost nobody in Russia had heard of the celesta. He wanted to surprise his audiences with the beautiful sound of the new instrument, so he kept it a secret from other Russian composers until he finished his first music for it in 1891. In 1892, *The Nutcracker* made its premiere – and when the Sugar Plum Fairy danced to the delicate chiming tones of the celesta, it marked the first time many people in Russia had heard Mustel's new musical instrument. The *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* is still perhaps the world's best-known piece of music for the celesta.



*The full-length version of The Nutcracker begins with a Christmas party, during which the audience hears music made with "instruments" including toy horns, toy drums, and bird whistles!*

## The Man Behind the Music



Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Kamsko-Votinsk, Russia on May 7, 1840. He was a very bright child who learned to read Russian, French, and German by the time he was six years old. He was known for not liking

to exercise or take baths, and he didn't really care about how he looked or what he wore.

But Peter loved music—so much that it worried his governess when he was little. It was his great passion in life. When he made up a new song, he had to try it on a piano right away. If there wasn't a piano around, he would tap out his song on the windowpanes in his house. Once he tapped so hard that he broke the glass and cut himself very badly!

Peter started piano lessons when he was only six years old. He went to school at a boarding school, and later he studied law and mathematics. He worked as a clerk for the Ministry of Justice. But none of it gave him any pleasure. He just wanted music. After only four years, he quit his job and became a full time student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He studied music theory, composition, flute, piano and organ.

Tchaikovsky was a nervous, unhappy man all his life, yet his beautiful music made him the most popular of all the Russian composers. He wrote the music for the three most famous ballets of all time: *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Sleeping Beauty*.

In his lifetime he also wrote nine operas, six symphonies, four concertos, three string quartets, and numerous songs, suites, and overtures. One of his most famous pieces is the "1812" Overture, which uses cannons and church bells. Because it sounds so grand, it is often chosen to accompany fireworks at 4th of July celebrations.

Tchaikovsky was only 53 when he died in St. Petersburg in 1893. He had just completed his sixth symphony, which he felt was the greatest piece of music he ever created.

# What You'll See in the Theater

A ballet performance is similar to other “live” performances such as a symphony concert or a stage play. But it also has its own customs and traditions that help make your visit to the theater more special. Although each production may handle things slightly differently, here's a general guide to what you can expect:

**Before the show**, people come in, find their seats, and get settled. The signal that the ballet is about to start will be the dimming of the lights.

*The curtain will not go up right away; instead, you'll hear music called the overture. It's a preview of the music that will be heard during the performance. It helps viewers forget about their outside distractions and get into the mood to enjoy the ballet.*

**Once the overture ends**, the curtain will rise and the dancers will begin the performance. One thing you'll notice right away that makes ballet different from a movie or a stage play: *Dancers almost never talk onstage!*

*Instead of using speech, a ballet tells its story through movements, gestures, and facial expressions. This may seem like an odd way of telling a story – but if you think about it, it's perfectly natural. After all, you often watch your friends' movements, gestures and facial expressions to help you understand what they are saying and how they feel (can you think of a few examples?) So if you watch the performers carefully, you'll find you have no trouble knowing exactly what's going on in the ballet.*

**Changes in the music and the lighting** also help you follow along in the story. You'll notice how the music changes to match what's going on in each scene, and how the lighting changes from one scene to the next, helping to create a mood that matches the action.

**Most story ballets are divided into “acts,”** which are like chapters in a book: After one chapter ends, the story continues in the next chapter. When the first act ends, the lights on the stage may fade out and the main curtain may come down – but that doesn't mean the ballet is over! This is just a short *pause* while the performers get ready for the second act. The pause will last only a couple of minutes, so just relax in your seat until the next act begins.

*(Longer ballet performances often have one or more intermissions. These are longer breaks – usually 15 or 20 minutes – in which the lights come up in the theater and the viewers can walk out into the lobby to stretch their legs and talk about the performance with their friends. The program booklet will tell you which breaks are pauses and which are intermissions.)*

**You'll know the ballet is over** when the music finishes and the lights fade out on the stage. But there's still one more important moment to come. The lights on the stage will come up again and the dancers will face the audience, step forward, and bow to thank the audience for attending. Often the dancers who had the most prominent roles will bow separately, and finally the whole company will bow together. After the final bow, the curtain falls and the lights come up in the theater, signaling that the performance is over.



*At the end of the show, the audience thanks the performers with applause, and the performers thank the audience by taking a final bow.*

# Be In the Know

Ballet was invented to entertain kings and queens, princes and princesses. Today, of course, everyone is welcome! But it's fun to be “in the know” about its customs and etiquette:

- **Do** make sure you are ready to sit and enjoy the show in plenty of time before it starts. Try to take care of getting a drink, a tissue, bathroom breaks, etc., *before* you come to the theater.
- **Don't** chew gum, or bring food or drinks of any kind to the theatre. Also, texting, taking pictures, or using cell phones isn't allowed during the show.
- **Don't** leave your seat during the show. The theater will be dark, and it's hard to get around. If it's an emergency and you absolutely have to get up, check with your teacher or chaperone.
- **Do** laugh if the dancers do something funny. They like to know they're entertaining you!
- **Don't** talk during the show – not to your neighbor or to the dancers. There's a lot happening onstage, and you don't want to miss something important! There will be lots of time after the show to talk, and you can show that you enjoy the show by applauding.
- **Do** applaud (clap) if you want to show the dancers you liked what you saw. If you've been to a stage play or to the symphony, you may have been told that you should applaud only at the end. *But ballet is different:* it's perfectly okay to applaud *any* time you see something you think is really, really good!

Visit [balletnebraska.org](http://balletnebraska.org) to learn more about ballet, about our performers, and about our future productions.