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TCHAIKOVSKY

THE CHRISTMAS BALLET HE ALMOST DIDN'T WRITE

THE NUTCRACKER • A FAIRY TALE, A PREMIERE AND A HOUSE IN KLIN

THE BIG STORY
A FAIRY TALE TURNS TO BALLET

LIFE
THE MAN BEHIND THE MUSIC

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10 WORDS FROM THE STORY

SABER INGLÉS ES SABER USARLO

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Too Dark for *Christmas*

Every December, theatres all over the world fill with families coming to see the same ballet: a girl, a wooden soldier and a journey to the Land of Sweets. But the story behind The Nutcracker was not sweet at all. It began as a dark German tale — and its composer never believed in it.

> ***The ballet is much worse than The Sleeping Beauty — of this there is no doubt.***
> *— TCHAIKOVSKY, ON HIS OWN BALLET*



Dancers of the very first production — the Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg, 1892.

A DARK GERMAN TALE

In 1816, the German writer E. T. A. Hoffmann published a Christmas story with a dark heart. On Christmas Eve, young Marie Stahlbaum receives a wooden nutcracker. At midnight, her toys come alive and fight an army of mice, led by a terrifying Mouse King with seven heads. Dreams, danger and magic mix — and nobody is sure what is real.

A GENTLER FRENCH VERSION

In 1844, the French novelist Alexandre Dumas — author of The Three Musketeers — rewrote the tale for children. He took away much of the darkness and kept the wonder. It was Dumas's lighter version, not Hoffmann's original, that travelled to Russia and became the ballet. Even the heroine changed her name: on stage, Marie is usually called Clara.

A RELUCTANT MASTERPIECE

The Imperial Theatres of St Petersburg ordered the new ballet. Choreographer Marius Petipa gave the composer instructions for every number — down to the tempo and the number of bars. Tchaikovsky worked, but he doubted. The ballet premiered at the Mariinsky Theatre on 18 December 1892, together with his opera Iolanta. The critics were divided, and the public was only polite.

Two Versions of One *Story*

The same tale, told twice: first as a dark German story, then as the brightest ballet of the Christmas season. What changed on the journey from the page to the stage?

HOFFMANN — THE BOOK, 1816		DUMAS — AND THE BALLET, 1892
Marie Stahlbaum, seven years old — curious, brave, and a little afraid of the dark.	THE HEROINE	Clara: the same girl with a new name, in a brighter and safer dream.
A Mouse King with seven heads, who creeps to Marie's bed at night and demands her sweets.	THE ENEMY	One Mouse King, defeated in a single spectacular battle of toys and soldiers.
Dark and strange: fever, dreams and fear are mixed with the magic, page after page.	THE MOOD	Light and sweet: a Christmas party, a forest of snow and a shining Land of Sweets.
The Nutcracker returns as a young man, and Marie leaves with him to his kingdom of dolls.	THE ENDING	Clara travels to the Land of Sweets, and dances with the Sugar Plum Fairy.



The composer's house in Klin — a museum since 1894.

THE HOUSE IN KLIN

— the house from your Intermedio 2 lesson

Does it look familiar? The composer lived here, in the town of Klin, 85 kilometres north-west of Moscow, from May 1892 until his death in 1893. In these quiet rooms he finished his work on Iolanta and The Nutcracker, and wrote his Sixth Symphony. After his death, his brother Modest turned the house into a museum — the first musical memorial museum in Russia. The rooms are still kept as if the composer had just gone out for a walk.

85 KM FROM MOSCOW • MUSEUM SINCE 1894

The Man Behind the *Music*

He wrote the music that the world dances to every Christmas. But Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's own life was quieter, stranger and sadder than his ballets — a life of law books, secret letters and one last symphony.

1,200 +
letters to a friend he never met

6,000
rubles a year of freedom, 1877–1890

1891
conducting at the opening of Carnegie Hall

FROM LAW TO MUSIC

Born in 1840 in Votkinsk, he trained for a safe career: law in St Petersburg, then a desk at the Ministry of Justice. But music was stronger. He entered the new St Petersburg Conservatory, graduated in 1865, and left the office forever. The lawyer became the composer Russia loved most.

THE FRIEND HE NEVER MET

In 1877, the rich widow Nadezhda von Meck began to pay him 6,000 rubles a year — enough to stop teaching and compose full-time. Her one condition: they must never meet. For thirteen years, they wrote more than 1,200 letters instead. He dedicated his Fourth Symphony ‘to my best friend’. In 1890 she stopped writing, suddenly and forever.

NEW YORK — AND THE END

In May 1891, he crossed the Atlantic to conduct at the opening of Carnegie Hall in New York — the summit of his fame. Work on The Nutcracker filled that busy year. Two years later came the Sixth Symphony, the Pathétique. He conducted its premiere on 28 October 1893 — and died nine days later, aged 53.



Tchaikovsky in 1893, painted by Nikolai Kuznetsov.

The Language Edit

Real words from a real story. Here are some key words from this issue, with simple meanings and examples.

premiere *(noun)*
the first public performance of a work
The premiere took place on 18 December 1892.



stage *(noun)*
the place in a theatre where performers stand
Snow fell softly on the stage.



audience *(noun)*
the people who watch a performance
The audience applauded at the end.



rehearsal *(noun)*
a practice session before a performance
The dancers had a rehearsal every morning.



costume *(noun)*
the special clothes worn by performers
Her costume was white, like snow.



orchestra *(noun)*
a large group of musicians who play together
The orchestra played the Waltz of the Flowers.



curtain *(noun)*
the heavy cloth that hides the stage
The curtain rose, and the magic began.



encore *(noun)*
an extra performance, requested by applause
The audience asked for an encore.



fairy *(noun)*
a small magical person with wings
The Sugar Plum Fairy dances at the end.



perform *(verb)*
to present a work in front of an audience
The company performs the ballet every December.



LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT

based on • at first • in the end • as if — patterns from this issue's story.

TRY IT Choose the word: 1. The first performance of a ballet is its _____.
2. Practice before the show is a _____. 3. When it rises, the show begins: the _____. (premiere • rehearsal • curtain)

Five Secrets of the *Stage*

A secret instrument, a stolen triumph and a fame that arrived too late. Five things about The Nutcracker that most people never hear.



Inside the Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg — the stage where the ballet was born in 1892.

1 A sound he had to hide

In Paris in 1891 he discovered the celesta — and ordered one in secret, afraid rivals would steal its ‘divinely beautiful tone’. It sings for the Sugar Plum Fairy.

2 The music won first

Nine months before the ballet, the Nutcracker Suite triumphed in concert: almost every number was encored. On stage, the same music won only polite applause.

3 Written to order, bar by bar

Petipa fixed every number's tempo, character and length. When he fell seriously ill, Lev Ivanov staged the ballet from the master's plan.

4 America made it Christmas

The complete ballet reached America on Christmas Eve 1944, in San Francisco. Balanchine's 1954 New York version made it the world's Christmas tradition.

5 He never knew

He died in 1893, less than a year after the premiere, calling the ballet ‘much worse than The Sleeping Beauty’. Its worldwide fame came decades later.

THINK ABOUT IT

Tchaikovsky was sure his ballet was a failure. Can an artist be wrong about their own work?

Your Perspective

Now it's your turn. Read, think, speak and write about the ballet the world almost lost.

READ & THINK

1. Where and when was The Nutcracker first performed?
2. How did Dumas change Hoffmann's story?
3. Why did Tchaikovsky buy the celesta in secret?
4. What was Nadezhda von Meck's one condition?
5. Which fact surprised you most?

SPEAK

Discuss with a partner:
• Have you ever seen a ballet or a classical concert?
• Why do some artists become famous only after they die?
• Describe a Christmas tradition in your family or town.

SPEAKING CHALLENGE (60–90 seconds): you are a radio presenter introducing tonight's Nutcracker. Point – Reason – Example – Point.

WRITE

Write a short paragraph (100–120 words):
Imagine you are a dancer on premiere night, 18 December 1892. Describe the theatre, your costume — and your feelings.
Start with: “The curtain is rising, and nobody knows that…”

Word bank: premiere • stage • audience • rehearsal • costume • orchestra • curtain • encore • fairy • perform



The Waltz of the Snowflakes — danced every December, all over the world.

REFLECT

Tchaikovsky never knew his ‘failure’ would conquer the world. Is there something you have made that was better than you believed? When should we trust other people's judgement?

EDITORIAL SOURCES

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