

ABOUT THE NUTCRACKER BALLET

The Nutcracker History

Lyrical and enchanting, mesmerizing and magical, *The Nutcracker* ballet is a time-honored holiday tradition that marries music and dance in dreamy romance. As wintry and wonderful as the Christmas season itself, *The Nutcracker*, is a true fairytale brought to life.

The original *Nutcracker* ballet is based on a rather dark and somewhat scary fairytale intended for adult audiences called *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* by German writer, composer, caricaturist, and painter E.T.A. Hoffman. Published in 1816, this story told of mystical events that transpired during the Christmas season. French writer Alexandre Dumas rewrote a happier and more magical version of this tale years later so that it appealed more to children.



This lighthearted rendition caught the eye of French-born dancer and choreographer Marius Petipa, who was the chief master of the *Russian Imperial Ballet*. He

commissioned Russian composer extraordinaire Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky to write the music.

Petipa's assistant Lev Ivanov created the choreography and the production was first brought to life on stage in 1892 in St. Petersburg, Russia. The first



performance of the ballet was held in a double premiere together with Tchaikovsky's last opera *Iolanta* at the Mariinsky Theatre, home of the *Kirov Ballet*. *The Nutcracker* is one of Tchaikovsky's most popular.

Marius Petipa created more than 50 full-length ballets as chief choreographer of the *Imperial Russian Ballet*. He teamed with Russian composer Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky to produce some of the most beloved ballets of all time-- *The Nutcracker* (1892), *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890), and *Swan Lake* (1895).



It wasn't until 1934 that *The Nutcracker* was performed outside of Russia, in England. The first American full-length *The Nutcracker* was performed by the *San Francisco Ballet* in 1944, which was choreographed by William Christensen. George Balanchine

choreographed and premiered his version of *The Nutcracker* in 1954 with the *New York City Ballet*.

A true holiday tradition, *The Nutcracker* is staged each year at Christmastime by ballet companies throughout the world to the enjoyment of millions who wish to get lost in a land of sweets and the enchanting auspices of a larger-than-life fairytale.

The Nutcracker Story

For all of its spectacle and splendor, the actual story of *The Nutcracker* is quite simple. Long ago a young girl named Clara receives a nutcracker doll from her mysterious uncle on Christmas Eve during a gala family party. This unusual gift magically transforms into a soldier prince. This handsome and mysterious stranger escorts Clara on an enchanting journey to the Kingdom of Sweets. Here are the highlights.

ACT I

Once upon a time, a little lost girl happens upon a peddler who hands her a small wooden nutcracker. She falls asleep with this unusual gift in her arms and begins to dream of a better life... and so the fairytale and the magic begins....

Party Scene

Music and merriment fill the air as the Stahlbaum family welcome guests to a gala Christmas party at their grand home. Clara and her brother Fritz dance and play gleefully as elaborately dressed friends and family arrive. Like magic, Clara's dark and mysterious uncle, Herr Drosselmeyer, enters with gifts and much fanfare. To everyone's amazement, he has brought life-size mechanical dolls (called Harlequin and Columbine) that he has made. Once wound up, they dance! After their dance, Clara enquires about her gift. When it appears he has no more presents, she is upset. Then, like magic, he conjures up a toy Nutcracker and Clara is overjoyed. No sooner has Clara embraced her new gift than her brother Fritz grabs it out of jealousy and breaks it. Clara is heartbroken. Uncle Drosselmeyer magically repairs the doll and Clara lovingly places her Nutcracker in a cradle under the Christmas tree. The party is over. The house is quiet. But Clara cannot sleep. Concerned about her beloved Nutcracker, Clara sneaks back to the Christmas tree to check on him and falls fast asleep with the Nutcracker in her arms.

Battle Scene

As the clock strikes the midnight hour, the magic begins. Miraculously, the Christmas tree grows enormous as Clara appears to shrink and everything that was under the tree seemingly comes to life! The room is suddenly flooded with an army of mice led by an evil Mouse King. Not exactly "quiet as a mouse", these rodent insurgents wake Clara and she tries to

escape. The Nutcracker springs to life and he and his merry band of “toy” soldiers rise to defend Clara and battle the Mouse King and his army. Determined but outmatched, the Nutcracker is in peril. Clara rushes to his aid and tosses her slipper at the Mouse King, knocking him off guard. The Nutcracker moves in and swiftly defeats the Mouse King. The army of mice retreats in defeat, dragging their fallen leader (and tails!) behind them. Triumphant in battle, the spellbound Nutcracker magically turns into a handsome Prince! Smitten by Clara’s loyalty, beauty and bravery, he invites her on an awesome adventure to the Kingdom of Sweets.

Land of Snow

Dancing Snowflakes warmly greet Clara and her Prince as they travel through the Land of Snow on their journey to the Kingdom of Sweets. Majesty and magic abound in this enchanted forest blanketed with beauty. The Snow Prince, Snow Queen, Snowflakes and even Icicles dance for their guests, welcoming them into their wonderful wintry world. The curtain falls as Act I concludes and Intermission begins.

ACT II

Land of Sweets

Act II opens as the Dream Fairy awakens the Kingdom of Sweets in preparation for Clara and the Prince’s arrival. As they approach the Land of the Sugar Plum Fairy, Clara and the Prince are enchanted by their mesmerizing surroundings. The Sugar Plum Fairy greets them and the Prince tells her of Clara’s bravery in their daring battle with the Mouse King. Impressed with Clara’s courage, the Sugar Plum Fairy plans a celebration of dances in Clara’s honor. A repertoire of lovely dances follows. Each represents sweet treats and scrumptious things to eat (after all this *is* the Land of the Sugar Plum Fairy!).

- **The Spanish Dance** (Chocolate Dance)
- **The Arabian Dance** (Coffee Dance)
- **The Chinese Dance** (Tea Dance)
- **The Russian Dance** (Trepak)
- **Mirlitons Dance** (Marzipan, Dance of the Shepherdess or Dance of the Reed Flutes)
- **Mother Ginger** (Little Polichinelles or Punches)
- **Waltz of the Flowers**

As a finale, the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier (Knight) dance a mesmerizing Pas de Deux before bidding adieu.

As magically as it began, Clara’s dream ends.

The curtain closes and the little lost girl is discovered by her mother sleeping with the nutcracker by her side. Was it really all a dream?

The Magic

Look For

- As the curtain opens the stage is set for magic as a little lost girl and peddler exchange a Nutcracker and she slips away into a dream world. This is the first clue that a magical fairytale is about to unfold. Was it only a dream?
- As the clock strikes midnight in Act I, is the Christmas tree really growing or is Clara shrinking?
- In E.T.A. Hoffman's original story, the Prince is actually Herr Drosselmeyer's handsome young nephew. In true fairytale fashion, this nephew was transformed into a nutcracker by the Mouse King's evil spell. All of the hocus pocus that takes place after the Christmas party was actually arranged by Herr Drosselmeyer to break this spell. Look for signs of magic and hocus pocus throughout Herr Drosselmeyer's visit and underneath the tree.
- Spot costumes that reflect the country from which the dances represent in the Land of the Sugar Plum Fairy celebration in Act II. Can you guess the nationality just by the costume design?
- Dancers use their entire bodies to tell about a character. Because there are no spoken words in ballet, dancers must silently act as well as dance. Instead of words, they use body language and pantomime or mime. Mime uses a series of gestures, each of which has its own meaning. Dancers learn these gestures along with their ballet steps. Body and facial expressions along with mime help to tell a story and express feelings on stage. Dancers also make all of their movements larger than life. Look for mime throughout the ballet. One of the most outstanding examples can be found in Act II when the Prince re-creates the Mouse King battle for the Sugar Plum Fairy using mime.
- In Act II, Mother Ginger has an entire brood hiding under her humungous hoop skirt! Her costume is one of the most recognizable and complex in *The Nutcracker* in that it is enormous, cumbersome and quite challenging to wear. Talk about balance!
- The lovely Dew Drop Fairy leads the *Waltz of the Flowers* in Act II. It is one of the longest solos in the ballet.
- The Pas de Deux danced by the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier (Knight) is one of the most beautiful duets in all of ballet. This French term literally means a step or dance for

two. It is a breathtaking duet in which ballet steps are performed together.

- In E.T.A. Hoffman's original story, Clara wakes up at the end of her dream and all are left with the impression that her "dream" really happened. Myth? Magic? Truth be told, it's up to each member of the audience to decide!

The Music

Listen For

- At the start, by using only the upper registers of the orchestra exclusively in the Miniature Overture, the music sets the stage for a festive and fairytale-like mood as the Party Scene opens and the celebration begins.
- A skippy march-like musical cadence can be heard as the children and their parents "gallop" in during the fun Party Scene in Act I.
- The music, mystery and the mood grows darker and deeper with the arrival of the black-caped Herr Drosselmeyer in Act I.
- As the guests depart, listen as the music signals that the party is over.
- Once the lights dim, the battle scene with the mice and the soldiers begins in earnest with hints of trouble at first and then all-out war! Here, the composer (Tchaikovsky) creates the mood by setting the battle music predominantly in the upper registers.
- The musical score introduces a wordless children's chorus to brilliantly convey the wonder of the wintry Land of Snow at the end of Act I.
- One novelty in Tchaikovsky's original score was the use of the celesta, a "new" instrument for that era that he discovered in Paris. Although a celesta resembles a piano, it sounds more like a *glockenspiel*, which is like a xylophone. Listen for it in the *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* in Act II. The composer wanted it included to characterize the Sugar Plum Fairy with "heavenly sweet" sound. Everyone was enchanted.
- In Act II during the celebration in the Land of the Sugar Plum Fairy, listen for the distinctive refrains of the Trepak (Russian Dance) which is one of the most distinguished and celebrated ethnic dances in *The Nutcracker*. This lively dance is based on the Ukrainian dance, Tropak.
- The Mirliton Dance is known by many names! Also called the Reed Flute Dance, it depicts the shrill sound of a child's toy flute. The title of this movement in *The Nutcracker* ballet may refer in jest to the flute duet in the music or to the reed pipes that a shepherdess might have

played to her flock of sheep. The term is often used to refer to the shepherdess dancer (Shepherd Dance). On a sweeter note, it may also be a pun which refers to the fluted marzipan confections that the dance may represent and the almonds used in Mirliton pastries. Listen closely and decide!

- Listen for the *adagio* or beautifully slow refrains of the Pas de Deux near the end of Act II. *Adagio* is an Italian word that means “at ease”. In musical notation, it denotes a tempo change indicating that the music is to be played slowly. How dreamy!

Just for Fun

- Read the story of *George Balanchine's The Nutcracker* as performed by the *New York City Ballet*
http://www.nycballet.com/nutcracker/read.html?TierSlicer1_TSMenuTargetID=121&TierSlicer1_TSMenuTargetType=1&TierSlicer1_TSMenuID=23
- Listen to excerpts of the music from *The Nutcracker* ballet:
http://www.nutcrackerballet.net/html/nutcracker_music.html
- Color *Nutcracker* pages from the *Pacific Northwest Ballet*:
<http://www.pnb.org/kids/drawings.html>