

Music

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: A Maestro's Magical Journey

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, a name familiar to any classical ballet enthusiast, was born in 1840 in Votkinsk, a small town in the Russian Empire, into a family with a long history of military service.

He began piano lessons at age 5 and in 1862, when the St. Petersburg Conservatory opened, he was accepted into its premiere class. He was later recruited to be a founding member of the faculty at the newly created Moscow Conservatory.

Within just a few years he had managed to write some of his early masterworks and most popular pieces, including the orchestral fantasy *Romeo and Juliet* (1869), *Swan Lake* (1875), *Piano Concerto No. 1* (1875), the opera *Eugene Onegin* (1879) and *Symphony No. 4* (1878).

In 1878 Tchaikovsky officially left the conservatory to devote himself to composing and performing. In 1884 he was honoured by Tsar Alexander III, which was naturally seen as a seal of official approval.

Following a successful, new production of *Eugene Onegin* commissioned by the Tsar in 1885, Tchaikovsky was awarded a lifetime pension, making him the premier court composer, in practice if not in name. He died suddenly in 1893, at only 53, some nine days after the premiere of his Sixth Symphony.

As a composer of ballets, Tchaikovsky was not an initial success. His first, *Swan Lake*, premiered at the Bolshoi Theatre in 1877, and was met with little enthusiasm. Despite

this setback early in his career, he didn't hesitate to accept a commission from Ivan Alexandrovitch Vsevolozhsky, Director of the Imperial Theatres in St. Petersburg to compose for *The Sleeping Beauty*.

Following the success of *The Sleeping Beauty* in 1890, Tchaikovsky initially refused a second commission in 1892 to create *The Nutcracker* with choreographer Marius Petipa. Neither he nor Petipa cared for Alexander Dumas' interpretation of *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, on which the ballet was based. Tchaikovsky eventually agreed to write music for *The Nutcracker* when Vsevolozhsky also commissioned a one-act opera, to be presented in the same performance.

Tchaikovsky already had a story in mind for the opera, which he titled *Iolanta*. He began work on both *Iolanta* and *The Nutcracker* simultaneously but made much faster progress with the opera, which interested him, as opposed to *The Nutcracker*, which he wrote only to fulfil his commission.

When he completed *The Nutcracker*, Tchaikovsky wrote, "And now it is finished, [it] is all ugliness." Despite this rather morbid analysis, Tchaikovsky was proud of his use of the celesta, a new instrument he had discovered in Paris, and whose "heavenly sweet sound" has now become synonymous with the Sugar Plum Fairy.

Over time, however, Tchaikovsky's opinion mellowed. "Strange that when I was composing the ballet I kept thinking that it wasn't very good but that I would show them [the Imperial Theatres] what I can do when I began the opera. And now it seems that the ballet is good and the opera not so good."

The Celesta

The Celesta is an orchestral percussion instrument resembling a small upright piano, invented by French organ-maker, Auguste Mustel, in 1886. Tchaikovsky first heard the celesta while in Paris before sailing onwards to America. He was so taken with the unique instrument that he quickly wrote to his good friend and music publisher in Russia, Pyotr Jurgenson, asking him to buy the celesta for about 1,200 francs. In the letter Tchaikovsky gave very strict instructions, 'I have discovered a new instrument in Paris, something between a piano and a glockenspiel with a divinely beautiful tone... have it sent direct to St Petersburg. Don't let anyone, especially Rimsky-Korsakov or Glazunov, see the celesta. I want to be the first to use it. I expect the instrument will make a tremendous sensation.'

