



Photos by Rosalie O'Connor.

**BALLET**  
ARIZONA  
IB ANDERSEN ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

*Student Matinee Study Guide*  
**THE NUTCRACKER**

## Story

### Act I

It's a cozy Christmas eve at the Stahlbaum's house. Their house is decorated with Christmas ornaments, wreaths, stockings, mistletoe and in the center of it all, a majestic Christmas tree. As the Stahlbaums prepare for their annual Christmas party, their children Fritz and Clara wait anxiously for their family and friends to arrive. When the guests finally appear, the party picks up with dancing and celebration. A mysterious guest arrives dressed in dark clothing, nearly frightening Fritz but not Clara. Clara knows he is Godfather Drosselmeyer, the toymaker. His surprise arrival is warmly accepted and all the children dance and carry on with laughter. The celebration is interrupted again when Drosselmeyer reveals to the children that he has brought them gifts. The girls receive beautiful china dolls and the boys receive bugles. Fritz is given a beautiful drum, but Clara is given the best gift of all, the Nutcracker. Fritz grows jealous, snatches The Nutcracker from Clara and plays a game of toss with the other boys. It isn't long until the Nutcracker breaks. Clara is upset, but Drosselmeyer fixes it with a handkerchief. Drosselmeyer's nephew offers Clara a small make-shift bed under the Christmas tree for her injured Nutcracker.

The party grows late and the children become sleepy. Everyone generously thanks the Stahlbaums before they leave. As Clara's family retires to bed, she checks on her Nutcracker one last time and ends up falling asleep under the Christmas tree with the Nutcracker in her arms.

At the stroke of midnight Clara wakes up to a frightening scene. The house, the tree and the toys seem to be getting larger. Is she shrinking? Out of nowhere large mice, led by the Mouse King, begin to circle the room while the toys and Christmas tree come to life. Clara's Nutcracker groups the soldier toys into battle formation and fights the mice army. The Mouse King traps the Nutcracker in the corner, but the Nutcracker can't overcome the Mouse King's strength. Clara makes a desperate move to save her Nutcracker from defeat and throws her slipper at the Mouse King. She hits him directly in the head! The Nutcracker is able to overcome the stunned Mouse King and claims victory. The mice army quickly carries away their King.

Clara falls onto the Nutcracker's bed, overwhelmed by the moment. As angels and delightful music hover over their heads, the bed turns into a magical sleigh, floating higher and higher. The Nutcracker is transformed into a human prince (who looks strikingly similar to Drosselmeyer's nephew). He gets on Clara's sleigh and drives through a snowy forest where the snowflakes turn into dancing maidens.

### Act II

After their magical journey through the snow forest, they come to their destination in the Land of Sweets. Clara can't believe her eyes; ladyfinger mountains topped with whipped cream whiter than snow, sweetly glazed flowers and buttercream frosting everywhere she looks. Upon their arrival, they are greeted by the Sugar Plum Fairy. As they reenact the night's events, the Sugar Plum Fairy becomes impressed with Clara's bravery and the Nutcracker's heroism. In their honor, the Sugar Plum Fairy takes them

inside the candy castle and throws a lavish festival. They are treated like royalty and presented with every imaginable sweet. Shortly thereafter, the dancing begins.

Hot coco dances to the lively music of trumpets and castanets of the Spanish fandango. The women of coffee dance in veils and move their bodies like rising steam to an Arabian song, while Mandarin tea dances to an exotic Asian flute chorus. Matroishkas (Russian dolls) follow the Mandarin tea leaping and dancing to an invigorating Russian Trepak.

To Clara's enjoyment there is still more to be seen. Mother Ginger dances onto the Sugar Plum Fairy's court, opens her skirt and little gingerbread children come dancing out, circling around her. Soon after Mother Ginger exits, the dancing flowers enter to the tune of the harp. Perhaps the most beautiful waltz she has ever heard, Clara and the Nutcracker Prince watch with amazement. The flowers dance in beautiful, mesmerizing patterns as a single dewdrop floats above them.

Silence quickly follows the end of their dance. Clara doesn't know what to expect next. A handsome cavalier enters the scene and escorts the Sugar Plum Fairy to the center of the room. They dance to the most recognizable song in the entire work. The captivating pair dance lighter than air. This beautiful dance completes Clara's most perfect evening. The festival concludes when everyone comes together on the court and bids Clara and the Nutcracker Prince farewell. She tells the Nutcracker she wishes the adventure would never end and he tells her it won't for those who have an eye to see it. Clara wakes up the next morning under the Christmas tree with her Nutcracker still in her arms.

## Take-Aways

- Identify and describe the plot structure of the story. This can be shared orally, written, or drawn in storyboard fashion. (Structure this according to the level of your students. Students can identify the beginning, middle and end of the story, or students can identify the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution of the story or they can summarize and retell the acts.)
- Who are the main characters of the story? Who are the supporting characters? How do you know? Imagine what the characters will look like based on their character traits and design the costume of the character that most intrigues you. After the performance, compare and contrast your costume design to the one in the performance.
- Drawing from evidence provided in the ballet's storyline, imagine what the set design for each act will look like. Design the set for one of the acts, providing as much detail as necessary to illustrate the setting (time and place).
- List 2-3 conflicts that occur within the ballet and their respective resolutions. In your opinion, which is the most central/important conflict and why?

## The Music of Tchaikovsky

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (May 7, 1840 – November 6, 1893) was a Russian composer of the Romantic era. Although not a member of the group of nationalistic composers usually known in English-speaking countries as The Mighty Five, his music has come to be known and loved for its distinctly Russian character as well as its rich harmonies and stirring melodies. His works, however, were much more western than his Russian contemporaries as he effectively used both nationalistic folk melodies and international elements. Tchaikovsky was born in Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia to a mining engineer and his second wife, a woman of French ancestry. His last name derives from the Polish/Russian/Ukrainian word *chaika*, meaning seagull. Musically precocious, he began piano lessons at the age of five. Tchaikovsky is perhaps most well known for his ballets:

(1875–1876): *Swan Lake*, Op. 20. Tchaikovsky's first ballet, it was first performed (with some omissions) at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in 1877.

(1888–1889): *Sleeping Beauty*, Op. 66. Tchaikovsky considered this work one of his best. Its first performance was in 1890 at the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

(1891–1892): *The Nutcracker*, Op. 71. Tchaikovsky himself was less satisfied with this, his last ballet. It was only in his last years, with his last two ballets, that his contemporaries came to really appreciate his qualities as ballet music composer. Find out more about Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)).

## Take-Aways

- What do you think is the relationship between dance and music?
- A writer has a toolkit full of devices for communicating: words, literary elements, rhyme, figurative language, punctuation, structure, etc. What tools do you think a composer has to communicate through music?
- If the music is described as lively, what do you think is the tempo (speed of the beat or pace of the music)? What pitch (high or low register) might you use for a character as small as a mouse or as big as a giant? How do you think volume (loud or soft) and tempo can contribute to the plot of the story? What instruments would you use to mimic a thunderstorm and why?
- How is the composer's music described? Listen to a selection of the composer's music and discuss your observations in support or against the description.



Photo by Rosalie O'Connor.