

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

The *Nutcracker* Suite

The narrative of nineteenth century Russian composition is essentially the ‘tale of two cities’, St. Petersburg – which supported the group of composers known as ‘the might five’ and Moscow, home to Anton Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky. The rivalry was a healthy one, not unlike the rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge Universities, with as much reasonable snobbery. The musical pedigree of ‘the mighty five’, led by Balakirev, was held up as the best Russian ideal, nationalistic and proud. With the two stellar orchestrators, Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin amongst their number, this idea could receive some serious traction.

Tchaikovsky, as a pupil of Rubinstein, learnt to craft a more Germanic format, which though instantly popular everywhere else, caused considerable friction at home. Nevertheless, he emerged as a pillar of musical Moscow – and his work, a bastion of emotional subjectivity. This, after all, is the main strength of Tchaikovsky’s music. “That which is unfamiliar to the heart, should never be the source of musical inspiration”, he wrote, - and in his work, it seems that there is no point at which music is devoid of emotion. We all can recognize how this style served Tchaikovsky well, not just because he was good at expressing it, but that he had such constant emotion from which to draw. This powerful music is as a bucket to a well – neither missing the *raison d’être* of the other.

But it is not fair to take the St. Petersburg coterie at their word. Tchaikovsky’s innate Russianness is evident in his love of country melodies and can never be relegated to a back burner. Nor, in good conscience, can one suggest that his style was in imitation of western Germanic composition, because it arrives at its own splendid fruition, essentially Tchaikovsky and nothing else. As much as in any format, whether, symphonic or operatic, the broad sweep of Tchaikovsky’s style is front and center in his ballets.

Of the three great ballets, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker*, it is undeniable that *Sleeping Beauty* demonstrates the finest craftsmanship. This was to Tchaikovsky’s mind his finest, and though we have some of the same language return in *Swan Lake*, there is a fantastic dynamism in the rhythmic and sonic elements of both. By some contrast, *The Nutcracker*, written late in life, in 1891- and in a kinder, gentler time in Tchaikovsky’s emotional rollercoaster, is by his own admission, a lesser work.

The introduction of a new instrument, the celesta, which also featured in his opera *Iolanthe* – is small consolation for the fact that the emotional power of this story is just not as compelling as his previous ballets, nor even *Romeo and Juliet* which followed. The scenario that Petipa devised, rewritten by Dumas (père) was a formal straightjacket which couldn’t allow Tchaikovsky’s emotional spirit to soar. Despite this, what might seem to the casual observer as a series of trite themes and childish vignettes, has a stamp of vintage, seasoned Tchaikovsky, sounding marvelously sentimental and lush. It is a testament to Tchaikovsky’s brilliance that the piece is regarded so fondly. It is a testament to how we revere Tchaikovsky, that *The Nutcracker*, is perhaps the most widely performed ballet in the world, upon whose melodious spring countless adults associate their childhood giddiness and Christmas cheer.